

Experts and advocates re-evaluate value of shelters for homeless people

Say homes are a better, cheaper solution

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Mary E. Brundage in her room at S.O.A.R in the Hill District. She has been there for almost a year after being homeless.

By Diana Nelson Jones
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Four would-be rescuers climbed a steep slope of icy Belgian blocks under an interstate overpass on the North Side one recent night.

An older man in a knit cap lay on a bed under a pile of blankets. He extended a wizened hand to shake all around. He accepted an apple, beef jerky and a pair of gloves, burrowing each hand slowly and tenderly into the thick wool.

The group from Operation Save-a-Life knows this man, who coordinator Mac McMahon said wants to get off the streets. He just doesn't want to go to a shelter.

Increasingly, social service workers and federal funders are reconsidering the effect of shelters. They are advocating instead the more obvious solution to homelessness: homes. Research shows that permanent housing is more effective and less costly.

Putting the homeless into housing at the outset and bringing services to them, a model called Housing First, exemplifies the "cure" for which the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness has been funding 10-year plans in 200 cities for several years. And more agencies are adopting the method.

"We need a systemic change," said Michael Glass, director of the Northside Common Ministries' Pleasant Valley Shelter. "Shelters serve a purpose, but they're a band-aid. The way we seek solutions is inefficient and incorrect."

Housing First has numerous adherents locally, but they can get only so many people off the streets at a time.

Mr. Glass' agency has permanent housing for 11 chronic and disabled homeless people, a Housing First model, but the agency can't put up bigger numbers for several reasons. It is one of a slew of small efforts competing for funding. There is no over-arching coordination of all the programs, so each model approximates the standard and each has to scrounge for housing sites. Then there's the resistance from homeowners that plagues efforts everywhere.

Dennis Culhane, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, is at the forefront of research that shows strong retention in housing, even among chronic and psychiatrically disabled homeless people, 85 percent to 90 percent after one year, 75 percent to 80 percent after two.

He calls for funds sufficient to do Housing First right, to shift money away from the maintenance of homelessness that has defined intervention for decades.

Traditional method fails

Philip Mangano, director of the U.S. Interagency Council, calls the traditional method "an abject failure." It's a ping-pong system that sends one shelter's overflow to the next, from doorways to emergency rooms, from the jail back to the street and over and over again. Mr. Mangano said it would be cheaper to put homeless people into luxury hotels.

He cited a late 1990s study of 15 homeless men in San Diego. It showed that such uncoordinated and random intervention for 15 people cost \$3 million over 18 months. "At the end of 18 months," he said, "they were in the same condition, same situations, on the same street corners."

By contrast, he said, the per-person cost of Housing First tops out at \$25,000 a year. For 15 people, that's \$375,000.

The 2007 federal budget for homeless services is expected to reward that model and, as proposed, would increase from \$3.9 billion to \$4.2 billion next year. It is one of the only increases that the Bush administration is proposing in support of a vulnerable domestic population.

But the political will is shifty, because, while homeless support is up, low-income housing support is being cut by as much as 20 percent to 30 percent. A Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report warns that deep cuts threatening low-income housing threaten efforts to prevent homelessness.

Robert Greenstein, executive director of the center in Washington, D.C., said the Bush administration's proposed budget might be "the most egregious" so far and that its level of domestic cutbacks would serve only to widen economic disparities.

Homeless count varies

The nationwide homeless count varies. Some estimates say 2 million to 3 million people spend at least one night homeless a year. "Snapshot" surveys have set the number at 740,000 on a given date. Among them, 150,000 to 300,000 are said to be chronic, often with more than one disability. No one knows how many people sleep in abandoned houses or on friends' couches, so the number fluctuates.

Allegheny County's Department of Human Services counted 2,000 in its most recent survey.

The county has 15 emergency overnight shelters. Many agencies offer permanent housing. One is Bethlehem Haven's "safe haven" residency. It serves 16 women in an Uptown dormitory the agency rents. The women share a living room and meals. Those who agree to treatment have case managers, a curriculum developed by occupational therapists, psychiatric services, employment training and addiction recovery treatment.

