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Brighter, Easier-to-Use DHS Offices Promise Choice, Efficiency, and Self-Sufficiency

Chicago, IL—March 1, 2006—It's out with the old and in with the new at Illinois Department of Human Services office locations. Outdated furniture, decor, and utilization obstacles are slated to be replaced by more colorful and artfully arranged environments designed to empower DHS staff and customers and to significantly enhance transaction experiences.

Design can often be an overlooked component of any project, particularly under ever-increasing pressure to meet rapid deadlines with even greater cost-efficiency. Social agencies such as DHS are often asked to perform tasks of great human value, but with little regard for their facilities or tools. The new DHS office designs will provide appropriate environments for case workers to do their jobs effectively, and for DHS customers to achieve their goals as quickly as possible.

The new DHS offices will feature:

- **New Information Areas**—access to equipment that allow customers to create resumes, review job postings, and apply for jobs online; also informational materials on employment, housing, safety, health, and customer rights and responsibilities
- **Self-Service Kiosks**—quick access to information about DHS services and customer account information
- **Express Service Desks**—enable customers to efficiently perform bureaucratic transactions with DHS case agents
- **Children's Areas**—enclosed areas that provide educational and social activities for children
- **Service Areas**—regular access to representatives from social agencies
- **Individual/Interactive Areas**—waiting rooms revamped with color and new seating; grid-like arrangements are being replaced with more aesthetic, graceful layouts to encourage interaction and decrease stress

The new office designs were conceptualized at Archeworks, an alternative design school in Chicago, and executed by Designs for Dignity, an agency that provides pro bono interior design services to non-profit organizations. The execution of the designs represent the realization of DHS's initiative to infuse change into its offices throughout the state. In an effort to better enable its customers to reach their goals, the agency realized a change in physical space would be necessary.

Response to the proposed improvements from DHS management is extremely favorable. “We are very pleased with the work done by Archeworks. Their design for our offices, particularly the color schemes, will go a long way toward boosting customer and staff morale and helping us to actualize the change in our customer service philosophy,” said Marva Arnold, Director of the Division of Human Capital Development.

The plans and specifications for the new office designs are now in the hands of the agency’s architects. They will be included in all present and future RFPs, to be implemented and included in construction bids as the agency grows and changes locations. Additionally, a scaled-back version of the new design is currently in operation at the DHS Lower North Local Office at 2650 West Fulton Street in Chicago.

“We were interested in this project, because the Dreihaus Foundation believes that design and architecture enhance quality of life,” said Sunny Fischer, Executive Director of the Richard H. Dreihaus Foundation, the organization that funded the DHS Model Office project. “A well-designed office will be able to immediately give clients hope and respect, and there is a better chance they will be able to reach their goals. The same applies to the workers. We hope the Illinois DHS offices will be a model for the rest of the country.” She added, “It’s impressive that DHS and Archeworks worked so well together to improve the environment for DHS clients and staff.”

The new office designs are part of an effort from DHS to implement a culture change within the agency. The designs address existing organizational obstacles that often impede the agency’s efficacy. New layouts offer both DHS case workers as well as their customers an environment that better suits their needs, and one that will allow them to access the information they need quickly and efficiently.

“The physical space makes such a difference in delivering a new way of servicing,” said Eva Maddox, co-founder of Archeworks. “This is going to dramatically change the way DHS service is delivered, enabling customers to achieve their goals, and allowing case workers to better assist them.”

A pre- and post-design survey will be conducted by Archeworks to measure the impact of the design interventions at DHS offices. “Archeworks is always striving to bring good design to underserved market segments,” said Molly Baltman, Executive Director at the school. “We are extremely pleased to be involved in this project for DHS.”

Archeworks initially became involved in the project in 1999–2000 when a team of students from the school partnered with DHS to identify ways to infuse values into the DHS customer experience, an effort funded by the Dreihaus Foundation. The Designs for Dignity solutions represent the realization of the initial research.

Archeworks is Chicago’s only alternative design school, where students work in multi-disciplinary teams with nonprofit partners to create design solutions for social concerns. The one-year, part-time evening program for professionals awards certificates in alternative design. Archeworks was founded twelve years ago by two nationally recognized members of the Chicago architecture and design communities. Stanley Tigerman, FAIA and Eva Maddox, FIIDA started the school to fill a void they felt existed in design and design education. Over the past twelve years over 40 student projects have been completed in areas such as eldercare, early learning, impoverished neighborhoods, and other urban environment needs.

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