

Sister Jean's turned down meeting with state, city prior to eviction

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ATLANTIC CITY — Prior to its eviction from the Tourism District, Sister Jean's Kitchen, the nonprofit that provides nearly 300 meals a day to those in need, declined to meet with city and state officials on a contingency plan.

On Monday, city officials issued a Notice of Unsafe Structure to Sister Jean's, which operates out of the 163-year-old Victory First Presbyterian Church at Pennsylvania and Pacific avenues. The notice said the location must be vacated by Thursday.

That remained the case Wednesday night after representatives from Sister Jean's and the state Department of Community Affairs met with Mayor Frank Gilliam.

The Rev. John Scotland, executive director of Friends of Jean Webster Inc., the nonprofit that runs the kitchen, said officials discussed working out a temporary solution in addition to finding a long-term home, but no one would be fed at Victory on Thursday.

"We have more meetings to do," Scotland said, adding he was asked not to comment further.

State officials said the Atlantic City Rescue Mission has agreed to provide daily lunches to people once Sister Jean's closes. The Casino Reinvestment Development Authority has agreed to underwrite the cost of the lunches and post staff outside Sister Jean's to help direct people to the rescue mission for food and assistance.

Lisa Ryan, a spokeswoman for the DCA, said in a statement Tuesday that officials from the state, the city and the CRDA tried to set up a meeting with representatives from Sister Jean's about a month ago, but the 28-year-old charity rebuffed those efforts.

"Throughout this process, the city has sought to work with Sister Jean's on alternate means of serving meals, including considering other sites to work from and engaging other service providers of meals," Ryan said in a follow-up statement Wednesday. "Those efforts have not produced a resolution, and the condition of the building reached the point that it is no longer safe for use and/or occupancy. From the city and the state's perspective, the most important thing right now is taking care of residents who need assistance."

Scotland said the group declined to meet with the city and state in January because he believed it would have mirrored a previous meeting they had in June during which the two groups could not reach an agreement.

He said that at the June meeting the charity had hoped to discuss moving to the former St. Monica's Catholic Church on North Pennsylvania Avenue.

However, he said, city and state officials had a different agenda.

He said they held the meeting to determine how to redistribute the work of Sister Jean's to other social service groups in the city.

Not wishing to discuss closing at the January meeting, the charity declined to attend.

"We recognize the good work that Sister Jean's Kitchen has regularly provided for people in need. But the city also has the obligation to act in the best interest of the people who visit Sister Jean's for help," said Ryan.

An online petition was started this week requesting Gilliam allow Sister Jean's to relocate to St. Monica's, which the nonprofit purchased with reserve funds more than a year ago.

According to Scotland, city officials have denied Sister Jean's a certificate of occupancy at the new location.

Gilliam's office has not responded to repeated requests for comment or clarification.

The online petition has more than 1,500 signatures, and the organizer, Paige Vaccaro, said she has more on paper.

The church that currently houses Sister Jean's was badly damaged during Hurricane Sandy in 2012 and has continued to deteriorate, said Dale Finch, director of the city's Licensing and Inspection Department. In February 2017, the charity was issued a Notice of Violation by city inspectors for 15 code infractions. Some of the listed violations were abated, but others were not.

On Jan. 17, city construction officials inspected the building and determined it to be unsafe, noting holes in the ceiling, compromised structural integrity due to exposure to the elements post-Sandy and the poor condition of the sanctuary's ceiling, walls and balcony.