



Worcester Community Action Council

Head Start Renovation Project

116 School Street, Webster

Organization Description

Worcester Community Action Council, Inc. (WCAC) is the federally-designated Community Action agency for Central Massachusetts, serving 75,000 people annually in Worcester and 45 surrounding towns through a variety of economic self-sufficiency and emergency programs. Our mission statement, "Helping people move to economic self-sufficiency through programs, partnerships, and advocacy," reflects the programs and services we provide: Job & Education Center (HiSET preparation, work readiness, youth employment and workforce development), Family Development (Head Start/Early Head Start and Healthy Families of Southern Worcester County), Nutrition (SNAP), Asset Development (financial literacy and free tax preparation), and Energy Assistance (Fuel, Weatherization & Appliance Management, and Heating Emergency Assistance Retrofit).

In 2015, WCAC celebrated 50 years of providing important and responsive anti-poverty programs and services. In 2017, WCAC celebrated the 25th anniversary of our Head Start program, which has provided more than 4,000 preschoolers high quality programming in a safe, nurturing environment. WCAC's Head Start program is licensed by the Massachusetts' Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) and accredited by the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC); it is currently in year two of a five-year Head Start federal funding cycle.

Project Description

WCAC plans to renovate the former Webster Senior Center property, located at 116 School Street in Webster, to establish a four-classroom Head Start center. The need for the project presents from a FEMA-designated natural disaster, the winter snow storm of 2015, in which an Oxford town-owned building occupied by WCAC experienced severe damage resulting in the emergency evacuation and permanent displacement of 87 children and 15 staff. Although temporary sites have been functioning in the interim in order to maintain services for this critical, federally-funded program for low-income children, the town-owned building in Webster has been identified as a more suitable, permanent site, fulfilling a dire need in the second highest community of need in WCAC's service area.

Currently, the 35 children enrolled in the half-day program and the 28 children enrolled in the full-day program from Webster are transported by school bus daily to WCAC's Head Start program site in Southbridge, a trip of approximately 45 minutes each way, which is less than ideal for such young children.

The Town of Webster's administration, public school department, elected officials, and town voters are supportive and welcoming of WCAC as the Town and the agency have finalized a 25-year lease for the property, with the Town contributing generously to the agency's required federal match and extending rent credits.

With an estimated total project cost of \$2,900,000.00, WCAC has a solid funding plan balanced with state, federal and private resources, agency financing, and capital campaign strategies. The renovation project will result in a code-compliant building to serve 71 low-income children, employing a staff of 15 in four classrooms with a gross motor/community meeting room, a kitchen, office space and a small playground. Beyond providing much needed early classroom time and care to Webster families and allowing their children to enter the public school system at a higher level of readiness, the improvements will increase the value and useful life of the building, which the Town would otherwise be unable to afford.

Project Budget & Finances

The School Street building was assessed by Cardinal Construction and Lamoureux Pagano Associates (Architects) and all indications are that it can meet federal Head Start and Massachusetts Early Education and Care (EEC) regulations. The 1950's building was originally designed as a private school and was subsequently renovated in 1979 to serve as Webster's Senior Center. The most recent renovations included significant upgrades to address accessibility, some building systems, and finishes. Lamoureux Pagano Architects have developed conceptual drawings, the Town of Webster has conducted a HazMat analysis of the building's interior; a Phase One environmental study and soil testing was conducted by Tighe & Bond; a Capital Needs Assessment was conducted by On-site Insight; and a list of renovation needs and cost estimates has been developed by Cardinal Construction and On-site Insight.

In a May 2, 2017 meeting with the Webster Building Inspector and Fire Chief, the life safety and occupancy building needs were assessed. It was determined that the existing, partial sprinkler system must be expanded to include the entire building and that all life safety systems would need to be brought up to current building and fire safety codes. It was noted that there is adequate water pressure and power at the site to meet these requirements. Additional work required for the conversion to a Head Start facility will include: restroom modifications to address both child and staff/public needs, refinement of the existing accessible paths to meet current Architectural Access Board requirements, lead abatement, layout modifications to address classroom and office needs, new finishes as required due to renovations, soil remediation, a fenced play yard, and improvements to the paved parking area. The project also includes core/shell upgrades - windows, roof, and foundation repairs, an elevator, mechanical and sprinkler system installations, a new boiler, landscaping, ceiling and lighting repairs, kitchen improvements, and electrical, flooring, and finishing.

