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## First 'green' homeless shelter opens

Oakland facility will mostly serve the sick

By Barbara Grady, STAFF WRITER

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OAKLAND — After eight years of fundraising, pleading, planning and building, Alameda County's largest homeless shelter will reopen today in a newly built ecologically "green" shelter on International Boulevard.

With solar panels supplying electricity and water-based hydronic heaters warming rooms in the 125-bed shelter, the Crossroads building of the East Oakland Community Project is said to be the first "green" homeless shelter in the nation. It replaces a cold, damp and leaky building up the road on International that has been housing homeless for the past 17 years.

"You'll wake up here and feel good because it's an environment that is healthy. We are asking our people to deal with some heavy issues, so it is best that we support their health," said Wendy Jackson, executive director of the East Oakland Community Project.

"Many of the clients are ill, about 60 percent are ill, often with chronic diseases of asthma, diabetes, so we wanted to do whatever we can to make this as healthy an environment as possible," she said. The building, with high windows for natural light and walls painted with a green paint that does not emit toxins, has an airy, good feel to it.

Over at EOCP's 17-year-old shelter at 5725 International Blvd., resident Bobby Ross said he's excited about moving to the new place.

"It's going to be beautiful there, and we need to get out of here. It's freezing in here and the roof leaks," he said.

Chester Featherson is one

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warmer.

The new Crossroads shelter has other firsts besides being the nation's first green shelter.

It'll be the first in Alameda County with a respite wing for people who have been released from the hospital but with nowhere to go. Now, homeless people who are hospitalized and return back to the streets have a good chance of succumbing to further illness.

It also has a family wing with bathtubs in each of five units.

"Our little guys don't like to take showers," much less take showers with strange adults next to them, as they must do at the homeless shelter up the street. "The idea is to keep families intact, and let people preserve their dignity."

On any given night, about 6,200 people go homeless in Alameda County — and about 16,000 experience homelessness sometime in a year in the area.

Families make up 43 percent of the county's homeless population and children about 28 percent, Jackson said.

In some of those families the breadwinner lost his or her job and then fell behind on rent and was evicted. In other cases, families are running from abusive situations at home.

The new shelter cost \$11 million to build and was funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS program; the Alameda County Health Care Services Agency; the City of Oakland Community Development Block Grant program; the California Emergency Housing Assistance Program, and some private foundations, including StopWaste.org, the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund and Y & H Soda Foundation. The grand opening is today from 4 to 6 p.m. at its 7515 International Boulevard location. "Many of the clients are ill, about 60 percent are ill, often with chronic diseases of asthma, diabetes, so we wanted to do whatever we can to make this as healthy an environment as possible," she said. The building, with high windows for natural light and walls painted with a green paint that does not emit toxins, has an airy, good feel to it.

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Chester Featherson is one client who is sick with the flu and a chronic cough. He carries a briefcase full of cold medicines, tissues and hand cleaners which he said he gives to others at the shelter who are sick, too. Bundled up in a jacket, sweatshirt and shirt, he said "I'll be glad to not wear so many layers," at the new building which should be warmer.

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Wendy Jackson, Executive Director of the East Oakland Emergency Project, stands on top of the organization's new homeless shelter on International Boulevard in Oakland. (D. Ross Cameron/MediaNews)

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