

# A growing home for Shalom

Community counselling agency will double in size with new building

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Chronicle Staff

The people behind Shalom Counselling Services said they knew it was time to expand their services when it was standing room only for clients waiting for appointments at the Waterloo-based centre.

Wanda Wagler-Martin, the executive director, said the community-based counselling service has only expanded incrementally since they first opened in 1983 to provide affordable and accessible counselling services to people regardless of their ability to pay. But the need over the past decade has grown exponentially, and the demand for Shalom's counselling services has spiked by 29 per cent just in the last three years as they now help more than 1,600 people a year.

The program needed a bigger building, and a special ground breaking ceremony featuring local dignitaries and politicians was held last Thursday at the site of the expansion, 9 Avondale Ave. S., which will eventually double its size.

"Shalom is part of a network of seven community counselling centres in the region," said Wagler-Martin. "We're the only one in Waterloo, and we're all identifying this incredible need for more services."

Community mental health advocates are asking why the need has grown so much, especially in the last few years? Some of the answers come from the fact that the stigma for seeking help has diminished and that people aren't afraid to ask for help like they were in the past.

"The stigma for seeking help has decreased, which is a good thing," said Wagler-Martin. "I think people are recognizing more readily that they need help, and we always wish people will come for counselling a little sooner than they do."

"They shouldn't wait until things get so difficult before they give themselves permission to come."

The general level of anxiety seems to be on the increase as well, she said, as our hyper-connected society doesn't



Andrew Roth, board chair and building campaign chair of Shalom, joins executive director Wanda Wagler-Martin in breaking ground on a new centre last Thursday.

BOB VRBANAC PHOTO

give us any respite from troubles, even if they are a world away.

"I believe that the collective anxiety is high in society," said Wagler-Martin. "We have access to information that informs us multiple times a days about situations around the world."

"We live in the information age, and people are so aware and I think it is impacting our collective conscious as people, and people who are a little more susceptible to struggles with anxiety and depression. When you layer that on top of it, it becomes a tipping point for people struggling with mental illness."

"It impacts those who are vulnerable ... it's one more thing to deal with on top of the other things you're also dealing with."

The cost of services, and the referrals Shalom is getting from the community partners, also suggests afford-

ability is an issue. The centre provides fee subsidies to 92 per cent of people who cannot afford to pay the full counselling fees, and 39 per cent of Shalom's clients have family incomes below the poverty line.

That started Shalom, which is based on a property owned by Erb St. Mennonite Church, to think of expanding again and launching a \$1.2 million capital campaign called A Growing Home for Shalom. More than \$800,000 of that goal has already been raised in the community.

Last week's ground breaking ceremony included a promise of funding from the Region of Waterloo by Regional Chair Ken Seiling, as Shalom has \$400,000 to raise over the next five year to pay off the new building that will open this fall.

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# Campaign hopes to raise \$400,000

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“Counselling agencies have long been on our list as partners for funding, and we know we can’t give you everything you need, but you can take that money and do much more work in the community,” said Seiling. “To my council colleagues here from regional council, you don’t know it yet but we are making a capital contribution to this project”

When it is completed, Shalom will have five additional counselling offices, an enlarged group/meeting room for group therapy sessions, and changes to make it accessible to clients with special needs. It

will also expand the waiting room from three to 16 chairs. More important will be the sense of comfort and peace that will also come from the new centre said Andrew Roth, chair of the building campaign.

“We’re not sure what we’re getting from the region, but whatever it is will get us a little bit closer,” Roth, who is also chair of Shalom’s board of directors. “We do need a little bit more to get over the hump, and we’ve had some big donations and support, but we’re hoping to get there with a lot of small donations from here to the end.”

For more information on the campaign visit [www.shalomcounselling.org](http://www.shalomcounselling.org).