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New model to help the homeless: First find them a place to live

By Ed Koch

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Put the homeless into homes first, then provide for their other needs such as substance-abuse rehabilitation and mental-illness treatment.

That "housing first" approach was not available to David Little, 38, when he was a homeless drug addict sleeping in Las Vegas parks in the winter of 1998.

Little went through the old-school homeless rehabilitation, called "continuum of care" - a shelter bed, drug-abuse treatment, job training, transitional housing and, after he cleared those hurdles, a low-rent apartment downtown.

When Liz Olmeda, 22, became homeless earlier this year, however, she was given the housing-first option that included a nonprofit organization paying 70 percent of her rent for six months on a two-bedroom apartment in northeast Las Vegas.

Those seemingly polar-opposite philosophies have worked for Little and Olmeda. But with as many as 800,000 people reportedly in our nation's shelters on any given night, critics question whether any current assistance methods are effective.

"For 20 years, the federal, state and local policy has been servicing homeless people instead of ending their homelessness," said Philip Mangano, the Bush administration's homelessness czar.

"The efforts, though well intended, have failed and have resulted in the unintended consequence of chronic homelessness. The issue should be providing permanent supportive housing instead of a blanket and bowl of soup."

Mangano, whose official title is executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, said there is an 80-85 percent retention rate of those in housing-first programs in communities focusing on that program.

Critics of continuum of care, which replaced the practice of simply warehousing the homeless in shelters, say the solution is more affordable housing.

Continuum-of-care defenders, including local nonprofit groups, say they must first treat the homeless for the personal problems that contributed to their homelessness and provide job training to give them a fighting chance to keep their homes.

Little might be a poster child for continuum of care.

A 36-year Las Vegas resident and Chaparral High graduate, he worked as a hotel cook before his methamphetamine addiction cost him his job and his apartment.

During a 1998 snowstorm, Little went to Catholic Charities of Southern Nevada for help. After completing drug rehabilitation and job training programs, he became the manager of St. Vincent's Dining Room and today is Catholic Charities' client housing manager.

"To get out of homelessness you need to be willing to seek help," he said. "You need to stop doing the things that got you homeless. You need to find a job that makes you happy, keep a positive attitude, set goals and pay your rent and bills."

While homeless, Little drove - and often slept in - a beat-up 1989 Chevrolet Citation he had bought for \$400. Today he drives a 2006 Hyundai Santa Fe.

He earns \$27,000 a year and lives in a modest two-bedroom apartment near Washington Avenue and Lamb Boulevard that he furnished, complete with a cozy sofa and love seat that he bought from another formerly homeless man four years ago for \$250. Frameless Heavy Metal-style posters add splashes of color to his living room, which houses a TV and home entertainment center.

"Before I was homeless, I often pawned my TV to buy dope, and I destroyed my credit," Little said. "It takes a while to get back to where you were before you were homeless. One day I'd like to own my own home. I've been looking into loans for first-time buyers."

Sue Markham, director of homeless services for the Clark County chapter of the Salvation Army, says her organization is the nation's "benchmark for continuum of care," and she believes its tried-and-true methods have significantly reduced homelessness.

"There is a certain segment of the homeless population that will not cooperate with case-management programs, and housing first, if done correctly, involves intensive case management," she said.

Markham said continuum of care requires months of disciplined recovery programs and training - time some clients need to learn to budget their money and beat their addictions.

She said 73 percent of her clients complete training and get jobs, and of that number, 70 percent retain housing for at least 90 days.

Markham doesn't oppose housing-first as an option but questions whether there is enough affordable housing for the housing-first philosophy to be a primary solution: "Clients who complete our programs have told us how difficult it is to find affordable housing."

The housing-first movement got its start in New York City. After seeing the numbers of homeless swell in the streets during the 1980s, Sam Tsemberis created the model in 1992.

"Somehow those of us who help the homeless got lost along the way," said Tsemberis, executive director of Pathways to Housing, which focuses on assisting New York's mentally ill homeless. "We have to become more consumer-driven and listen to what the homeless say they need. Many of them say housing is their No. 1 priority."

Tsemberis said he found that when he put even the most chronic of homeless into their own homes, "they just did a lot better. They stayed with their treatments because they did not want to lose their apartments."

Had a housing-first program been available to him, ex-addict Little said, "I could have made it work. Housing was always my No. 1 concern."

