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## Building a beginning

LOWELL-The weatherman had forecast rain, but the sun the other day was as bright as the fresh yellow paint on New Hope Apartments, a small but not insignificant outpost in the war against homelessness and escalating rental costs in Massachusetts.

New Hope began as the vision of people committed enough to imagine a more permanent solution than emergency shelters to the housing needs of the very poorest residents of the Acre, one of this city's scrappier neighborhoods. It materialized as an 11-unit apartment house, one year to the day after ground was broken and two years after the purchase of a weed-choked lot on Salem Street.

Housing for 10 families and a resident manager who will coordinate supportive services will hardly end homelessness in Massachusetts, but New Hope Apartments is as noteworthy for how it came about as for how many it will serve. The project embodies the sort of public-private partnership we hear about more often than we actually see in action.

The \$2 million building is the result of the combined efforts of the community leaders, city officials, and state bureaucracies that found the funds and the design and construction professionals who drew the plans and drove the nails. "This was never a meeting of competing agendas or self-interested individuals, but, rather, it was a team united in a single purpose with a shared vision: to build the very best housing possible for homeless families" said Deb Chausse, the executive director of House of Hope, a shelter for families just across the back fence from the new apartment house.

Chausse, a former director of Boston's Homeless Services Department, has been imagining this building since she arrived in Lowell in 2000 and began to worry that a lack of low-income housing was creating a permanent shelter class.

In November 2003, the Governor's Executive Commission on Homeless Services echoed her fear, calling "an increase in affordable housing for those with very low incomes" its most pressing concern.

That is precisely who will be housed at New Hope Apartments. Families now in a shelter, many fighting substance abuse or mental health issues, will be given priority. Some of the mothers with children will come from across the back fence, transitioning from House of Hope to New Hope, winning greater privacy while learning to manage their subsidized rent and utilities payments.

Perhaps no one knows better than Richard Jumpp how rare an opportunity this is for homeless families in Lowell. An area real estate agent, Jumpp served for years as president of the board of directors of the House of Hope shelter and now heads the board created to govern the apartment house. He had trouble keeping his composure at the dedication ceremony in the backyard of the new building, as he looked out at a crowd of impoverished young mothers clutching the hands of small children.

"This is our first project, but we hope that it won't be the last," he told them, gesturing to an adjacent multifamily house purchased by the board when the owner threatened to sue to stop New Hope Apartments. "It would have cost us so much in legal fees to fight him that we figured we would just buy him out and create more housing for homeless families in the process," Jumpp explained.

That purchase has strained the finances of this nonprofit enterprise, but it has not dampened its enthusiasm. House of Hope is banking on private contributions and public resources from the city, state, and federal government to see its next project to completion.

"This neighborhood has always been about hope," Mayor Armand Mercier said, speaking less from his political perch than from his memories of growing up two blocks down this same street. "I am the second mayor this neighborhood has produced. The more we do for the less fortunate in our community, the better we all are and the better we will feel about ourselves. This is one beautiful building."

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