

Chicago Sun-Times Metro Section

Eateries for Homeless Join Hands Across City

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BY CURTIS LAWRENCE Staff Reporter

Inspiration Cafe, the Uptown nonprofit that built its reputation on feeding the homeless with dignity in a restaurant setting, is going corporate. In a way.

Earlier this month, Inspiration joined forces with The Living Room Cafe, a similar South Side agency that offers homeless people not only a daily meal, but also connects them to clothing, job training and resources to find their own place to live.

The new organization, Inspiration Corp., also will include Cafe Too, a culinary skills job training program, under its umbrella. The corporation will celebrate the merger at 10 a.m. today at The Living Room Cafe, 6422 S. Cottage Grove.

The merger lets agencies pool their resources at a time when many social service outfits are struggling in the uncertain economy.

"Everyone's after the same pool of money," said Angela Bowen, development director for Inspiration Corp. "Times are tough for nonprofits, so we're merging fundraising, food distribution and administration."

More than 300 nonprofits have closed since January 2002, said Attorney General Lisa Madigan, a longtime Inspiration Cafe supporter who will be the keynote speaker at the merger celebration.

"Nonprofits are just getting hammered," Madigan said. "The merger is really a great way to maximize the resources of both organizations."

Inspiration Cafe was founded in 1989 by Lisa Nigro, a Chicago cop who worked in the Uptown neighborhood and wanted to do something about homeless people she came across on the streets. The effort grew from a wagon delivering sandwiches to a full-service cafe at 4554 N. Broadway that serves meals and offers social services.

About eight years ago, Jennifer Kihm, an Inspiration Cafe volunteer, branched out on her own to form The Living Room Cafe.

Both cafes, which rely heavily on volunteers, require that their "guests" or clients meet weekly with case managers, be clean of drugs for at least a month and have no history of violence. The two cafes combined serve more than 33,000 meals a year and provide services to nearly 500 people.

Unlike Uptown's cafe, the South Side location found that families--single women with children--were most in need of the services, said Tiffany Newsome, The Living Room Cafe's case manager and social worker.

Nanette Norman, the mother of five children ranging in age from 5 months to 18 years old, said the Living Room Cafe not only provided meals for her and her children, but gave her a place to stay and to receive calls from prospective landlords during the day.

"It's one of the few agencies that's supposed to help and actually does," Norman said.