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Transitioning homeless back to society

County program removes homeless with mental health issues from the streets

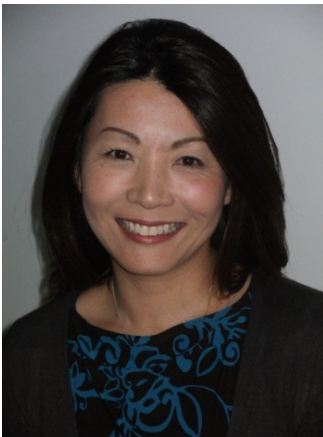


Photo courtesy of Volunteers of America, Chesapeake. Kyoko Queen.

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By Chris Grady

Facing the issue of mental illness in homeless people in Prince George's County, Volunteers of America, Chesapeake has taken an approach that has removed homeless people with mental illnesses from the streets and placed them into supportive environments.

The group runs Prince George's County Mental Health Services, which has 29 housing units around the county as part of its Shelter Plus Care program that serve as permanent shelters for homeless people with mental illnesses who have also had trouble with the law. The units used in this program were subsidized by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Not only does the program give homeless people with mental illnesses a place to live, but it also provides them with the support they need to tackle tasks that they are not familiar with to help their transition back into society.

The staff helps clients with filling out paperwork, establishing a budget and staying on prescription medications.

"In a few cases, the clients in the Shelter Plus Care program have been successful enough in their return to society that they have made too much money to be eligible for the Shelter Plus Care housing and the county Mental Health Services have had to help them find new places to live," said Vice President of Mental Health and Rehabilitation Services Kyoko Queen.

Despite the immense success of some, transitioning back into society is not an easy process. "It doesn't happen overnight," Queen said.

James, 60, has been in the program since 1997 after being homeless for almost two decades, during which he struggled with drug abuse and mental illness.

For James, the program has been more than a means of getting off of the street and staying out of legal trouble.

"It has given me a sense of direction," he said.

Initially, he was apprehensive about the program because he did not know what he was getting into. However, as the years have gone by James has seen the benefit the program has had on his life, he said.

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The program has been helpful for James who has had staff members assist him with grocery shopping, cooking and making sure he gets to his doctors' appointments.

The biggest issue that the program faces is the lack of resources available for the clients of the program. "Although individuals and organizations have been very generous to the county's Mental Health Services, there is still an inadequate amount of resources to help all of the homeless people with mental illnesses," said Queen.

According to Queen, the ignorance that exists about mental illness is an underlying cause of the scarcity of resources for the people in the program. "People seem to push it out of their minds because they feel that it has nothing to do with them," said Queen.

"The success of the program in helping to bring these formerly homeless people back into society can be attributed in part to the program's employees who work hard to benefit their clients," said Queen. "However, the work the employees do benefit their own lives as well."

"We feel blessed that we get this opportunity... to work with people who give us so much," she said.