

Shopping for a home for the homeless

■ Confronting a problem exacerbated by the pandemic, organization and county apply for grant that would be used to create shelter that could house up to 20 people

By **DAN BENSON**

Ozaukee Press staff

Ozaukee County is the wealthiest county in the state of Wisconsin but not everyone in it is wealthy.

For some, it's not even close and that means there are people and families who are homeless.

"Ozaukee County is very fortunate to be in the position we're in," Kathleen Christenson Fisher, chief executive officer of Family Promise of Ozaukee County, said. "The need isn't huge but there are still people who need our help."

While maybe not huge, the need increased dramatically in the last year due to Covid-19 as people lost jobs or lost their living situations.

"Before Covid, there were a lot of people on the fringes of homelessness doubling up. They couldn't really do that any longer because of social distancing and quarantine issues," Christenson Fisher said.

To meet the growing need and create a more permanent solution to the county's homelessness situation, Family Promise of Ozaukee County is seeking \$1.34 million in state grant money with the help of Ozaukee County to buy a building or buildings that would house 15 to 20 people at a time, about 125 over a year's time.

Before the pandemic, Family Promise, a private nonprofit organization based in Port Washington, used a network of churches to temporarily provide a place to sleep and food for single women and women with children.

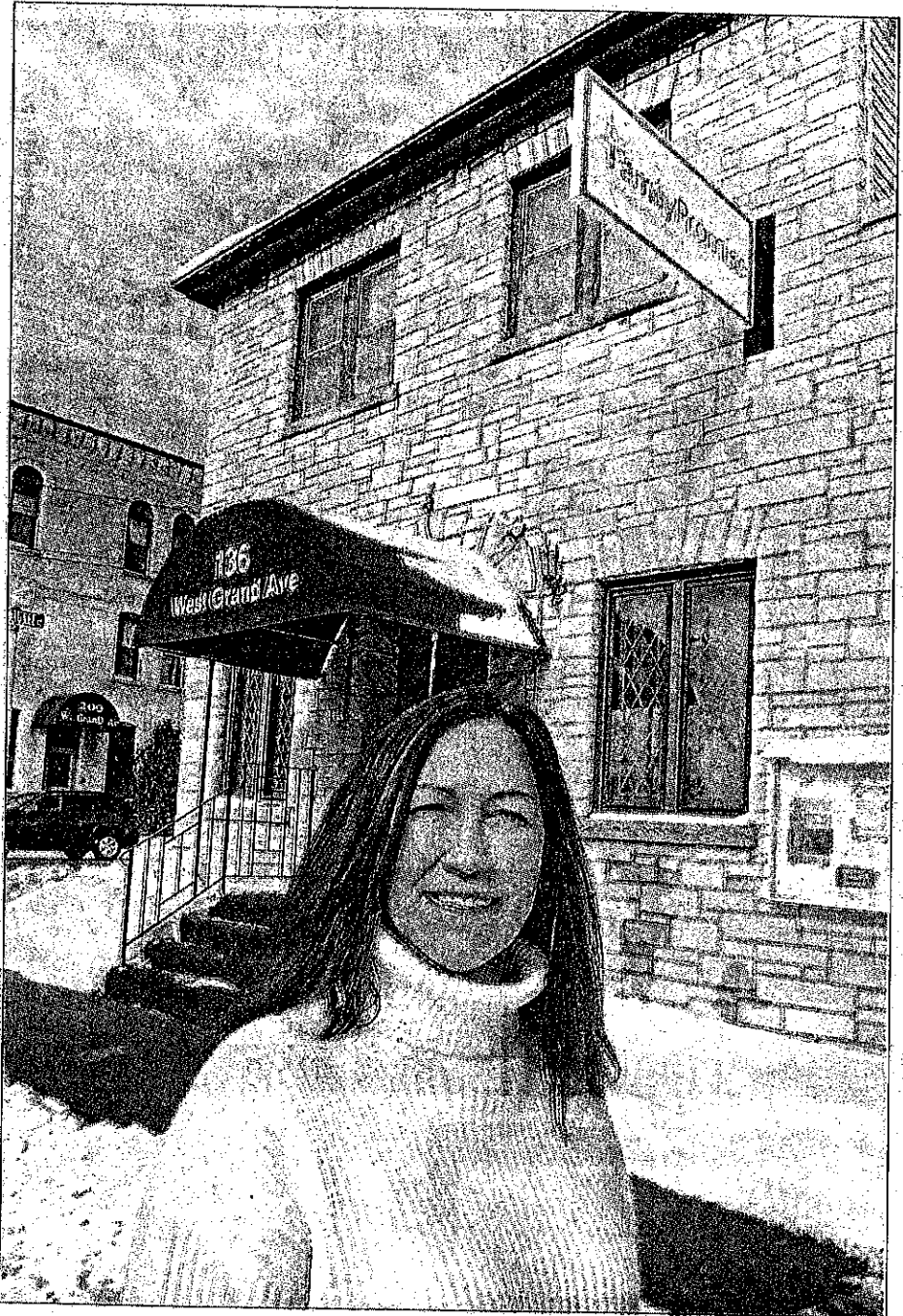
Once the pandemic struck and restrictions were put in place on congregations, that ended.

