

Emerge Center tax credits to go toward upgrades



[Show caption](#)

Advocate staff photo by HEATHER MCCLELLAND -- Speech Therapist Tanya Bourgoyne, right, and Behavior Analyst Katie Barlow, back center, conduct at group language session with, from left, Avery Blaize, 2, Kaleb Cunningham, 4, and Averie Bergeron, 4, at The Baton Rouge Speech and Hearing Foundation on Thursday. The foundation has outgrown its existing space, relying on room partitions and shared computers.

BY CHAD CALDER

Advocate business writer

The Baton Rouge Speech & Hearing Foundation got approval from the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority on Thursday to receive federal tax credits to help fund its \$8.1 million center at the LSU Innovation Park in the Gardere area.

The Emerge Center for Communication, Behavior & Development will double the capacity of the foundation, which provides an early-intervention program for children with autism, group and individual speech and language therapy and hearing aids and testing for children.

The foundation has raised \$3.4 million through its fundraising campaign and has a \$2.7 million line of credit from Iberiabank. But it will use the proceeds from the sale of \$8.1 million in credits approved by an RDA committee Thursday to fill the gap, which could amount to about \$2 million, according to foundation board member Ryan Thibodeaux.

Melissa Juneau, the foundation's executive director, said the 26,000-square-foot facility on 3.2 acres it will lease from LSU also will provide room to grow if necessary. And if the center's past is any indication, that could certainly be the case.

The foundation was created in 1960 primarily to help the hearing-impaired. It has since expanded in scope and services, most recently as the number of children diagnosed with autism exploded, but also because of changes in insurance coverage, Juneau said.

Last year, it had 1,600 audiology patients — adults and children — and served 900 children in all of its programs. The new center will allow it to double its capacity, Juneau said.

The current center on West Roosevelt Street has the capacity to provide services for 46 autistic children, for example, but has a waiting list of about 70 for the early-intervention program and other services. The new center will boost its capacity to 100, Juneau said.

The center will allow it to double its audiology patients to 1,600; increase the number of group therapy classrooms from six to 10; add a pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classroom for a dozen children at a time; serve up to 300 children a week in the group therapy program; and increase occupational therapy from one to five days a week, treating up to 60 clients per week.

The expansion will create 50 full-time jobs for the center, which now employs 17. It employs about 50 students from nearby universities on a part-time basis and will be able to double that as well, Juneau said.

RDA President Walter Monsour said the foundation is a worthy recipient of the tax credits not only because of its mission, but because of its location in the Gardere area. He said the work of the center could be a key component in attracting support services to the area and seeding economic development.

“We look at this as a catalytic project,” he said.