



Caroline Chisholm Society volunteers Christine Mimmis, Irene Brown, Linn Riccardi, Mary Brosche and Tess Fogarty.

Caroline Chisholm Society may be forced to close its Moonee Valley centre

Linh Ly, Moonee Valley Leader

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TIME is running out for a family support organisation that has helped pregnant teens and domestic violence victims in Moonee Valley for more than 40 years.

Caroline Chisholm Society chief executive Helen Cooney said if the \$950,000 it desperately needed from the State Government wasn't forthcoming, the society might have to leave the municipality.

Ms Cooney said the board would need to “consider all its options”, which included moving, a merger or winding back regional services.

“We want Caroline Chisholm Society to stay here, but while we still don’t know (about the funding) there’s uncertainty for us,” she said.

The organisation has had plans approved for a two-storey integrated community hub on land it bought at 977 Mt Alexander Rd in Essendon.

Ms Cooney said it was unable to continue operating out of its current premises, which it only has leased until early 2016, because it was too small and did not have disability or family-friendly access.

The society’s building is bursting with donated prams, cots, clothes, blankets, food and toys crammed into every space.

“It’s not suited to our work. It’s OK for a short-term situation but we can’t run playgroups and social groups here,” Ms Cooney said.

The society raised \$1 million to buy the Essendon land and its supporters raised \$300,000 to go towards work, leaving a gap that required government support.

A spokesman for Planning Minister Richard Wynne said the society was in line for a grant through the community infrastructure fund under the previous government, but it was not approved before the former Liberal government entered caretaker mode.

“We are looking into the issue to understand why a grant was not approved and are working towards a solution for Caroline Chisholm and the four other applicants in that round whose applications were also not supported by (former planning minister Matthew Guy),” the spokesman said.

Simonette’s story

WHEN Simonette Soto knocked on the door of Caroline Chisholm Society as a pregnant teenager more than 16 years ago, she felt alone, scared, humiliated.

Her mother had kicked her out, Ms Soto said, and she was running out of options to stay with friends because their parents feared she would be a bad influence on their daughters.

“I remember being 16 and having the world against me, and I walked into this place and felt like I walked into a home,” Ms Soto said.

“I felt safe the minute I walked inside the door.

“There was so much stigma attached to young girls.

“Mum’s extreme reaction meant that I didn’t know what to do. I pretty much packed my bags and headed off.”

Her case worker, Kerry, who still works for the society, showed her a rack of maternity clothes she could wear and organised housing for her.

“I was really anxious because I had already suffered so much humiliation,” Ms Soto said.

“I felt humiliation from the hospital, I felt humiliation from the midwives and I felt humiliation from my family.”

She gave birth to son Jeremiah, who is now 16.

The society supported the pair for a year while they were put into transitional housing in Essendon North and it allowed Ms Soto to finish her education and find employment.

But, most importantly, the society was able to make sure Ms Soto’s son was not taken from her because she was homeless, poor and vulnerable.

“That early intervention of providing your typical vital needs and physical needs and emotional needs set up the opportunity for me to become self-determined,” she said.

Ms Soto returned to Caroline Chisholm Society this year but this time as a case worker.