

Family Promise christens day center for homeless

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Brian Johnson, executive director of Family Promise of Greater Helena, is overwhelmed by the momentum of the organization and the excitement for its new offering of a day center for homeless families.

“It’s humbling and inspiring,” Johnson told dozens of supporters who gathered at the North Cooke Avenue facility for the grand opening celebration on Sunday afternoon.

“We’re changing our neighbors’ lives and hopefully we’re changing our own,” he added.

The day center is the latest installment of an effort to help homeless and low-income families achieve sustainable independence. Family Promise of Greater Helena includes 22 churches “from across the rainbow,” according to Johnson.

The day center has a kitchen, showers, laundry and storage space but, more importantly, it provides the guests with an address and use of phones and computers to help them with job searches and staying in touch with relatives and friends. It also has space for the children to play and do their homework.

The organization has graduated three families in the last five months.

The way it works is the families spend the night in host churches, which rotate duties each week. The families arrive each Sunday afternoon along with a trailer carrying beds and personal belongings. Each family has a discrete and private space, either in an existing room or often a partitioned space in a larger room.

One volunteer stays at the church through the night with the guests.

Volunteers from the host church, or from the assisting volunteer churches, bring in a hot meal each evening, which is served family-style with the hosts and guest families eating together. The host church also provides breakfast and fixings for sack lunches that the guest families can fix for themselves for the next day.

Early in the morning, a van picks up the families and transports them to the new day center, from which the children are bused to school.

Lewis and Clark County Commissioner Andy Hunthausen said he is honored that the community has taken this step.

Many donors — both business and private — have helped the program, which costs an average of \$321 each day of operation.

“It’s amazing what we can do together and for the community,” he told those gathered.

In January, a survey taken of families in the Helena area found that more than 400 people were homeless or lived in an overcrowded setting. On the day of the survey, 13 children slept outside.

“It really is unacceptable for a community to have that happen,” Hunthausen said.

During the celebration, Johnson was tasked with telling those gathered what the program can accomplish.

“Where we hope to go is as close to the edge as we can,” he said, referring to those on the fringe of society. “We’re strong and we’ve moving fast down that road. We’re going to the edge.”