

EVANSTON

Evanston's Connections for the Homeless purchases Margarita Inn after nearly four years of operation

By Alex Hulvalchick
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The Margarita European Inn in Evanston which is used to house homeless families seen here on Friday, April 9, 2021. (Jose M. Osorio/ Chicago Tribune)

Connections for the Homeless, a nonprofit working to house the homeless in Evanston, has purchased the Margarita Inn after operating out of the building since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The \$6.5 million purchase was made possible with a no-interest, fully forgivable 30-year loan from Cook County's American Rescue Plan coffers. Connections Chief Development Officer Nia Tavoularis said an additional \$1.2 to \$1.5 million in legal fees also factored into the project's cost.

"We're really really excited," Tavoularis said. "We're not done. This is definitely a big step in the right direction in what needs to be done."

The funding marks a shift in the county's support of homeless services which according to Tavoularis amounted to about \$30,000 a year to Connections before the pandemic.

The hotel, located at 1566 Oak Avenue in the city's 4th Ward, began operating as a homeless shelter after Gov. J.B. Pritzker announced stay at home orders in March 2020 to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Since then, Connections has secured a special use

permit and completed an operating agreement with the city despite pushback from residents and a lawsuit filed by Cameel Halim, who owns the Halim Time & Glass Museum next door and the King Home across the street.

According to a news release from Connections, the inn can house up to 65 residents in its 40 rooms and provides three meals a day year round along with laundry, medical and counseling services. Services are designed to give residents the chance to move on to more permanent housing, which 86% of those served did last year, according to the news release.

"Our primary focus is making sure that those services inside the Margarita Inn ... remain strong and flexible and they are doing what our participants need them to do for them so that they can move into a stable housing situation," Tavoularis said.

Now that Connections owns the building, the organization is looking to make improvements in ADA accessibility to ensure residents can live "in a way that is dignified."

Beyond the Margarita Inn, Connections is looking to wrap up its \$23 million campaign which Tavoularis says is 80% of the way there. She hopes to finish the campaign by summer 2024 to allow for growth within the organization's infrastructure.

Hilda's Place, currently functioning as a day center for the homeless in the basement of Lake Street Church, is another project Connections is taking on with hopes to reopen the overnight shelter after it was closed during the pandemic. U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky helped the organization secure \$2 million in funding in July, and the shelter is expected to reopen by summer 2025 with 30 to 50 beds available.

The shelter now functions as a drop-in center where people can take showers, grab essentials like clothing and food and meet with the Connections case management team.

An event to celebrate the Margarita Inn purchase is tentatively scheduled for February.

"We're all better when people are sheltered and housed and have a chance to thrive," Tavoularis said. "It is deeply rewarding and we have a huge amount of gratitude for the way in which our community came behind us ... we're really proud of what has been done."