

KEVIN L. CROOK ARCHITECT, INC. PROVIDING PRO BONO SERVICES FOR HOUSE OF RUTH PROJECT



This rendering depicts the House of Ruth complex that Family Promise of Orange County and HomeAid Orange County are developing to house homeless families with young children. (Courtesy of Kevin L. Crook Architect Inc.)

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For now, it's just a rectangular stretch of dirt, 18,000-square feet of empty lot next to a wall that's supposed to mute the endless roar of the northbound 5 freeway.

But this spot, on El Camino Real in Tustin, soon will be where the House of Ruth will stand.

And in the battle to help homeless people and the communities they inhabit, the House of Ruth could be something of a milestone.

The two-story, seven-unit apartment complex will offer temporary, private residences for about 30 people, most of them children. Another 10 to 15 families a week who don't live at House of Ruth will be able to access its community resource center, which will include showers, washing machines and support services aimed at helping them find permanent homes.

The goal is to help a world of people who've been hit particularly hard by Southern California's long-running housing crisis — families who are homeless or at risk of becoming so.

The project has been talked about for at least six years. It is being led by the nonprofit Family Promise of Orange County, supported by two dozen congregations in the county. Building plans are on track to be submitted to the city for final approval and ground breaking is expected in late March.

The city of Tustin is donating the land, with unanimous support from both the city council and the planning commission. And a \$3.7 million capital campaign, now half complete, is expected to reach its goal in the next few months.

Family Promise, established in 2009, is working in partnership with HomeAid Orange County, a charitable arm of the Building Industry Association. HomeAid is lending its expertise in housing development and securing in-kind donations from member firms and trades to reduce upfront costs. HomeAid's aim is to bring the project in on schedule and on budget.

If all goes as planned, House of Ruth should be open within 18 months, said Gina Cunningham, executive director of HomeAid OC.

Family Promise and HomeAid worked together to gain the acceptance of House of Ruth's future neighbors. That includes people who live in a two-story apartment building near one side of the property and two single family homes on the other side, at the corner of Browning Avenue, as well as residents of single-story houses around the corner, on Sierra Vista Drive.

Getting that acceptance meant knocking on doors and talking to people to let them know what House of Ruth would be and who it would be serving.

That effort, according to Cunningham, was something of a listening mission.

"It was really hearing their concerns about the population and dispelling myths."

"Able to move on"

All of the consulting work on House of Ruth is pro bono. Brookfield Residential, a member of HomeAid OC, is spearheading construction.

"They're the builder," Cunningham said. "They are working with HomeAid to bring trades to the table to reduce cost as much as possible."

Tustin Presbyterian Church kicked off the fund drive with a \$50,000 grant in 2015; other donations have come from Aldersgate United Methodist in Tustin, Irvine United Congregational Church and St. John's Lutheran Church of Orange.

House of Ruth will be in addition to a pair of four-bedroom, two-bath homes already run by Family Promise in Fullerton. Those are considered shared transitional housing for homeless families. But at House of Ruth, each family will have privacy in the one-, two- and three-bedroom units, though the largest units are designed to house more than one family if necessary.

Family Promise also operates an emergency shelter program. That involves rotating families among the sites of member congregations in its interfaith hospitality network, who make places to sleep in gyms and basements and classrooms. The organization launched a mobile shower program early last year to help people staying in shelters that lacked washing facilities.

Though the emergency shelter program and the mobile shower service have been paused because of the pandemic, Albertson hopes to revive the emergency shelter program in March. Between temporary housing and other supportive services, Family Promise has assisted 96 families in 2021.

While families will be able to stay at House of Ruth for up to a year, Albertson expects the average stay to mirror that of the two Fullerton homes Family Promise operates — about six months. Most of the families currently housed by Family Promise — 80% — transition from shelter services to permanent housing. Most do that with some type of housing or financial assistance, but some make the jump after improving their job situations and finding affordable places to rent, Albertson said.

"People just need a little bit of a hand up," she said. "They don't have to stay in that situation if they get the right support."

'Right support'

House of Ruth will be a temporary home to families with at least one underage child, who are experiencing homelessness.

Unlike some other programs, Family Promise will not prevent the families it houses from including in their households young adult children who are over 18, or older family members. If young adults or grandparents were part of the family unit at the time they became homeless, they can be eligible for assistance, according to Family Promise Executive Director Cyndee Albertson.

"Your family is your family. We take and embrace the whole family," said Albertson, who has led the nonprofit since 2017.

"They need the right support, and that includes not worrying about your young adult children who can't be with you."

Albertson said House of Ruth will focus on struggling families in central Orange County, with priority to be given to those who have ties to Tustin. Participants must be part of the county's coordinated entry system for homeless housing and services and will be referred to the program by the Family Solutions Collaborative, a coalition of 24 nonprofits that work together to reduce homelessness among families and children.

Homeless families with young children tend to remain more in the shadows than the general homeless population, partly because parents fear losing their children. As of Dec. 1, there were about 445 families — representing 836 children and 604 adults — who were accessing services and some type of housing assistance through the coordinated entry system for families in Orange County.

A good 90% of those families are homeless under the definition used by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development — meaning they live in a place not meant for human habitation, such as a car, a tent or a shed — and the rest are at risk of becoming homeless, said Nikki Buckstead, executive director of Family Solutions Collaborative.

"There are likely additional families experiencing homelessness, or at-risk of homelessness in Orange County, (who are) not currently connected to the family system," Buckstead said.