

'Housing first,' help that lasts

Deborah's Place celebrates 25 years of helping single women find and keep a secure place to live

By Pat Dunnigan, Special to the Tribune

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For Jacqueline Parker, the road to homelessness was dazzling and well-lit.

The 63-year-old Mississippi native had an apartment and a job when she began accompanying a friend to a Chicago-area casino to play the slot machines.

Soon, she said, she was gambling with her rent money and digging herself into a deep financial hole. "It just went to my head," she said in a soft drawl. "One thing led to another."

LaShon Gant, 39, made her way along a darker route, from a cocaine and heroin addiction to a prison cell. She had been drug free for a decade but a criminal record and two low-paying part-time jobs left her with no margin for error when her living arrangements fell apart. "I was living with a guy, and things didn't work out," she said.

Both women cycled through a patchwork of temporary accommodations — exhausting the hospitality of friends and family, dropping in and out of homeless shelters and, in Gant's case, spending 18 months living out of a car. Then they found Deborah's Place, a provider of housing and support for single, homeless women celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

Today each lives in her own studio apartment on Chicago's West Side, supported by an array of health and social services that will remain available as long as they need them.

And that, says Deborah's Place Executive Director Audrey Thomas, is the end of that road.

"Our goal is when a woman walks through our doors it is her last experience with homelessness," said Thomas, who began as a volunteer 25 years ago and has been the organization's executive director for six years.

From its beginning as an overnight shelter in a church gymnasium in 1985, the program has grown into a range of services and housing on the city's West and North sides that includes crisis intervention, counseling, health care assistance, job training, education, daytime learning centers, transitional housing and 129 supported living apartments. The housing available includes 90 rental studio apartments, where women pay 30 percent of their income in rent and can stay as long as they want. Last year 487 women used at least one of the program's services.

Deborah's Place grew out of the efforts of a Catholic peace and justice organization and a group of Chicago-area women determined to provide safe shelter for the homeless woman they saw walking the streets by day and sleeping on sidewalks at night.

In addition to their decision to focus on single women, the organization stood out for its willingness to accommodate women's individual needs and for policies that did away with many of the rules imposed by other shelters in favor of the philosophy that a safe place to stay was a basic right.



Deborah's Place Executive Director Audrey Thomas, left, shares a laugh with resident Stephanie Hooker. Deborah's Place provides services and support to homeless women. (Heather Charles, Chicago Tribune / July 15, 2010)

That priority soon led the founders to broaden the program from just providing overnight shelter to offering support services designed to break the cycle of homelessness. Those services include computer training, help with job placement, health screening, life skills training and even art therapy. But first and foremost, said Thomas, is a safe place to live.

Deborah's Place did not invent the "housing first" model, but was one of the earliest programs in Chicago to adopt it, said Nancy Radner, CEO of the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness, the umbrella organization for the city's 84 homeless service programs.

In particular, Radner said, Deborah's Place has been a model for other programs in its eviction prevention policies. While other programs make compliance with treatment programs and other rules a condition of housing, at Deborah's Place, "they will go to great lengths not to evict someone," Radner said.

That is critical in serving a population in which as many as half also suffer from other problems including mental illness, physical disabilities and addictions, she said.

Thomas agrees. "When people hit our doors, the journey that got them there is really messy and complicated," she said. "I just think Deborah's Place is unique in our tolerance for where women are individually. You break a rule and it does not mean you get kicked out."

It's a philosophy that does create "intrinsic tensions," Thomas said. In 2003, during the process of aligning the program with the city's 10-year Plan to End Homelessness, such tensions led some staff members to leave, she said. "There was resistance," Thomas said. "We did have people who left the organization because it just didn't resonate with them."

And from neighborhood battles over plans to develop new sites to philosophical disagreements over growth and direction, the organization's leadership has always had more than the problems of the homeless to confront.

But 25 years later, it is its consistent adherence to the philosophy of its founders that is cited as the secret of the organization's longevity and success.

Jean Durkin is the coordinator of the organization's learning center in Old Town, where homeless women drop in to receive mail, make phone calls, have coffee and a snack, take a class or use the art studio. Durkin has been providing art therapy to Deborah's Place clients since 1987. She believes the organization's focus on individual needs is the key to everything that works.

"Deborah's Place programs work because our vision at the very start was so clear," Durkin said. The services, she said, are designed to help women find "their own way out of homelessness."

Margaret Herring is one of 17 women known as the organization's "founding mothers" who first met back in 1984 to try to address the problems of the women they encountered on Chicago's streets.

She says the organization succeeded because of a "shared vision" and an "established culture" that drew as much from the women it served as from the women serving them.

"It was very important to us that the women be respected as individuals," Herring said.

That, said Thomas, keeps the focus pretty simple, no matter how complicated the problems.

"A lot of what we do is just old-fashioned Jane Addams social work," she said, citing the pioneering 19th century social services advocate.

"You meet people where they are, ask them what they need and you try to get them access to it. Recovery," she said, "looks different for every person."

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