

Can a home save the homeless?

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Vincent DePaul Sims hands a soda to Charmaine Thompson, clothing bank manager and emergency assistance program supervisor at Greensboro Urban Ministry. *Credit: [Nelson Kepley](#) / News & Record*

Vincent Sims used to sleep under the Lee Street bridge. He spent some of his Social Security money on drugs and booze.

Banned from city shelters for schizophrenia- and drug-fueled outbursts, he sometimes got arrested just to have a warm, safe place to spend a few hours.

And when he got out of jail, he'd go right back to sleeping by the train tracks or in abandoned buildings.

Then one day last year, the Rev. Mike Aiken approached him with an offer: a no-strings-attached apartment through a new Guilford County program.

Sims was hanging out with day laborers on South Elm-Eugene Street that day. He wore six coats and stunk like a pigpen. He thought Aiken, who leads Greensboro Urban Ministry, was making fun of him.

“He said, 'Mr. Sims, God almighty has shined on you today,'” Sims remembers.

“He said, 'Get up,' and I got up. He said, 'This is not your place no more. This is not your place. Look around. Look up and down this sidewalk. This is not your place.’”

Since last year, Guilford County's Housing Support Team has given 76 chronically homeless residents the same opportunity: a chance to get off the streets and into a home.

The team of counselors from High Point and Greensboro find apartments for homeless residents and help them navigate social services. The 26-month pilot program, funded with \$644,000 from the state and more than \$50,000 in local grants, pays for down payments, rent and utilities.

It's a social program with a pragmatic purpose: to save taxpayers money.

The chronically homeless often suffer from mental illnesses, disabilities or addictions that drain public

and nonprofit resources without getting them off the streets.

“You don’t really look at homeless needs from the business point of view,” said Jehan Benton, director of Partners Ending Homelessness. “When you do, you start to look at how much money we are expending with little result.”

Organizers hope to find what other programs like this have discovered: It costs less money to house the chronically homeless than it does to fund their days in jail, trips to the emergency room and nights at shelters.

A similar program in Raleigh found that it cost 30 percent less to put homeless residents directly into supervised housing, said Martha Are, a state homeless policy expert.

“We were spending 30 percent more just to keep people out on the streets,” Are said.

The housing support team, a partnership between Family Service of the Piedmont, the Greensboro Housing Coalition and Open Door Ministries with help from local social service agencies, started searching for homeless residents in mid-2007.

“They had to be someone who is cycling through the system a lot,” said Mitch McGee, the housing support team coordinator. “In and out of jail, in and out of the hospital.”

Folks who continue to live on the street no matter how many times police pick them up or nonprofits feed them a hot meal. Folks like Reid James.

In the summer of 2006, James, a 47-year-old who suffers from bipolar disorder and depression, ran out of friends willing to take her in.

She and a boyfriend pocketed money by ripping off copper pipes and selling them to a recycling center. They planned to use the money for a place to stay and a warm shower.

“We would always vow that we would get a room for the night at the Coliseum Inn,” she said. “Most of the time we stopped off and bought drugs before we got anywhere near the Coliseum.”

Her drug of choice: crack. “I am one of those people who just sits there and smokes until it’s gone.”

They lived in condemned or empty houses. Once they found a nice place, an unoccupied house with electricity, near Grace Church.

They found a mattress, some sheets, a fan and a radio.

“We made a little nest,” she said.

Then one morning, officers broke down the door.

By year’s end, James landed in jail. After she served her time, she went back to crack — and to the streets.

Folks like James are tough cases because their homelessness isn’t just about poverty.

“Some of these folks have been in treatment a gazillion times,” McGee said. “They don’t have a lot of hope in it because you do your 30 days and you go back to the streets.”

The housing support team offers something tangible up front: an apartment.

“It is really kind of radical,” said Aiken of Urban Ministry, who helped find homeless people for the program. “From the old model of doing things, you had to earn the roof over your head. How are you going to get yourself straight before you get your roof over your head?”

Participants are responsible for keeping the lease. They must get along with neighbors, stay out of trouble and pay bills on time, although the program helps with expenses.

Case workers and peer counselors hook them up with social programs, churches and community groups. They help participants identify behaviors they need to change, such as drug addictions.

That gentle pressure — and a place to live — can make a big difference, Are said. “Stable housing in and of itself has therapeutic value.”

Take Lea, who moved into her new apartment in July.

Lea, 46, who asked that her real name not be used, is thin with pale skin and blue eyes, a sassy sense of humor and a toothless grin.

For the past 10 years, Lea turned tricks for drug money. “I call it being an independent, self-employed worker,” she said. “That’s all I was. I specialized in entertainment.”

She lost everything to her crack habit. Jobs. Apartments. Her teeth. Her two daughters.

