

## Building a community

Permanent center will help ministry's outreach

**By Barbara Kiviat**  
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Train tracks lead to the door of this warehouse church.

Inside, needy children and adults will find fellowship, food, clothing, medical attention and, if they wish, a Sunday service.

Neighborhood Ministries is turning eight industrial acres at 19th Avenue and Van Buren Street into a haven and way station for families trying to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.



Pastor Billy Thrall of Neighborhood Ministries, an outreach group, leads the congregation in song. (Russell Gates/The Arizona Republic)

When the first phase of the center opens this month, it also will give the group its first real home in its 20 years of existence.

"We've already been a community, but a homeless one," said Billy Thrall, pastor and a member of the non-profit organization's board. "Now we have a place to come home to."

Barbara Feder, a district governor for Rotary International, said, "So many times children in an economically underprivileged area want to get out, but they see no hope or avenue by which they can do it."

Feder's group has adopted the Neighborhood Center as a major project. The center "is giving them a window to see out into a larger world," she said.

Neighborhood Ministries started in 1982 as a food bank, but has grown to include nearly a dozen youth groups, a food bank for 30 families a week, a medical clinic that sees hundreds of patients a year and more.

But until now it has been operating ad lib. This summer's Kids Camp, for example, was held at a downtown Lutheran church; since June, Thrall has been leading worship services at the barely cooled Madison Street Boxing Gym down the street from the new property.

The stability of a permanent home is especially important because Neighborhood Ministries pulls from so many different Phoenix neighborhoods, said Louisa Percudani-Symmes, another of the group's leaders. Buses pick up kids for after-school and summer programs from 91st Avenue to 43rd Street, from Baseline Road to Glendale Avenue.

"If you put a pinpoint on a map and say what's the epicenter of Neighborhood Ministries, it's this property," said Percudani-Symmes.

Proximity is key. Ralph Martinez, 22, first joined Neighborhood Ministries 13 years ago because he lived across the street from the group's founder. Then he moved away, and started getting into trouble. "The further away I was, the less involved I was," said Martinez, who has returned to the group and was a counselor at its summer camp.

"The center is a place to go hang out, to keep kids out of trouble, or for parents who need something to do," Martinez said. "We're going to be there."

The price tag for the land and phase one of the construction is \$2.8 million. Individuals, civic organizations and businesses have donated money and services, but the group still needs to raise an additional \$1.2 million before it starts construction on phase two.

The building due to be renovated by September will include the food and clothing bank, kitchen, and worship and meeting space. Two ball fields will follow to the south. By fall of 2002, the medical clinic, bike repair shop, and more meeting and office space should be ready.

Though based in the Christian faith, Neighborhood Ministries offers its services to all, Thrall said, and plans to reach out to its new neighborhood. "Our goal is to be led by people from there, to be indigenous," he said.

The new campus also will give Neighborhood Ministries a chance to grow, and give the group an opportunity to host

festivals and events, maybe even a wedding.

"It gives us that feeling of home," Thrall said. "For us, it feels like a gift from God."

*(Reach the reporter at [barbara.kiviat@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:barbara.kiviat@arizonarepublic.com) or (602) 316-5469.)*