

# The Boston Globe

## 14 women find rooms of their own

Nonprofit opens third permanent housing facility

By Victoria Cheng

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The three-story clapboard house near Fresh Pond Circle sports a fresh coat of beige paint, and the picket fence out front is brighter than a Tom Sawyer whitewash.

Early this month, 14 formerly homeless women made their way up the wooden porch steps, around the winding access ramp, and across the polished hardwood floors to spacious rooms numbered from 1 to 14, each with its own lock and key, a wooden bureau, and a bed draped with a white scatter rug.

The house is the third building of its kind in Cambridge set up by Heading Home, a nonprofit organization devoted to ending homelessness in Greater Boston by providing permanent housing for families and individuals.

"It's not a shelter," Heading Home executive director Tom Lorello said. "It's a housing program for people who are homeless, but . . . everyone has their own room and it's considered permanent housing, meaning people can live there for as long as they want."

The women who moved into Duley House - named after former Heading Home executive director Susan Duley - are "a good mix," said Charleen Tierney, program coordinator at the house. "We have every nationality under the sun, various ages . . . and they're all so happy to live here. The first day, some of the women were crying because they couldn't believe they got to live in such a beautiful place."

The house was gutted on the inside, with certain features preserved in accordance with Cambridge Historical Commission provisions, and renovated to provide a common living area and kitchen, as well as the 14 bedrooms and four full bathrooms. The women may furnish their rooms as they wish or as they are able, and some have brought in mini-fridges, televisions, and armchairs.

At a recent tour, a batch of chocolate muffins from Whole Foods sat on the kitchen table, a pot of yellow daisies adorned a windowsill, and clothes tumbled in a dryer tucked away in a third-floor closet.

So-called permanent supported housing is an increasingly popular way of addressing homelessness because recent research indicates that "it is actually cheaper and can be more cost-effective than putting people in shelters," Lorello said. "It's definitely a growing trend. . . . We like to think we're ahead of the curve, but I would expect you'll begin to see more and more agencies who do it."

Between 1989 and 1997, Dennis Culhane, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, followed 4,679 homeless individuals with severe mental disabilities who had been placed in supportive housing in New York City. In a 2002 article, Culhane said these individuals "experience marked reductions in shelter use, hospitalizations . . . and time incarcerated." This decreased use of services translated into \$16,281 saved per year for every housing unit.

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Heading Home also maintains an emergency shelter in Central Square, where "we're cramming three people into a relatively small room and people don't have their privacy," Lorello said. "Because it's a common living situation, it's a lot more rules designed to keep everyone safe - there are curfews and things like that."

In a permanent home, by contrast, "people can come and go as they please. Like any of us, they have to be good neighbors and respectful of other people in the house, but it's a lot more freedom and a lot more privacy."

Tierney, who previously ran Common Ground, Heading Home's drop-in center in Central Square, selected the 14 residents of Duley House from a group of chronically homeless women who frequented Common Ground or were staying at On the Rise, a Cambridge shelter that serves women in situations of domestic violence. Heading Home's budget for the year ended June 2007 was \$3.6 million, with the majority of funding from government contracts and grants.

Some of the women at Duley House struggle with substance abuse and/or mental illness, but all expressed a desire to move away from homelessness and perhaps eventually to find an apartment of their own. As a precursor to maintaining finances for independent living, the women who have jobs contribute 30 percent of their income toward their housing, whether they make \$40 or \$175 a week.

All the women meet every week with Tierney, who helps those without income find work or apply for emergency aid or Supplemental Security Income.

Diane Rufo, a 47-year-old nurse raised in Waltham, said she was initially hesitant about the idea of moving into a permanent home. "I was at Common Ground along with a couple of other women. . . . It was a big decision to make, because in recovery, we don't like change. But we talked amongst each other and the only reason we came is because Charleen [Tierney] is going to be here."

Now that she has installed herself in a room on the first floor of Duley House, she is full of admiration for her new home, lavishing praise on the large backyard and on the convenience of having a bus stop right across the street.

Rufo offered to make coffee for her visitors and explained that she has set up a routine to run the dishwasher - "expensive equipment that I like to see put to use" - on a daily basis. Glancing at the potted plants perched on the sunlit windowsill, she added: "It's a great place to live. . . . I treat this home like my own."

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