Mary Williams Brundage earned her clean-and-sober certificate from the program last year, volunteers at a thrift store in Garfield and is on a waiting list for public housing.

She was squatting in a condemned house on the South Side for several years when "some guy named Mac left a card on the door" last spring. The city had recently told her she had to leave. She called the number and Mac McMahan came to take her to the Safe Haven Uptown. First, they shared the lunch he had brought.

"Chicken, salad and applesauce," Ms. Brundage said. "We sat out on the steps and ate and talked. When he asked, 'Was I ready?' I said yes, but I cried." The house had no utilities, but she had made it a home and collected rainwater in a garbage bin to flush the

toilet and wash. She made money selling recyclables and household items people left out on garbage day.

Since she has been at Bethlehem Haven's residence, she has felt like running out several times "because I liked being on my own." She said she realized her current course would give her autonomy again someday, but with the benefit of job training and sobriety.

"I am happy," she said, looking forward to "a life with light and gas and running water where I'll be able to cook."

Operation Safety Net, too, has supported homeless people at scattered-site apartments for 10 years, taking services to them. With federal and county grants, Safety Net supplements private landlords at 20 units, most in the Mon Valley.

It was a Housing First model before the model was named.

"When we started, we began to note that most people resisted going into a rehab process before [getting] housing," said Dr. James Withers, who founded Safety Net as an outreach to people on the streets. "We noted that when we took them right to housing and figured out the details later, it worked better.

"Then came the [Housing First] stats. We weren't surprised, but we're glad someone did the numbers."

Safety Net remains committed to people who sleep in the streets, he said.

"They're like hunter-gatherers, a different breed. Any feeling that they're being herded into a group or put under someone else's thumb ... some guys would rather die."

Housing First holdout

Two of the county's three largest shelters sit a half mile from each other on the North Side.

Between them, Pleasant Valley and the Light of Life shelter more than 100 men a night, some randomly, others who commit to recovery programs.

Light of Life has been a holdout in the Housing First movement, preferring housing last, spokesman Beth Healey said. "We want to find out why they lost their home in the first place" and work on repairing the problem.

The mission graduates 15 to 20 people a year from a recovery program it runs in its shelter. It restricts their movements while they learn the rules: staying sober and drug-free, committing to classes in life skills, anger management, coping and strategies for maintaining recovery. From there, the more vulnerable graduates are moved into apartments for extended care.

They still are accountable to caseworkers and still belong to the homeless demographic, but each has control of his own space.

A new start

Miguel Gonzalez, 46, a native of Puerto Rico with a master's degree, is in that transition now, living sober in a North Side apartment of a 12-unit building and volunteering in his church's youth programs.

From the high point of a career as a psychologist, working at a hospital in Ohio, he fell to drifting in the alcoholic dissolution of his marriage, his job and the ability to maintain a home. He wandered from state to state "in a search for something. I thought that, with a change of geography, I would find what it was. In Pittsburgh, I came to the end of the road."

Alighting from a bus Downtown one night in the fall of 2005, he met several drifters. "They told me about this mission and made it sound like an option. Spiritually, it's been the opportunity I needed."

Bob Wilson arrived the previous June after a policeman found him sleeping off a pint of vodka on the shoulder of Route 8. For most of his adult life, he had been dispensing pieces of his life while drunk and using drugs.

After one relapse in the recovery program, he has followed the rules and worked his way into a room of his own. Describing that, his face lights up.

At 48, he expects to graduate in August with mostly A's in a class of 12 from the Bidwell culinary program.

As for the man with the new gloves, sleeping under the overpass, he is one of several whom Mac McMahan is "working on."

"He told me he wanted to get an apartment and a truck to pick up recycling stuff. He uses a shopping cart now."

To get him on his feet, Mr. McMahan is obtaining documents: a photo ID, Social Security card and another ID with his name on it, such as a voter registration card.

He stops by twice a week bearing food.

"Are you staying warm enough?" Mr. McMahan asked him dubiously.

The man flexed his gloved hands and said, "Pretty good."

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