

# Banker's dream for former Dana College: a foster youth transition zone with housing, job training

- By Roseann Moring World-Herald staff writer
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An Omaha banker wants to take the former Dana College campus and use it to address two problems: homeless former foster care youths and Nebraska's workforce shortage.

Ed Shada wants to see the 151-acre site in Blair transformed into a holistic campus where foster youths who have aged out of the system can live, learn and work.

They would live in dorms or apartments and receive training in the trades. They also would be able to learn life skills, such as opening a bank account.

In total, Shada estimates the project would cost about \$20 million in capital costs. He's gotten \$500,000 in grant funding for the project and identified \$17 million more in grants. Now he's hoping to raise donations for the rest of the \$2.5 million, with the goal that the project will be ready to open before high school graduation in May.

He said donations along with land sales have so far covered the cost of "keeping the lights on" at the campus, though he hopes the project would eventually become financially self-sufficient.

"I'm pretty confident," Shada said. "Everybody thinks that these things happen overnight, and they don't happen overnight, they happen over time."

With the help of the City of Blair, five buildings have been demolished to make way for workforce housing.

Shada, a senior vice president at Great Western Bank and president of the nonprofit Angels Share, came up with the idea while working on an annual event devoted to getting people who are homeless connected with the services they need.

Former foster youths are at a much higher risk of homelessness — **one study** found that one-quarter to one-half of the former foster youths tracked had been homeless before age 26. That compares to about 4 % of the general population.

Shada took his idea to Omaha developer Frank Krejci, who had bought the Dana College campus and said he'd be **willing to donate it to the right cause.**

Now, Angels Share is working to rehab the buildings on campus.

The group will work with other organizations including Boys Town and Kansas-based KVC Health systems to connect the young adults living on the campus with any other services they need.

Shada wants to see the campus become “a mecca” for job training for former foster youths.

“Let’s bring the kids in,” he said. “Let’s get them what they need. Let’s help them.”

He also envisions it as a means of economic development, bringing young adults from around the country to Blair to help stave off **Nebraska’s brain-drain problems.**

Many of the buildings will retain their original use — dorms will stay dorms or become apartments. He’s hoping the library will remain a library. Trades training can take place in Dana’s classrooms. A Lutheran church will move into the church building.

Shada said he’s been working with the Omaha Federation of Labor on the possibility of incorporating the AFL-CIO’s Labor Ready program onto the campus.

Michelle Tauber, Trade Life program manager at Boys Town, said the organization has been part of some of the planning.

“We see this as having benefits and opportunities for our kids that are part of our trades program with affordable living and on the job

training in those fields,” she said. “Once completed, the project would provide a nice pathway for Boys Town Trade Life youths and we look forward to continuing to be a part of the planning and discussion.”

The campus has been vacant for nearly a decade, since the small Lutheran liberal arts college shut its doors in 2010.

Shada said when he acquired the property it looked as if people had left for the day — jackets remained on coat hooks, library books sat on the shelves, graduation gowns were stored for ceremonies that would never happen.

Two other colleges considered using the space to expand. Grace University instead **closed as well**. Then a proposed offshoot, Charis University, **downsized its plans** and scrapped its proposal to take over the Dana site.

The City of Blair has used tax-increment financing to tear down five buildings on the campus and, along with a private developer, are in the process of **constructing workforce housing**, a term planners use to refer to housing that is affordable for area workers and close to their jobs.

“We’re working as hard as we can to help redevelop the campus and reposition it for the future,” City Administrator Rod Storm said.

He said Blair residents are excited at the prospect of an influx of youths in the city once again.

“Any activity that would be helpful in getting those facilities fully utilized would be a tremendous benefit to the community,” he said.