

After 30 years, Community Assistance Center grows to meet needs

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John Ruch



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In its 30th year of preventing homelessness and hunger, the nonprofit [Community Assistance Center](#) says the needs in Dunwoody and Sandy Springs are only growing. So the CAC is growing, too.

With a \$2 million capital campaign underway, the CAC is starting work on a greatly expanded food pantry at a 14,000-square-foot Roswell Road building it recently purchased. And on the drawing board: two satellite locations for food pantries and counseling services in Dunwoody and Sandy Springs.



Tamara Carrera, the Community Assistance Center's chief executive officer, shows off the CAC Boutique. (John Ruch)

After starting small in 1987, says CAC Chief Executive Officer Tamara Carrera, “our organization is bigger. Our cities are bigger. The need in our community is bigger ... We’ve been slowly moving from [covering] basic needs to self-sufficiency.”

When the CAC began, Carrera said, the local poverty rate estimated at 4 percent. Today, it’s around 14 percent, and she thinks that undercounting people.

“Food insecurity – which is the new name for hunger – is very prevalent in the community,” she said.

Originally called the Community Action Commission, the CAC was a project of the Sandy Springs Ministerial Association, a group of area church leaders. Its first office was a room provided by Mount Vernon Presbyterian Church. Within a year, it expanded service into the Dunwoody area.

In 2005, after a previous capital campaign, the CAC moved into its current headquarters at 1130 Hightower Trail in northern Sandy Springs. Among its new programs there was the CAC Boutique, a thrift store that provides goods for clients and raises funds from public sales.

Today, the CAC has 11 staff members, 350 volunteers with its Boutique, and about 1,200 on special projects. Each year, the organization serves 2,300 to 2,500 families – about 5,000 to 6,000 individuals.



The CAC Boutique at 8607 Roswell Road, in a building where the food pantry will open early next year.
(John Ruch)

The Hightower Trail location is now bursting at the seams. Last year, the CAC got a rent-to-buy deal on a former construction company office building nearby at 8607 Roswell Road. The CAC Boutique moved into the house-like front, and now work is beginning to construct the food pantry and other back-end facilities for the thrift store. The buildout is being performed by Sandy Springs-based Choate Construction, whose vice president for interior work, Steve Soteres, just became the city councilmember-elect for the area.

On a recent tour of the building, which is much larger than it appears from the street, Carrera said the extra space is already having a major boost for the Boutique, whose retail space increased in size from 1,000 to 3,000 square feet.

The Boutique raised \$35,000 a year ago and is on track to bring in \$75,000 this year, she said. The CAC hopes to get that to \$500,000 a year and make the store the organization's major funding stream.

At the back of the building, a former break room will become a "little supermarket" for the food pantry. Set to open early next year, the pantry has its own rear entrance. "It's very dignified," Carrera said.

She pointed out the door to a wooded area that is part of the property, but currently has an easement placed on it. "We would love to have a vegetable garden in there," she said, though that is not part of the immediate plan.

Also planned are the satellite offices aimed at "pockets of poverty" on Roswell Road near I-285 – the CAC has its eye on specific space – and somewhere in southeastern Dunwoody.



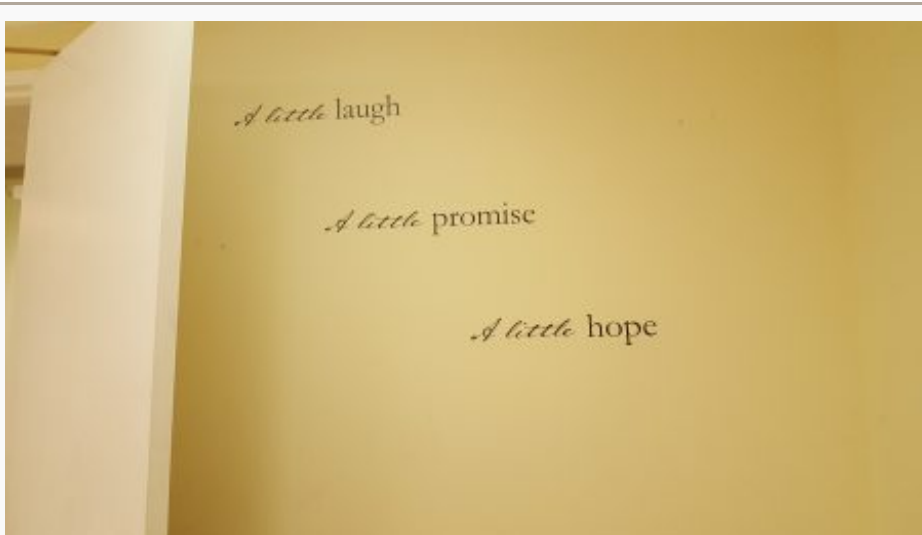
Celebrating an especially good day in CAC Boutique sales – more than \$700 – are, from left, volunteers Barbara Saheb, Nanci Epstein, Margaret Schultz and Karen Giles. (John Ruch)

“This building will be like the mother ship,” Carrera said.

The CAC will retain the Hightower Trail building as the administrative headquarters and for counseling, education and youth programs, some of which will soon have room to expand there.

The CAC has raised about \$1.5 million of its \$2 million goal, including \$200,000 from its volunteers.

The CAC’s headquarters, an area of many lower- and middle-income apartment complexes, is changing rapidly. Skyrocketing rents are [pricing out many residents](#) in the short term. In the long term, the city is gearing up to [incentivize massive redevelopment](#) focused on mixed-income housing and a larger percentage of home ownership, though it remains to be seen how that plays out.



An inspirational phrase painted by the former owners on the wall of the future food pantry room may remain. (John Ruch)

Carrera said those housing affordability and displacement factors mean population changes in the CAC’s service area.

“The housing is not a Sandy Springs issue. It’s a metro Atlanta issue,” she said. “The poor are being pushed out and out. And I tell you, if the Earth was flat, they would just be pushed [off]” — she finished the thought by sweeping her

hand across a desk.

She said she hopes Sandy Springs finds a way to continue to be a city where the very rich and very poor can live together. Regardless, she said, the CAC will continue to fill local needs, particularly in employment and job training, which will expand at the Hightower Trail building. After all, new businesses in new developments need new workers.

“There are jobs. There are not enough people trained for those jobs,” Carrera said. “That is the future of the CAC.”

For more information, see ourcac.org.

