

LOCAL

Smith Centre a beauty

By KRIS KETONEN

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The brand-new Sister Margaret Smith Centre is ever-so-close to completion, and it's getting really difficult for the staff to contain their excitement.

The \$15-million, 51,000-square-foot Lillie Street facility is 80-90 per cent finished, and is to open its doors to out-patients at the end of August. The residential treatment programs are to start Sept. 8, with an official grand opening coming later in the fall.

"It's beautiful," Nancy Black, director of mental health, addiction and problem gambling programs with St. Joseph's Care Group, said during a tour of the site Monday. "It is actually turning out to be everything we imagined and more."

The new site will host a range of out-patient and residential programs, and services for adults and youth. Among those are treatments for gambling and drug addictions, eating disorders, and mental health programs, said Tracy Buckler, president and CEO of St. Joseph's Care Group, who added that the new facility will be able to host 40 residential program clients and hundreds of out-patients.

And the site has been designed from the ground up with all of that in mind.

But it's not just a matter of making sure it's big enough to hold everyone and everything, Black said.

"We wanted to create a warm and welcoming space, where people felt welcomed when they came through the door," she said. "The world is sometimes not a kind place to folks who are struggling with these issues, and we wanted them to feel that they were in the right place."

A healthy environment for staff and clients was also a priority, Black said. To that end, rooms, offices, work spaces and activity spaces all have windows that open to let in natural light and fresh air.

And finally, the facility maintains a degree of separation between out-patient programs and residential programs, Black said.

That's to protect the privacy of those who come to the centre for residential programs, which are more intensive and longer term, and each have separate entrances, she said.

Another feature, Black said, is an on-site school funded by Thunder Bay's Catholic school board for youth in a residential program. Youth will get 2 1/2 hours of schooling a day, Black said.

"Many of the youth that we serve have had challenges in terms of academic success, largely because of the challenges they face in life with substance abuse and other issues," she said. "And very often, this is the very first time they have completed a high school credit towards their high school diploma, and it really does help them gain that confidence that they need."

During Monday's tour, the classroom was still heavily in-progress, as was much of the rest of the building. Workers were painting in the hallways, or putting the finishing touches on landscaping or flooring. There were tools everywhere. The room that will be the gym was a temporary storage spot for the wardrobes that will go in the residential rooms.

However, the major work – including the state-of-the-art heating and cooling systems – was completed, and things were well on track to be ready for opening day.

Black said the staff is looking forward to opening "and to hearing the feedback from the clients and communities that we serve in terms of what they think about the building.

"They certainly had a tremendous stake in the design of the building," she said.

Buckler said the new centre was six years in the making, and is a much-needed replacement for the old centre at St. Joseph's Hospital.

"The old centre is not a purpose-built facility," Buckler said. "It's been well-utilized, it's not accessible, it's not air-conditioned, it's not the environment we like to serve our clients in."

The new centre is being funded by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.