



ARCHITECT'S RENDERING COURTESY OF ASSISI HOUSE

Assisi House will be built in Kempsville to house adults with mild to moderate mental disabilities.

FUNDRAISING | SUPERVISED HOUSING

Home aims to fill a gap in services for mentally disabled

By Rita Frankenberg
The Virginian-Pilot

Evelyn Kiebert remembers the day six years ago when her adult daughter Kimberly, who has Down syndrome, had a stark realization.

They were headed back home when Kimberly remembered she was the last sibling still living there.

"Clear out of the blue, she said, 'I'm the only one left at home,'" Kiebert said.

She mentioned her daughter's remark to her husband, Peter. It led the couple on a six-year process that is finally showing results. Late last month their brainchild, Assisi House, which will house eight adults with mild to moderate mental disabilities, kicked off its capital campaign.

The City Council signed off on the project a year ago. The 5,800-square-foot, nonprofit facility will be constructed on the property of Church of the Ascension on Rosecroft Street in Kempsville. The land was donated by the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, but Assisi House is a nondenominational facility.

"We need to raise \$1.2 million," said Deni Brown, fundraising chair for the project. "And that's for the building, the landscaping, plus one year's operating expense. I think it's a very achievable thing."

Although several facilities in Virginia Beach serve adults with severe and profound mental disabilities, there are no designated facilities to help those who are mildly to moderately disabled. Typically, Brown said, these are people who can support themselves with help, and some are employed.

These adults are under-

Interested?

To make a donation or find out more information about Assisi House, visit www.assisihouse.org.

served, Brown said, because they often aren't eligible for public assistance and the private sector isn't fully addressing the need for supervised housing.

"There's not a lot out there for milder cases of the mentally challenged," Brown said. "Many of them work at your Farm Fresh, your Sugar Plum Bakery."

"It's part of the community's responsibility to take care of these people after their families are not available."

In Virginia Beach, Brown said, there are more than 300 people on a waiting list for housing.

Jay Lazir, director of the city's developmental services division, said that number generally doesn't even include the population Assisi House is helping.

"The focus is on serving those with more severe disabilities," Lazir said. "So as a result, people with a mild intellectual disability such as those at Assisi House, they are not always able to receive the residential services support that they need."

Lazir said the city is serving 75 people with milder disabilities who are living independently and receiving support from the developmental services division.

The difference with Assisi House is that its residents will receive 24-hour supervised care.

"There's more than one way to provide the needed supports

for people with mild intellectual disability, and the Assisi House project is a unique option for this community."

During a fundraiser last month at the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, the group collected \$10,000 and had about 100 attendees who learned more about the project. Getting the word out, Brown said, is critical.

"We're planting the seeds to let everyone know," she said. Brown has more fundraisers already planned for the rest of the year, and she is applying for foundation and grant funding.

Brown, owner of the regional 17th Street Surf Shop chain, hopes Assisi House can begin construction late this fall. If not, it would likely begin next spring.

An admissions board that will include a social worker, CPA, psychiatrist, social worker and doctor will screen applicants for the facility once it opens.

The program is modeled after a similar facility, Good Neighbor Village, in Richmond.

Kiebert still remembers the many hurdles she faced in trying to raise her now-42-year-old daughter. Since Kimberly began going to school, Kiebert has been helping people understand her daughter's abilities.

"It's an education process," Kiebert said. "And now we're at the stage where the housing has to be met. So by the time that these other families come along and need housing in Virginia Beach, hopefully we'll have more housing available. And it will satisfy the needs of generations to come."

Rita Frankenberg, 222-5102,
rita.frankenberg@pilotonline.com