It was Liz Olmeda's first concern, too.

Olmeda, a local resident since 1996, tried Catholic Charities' housing-first program five months ago, ending a brief homelessness that began when she grabbed her 1-year-old daughter and infant son and left what she called an abusive relationship.

The organization's Homeless to Home program has placed 130 homeless women and their children into private-sector apartments.

For six months the organization pays 70 percent of the rent for a client, who during that time is supposed to get a job and save money to take over the payments in the seventh month.

While homeless, Olmeda bounced from the homes of friends and relatives, fearing that if she sought public assistance, officials would find out she was homeless and take away her children.

Olmeda got an apartment through the housing-first program and a \$300-a-week job as a construction company clerk.

"What I have come to appreciate most is my independence - the ability to earn a living, pay my bills and try to get ahead," she said, noting she has one more month of paying \$123 as her share of the rent and has saved enough to take over the full payments.

Relatives help by taking care of Olmeda's children while she works, saving her the cost of child care. She has no car, so she relies on the bus, which she takes 45 minutes each way to work and home.

"I have few needs," she said. "I am not a very materialistic person. As long as my kids and I have a roof over our heads, I think I am doing pretty good."

Homelessness czar Mangano said that federal funds to fight U.S. homelessness have increased from \$2 billion in 2000 to the \$4.15 billion that President Bush now is requesting from Congress for 2007.

In addition, 30,000 low-cost housing units have been built under the auspices of the Department of Housing and Urban Development in the last six years to help combat homelessness, he said.

Still, some questioned whether that is enough money or housing units to make a serious dent in the problem.

"The solution to end homelessness nationally is spending \$15 billion to build 350,000 affordable housing units," Tsemberis said.

Las Vegas homeless rights activist Linda Lera-Randle El, founder of Straight from the Streets, called it shameful that so few affordable units have been built in a half-dozen years.

"It is ludicrous to expect us to clean up the streets when there are 10,000 to 12,000 homeless people in Clark County who, if they all suddenly wanted an apartment, cannot be accommodated," she said.

"How can you expect to house the nation's homeless when just one Nevada county has enough homeless to fill a third of what has been built nationally since 2000?"

Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, in Washington, says efforts need to be stepped up to get homeless people back into housing as quickly as possible.

"Some long-standing programs have just not worked," she said. "There are people who have spent five, 10, 20 years on the streets."

Paralee, a 54-year-old Las Vegas woman who asked that her last name not be published, was homeless for five years before Lera-Randle EI got her an apartment a year ago.

"What I needed most was a roof over my head," Paralee said. "The shelters did not do me any good."

Catholic Charities, which has long practiced continuum of care, got a grant three years ago from Las Vegas to venture into the housing-first mode with its Homeless to Home project.

The program has had its ups and downs.

Clentine Wright, the organization's social services director, said in 2004 that 50 homeless women with children were selected for the program and 48 of them still have jobs and pay their own rents.

Last year, another 50 women were selected, but just 30 of them still have jobs. Fifteen sought help landing other jobs to keep their homes. The agency lost touch with the other five, Wright said.

Wright said the first-year candidates were women who came to the program "with good living and job skills," while the second-year candidates, as a group, lacked the same skill levels.

So far this year 30 homeless women, including Olmeda, have received Homeless to Home assistance and 21 of them are now working, Wright said.

Lera-Randle EI says she gets satisfaction watching the growing popularity of the housing-first philosophy, especially because people criticized her for championing that solution many years before Tsemberis coined the phrase.

"It was just common sense to me that if you get people on their feet first they will be well on their way to recovery," she said.

Lera-Randle EI believes that effectively addressing homelessness will involve a combination of continuum-of-care and housing-first programs.

"You have to have programs that tackle all of the issues," she said. "And you have to be willing to work with all of the homeless and not exclude the most chronic by claiming they don't want help."

Roman, from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, said that although there will always be some people in what she called a housing crisis, "I'm confident that we can end the widespread phenomenon of homelessness that began in the 1980s."

And when homeless people get a taste of having a home of their own, Mangano said, they more often than not will fight to keep it:

"Having their own home sustains their recovery from mental illness and addictions. It fosters responsibility and encourages people to improve their lives.

"You offer someone a home instead of a shelter bed, and the numbers of homeless will reduce dramatically."

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