

# Infant Welfare Society expanding to two-story building in Oak Park

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*Infant Welfare Society Development & Community Relations Director Kristin Schmidt stands in the demonstration kitchen area, still under construction, at the new Children's Clinic location in Oak Park that will open March 2. (Gary Gibula / Pioneer Press)*

It won't be long until the doors open on a new facility that will triple the amount of space available to provide health and dental services to children of low-income families in and around Oak Park.

The Oak Park River Forest Infant Welfare Society is preparing to move its operation to a two-story building about a mile away from its current Lake Street location.

Instead of renting a storefront for its health and dental Children's Clinic, the nonprofit has purchased 15,000 square feet of space, a former bank building, at 28 Madison Street. The new location will open to patients on March 2.

"We are so very excited about this," Infant Welfare Society Executive Director Peggy LaFleur said. "We typically have served just under 3,500 patients per year, but our hope with the new facility is to see 6,000 annually."



The building at 28 Madison Street, Oak Park, is scheduled to open as the Oak Park River Forest Infant Welfare Society's new location on March 2. (Gary Gibula / Pioneer Press)

The Children's Clinic provides health and dental services for infants to teenagers up to age 19. It can include standard health screenings and vaccinations but also dental visits.

LaFleur noted that 55% of visits to the clinic are dental. "Even for federally-qualified providers who treat this segment of the population, dentistry is expensive and reimbursement is awful. It's a real mission-driven service for us."

LaFleur said it made sense to purchase a building rather than continue renting.

"At our current space, rent was up to \$76,000 per year and we had limited space and difficult parking," she said. "We were able to purchase the building and raise almost all the costs to pay for it thanks to the wonderful philanthropy of people in the community, and during the pandemic. I'm very appreciative, and amazed and grateful."

According to Kristin Schmidt, Development & Community Relations Director, donations covered the \$3.8 million cost of construction as well as roughly \$600,000 for medical equipment and other items like furniture, signage and decor.

"The fundraising campaign is continuing to a public phase with several goals, like money for the building fund, adding another dental chair and providing new future programs that are yet to be determined," Schmidt said.

The new facility includes health screening rooms, open bay dental chairs and two additional private examination rooms. It also comes with its own 38-space parking lot.

The first floor also has a children's library room.

“Our library program is one that’s very dear to us,” LaFleur said. “It’s a way of promoting and developing literacy.”

Schmidt said, “At the end of every health or dental appointment, the patient gets to come to the library and pick out books to take home. We have a dedicated library committee who do a good job picking out materials from the gently used books that people donate to us.”

The clinic also features a pet therapy program with a room where children may play with a certified therapy dog or just observe through a Plexiglas window.

According to LaFleur, the Infant Welfare Society began in 1903 with the establishment of milk distribution locations that included Hull House in Chicago.

“It was found that milk was being made and sold with formaldehyde in it,” she said. “Kids were getting sick and even dying, so women throughout Chicago united and established places in the area to distribute clean milk. From there, they went on to support the health care needs for children of low-income families.”

The Oak Park and River Forest group eventually created its own entity in the 1940s and today continues operations as a nonprofit with an annual budget of just over \$2 million.

The Children’s Clinic employs 26 paid staff who include a medical doctor pediatrician, a nurse practitioner, a social worker, dental hygienists, both general and pediatric dentists and others.



The Oak Park and River Forest Infant Welfare Society's Development & Community Relations Director Kristin Schmidt stands in the pediatric

dentistry area in the new Children's Clinic location that will open March 2. (Gary Gibula / Pioneer Press)

“The Infant Welfare Society also is composed of members who volunteer to do fundraising and who have varied professional expertise,” LaFleur said. “We have an architect, a signage expert, an interior decorator and others. We have a very talented kitchen designer and one of our members donated a demonstration kitchen so we can now have cooking and nutrition classes.”

Schmidt said the average patient treated is between the ages of 10 and 12, and that almost all are insured by the All Kids Program, part of Medicaid.

“Regardless of their ability to pay, we treat all children,” LaFleur said. “Our main goal here is to have a facility that would be bright, happy, clean and respectful. I’ve also seen that the people here in the Oak Park area are very willing to help their neighbors, which I think is wonderful.”

For more information or to inquire about services, go to <https://childrenscliniciws.org>.