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Quad County Urban League grows to better serve area communities

December 14, 2007

By Elisabeth Kilpatrick STAFF WRITER

Most organizations couldn't dream of doubling their clientele in just two years.

That's part of what makes the Quad County Urban League unique.

The community-service organization runs more than a dozen programs, ranging from a job-referral service for adults to science enrichment for minority middle and high schoolers. The Urban League reaches about 1,700 people in the four-county area annually, but hopes to increase that number to roughly 3,500 in the next couple of years.

That goal will be much easier thanks to the organization's new 23,200-square-foot facility, the John C. Dunham Vocational and Educational Training Center, marketing manager Danata Andrews said.

The building's name pays tribute to late Aurora businessman John Dunham, whose charity, the Dunham Fund, gave \$1 million to the Urban League for the center. In total, the Urban League has received \$2 million for the center, including contributions from the Bersted Foundation, Caterpillar, Hollywood Casino, Kane County Board, the city of Aurora and the Community Foundation of Fox River Valley.

A hit parade of community leaders, including Mayor Tom Weisner and Dunham Fund President William Skoglund, gathered recently for the Dunham Center's dedication and ribbon-cutting.

Urban League President Theodia Gillespie said the center would act as a "pipeline for development" for the community by providing better education and job training for its residents.

"This center will give the Urban League an opportunity to provide hope for its members," she said.

The spacious facility is a far cry from the Urban League's old home base, which was a quarter of the size, Andrews said.

"We were running out of space to accomodate people," she said.

Fourteen Urban League programs are now operating in the Dunham Center, including the Aurora Middle School Academy. The academy provides an alternative learning environment for students who have been expelled from their home schools, helping them to manage social and behavioral problems. The center also houses Boys II Men Training Academy, a leadership program for young black and Hispanic males, and Youthbuild Aurora, a program where young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 learn to build affordable housing while working toward their GEDs.

The new space also will allow the Urban League to develop additional programs. One already in the works for next year will help formerly incarcerated residents re-enter society through job referrals and other services.

Andrews encouraged area residents to stop by and check out the center at 1685 N. Farnsworth Ave. in Aurora.

"Our doors are open," she said. "I think 2008 is going to be a great year for us."