

ServiceNet gives these homeless people in Northampton a place to start by The Republican Newsroom

Tuesday July 07, 2009, 7:23 PM



Photo by Brian Tedder

James S. Miller sits in the kitchen of 32 Straw Ave. in Northampton, where Miller and other chronically homeless people live.

BY FRED CONTRADA

fcontrada@repub.com

NORTHAMPTON - James S. Miller shows off his room with a mixture of shyness and pride. There is a small television set with "rabbit ears" for the local channels and a wall calendar and a desk where Miller's reading glasses lie. The bed sits next to a window with a view of the Northampton bike path.

Some might call the room modest. For Miller it's heaven.

"I never even dreamed of this," he says.

Miller, 59, had spent the preceding several years on the street and in homeless shelters. When ServiceNet asked if he wanted a room in the Florence house that Friends of the Hampshire County Homeless recently purchased, he didn't have to be asked twice.

Miller is now one of five chronically homeless people who call the house at 30-32 Straw Avenue home. He and three other men share an apartment on the top two floors. The bottom floor apartment is reserved for two female tenants, though only one is currently living there.

More...

Except for a small plaque in back that proclaims it "Yvonne's House," the building is like any other home in the neighborhood. It's just the way Yvonne Freccero envisioned it.

A champion of the homeless, Freccero helps organize volunteers at the Interfaith Cot Shelter in downtown Northampton, where many of the area's homeless sleep during the cold weather months. She had a bigger vision, however. Freccero wanted a more stable place where homeless people could begin to claim their lives back.

Last year, Friends of the Hampshire County Homeless, of which Freccero is president, applied for and received \$220,000 in Community Preservation Act funds to buy six units of permanent housing. With the help of some supplemental fund-raising, the organization purchased the Straw Avenue house, then turned it over to ServiceNet, which administers a number of programs for the homeless.

"It fits right in with the 'housing first' model," said Wanda Rolon, the director of shelter and housing for ServiceNet. "People can't do too much being on the streets or in shelters."

ServiceNet, which operates the Grove Street Inn homeless shelter, selected the six people who moved into Straw Avenue last November. One woman has since moved out. The apartments include common kitchens, bathrooms and living rooms as well as private bedrooms with locks. There is also a small office where a social worker provides assistance when needed. The nearby bike path and a bus stop on the corner offer easy access to downtown Northampton and Florence. Residents pay rent according to their income. ServiceNet picks up the cost of the utilities.

Don, who didn't want his last name published, is 58 and spent the last several of those years outdoors, in shelters and on the couches of friends. Don says he has a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Massachusetts but no real marketable skills. Since leaving academia decades ago, he has gone through numerous jobs trying to gain some stability.

"If you live outside, it's really difficult to get a job," he says. "You really don't sleep too much."

Now that he has a home, Don gets up and goes to the library, where he checks the on-line job listings and writes a blog on philosophy. Although his bedroom is small, he says, "It's bigger than Pulaski Park bench number three."

At Grove Street, Don had to share a bathroom with 12 other men. Here in Straw Avenue, he and his roommates keep their apartment immaculate.

"This is the first place I've been in where I have my own space," he says. "In a house like this you can recover and maintain your dignity."

Miller, a painter, often rises at 4 a.m. to enjoy his solitude. He calls a partner to see if they have any painting work lined up. If not, he walks downtown for his shift at Kathy's Diner.

Don understands that some people might object to the notion of providing a house to the homeless, but, like a good philosopher, he is ready to argue the point with anyone.

"This is not a place to stay," he says. "It's a home. If you have something to say to me, bring it on."