



Lowell's House of Hope helping homeless leave shelters behind

By Lyle Moran, Sun Correspondent

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Leticia Brown, a former resident of the House of Hope shelter, and her daughter Madisyn, 4, admire the Christmas tree in their Lowell apartment. SUN / TORY GERMANN

LOWELL -- In 2006, 39-year-old Leticia Brown entered the House of Hope. The homeless shelter on Merrimack Street was a source of support during one of the low points in her life, but Brown had to abide by its many rules and regulations.

"The shelter was a huge blessing for me, but I felt like I didn't have control of my life," Brown said.

On Mother's Day 2007, Brown, a mother of two, moved into one of House of Hope's apartments for low-income residents as part of the organization's goal of finding permanent housing for its shelter population.

Brown, who now works in the housing department of a local nonprofit agency, said getting her own space has given her a more positive outlook, along with more independence and privacy.



Leticia Brown wraps presents with her 4-year-old daughter, Madisyn, on Tuesday at their Lowell home, an apartment run by House of Hope. The shelter is participating in Housing First, a nationwide project that focuses on securing housing for the homeless. SUN / TORY GERMANN

"Once you get an apartment, it is a whole new life," she said. "I feel motivated, proud and confident. I also can cook and eat whenever I want."

House of Hope's strategy is known as Housing First, a growing approach to end homelessness by securing housing for the homeless, rather than continuing to rely on shelter systems.

The philosophy moves support services, including medical and mental-health care, case management and vocational training, from the shelter to the home setting. The primary focus is providing long-term help in a stable place, instead of an emergency shelter, for those who have been homeless for more than a year or in a shelter at least four times in 12 months.

Most of this target group struggles with a mental illness.

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"Housing is the absolute foundation for everything people can achieve in their lives," said Deb Chausse, executive director of House of Hope. "It enables education, employment and taking advantage of community resources."

Gov. Deval Patrick's administration has thrown its support behind the Housing First model, joining providers and advocates across the commonwealth. A major thrust came on Dec. 16 with an \$8.25 million award to help eight regions in the state begin the switch to the new strategy.

The fund was recommended in the Massachusetts Commission to End Homelessness' five-year plan to eliminate homelessness in the state by 2013, and survived Patrick's budget cuts in October.

According to Lt. Gov. Tim Murray, chairman of the state's Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness, most of the money will help local agencies work together to implement Housing First plans, place people in housing and provide funds to help people stay in their housing.

"At the end of the day, we want people to try to work together for the mission of housing people long-term for their health and economic betterment," Murray said. "We believe Housing First will drastically stem the tide of those at risk of being homeless, or in a hotel or motel."

The new funding comes at an opportune time. By the end of November, 2,565 homeless families were being served by the Department of Transitional Assistance -- a record high and almost 100 more than September.

All 2,900 beds available statewide for individuals are filled, forcing communities to move people into motels. More than 650 families are in motels across the state, led by Cambridge (82 families) and

Brockton (76).

As the housing crisis and economic recession continue, the numbers are likely to rise.

"With unemployment rates going up, there is going to be more need for assistance," said Robert Pulster, executive director of the state Interagency Council.

The rise in homelessness has boosted support for Housing First among providers and policy advocates.

The Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, a policy-advocacy group for the homeless that represents 88 agencies, has run a state-funded pilot program, Home and Healthy for Good, since 2006.

The program helped secure housing for 275 of its 336 participants, who had been homeless an average of 5.6 years. The alliance found that for each tenant, the state spent an average of \$7,224 less on housing and state services than they have for a person in a shelter.

"For too many people, the emergency shelter has become the housing niche for the poorest of the poor," said Joe Finn, executive director of the Shelter Alliance. "Housing First is more efficient and effective, and we have seen reductions in health-care costs in particular."

Phillip Mangano, executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, which includes top officials from 20 federal agencies, applauds Massachusetts's support of the more cost-effective policy.

Mangano, who has visited Lowell, cites 65 cost studies from across the country that have found a sheltered person costs between \$35,000 and \$100,000 a year, while a person in housing with

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supportive services costs between \$13,000 and \$25,000.

"People who are on our streets or who are in shelters long term, are some of the most expensive to the public purse," Mangano said.

The Interagency Council encourages municipalities across the country to create 10-year plans to end homelessness. Mangano is thrilled that 14 communities in Massachusetts, including Lowell and Fall River, have taken that step.

Mangano points to Lowell's plan as a model of success because it is innovative and has political will behind it, along with support from the business community.

Promoting affordable housing is also a major component of the state's Housing First strategy. Patrick signed a \$1.3 billion housing bond bill in May that will boost the commonwealth's efforts to create and sustain affordable housing over the next five years.

But not all are enthusiastic about new spending for Housing First. An economist at the conservative-leaning Beacon Hill Institute believes it is not the time for the Legislature to invest \$8.25 million in the plan.

"We should be addressing the root causes of homelessness and to address many of the root causes, there doesn't need to be a single dollar being spent," said Benjamin Powell, a senior economist at the institute.

Lyle Moran is a Sun correspondent through the Boston University Statehouse program.

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