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Not just shelter, but home, for the homeless

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The homeless veteran, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, had been living in a tent behind a plaza in Plymouth for nearly a decade.

A woman struggling with serious mental health issues had been homeless for three years, in and out of shelters on the South Shore.

Thanks to the Housing First program started three years ago by Father Bill's Place, an emergency shelter in Quincy, the man and the woman - and many more like them - are now in their own apartments or lodging house rooms. For many, it is the first home they've had in years.

It makes good sense, giving the homeless homes. The hard-core homeless come off the grates, out of the woods and emergency shelters, and move into places of their own, with support services. It's both compassionate and cost-effective, since that population tends to cycle through expensive court visits, detox, jail, and/or hospital stays.

Father Bill's has been ahead of the curve in what is becoming a nationwide trend. Governor Deval Patrick has recently proposed spending \$10 million to place thousands of homeless people in their own apartments or rooms over the next five years.

Though some of the chronically homeless don't make it on their own, the majority do. "The woman had been sleeping in a tent, off and on, for years," says John Yazwinski, executive director of Father Bill's, which merged with MainSpring in Brockton last summer. "When we first moved her into an apartment, she slept on the floor in her sleeping bag." She has been connected with mental health services and is reunited with her family.

The vet who pitched his tent in the Plymouth woods calls his new place "the Taj Mahal," says Yazwinski.

Housing First is just what the name says: a move away from emergency shelter and toward permanent housing. The belief is that given a home of their own, folks can then start focusing on jobs, mental health, and sobriety. It represents a radical change from warehousing the homeless one night at a time, only to kick them out the next day.

"All we were continuing to do is manage a problem," says Yazwinski. "It's been just temporary housing. We asked ourselves why we were putting so much money into shelter and less money into housing."

Most important, they asked the homeless what they needed. The invariable reply: housing first, then help with other issues.

There will always be people who, for whatever reason, need temporary shelter. But the more people Yazwinski can place in their own units, the fewer shelter beds will be needed, he believes.

In 2003-2004, Father Bill's sheltered 140 per night. "We said we have to go in a different direction," says Yazwinski. Now, that number is down to 95.

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A recent study of the first two years of Housing First by a UMass-Boston researcher found that the program has reduced the number of those seeking emergency shelter and has provided stability for 86 percent of the 64 residents who remained housed a year or more after their move. In Quincy and Weymouth, the report found, chronic homelessness decreased by 19 percent between January 2006 and January 2007.

Also, the quality of life improved drastically: Residents began to address their medical needs and were no longer exposed to disease in crowded shelters. Nor did they have to cart their possessions around all day, or wait in long lines for a bed and a meal. The number of those receiving SSI benefits increased, since they had a permanent address; many also got on MassHealth, the state medical plan for the needy. Most were able to get jobs and stay sober, with the help of staffers from Father Bill's who provided support services. According to the report, hospital stays were dramatically reduced: inpatient visits by 77 percent, emergency room visits by 83 percent.

And the model is \$3,500 cheaper per person than housing them in shelters - a figure that doesn't include savings from expensive hospital visits.

The sheer fact of having a home, or even a room, of one's own is life-giving, perhaps life-saving. Consider the 18-year-old heroin addict who had grown up in foster care, aged out, and found herself in an adult shelter with women in their 50s, also struggling with serious issues.

"She's trying to finish high school, and instead of her sleeping in a dorm room with 30 other adult women, we gave her a room in a lodging house in Quincy," says Yazwinski. "The women there each have their own room; on bad days or whenever, they can close the door."

But let's hear from the tenants themselves, who, when they get on their feet, pay 30 percent of their rent; the rest is covered by Father Bill's. Before she had her own place, one woman told the UMass study, "We had to be out of the shelter by 7:30, and we were out on the streets by 8. I went to the library, walking."

Most notably, the new tenants appreciated being able to live their own lives free from strict shelter rules such as when to eat, when to shower, when to leave. "Now I have peace and quiet, a lot more peace, have TV. . . . Getting my life back was a big thing. . . . I don't have to stand in line," were typical comments in the UMass report.

Because emergency shelter is more expensive than Housing First units, Yazwinski is asking the state to convert funds from shelter beds to permanent places such as the ones his agency has opened in Quincy, Brockton, and Plymouth. "I think what makes Father Bill's & MainSpring a strong entity is that we're trying to end this problem of homelessness, not just continue to manage it. We're trying to take the shelter sign down."

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