



City & Region

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Housing fix close at hand

LO WELL-Sometimes solutions to the most intractable problems are right under our nose or, in Deborah Chausse's case, just outside the window.

For years, the executive director of the House of Hope had been scouting for the right site on which to build affordable permanent housing for the women and children served by her shelter in this city's struggling Acre neighborhood.

It wasn't until a board member wondered aloud who owned the weed-choked lot across the way that Chausse realized she had been staring at the answer to her prayers every time she looked out her office window.

Next month, ground will be broken on that newly purchased lot for New Hope Apartments, a project that Chausse hopes will be a catalyst for a broader public discussion of homelessness.

The shelter system, whether a facility like ours or a motel room, is not the answer to the crisis of homeless families. We have made permanent what was supposed to be a temporary solution," says the former director of Boston's Homeless Services Department, noting that there are now 80 state-funded family shelters in Massachusetts. In 1982, there were two.

Women and children who once spent days or weeks at the shelter until they could find reasonably priced apartments now routinely stay a year or more. "There are no more Section 8s," Chausse says of the rental subsidies that have all but disappeared. "Once we had guests; now we have residents."

Government retrenchment came just as the cost of housing skyrocketed. Rents in Massachusetts are the most expensive in the country, according to a report issued last week by the National Low Income Housing Coalition in Washington, D.C.

A full-time worker, hoping to pay no more than 30 percent of income in rent, would need to earn \$22.40 per hour. Minimum wage is \$6.75.

The report, based on census statistics and data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, found that only Boston's rents are higher than those in Greater Lowell, where a two-bedroom, market-rate apartment costs \$1,065 a month.

That was not news to us," says Patricia Talty, a local lawyer who is president of the nonprofit's 21-member board of directors that has embraced Chausse's search for more permanent solutions to homelessness. "We are already calling this our first project."

For the families served by House of Hope, money is only one barrier to independence. Substance abuse and mental health issues are often challenges as well, ones that will not preclude a woman committed to recovery from earning a shot at one of the 10 apartments to be built with city, state, and private funds.

A resident manager will live in the building and provide the kind of support services that have helped shelter residents achieve greater independence.

These sorts of problems are hardly unique to poor people, Chausse notes, but the poor have fewer resources to address them. "We believe that a little intervention over a long period of time will make the difference for these families," she says. At least \$1 million of the \$2.2 million project will be provided by the state Department of Housing and Community Development, a reflection of Governor Mitt Romney's oft-stated commitment to ease homelessness in the Commonwealth. The city and federal governments have also committed funds to the project. To close the gap that remains, the House of Hope is launching a capital campaign, counting on the kind of community support it received this past spring when the city's Zoning Board of Appeals approved the project and dozens of supporters stood up and cheered.

An alley separates the shelter that has served as a temporary home to scores of women and children in the last 20 years from the vacant lot that is just beyond Deborah Chausse's window. That alley is about to become a bridge.