



HAIR CARE — Cassandra, 11, uses the TV screen as a mirror as her mother, Dolores Britto, combs her hair while her sister, Shanice, 9, looks on, in their room at the House of Hope in Lowell. Below, Shanice shows her mother her new donated school supplies and knapsack.

The young and homeless

By Christine McConville
GLOBE STAFF

When people think of the homeless, they often think of adults, battered by life. But in Massachusetts, the average age of a homeless person is 8 years. And this week, many of the 2,088 children living in homeless shelters in the state will return to school. Cassandra and Shanice Britto, who live in a nondescript yellow house on the outskirts of downtown Lowell, are among that group. On Tuesday morning, in a home they share with their mother, 13 other women, and 20 other children, Cassandra, 11, brushed her thick black hair, blown dry for the first day of school. Shanice, 9, laced up the crisp, clean laces of her new sneakers.

By 8 a.m., both girls picked up their book bags, loaded up with donated pens, pencils, and notebooks, and made their way to unfamiliar classrooms and classmates.

The two girls would rather return to their old schools in Brockton, their mother, Dolores Britto, 41, but with so little shelter space for homeless families, she's grateful for the roof over their heads. The Brittos are residents of the House of Hope, a state-funded shelter for homeless families.

"The girls were upset, but we are together," Britto said last week before the threesome went browsing for back-to-school sneakers. "We are just going to look, because I want to see what's out there. I'm a real bargain shopper."

She has to be. To qualify for a room at House of Hope, Britto can't earn more than \$15,670 a year. Britto meets that criterion, with the \$342 she receives from the state Department of Transitional Assistance and the \$678 she gets in Supplemental Security Income she gets each month.

Britto lived with her two girls in Dorchester for 10 years, but they left a year and two months ago when Britto said, a neighbor threatened to "cut" her. So, for safety reasons, she moved into her sister's apartment in Brockton, where her family shared a room for a few months.

When that stopped working out, she moved with her girls into a homeless shelter in



More than 2,000 schoolchildren live in shelters

Brockton. They stayed there for five months, but after a few problems with the administration, they moved to Lowell in June. In eight months her stay at the shelter must end, and Britto is already nervous.

Here are we going to go?" she mused earlier this week.

Britto, who grew up in Jamaica Plain, is a recovering alcoholic and struggles with depression. Of her new life in Lowell, she said, "I'm finally accepting it, because we have no choice right now."

Life in a homeless shelter can be trying, but it's the only realistic option for most of its residents. And for many of the children, a shelter offers the first relief from a transient lifestyle.

According to advocates for the homeless, Britto and her family are lucky to even be in a shelter. About 50 percent of the homeless families who arrive at shelters in Massachusetts are denied rooms. Richard Powers, a spokesman for the state's Department of Transitional Assistance, said some are turned away because they don't have the proper paperwork; others, because their children are above the cutoff age of 21. A small percentage are denied access because they make more than the state's income limit, he said.

No matter what the reason, if these families are denied access to a shelter, they aren't counted among the state's 1,600 homeless families.

Homelessness depends on how you measure the numbers," said Leslie Lawrence, associate director at the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. "The state says it is getting better, but that's because they measure how many people are in the system. There are many people who are not in the system." According to the coalition, families denied shelter by the state often return to unsafe conditions, such as living in cars or remaining in abusive relationships. Sometimes parents will split up the family so the children have a place to stay. Shelter space has been so scarce in recent years that in August 1999, the state began placing families in motels. In fiscal 2003 alone, the state spent \$20 million to house as many as 599 homeless families in motels.

By last month, the state had removed all those families. Some found permanent housing. Others were placed in shelters, to which the state has added

148 rooms in the past year alone.

One of those shelters is the House of Hope, which was founded 20 years ago by an ecumenical group from Lowell and is run by a former nun, Deb Chausse. The shelter mainly serves women and their children, but has taken in a few men and their children.

According to Chausse, the shelter is the first stable environment that many of the children have experienced.

Residents receive job training, advice on how to save money, and if necessary, mental health counseling. Strict rules require that residents maintain a clean household and be on time for shared meals in the evening. The state expects residents to stay about six months, but House of Hope staffers say some people have stayed for more than a year.

For Britto, who shares a bedroom with her two girls, there's no telling how long her stay here will be. She needs to wait until government-assisted housing money becomes available.

The federally-funded, state-run Section 8 program allows people who qualify for Section 8 vouchers to live in a privately owned residence. The tenant pays 30 to 40 percent of his other income to the landlord, and the government pays the rest, so the landlord receives a fair value for renting the property.

Recently, however, the state stopped spending the money it has in the program, because the federal government has stopped funding it, as it considers making sweeping changes to the program.

For Britto, without the voucher, entering the private—and wildly expensive—housing market seems impossible.

“This is one of the most expensive housing markets in the nation,” Lawrence said. “The real answer is affordable housing, and until you [provide more], you are never going to solve homelessness.”

There is some progress there, said Linda King, a community development specialist for the city of Lowell. Last year in Lowell, 44 homeless families and 501 individuals moved out of shelters and into permanent housing.

Britto hopes that she'll be among that group one day.

Britto said that last year, when classmates in Brockton found out that her girls lived in a shelter, they were teased.

“They'd be hurt by it,” Britto said, “and a few times, they didn't want to go back [to school] because of the teasing, even though they like school.”

She's hoping that doesn't happen in Lowell.

Inside the shelter, the stigma of homelessness doesn't exist.

“A lot of us here are single parents, and they don't mind the kids,” she said.

“These girls, I've been their father and their mother all their life. It's not easy, but the kids keep me happy. They put a smile on my face,” Britto said. “We are human beings. The only thing we don't have is a home.”



RELAXING — Shanice talks on a play phone while Cassandra brushes her hair.

Globe North West

THE BOSTON GLOBE THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2004



HOW FOR THE SHOES — Thanks to a set of the sneakers the girls bought together, which was the going for 4 years.



STUDY AIDS — Looking over donated school supplies, from left: Doreen D'Amico, Maria, Maria, and mother, Ada Skofic, and brother James M. D'Amico, 10.