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RFK celebrates a new stage in services

By Erin Maroney
ITEM STAFF

LANCASTER— A groundbreaking celebration was held Thursday evening for Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps new 37,000-square-foot residential building.

The group home, which will be able to hold up to 72 boys, is still plywood and concrete, but is on its way to becoming a residential building with four independent living areas.

Each of the wings will include both single and double occupancy bedrooms, with a total of 18 beds in each wing.

The facility will also include a TV room, two bathrooms, offices, laundry room, mudroom, and living room with two computer stations, nursing station, family meeting space, and dining room so the children can eat together family-style.

"We are grateful for the support from our community, neighbors, and town officials," said Edward Kelley, president and chief executive officer of the RFK Children's Action Corps, headquartered in Boston.

"Our children and their families deserve a first-class facility," he added. "This has been an agency goal for nearly two decades."

The agency's statewide services include educational, residential treatment, juvenile justice, and community outreach programs, which support, educate, and rehabilitate children.

RFK operates a school and residential program at the Lancaster site, for boys ages 6 to 17, who are in the care of the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS), as well as other day students.

The celebration began with a tour of the old and the new.

Tour groups were shown the two old residential buildings, Wellington Hall, which houses ages 6 to 12, and ATU, which houses 12 to 17, both constructed in the 1860s.

Much of the existing wiring, plumbing and heating systems are more than 150 years old, making the buildings difficult to operate and maintain, officials said. The bedrooms are so small that some cannot even fit a desk.

The new building is expected to be completed in summer 2006. When the new, 26-acre, \$14.5 million renovation is complete, the two older buildings will be converted to classroom space, and a campus center will be built connecting the two buildings.

The campus center will include a library, gymnasium, 10 therapeutic treatment offices, a medical suite with two exam rooms, occupational therapy and speech therapy treatment rooms, conference space and a cafeteria.

The evening's program also included remarks from Bill Hogan, administrator of the Lancaster RFK site, Paul Woods, president of the Board of Trustees for RFK, Philip Johnston, co-founder of RFK, Cindy Schofield, program director, and Kelley.

The project has been funded in part through a bond from the Massachusetts Development Finance Agency and secured through a letter of credit from Citizen's Bank.

The remainder will be financed through a combination of corporate, foundation and private donations.

RFK is a private, non-profit, nonpartisan child welfare agency founded in 1969 in memory of Robert F. Kennedy.

The agency operates 16 residential, educational, and community-based programs located across the state.