



## **Dr. Jessie M. Gaeta: Tending to the homeless**

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By Laurel J. Sweet

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Photo by Faith Ninivaggi

Dr. Jessie M. Gaeta has a bedside manner that's beyond reproach, though she sadly finds her favorite patients often lack so much as a bed when she makes house calls.

Gaeta, 35 and the married mom of a 14-month-old daughter, is a staff physician for Boston Health Care for the Homeless, a job where hope - but never gratitude - can be in short supply.

"I started doing volunteer work in college and met some homeless people who I got to know very well," said Gaeta, a Maryland native who's also affiliated with Boston Medical Center. "I got interested in homelessness as a social issue and it snowballed from there."

With disease and illness often prioritized well below the search for a meal or shelter, the average life expectancy of a homeless person is 47 years.

"I hear these unspeakable stories every day," Gaeta said. "In my mind, it really is a public health crisis.

"If I'm not able to help much medically," she said, "at least I can witness what they're going through and document it and bring it to people who can affect change."

Gaeta partnered this year with Joe Finn, executive director of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, on a state pilot program called Home and Healthy for Good. Her treks to the State House to inform policymakers how to end homelessness has helped find housing for 200 individuals, whose homes had been the streets.

“It’s amazing what you can accomplish when you don’t care who gets the credit,” Finn said in admiration of Gaeta’s work, quoting Harry S. Truman.

Housing, Gaeta noted, can do more to cure what ails one homeless person than any prescription she could write.

“It’s depressing at times, of course,” she acknowledges of doctoring the homeless, “but it’s also fascinating to someone who loves science. The patients are very thankful. They bring gifts, they write letters. I feel it’s the best job in the world.”

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