

Front, from left: Executive Director Maria Elena Hallion, Rev. Allison Burns-LaCreca, Board Trustee Terri Miscione, Program Director Sandra Lockhart, Operations Director John Bolte, Board Trustee Nancy Bolte and back, from left: Board trustees Norm Proulx, Louis Schweickhardt, Jack Olthius and Lawrence Schmidt.

RIO GRANDE – The Branches Outreach Center cut the ribbon on its new facility in a former bank building at 201 Hirst Avenue in Rio Grande Oct 20.

Community members and elected officials gathered for a celebration marking the end of two years of work to make the building ready for use.

“It was a two-year project – and a difficult project,” said The Branches Board of Trustees President John Bolte.

The Branches operated for years in a location that can be seen from the new facility. Begun as an outreach of St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Stone Harbor, The Branches traces its roots to the “This ‘n’ That” thrift store. The Branches started to offer coffee and refreshments to seniors, who were looking for some social activity. Eventually, others in the community with a place to go, and perhaps homeless, would stop by to get warm and enjoy what The Branches offered. The 501(c)3 organization began offering meals, haircuts, and other services to those experiencing homelessness in the community.

Eventually, The Branches sought to move into its own building, and an anonymous donor offered them the former bank building, nearby, and paid for the renovation. The 3,200-square-foot building has a new kitchen for warming and serving food, a common room for up to 30 people, a TV, showers, a donation area, and administrative offices.

Rosalie Rivera, a volunteer at The Branches, said there are separate showers for men and women, as well as separate donation areas, where they have new or gently used clothing. There are a washer and dryer for those who want to clean their clothes, or for the center’s use, and there is a supply of winter coats and boots for men and women, organized and labeled with sizes.

“It took two to three volunteers to do this,” Rivera said.

The administrative offices provide a place for staff and volunteers to sit and speak with clients/visitors about some of the issues with which they might need help.

Rivera said The Branches expects to serve over 700 meals per month at the center, which will be warmed and served to clients in the main room. The Branches also delivers food to people in the community. Formerly using volunteers’ vehicles to take food to people living in local motels, last year The Branches used grant money to buy a van for that purpose.

The Branches also has a “backpack” program that expects to deliver 85 backpacks for children in kindergarten through 3rd grade, so they will not go hungry over the weekends. The program delivers to Glenwood Elementary in Wildwood and Elementary School No. 1 in Middle Township.

Bolte praised the efforts of Operations Director Sandra Lockhart and Program Director Terri Masione, who each have years of experience at The Branches.

“Most people got involved with The Branches because of Sandra and Terri,” Bolte said. “They asked me to volunteer and then to be on the board.”

Bolte introduced Maria Elena Hallion PhD, as the first executive director of The Branches. Hallion will be responsible for the administration of The Branches, programming and strategic planning. Hallion spent 23 years at Cabrini University as a professor and chair of the Department of Health and Exercise Science.

Thoughts? Email Christopher South at *csouth@cmcherald.com* or call him at 609-886-8600 ext. 128.