"Once Covid hit, the congregations had to shut down," Christenson Fisher said. "We had to pivot, and thought we would just need to lease a couple motel rooms. But we had no idea how long it would last. Then it went to five rooms and then 10 rooms."

It's unclear when, or if, churches will open their doors again to the homeless population, she said.

Eventually, Family Promise was spending \$15,000 a month on housing

See **Shelter** on page 15B



KATHLEEN CHRISTENSON FISHER, chief executive officer of Family Promise of Ozaukee County, was pictured outside the agency's office in downtown Port Washington. Family Promise and Ozaukee County are partnering to obtain a grant that would help establish the first permanent homeless shelter in the county.

Photo by Sam Arendt

Shelter: Grant key to project, is scheduled to be awarded this month

FROM PAGE 3B

people in motels.

"We basically have been at capacity since April 2020. We were happy to be there for them and we had received a decent state grant to cover the costs so we were able to continue serving those folks at the capacity of 10 rooms," Christenson Fisher said.

As the need grew, Family Promise expanded its service to include single men and men with children.

As a result, the number of households sheltered by Family Promise grew from 21 in 2019 to 56 in 2020 and from 40 individuals to 113.

The number of households served but not necessarily housed increased from 56 to 185 and the number of individuals from 129 to 450.

Money spent on rent assistance, more than quadrupled, from \$61,218 in 2019 to \$259,931 in 2020.

"We helped people find other programs so that was one reason for the uptick," Christenson Fisher said.

One of those programs is a "rapid rehousing" program designed to provide immediate rent assistance.

"It's for people who are literally homeless," Christenson Fisher said. "There are a lot of people looking for help in these times."

Ideally, Christenson Fisher said, a new shelter would consist of six to eight rooms serving 15 to 20 people at a time with separate areas for families, single women and single men.

Christenson Fisher was made aware of a Community Development Block Grant

through the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act that could fund a homeless shelter in the county.

The grant application requires the participation of a unit of government.

"I called (county Administrator) Jason (Drwine) and he was all for it. That got the ball rolling," Christenson Fisher said.

The county submitted an "intent-to-apply" form in November and in December it was invited to submit a formal application for funding.

"We learned that we would have a decent chance," she said.

The grant awards are scheduled to be made on Feb. 26.

About \$885,000 would go toward site acquisition and building renovation, \$300,000 toward operations and \$154,050

for administration.

Three committees have been formed to direct the effort — building, operations and funding.

No site has been selected, Christenson Fisher said, although county officials have said three sites are being looked at, including a former day care center at the corner of Sunset Road and Highway LL near the Ozaukee County Justice Center.

The county would be required to administer the grant for two years. After that it would have no involvement in the shelter.

After seven years, Family Promise would have the option of owning the property outright.

"Most importantly, this is a community project. It's a community response to community need," Christenson Fisher said.