The single, town-owned building at 116 School Street includes a 36,765 square foot (0.84 acre) lot and 28 car parking lot. A detailed site map is included as Attachment 3. The two-story masonry facility has 4,200 gross square feet per floor for a total of 8,400 gross square feet. When converted to the Webster Senior Center in 1979, the building was renovated by the Town to provide accessible entrances at each level; however, the building does not have an elevator. A full service elevator is being proposed and will allow full accessibility and program use of both floors. Constructed on a sloped site, the parking lot is located at the lower elevation with direct access to School Street. A relatively flat landscaped area outside the main level entrance is well suited for development as a fenced play area for the Head Start facility. The proposed play area will be 2,700 square feet, in compliance with EEC requirements.

There will be one 18-slot classroom on the lower level, and two 18-slot classrooms and one 17-slot classroom on the first floor (main level) to serve a total of 71 children. Main level classrooms will be 634, 693, and 604 square feet each. This level will also have two offices (150 and 158 square feet), a reception area (215 square feet), two storage areas (155 and 53 square feet), and three bathrooms. The lower level will have one classroom (650 square feet), a multi-purpose room (1,014 square feet), one office (96 square feet), a conference room (228 square feet), a kitchen (204 square feet), as well as 3 bathrooms and a janitor's closet. An elevator will be added in the central area of the building. The parking lot will be resurfaced, the exterior retaining wall will be repaired, and railing/fencing improvements will be completed. Requisite furniture, fixtures, and equipment - much of which WCAC currently owns from the Oxford site will be installed, and reception and meeting room furniture and kitchen equipment will be purchased and installed.

Project Impact

As noted, Webster represents WCAC's second highest community of need. The cost of child care is a significant barrier for many low-income families, leaving them trapped in a cycle of poverty where they are unable to work due to the unaffordability of quality care. The Head Start program provides developmentally-appropriate curricula, health and nutrition services, breakfast, lunch and snacks, as well as special-education opportunities and critical family support services. Parents are the primary educators of their children and are therefore strongly encouraged to become involved by attending trainings and workshops, volunteering in their children's classrooms and becoming members of parent-driven committees and the Head Start Policy Council.

Transportation options are limited for many of the families enrolled in WCAC's Head Start program and getting their children to a site out of the local community is difficult, creating an obstacle for parents to participate in program activities. Program records indicate the number of Webster parents who were able to attend parent/teacher conferences dropped significantly at the site in Southbridge. Parents who would otherwise be available to volunteer in the classroom are unable to do so. Moving children back to their local community will allow for greater family engagement and parent/teacher interactions which in turn will contribute to greater growth and school readiness for the children.

The establishment of a Head Start site in the heart of Webster will afford low-income families the opportunity to pursue employment or training while knowing their child is being well-cared for in a center close to home. WCAC estimates that the completion of the project will provide high quality care and instruction for approximately 1,500 Webster children over the lifetime of the lease agreement with the Town.

Former Webster School Superintendent Dr. Barbara Malkas states, "We now know that early childhood experiences can have a lifelong impact to the physical and emotional development of young children, and this impacts their ability to be school ready at the age of five. This is why I support the work of WCAC and Head Start in providing early childhood programs for children and their families. To me it is like planting seeds and making sure they take root in a garden. Without that strong foundation a crop can be easily destroyed by a host of harsh variables, but with nurturing in the early stages there can be a robust yield that provides multiple benefits. Children who attend Head Start programs are ready to learn when they enter school and ready to demonstrate the social and emotional competence to meet the academic demands and challenges of accountable schools. These early experiences of academic success close the pre-existing achievement gap for children of poverty that creates future aspirations. Congratulations to the citizens of Webster and WCAC Head Start because the future is getting a little bit brighter."

During the summer of 2017, WCAC began a capital campaign to raise a projected \$1,000,000 balance required for the building renovation. As of October 2018, the funding gap stands at between \$600,000-\$700,000. WCAC has, through the support of several key community partners, identified potential philanthropic collaborators whom we are hopeful will help us bring this project to full fruition.