“I couldn’t take care of myself,” she said. “How in the world was I going to take care of my kids?”

Her new apartment, which costs \$410 a month, has one bedroom and a small kitchen. It’s paid for with government-subsidized housing vouchers. She doesn’t want people from her past to know where she lives, and she doesn’t want new friends and neighbors to know her past.

Being out of the 24-hour cycle of survival has given Lea time to think about priorities.

“Out there, I had to keep using just to keep awake and alert,” she said. “Here, I can just relax and be me.”

Her goal is to get herself established and reconnect with her family.

“I want to be a respected, productive citizen of the community. I don’t want to be an eyesore.”

Since the program began, participants like Lea have started new lives. They’ve entered drug addiction rehabilitation, studied for GEDs, trained for jobs and applied for disability.

But does that really save taxpayers money?

A similar program in Raleigh housed 21 homeless people and evaluated the services they used for four years. During the two years before they got into housing, the 21 participants received services worth \$377,141. In the two years after, that number dropped to \$265,785.

Studies in New York, Denver and Portland, Ore., found similar results.

The Jordan Institute for Families at UNC-Chapel Hill will track the participants from Guilford County to see if the trend continues. But consider this: In 2007, police charged Sims more than a dozen times with crimes such as trespassing, begging without a permit and drinking or urinating in public. Nearly all of those charges were later dismissed by the district attorney. But Sims still spent 12 nights in the county jail.

And that does not take into account the times police picked him up because it was too cold to sleep outside or he was so intoxicated that he was a danger to himself.

Since Sims moved into an apartment, he has been cited for drinking in public on three occasions. This year, he hasn’t spent a night in jail.

It’s not perfection, McGee said. But it’s progress.

Since James moved into her new apartment in May, she has been making progress, too.

On a late summer afternoon, she busied herself at the antique stove, dumping mounds of chopped peppers and zucchini into a sizzling pan. One of her three cats, a black kitten named Shadow, played at James’ feet as she sautéed her contribution to a free dinner hosted by Food Not Bombs, which runs a

food pantry in Glenwood.

“They fed me enough when I was out on the streets, so I figure it’s time I feed them for a bit,” she said. “It’s going to be a feast.”

Her shelves are stocked with neatly organized rows of cans — food pantry booty.

“Mine are almost military,” she said. “That’s part of the obsessive compulsive disorder.”

Section 8 helps pay the rent, food stamps and food pantries provide sustenance, and Grace Church pays for medications. The housing program pays for things such as the dental clinic, which costs \$10 — more money than James has because she doesn’t have a job. That stresses her out, especially because food stamps don’t pay for cat food.

She has put on 35 pounds since quitting drugs and has plenty of time to work on sobriety.

“I can’t guarantee anything, but I’m not doing what I was, so there’s a better chance,” she said.

But she could lose it in a heartbeat if she started using.

“Next thing you know, boom, I’m on my path to self-destruction.”

James isn’t the only one living close to the edge.

Even with housing and help from counselors to work through problems, some people squander their second chance.

Nine participants have dropped out, either because they’ve been evicted or had a difficult time transitioning out of homelessness. But people such as Sims give McGee hope.

Sims is the poster child for homelessness in Greensboro. His silhouette, bent in prayer over a plate of food, graces the cover of the county’s 10-year plan to prevent homelessness.

Sims was there the day Urban Ministry served its first lunch in 1982.

On the streets, they called him Thorazine. Sims had that telltale shuffle of the psychiatric drug’s side effects.

“Mental health in the jail were giving me some medicine that would knock a damn elephant down,” he said.

He self-medicated with crack cocaine, meth and alcohol.

So when Aiken approached him that day on the sidewalk last year, he found it hard to believe that anybody at Urban Ministry would be willing to help him, considering how many times he had gotten kicked out for cussing or starting fights.

Sims moved into his new apartment in December. It’s a tidy one-bedroom with wood paneling and shelves for knickknacks. He spends most weekdays at Urban Ministry, volunteering at the food bank or the soup kitchen.

On a recent morning, Sims divvied up oats into sandwich bags at the food bank.

He wore a fedora and wingtips that once belonged to his dad — treasured items he got from his family when he moved into his new place.

The Urban Ministry board of directors asked Sims to be a member and act as a direct line to the people they serve.

“I just have to give the good Lord thanks and give God glory that he saw fit for me to serve and give back to the community,” he said. “He got me up.”

Sims completed an outpatient substance abuse program and is studying for his GED. McGee helps him manage his Social Security checks so he won't spend the money on drugs.

"That apartment has given me time, has given me space to iron a lot of things out," Sims said.

"I moved in my apartment on Christmas Day. It was a child seeing his first Christmas tree to me. I'm still opening gifts up. I has so many gifts under the tree, I am still opening my gifts."

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