

MOONEE PONDS

Having helped pregnant women and vulnerable mums for years, an organisation now needs state support, **LINHLY** reports

Society in struggle to stay

ACROSS 46 years, Caroline Chisholm Society has become ingrained in the Moonee Valley community. Now it faces the fight of its life to stay there.

The pregnancy and family support service sold its original Moonee Ponds premises in Park St in September 2012 so it could build a new home and meet the growing demand for its services.

While leasing at a cramped Shuter St site, society chief executive Helen Cooney said they scoured for office spaces and land around Moonee Ponds, Strathmore and Essendon before buying the only genuine place to meet their needs — a former

TIME TICKING FOR CAROLINE CHISHOLM TO SECURE PREMISES

mower shop on Mt Alexander Rd.

The society wants to turn it into a community hub with pram access, disability-compliant facilities, space for volunteers to package baby bundles and repair second-hand goods, meeting and counselling rooms.

"We are not a normal office," Ms Cooney (pictured) said. "We need to be fully accessible for disability, aged and parenting. We need a place fit for purpose."

Ms Cooney said it was essential the organisation remained in Moonee Valley,



vice its most vulnerable clients.

Red Cross and Asylum Seeker Resource Centre are among the agencies that rely on the society's specialised material aid for babies and young children, helped by its proximity to the city and transport options.

"One of the things that's

fabulous about this place is the level of neighbourly goodwill," Ms Cooney said.

She said "rain, hail or shine" volunteers set up fundraising stalls in Moonee Ponds and Niddrie every fortnight.

Former students from Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School and St Columba's College returned to volunteer when they graduated after completing work placements there as students. "If we left, we would be rebuilding 40 years of community engagement," she said.

The society relies heavily on the support of its volunteer base, which brings in about \$10,000 a year selling crafts and baby goods at stalls in Moonee Ponds and Niddrie.

Volunteer co-ordinator Gwenda Rumble said with 80 per cent of those volunteers being Moonee Valley residents the society would lose a large proportion if it relocated.

Moonee Valley Mayor Narelle Sharpe said losing the organisation would be of "great detriment".

"Without it, already disad-

vantaged women would be forced to travel further to receive practical support," Cr Sharpe said.

The council, which has provided \$45,000 in program funding over three years, has supported the organisation's application to fund the community hub.

Residents, schools, businesses and the council poured in more than \$300,000 in donations to help fund the building on land the society bought for \$1 million.

The society's Shuter St lease expires in February 2016, so time is ticking to secure \$950,000 from the State Government so it can proceed with its new build.



Simonette Soto was helped by Caroline Chisholm Society when pregnant with son Jeremiah, now 16. Picture: DENNIS MANKTELOW

Stepping into home from a world of fear

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.

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