

Child care facilities are 'going green'

By Tara Mattimoe

Times correspondent

PEKIN - Many Pekin children will soon be learning in safer, more comfortable and environmentally friendly classrooms.

The makeovers are courtesy of Fresh Spaces for Learning Places through the Building Blocks program.

Fresh Spaces is a joint initiative by the Illinois Facility Fund and The Grand Victoria Foundation to bring early care and educational knowledge to programs geared for low income families.

Illinois Facility Fund is a non-profit organization working throughout the state to provide low interest loans, real estate development, and research services for non-profit parties only. IFF was founded in 1990 and since then has been working to identify communities that may need to strengthen their childcare early education infrastructure, said Heather Heaviland, community initiatives manager for IFF.

The Grand Victoria Foundation is a private, non-profit organization interested in land preservation, work force development, and childcare, said Heaviland.

The organization has paid for Fresh Spaces classroom makeovers throughout Illinois for the past three years.

Grand Victoria Foundation funds the green projects and works together with IFF, Heaviland said.

Heaviland said that IFF's first priority in its "going green" classroom projects is to make sure that all products used in the carpets, paints, linoleum and wood products contain little or no volatile organic compounds, or VOCs.

IFF's second goal when going green is to choose locally manufactured products whenever possible. Thirdly, IFF aims to increase energy efficiency in the buildings the organization makes over. Replacing lighting with more efficient fixtures and upgrading window designs are two main routes to increasing efficiency.

These improvements also save a lot of money in the long run - lighting upgrades recover their costs after only two to three years and make for lower energy costs thereafter.

Improved window structures, with more effective insulating qualities, decrease energy needs for heating and cooling.

In addition to economic and health benefits garnered from the green makeovers, they create a more affective learning environment. The appearance and feel of a room itself is very important to how a child learns, Heaviland said. Warmer environments, created by lighting, color, furniture placement and other effects, help children feel nurtured.



Alex Hilst, 3, Pekin, holds on to the hand of his mother, Laura Ragland, Pekin, as they leave the Pekin YWCA after day care let out on Tuesday. The counter Alex is grasping will be replaced as part of a restoration project at the facility. Photo by Robert Stoops / Times staff

Studies have shown that these more comfortable surroundings help children learn, said Heaviland.

South Side Catholic Childcare Center is one of the Fresh Spaces grant recipient. Kathie Raiborn with Rogy's Gingerbread House, the agency managing South Side's programs, is very excited and says that Fresh Faces is going "far beyond what we expected."

The South Side Childcare building will receive makeovers in several basement classrooms that desperately need upgrades. Raiborn recalled a teacher asking a question in her classroom, and a child from another classroom hollering out the answer. Although the incident was amusing, the noisiness interferes with the children's learning.

The makeover will provide a reduction in noise via a new acoustic drop ceiling, sound absorption panels, and the closure of gaps between rooms. In addition, updating cabinetry, adding special colors, and installing drop lighting will add to the depth and warmth of the room.

"It's going to make the area so much more welcoming and cozy for the children," Raiborn said.

Many of the children who come to these non-profit childcare centers are at risk of academic failure, Raiborn said, which makes these makeovers all the more significant. The children of low income families, single parent and/or large families are all at a heightened risk, and these changes are all the more needed at these facilities for that reason, she said. "It's the whipped cream on top of your sundae," said Raiborn.

The YWCA of Pekin will also receive upgrades. Although the facility did not receive a full grant, the partial grant it received will make significant changes.

"We didn't have a lot of huge overwhelming issues that other centers may be having to deal with," said, Melinda Figge, executive director for the Pekin YWCA. "So although we were disappointed (at not getting the full grant), we were glad that our center isn't in really really bad shape," she said.

Pekin YWCA will have its daycare lobby restructured by IFF. At present it is basically dead space, and has become more or less a storage area for the daycare, said Figge.

The lobby is the first thing that parents see when coming into their childcare facility and they would like it to have a fresher, cleaner look, Figge said. The room is also where the organization keeps its resource library for parents.

At present there is nowhere comfortable or private for parents to check out the books. Figge said she hopes that the improved lobby area will increase the usage of the library.

"As part of a conference room we want it to be a place where it's more inviting for families to come in, look at these resources Š to actually have a little more privacy," Figge said.

The new lobby will also provide a welcoming place for faculty to sit with the parents and discuss the children's needs.

As an accredited member of the National Association for Education of Young Children, "one of the things we need to do Š is sit down with our parents and talk to them about how their children are doing," Figge said.

There are day-to-day discussions with parents in the classrooms, Figge said, but there is currently no place available for more in depth conferences. The new lobby will supply that space.

The partial grant will also provide a lighting upgrade throughout the entire building. The current lighting is not energy efficient, Figge said, and is not up to current standards.

In addition, the new lighting will more closely mimic natural sunlight and will be much different from the harsh fluorescents now in place.

"The more sunlight you can bring into your center, the better off your children are. It's just the way it is," Figge said. "The mimicking

should help our children, it should help our teachers, it should help our parents who are in here just feel better about themselves, about their day, about their activities," said Figge.

"So we're really very excited about that."

In addition to the main building, the pool area is also slated to receive a lighting upgrade. "So it will be a benefit not only to our childcare families but to all the families that we serve," said Figge.

The new lighting is estimated to save the facility \$12,000 per year, Figge said. "That's huge. Just huge," she said. "It will really make a significant difference to our budget in 2007."

With the upcoming increase in energy costs, YWCA will have to budget that hike into its financial plan. The money the organization saves with the new lighting will help it absorb the increase in costs, said Figge.

Pekin YWCA also received some money from IFF to help it work on a strategic plan on child care issues. "Mostly issues about our building and its age," Figge said. "Could we lay out this whole side of the building in a more efficient way?" The organization had an architect come through and talk about what it could do with the building, Figge said. There would have to be a great deal of structural changes to really change the building's layout, said Figge. "If we do anything, it would end up being a very big project."

YWCA officials are very excited about the help they are getting from IFF, Figge said. "We have a lot of dreams," she said.

In total, seven Fresh Spaces grants have been awarded: Children's Center of Tazewell County, Creve Coeur; Crittendon Centers, Peoria; Neighborhood House, Peoria; Peoria Citizen's Committee for Economic Opportunity; South Side Catholic Child Care Center, Peoria; YWCA Peoria; and YWCA Pekin.

According to Robin Toewe of IFF, construction has recently begun on the YWCA in Peoria, as well as South Side Catholic Child Care Center in Peoria.