Philanthropy & Nonprofits

Atlanta nonprofit secures financing to launch 'another form of ministry' in Avondale Estates

Wellroot Family Services plans to develop a 7-acre site in Avondale Estates for its Canopy of Hope campus. It will include housing and wraparound services.

By Crystal Edmonson – Senior Editor, Atlanta Business Chronicle

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- Demolition has begun at Wellroot Family Services' Avondale Estates campus.
- Wellroot will leverage a series of tax credits and federal grants to cover most of the project's $67 million price tag.
- The 65 new apartments will be affordably priced to support child welfare.

Two years after buying the former site of Avondale Pattillo United Methodist Church, Wellroot Family Services has the funding for the first phase of its development project, which will include apartments and a training facility in Avondale Estates.

Wellroot provides housing and supportive services for children and families in the foster care system and for youth that have aged out.

"What's unique about churches is that they are often in areas of town – downtown or across from a MARTA station – where you might not otherwise be able to afford to build affordable housing," Allison Ashe, president and CEO of Wellroot Family Services, told Atlanta Business Chronicle during a recent tour of the 8.7-acre site that Wellroot calls Canopy of Hope.

"We are able to take this property and buy it for a lower amount and convert it into a different type of ministry," Ashe said.

The nonprofit will leverage $23 million federal low-income housing tax credits and a $2 million national housing trust fund award from the Georgia Department of Community Affairs to build 65 apartments.

Crews could break ground in August 2027 on the apartments, most of which will be affordably priced and developed in partnership with the Housing Authority of DeKalb County, and the consulting firm Collaborative Housing Solutions. The apartments could open by January 2029.

Crews have begun demolition of part of the church building, which will house offices and training space. By early next year, construction could begin on a behavioral health center and resource hub.

The development of the service and training hub is supported by nearly $13 million in New Markets Tax Credit financing through Truist Financial and Capital Impact Partners.

"Our goal is to get the service center open prior to [the apartments] so that our staff can move in and we can start providing services to the greater community, and then be ready to serve those who move into the apartment building," Ashe said.

The total cost of construction at the Canopy of Hope campus is estimated at $67 million. Wellroot has secured most of the funding, Ashe said. It will turn to philanthropic sources to raise the remaining $12 million outstanding.

Ashe said she anticipates the expanded footprint and services will require more staff. Wellroot has about 135 employees. That could increase to 162 full-time and part-time workers by 2030.

Wellroot bought the Avondale Patillo United Methodist Church at 3260 Covington Highway in May 2024 for $4.8 million.

It was not its first foray into faith-based real estate development.

Wellroot's beginnings date back to 1871 when it operated as the Decatur Orphans' Home, and later became the United Methodist Children's Home.

In 2017, it sold its 77-acre campus on South Columbia Drive to the City of Decatur.

The transaction unlocked financial resources for Wellroot to expand. It acquired a 29-bed apartment complex in the Oakhurst neighborhood of Decatur.

"We're in a season where there are church closures and a decline in church attendance," Ashe told the Chronicle while standing just outside the Patillo church lobby as construction workers dismantled the sanctuary. "We're excited that we're able to transform a church property into another form of ministry of housing, and food and resources for people."