

# The Boston Globe

Letter to the Editor:

## **Permanent home should be priority**

July 13, 2009

I COMMEND the officers of the A-1 station for all they are doing to help Diana (“Neediness, compassion on police station steps,” *See article below*). Startlingly absent from the article, however, was any mention of the permanent solution to Diana’s homelessness: a home.

A Housing First approach to ending homelessness, which provides people like Diana with permanent housing and supportive services, has proved to be humane, efficient, and cost-effective in even the hardest cases. It is an antidote to, as Pine Street Inn president Lyndia Downie put it, “the most backward system you can think of.”

Pine Street collaborates with the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance (MHSA) in our statewide Housing First initiative, *Home & Healthy for Good* (HHG), boasting a 99 percent retention rate of their tenants. Even more compelling, the reduction in expensive emergency service usage among HHG participants saves taxpayers nearly \$9,000 annually per tenant. With additional resources, Pine Street and MHSA could provide housing and services to many more people just like Diana - saving the state even more.

As Sergeant Tom Lema put it in your article, officers concerned about Diana don’t ever want to ask “Where’s Diana?” But wouldn’t they find comfort if, finally, the answer is “She’s home”?

**JOE FINN**

Boston

The writer is executive director of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance.

# Neediness, compassion on police station steps

By Milton J. Valencia, Globe Staff | July 2, 2009

She arrives by 8 most nights, shuffling past City Hall plaza, her backpack in tow with her orange and black blankets, a cardboard mat, a change of socks, and a pair of fleece-lined slippers, all she needs even on the coldest rainy nights.

Settling down on the hard, concrete steps of a downtown police station, the small, plump woman nestles into her blankets, twitches and shakes when she tries to sleep. Patrol officers step over and around her as they bound out the doors on their way to the nightly medley of emergencies.

They are hardly oblivious to each other, the police and the woman named Diana who has made the station her home. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Officers accustomed to a world of shootings, robberies, drugs, and tragedy reach out to her, offering food left over from some community event. Others tell her to go inside. Some ask about her story and offer help.

“Each and every officer tries to keep an eye on her,” said police Sergeant Tom Lema, a 27-year veteran based at the A-1 station on New Sudbury Street.

Loitering, of course, is illegal, and rampant chronic homelessness is considered by many to be a blight on downtown Boston. But Diana’s nightly presence on the precinct steps offers an unusual glimpse of the small gestures of kindness that divide police work and law enforcement.

Police officers would rather see her there than learn something worse has happened.

“The thing is, you know where she is every night, and no one’s saying, ‘Where’s Diana,’ ” Lema, a community liaison to the city’s homeless, said recently in a way that reveals his passion for helping anyone on the streets. “You don’t want to push someone back on the street and worry she’ll become a victim.”

Diana, 43, has a nest for hair and a gaping smile. She suffers from the darkness of a mental illness that blinds her from knowing she doesn’t have to sleep on the stairs. And her choice to do so reflects the challenges in helping the homeless, as Diana refuses to go to a shelter, and no one, not even police, can force her to seek help. But the result is a relationship between Diana and her protectors, a type not taught in police academies.

The A-1 district knows all too well the plight of the homeless and the mentally ill, particularly during the winter when temperatures drop and shelters are filled. Surrounded by most of the city’s main homeless programs, and home to Boston’s tourist destinations, where vagrants tend to panhandle, the district has a workload that mostly involves helping the poor and needy.

Of the 74,000 radio calls the district receives each year, about 85 percent are for assistance, a majority homeless-related. Boston officials counted more than 3,800 people living across the city in streets and emergency shelters this year, and some have stayed at the station before.

“Police see this every day,” said Mike Hayes, a 60-year-old from Medford who works nights downtown and sees Diana and Boston’s other needy during each trip into the city. “I don’t know what I can do personally, but thank God police have reached out, in a human way.”

Nowhere is that more evident than with Diana, short and sweet with wiry, graying hair and baggy clothes, who suffers from schizophrenia, delusions, and whose condition is so severe it has her denying she needs help.

She has a jumbled story - one that she constantly tells to anyone who will listen - of an FBI investigation, political conspiracies, and a police refusal to identify the true name of her father, the sole person the FBI will let her live with out of concern for her safety, she says.

“This is a person very important to me, who cares a lot about me,” she says with a bit of a lisp and a smile appreciated by anyone who takes the time to talk.

In reality, her father died a decade ago. She has family members in Central Massachusetts who still send her money, an aunt who talks with her regularly. But attempts to persuade her to seek treatment have failed countless times. She has been treated in hospitals and clinics in Central Massachusetts and in Boston, only to be discharged.

Diana once had a better life, working for a prominent investment and insurance firm. But something happened with this dark disease that psychologists are still trying to comprehend, and Diana has found her way onto Boston's streets, choosing to stay - in her view, forced to stay - until she can find the true identity of her father.

During the day, she eats and spends time at Women's Lunch Place on Newbury Street. In between, she makes her way to courthouses, filing her cases and interacting with staff.

Diana first became known to authorities when she was arrested by Boston police in June 2008 at the North End Library, when staff complained she was getting dressed outside. Fed up with constant complaints of her loitering and her refusal to go to a shelter, police charged her with trespassing in hopes she would be forced to seek help. The charge was later dismissed. She never got help.

Around the same time, she started filing court cases alleging an FBI conspiracy. And by November she made her way to the police precinct, staying inside the small, brightly lighted lobby at the onset of the cold winter months. During Christmas, she was a memorable sight to the lawyers, businessmen, and other officials who work downtown as she slept on a bench next to the precinct's decorated tree.

"Who knows what her real story is?" said Mike Leone, a 31-year-old from the North End who passes by the station on his regular trips to Boston Sports Club and noticed Diana sleeping outside on the steps earlier this month.

"You get used to seeing something like this, and it makes you reflect a little bit, makes you appreciate what you have."

Of all the people who have found shelter in the downtown police station, Diana became a presence. "She has that smile going," Lema said.

Police have tried to work with her before, when she first started staying at the station. A detective learned of the ways she spends her days, and of a family wanting to learn more. Records have been transferred between officers and emergency shelter workers, with the same conclusion of a woman in need. Officers offer to bring her to a shelter, but her case won't let her, she tells them.

The failure to help her highlights a larger legal struggle between services for the homeless and a person's civil rights to identify their own needs. Under constitutional law, police and other agencies cannot commit a person to a program unless they can prove the person is a danger to herself or anyone else.

To many who work with the homeless, the system can be frustrating.

"It's the most backwards system you can think of, where people who need help the most live on the streets," said Lyndia Downie, president of the Pine Street Inn, the city's largest homeless shelter. "It's frustrating to know your hands are tied when you know people are suffering."

Most of the police officers have come to know Diana - one young officer called her "babe" as he passed by on the stairs. One of them gave her the fleece-lined slippers. She liked the detective who researched her background, "but the problem is his bosses," she said. About Lema, she says, "he's not bad."

"A lot of them are nice, you know," she said with that smile that so many of them know. And then she talks again about her case, justifying it with an "honest to God."

Officers do their best to humor her. Lema remains hopeful. Perhaps a court could do more to mandate some form of help.

"We're just trying to get in her head, find out what this woman's all about," Lema said. "It's a big question mark, it's the unknown."

*Milton Valencia can be reached at [mvalencia@globe.com](mailto:mvalencia@globe.com). ■*