

Renovated Rooms to Help Foster Kids Come to a Happier Place

By Martin Wilbur

At any time, several hundred children in the county are in the foster care system, requiring critical services provided by the Westchester Institute for Human Development (WIHD) on the New York Medical College and Westchester Medical Center campus.

Just because the services are delivered in an older building on a medical campus doesn't mean the children and their families or guardians should have to visit a cold, drab institutional setting.

WIHD unveiled eight bright, newly renovated therapy rooms in its child welfare space last week where youths from birth to 21 years old receive an assortment of services, a vast improvement over the previous accommodations.

"The children and families have just been in awe of the new space," said Danielle Weisberg, director of child welfare services at WIHD. "They're so excited. We also created an amazing wish list and people from all over Westchester started donating from the wish list to fill the space with new games and toys."

Last Tuesday, WIHD held a ceremonial ribbon cutting and thanked eight to 10 key donors who helped make the \$180,000 project possible. The event comes about five years after a plan was conceived to upgrade facilities.

Its impetus came from a youngster who approached the institute's staff



MARTIN WILBUR PHOTO

Danielle Weisberg, foreground, director of child welfare services at the Westchester Institute for Human Development, and president and CEO Susan Fox greet visitors and donors at a ceremony for its renovated therapy rooms last week.

about replacing the outdoor playground equipment. Weisberg said that while the playground was the initial goal, the focus was eventually switched to the indoor space used by the nonprofit organization's clients year-round.

Renovation of the rooms took a few months and was completed in December, WIHD President and CEO Susan Fox said. WIHD has been located in the building at 20 Hospital Oval West for more than 30 years.

"The renovations are a message to

the children that we serve that they are important and that there are many people out there who truly care about them," Fox said.

The upgrades include age appropriate furniture, improved games, toys and activities, new carpeting and lights and bright-colored walls with beautiful images in some rooms, such as a lush green forest.

It was critical the project get done because the surroundings, which included dim lighting, old furniture and carpeting on the radiators, was having a negative

impact on the children the organization serves, said WIHD Board Chair Pamela Thornton.

Weisberg said most of the rooms had fallen into such disrepair that their appearance and poor comfort level ran counter to WIHD's mission of helping vulnerable children, their families and caregivers and people with disabilities.

"The space we had before was not consistent with our values as an organization helping people in all walks of life," she said. "It really detracted from the high quality professional work that was being done in the rooms, so it was really important for us to change the environment so we can use the space."

Westchester's Department of Social Services Kevin McGuire said while the county contracts with WIHD to handle the distribution of services, there aren't the resources to provide the improved amenities that the organization was able to obtain through its fundraising efforts.

Making those improvements will make a difference in the children's lives, he said. "I think it's wonderful, I really do," McGuire said. "I think that it's great... that (WIHD) is taking on these things and they want very much to do it. The money that we provide to them is all for direct services, but it's also wonderful to have the services and something that is so child friendly, family friendly. I'm very, very happy about it."