News



Catholic faith leaders and other local leaders break ground on the El Centro Homeless Day Center in Imperial County in Southern California on Aug. 30. (NCR photo/Melissa Cedillo)

by Melissa Cedillo

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

El Centro, Calif. — September 2, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

At the Aug. 30 groundbreaking ceremony for the first homeless day center in Imperial County in Southern California, by 11 a.m. the temperature had already reached 104 degrees.

Such heat is often deadly to those without proper shelter and food, according to Monica Enríquez, a member of St. Mary/Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish who has assisted with El Centro Catholic Homeless Ministry for 13 years. Every year, she learns of people in the homeless community who die from the heat.

That demonstrates the need for the El Centro Homeless Day Center, the county's first such center, built by Catholic Charities of the Diocese of San Diego in partnership with local leaders. The funding for the project came from the Imperial Valley Continuum of Care Council and Imperial County. The day center is set to open before Thanksgiving 2021.

The day center will be open to both men and women and will include a commercial kitchen, dining area, showers, restrooms and laundry facilities. It can serve three to four meals a day and reach more than 200 people per meal, according to Appaswamy "Vino" Pajanor, the CEO of San Diego Catholic Charities.

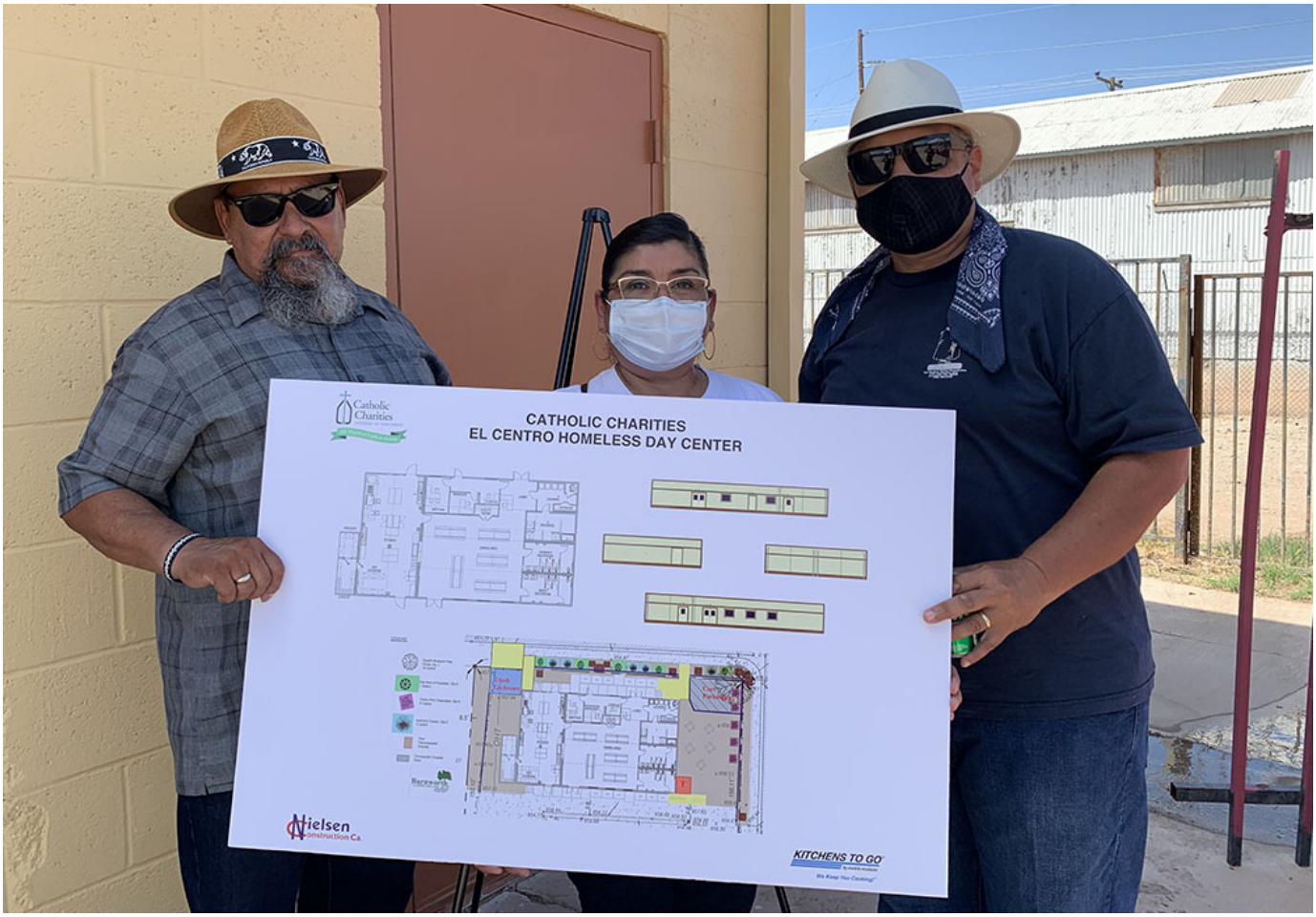
Advertisement

Community members at the groundbreaking said many El Centro residents have lost their homes during the pandemic, adding to the homelessness problem. According to 2019 Census data, El Centro is 87% Hispanic or Latino and is reported to have 24% of its population living in poverty.

Richard Enríquez said God didn't create people to live without shelter or food. "He created no one to live that way," said Enriquez, who at one point struggled with addiction and housing insecurity himself.

San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy, who spoke at the event, praised the deep collaborative effort that was used to make the day center possible.

"This is the work of Jesus Christ," McElroy said. "This exemplifies what Catholic Charities must be about and is about and hopes to accomplish in our world as the face of the Catholic community taking on critically important issues that our society needs to address in substantial ways."



From left, Andy Diaz, Monica Enriquez and Richard Enriquez show the floor plan for the El Centro Homeless Day Center in Imperial County in Southern California. (NCR photo/Melissa Cedillo)

The day center has been a dream of the community for over a decade.

In addition to responding to humanitarian needs, the Catholic community present at the ceremony see the work of ministering to the homeless as an expression of their Catholic faith.

"The hope that I have is that homeless get served in a particularly hard climate to be homeless in, and that by serving the homeless we [Catholics] are changed and for the better," Fr. Mark Edney, pastor at St. Mary/Our Lady of Guadalupe and dean of the Imperial County Deanery, told NCR.

For years, Andy Diaz, another parishioner involved in homeless ministry, wished their community had a place like this day center.

"And there it is," Diaz said, pointing to the future day center site.

Monica Enríquez added: "Jesus does answer your prayers. He does hear you."