

ReMerge to move into new building, serve 50% more women



by **KAYLA BRANCH**

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Rose Faherty shows the kitchen area at the new ReMerge building at 823 N Villa. [Sarah Phipps/The Oklahoman]

The ReMerge Oklahoma program is two weeks away from moving to its new building west of downtown.

ReMerge is Oklahoma County's only comprehensive female diversion program, offering an alternative to incarceration for pregnant women or mothers with young children who have nonviolent felony convictions, according to its website.

The organization is in the Palomar Family Justice Center with 8,000 square feet. The new building is over 19,000 square feet at a cost of \$10 million, said Rose Faherty, ReMerge community relations manager.

"We went off the idea that if we are going to do this, then we need to make it a really well thought out, beautiful, intentional space for these women," Faherty said. "We knew it needed to be more to show them that they do deserve to be in spaces like this. We are thrilled."

Right now, the group can serve 50 women and has 17 staff. With the move and expansion, that bumps to 75 women and 20 staff.

The property at 823 N Villa includes a gym, conference rooms, a full kitchen and dining area, an education and job training room, a living-room space, a daycare and a large group therapy room.

The building is connected to Positive Tomorrows, a school for children experiencing homelessness, by a large outdoor courtyard. It is also close by other service providers dealing with homelessness and mental health.

Construction started last summer, and women who were involved in the program were able to give input on what the space should include, Faherty said.

That led to simple considerations like not using paint colors that were found in jail pods, but also a specially designed bathroom meant for drug testing after a woman is brought into the program.

"Right now, they get dropped off in an alley and have to come in, and there is not a lot of dignity in that process," Faherty said. "Now that bathroom has a built-in shower, they can lock the door and have some privacy when they first arrive."

Sparked by a seed donor, Remerge embarked on a capital campaign to raise the needed \$10 million for construction and an endowment fund, said Hillary Burkholder, director of community engagement. They are still in need of the last \$100,000.

“I had one of the moms say to me, 'I'm going to feel so professional coming over here,'" Burkholder said. “That is exactly what we want.”

Remerge will move into the building Nov. 15, and a public dedication ceremony will take place March 27.



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Kayla Branch covers county government and poverty for The Oklahoman. Branch is a native Oklahoman and graduate of the University of Oklahoma. She joined The Oklahoman staff in April 2019.

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