

Christmas will be a little better this year for Benilde Hall, a treatment and resident home for homeless men who are substance abusers.

In September the Benilde Hall program got a \$500,000 grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Then came a \$300,000 federal housing loan, and there may be a \$200,000 loan in February from Missouri's Affordable Housing Program.

All the new money means that Benilde Hall can move to 3220 E. 23rd St. and expand its 24-bed program to 46 beds.

"`This comes at a good time," said Linus Benoit, executive director of Benilde Hall. "`The number of homeless men has increased since 1994. There are fewer places for the homeless to go. Many halfway houses have closed their doors for lack of funds. Our program has helped some 600 men. ... We'll be able to help more now."

Located at 1600 the Paseo, Benilde Hall began helping the homeless in the 1970s using volunteers. By 1994 substance abuse counselors were hired. Missouri certified the program in 1998, and this year it was honored by the Kansas City Chemical Abuse Council for its outstanding work.

The new site for Benilde Hall - 2.1 acres of property owned by Comprehensive Mental Health Services - cost \$160,000. Two of the three buildings on the site will be renovated.

The third building might be gutted or torn down to build more housing.

The new facility will open in about four to six months.

Men at Benilde Hall typically stay in the program a year and learn abstinence from alcohol and drugs. They receive counseling to build self-esteem.

"`Christmas is a difficult time for many of our clients," Benoit said. "`The holidays can trigger some men to feel sad about their lives, so they abuse drugs or alcohol. ... There are classes going on right now for the men to identify their triggers so they can avoid a relapse over the holidays.

"`Still, there always will be some who just want three hot meals and a cot - that is, three hot meals and a place to sleep. We've found, though, that the longer people are in the program, the better chance they have for a clean and sober mentality."

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