

Living on the edge

By Jennifer Kavanaugh / Daily News Staff

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FRAMINGHAM -- Janet Barnard said one word would describe her if she and her family hadn't received the legal services and housing assistance that brought them to Framingham this past year.

Homeless.

Barnard, her husband, Steve, and 24-year-old son Tom faced major setbacks before they moved into their two-bedroom apartment in downtown Framingham several months ago. Steve Barnard had a stroke, and the family got evicted from their Wellesley apartment.

The family has gotten legal aid, help finding their apartment and rental assistance to cover two months of rent when they fell behind. Several groups have pitched in to help, including a free legal office, social services programs and the MetroWest Outreach Connection Inc.

"I didn't know about any of this stuff," Barnard said. She said she would have contact with one program, which would then introduce her family to other services. "I think people should be aware that these services are out there."

MetroWest Outreach has helped the Barnards and about 120 households stay households through its Homeless Prevention Program. The all-volunteer group works with organizations such as South Middlesex Legal Services and the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, or SMOC, to help homeless people and people in danger of becoming homeless.

On Sept. 25, the group will hold its second annual Walk to Prevent Homelessness fund-raiser. The money will help pay for the group's efforts, which include providing emergency assistance, money for apartment security deposits and back rent payments.

"There are a lot of people in the middle, who don't qualify for other programs," said Mike Dineen, the organization's treasurer. "There are a lot of people in need."

From August 2004 to July 2005, MetroWest Outreach helped 108 households with an average income of \$14,584. It gave out more than \$31,000 to help clients who fell behind in their rent payments; almost \$31,000 to help clients pay security deposits to get housing; and \$2,055 in emergency assistance, which helped five households take care of problems such as old, unpaid utility bills that would keep them from getting service at a new address.

Of the clients followed during that time, 66 came from Framingham, 10 were from Natick, and the rest were scattered throughout the region. Though the group's statistics track 108 households up until July, the total is about 120 now, Dineen said.

Barnard's situation is one of the many complex stories of how people end up in need of a home. She went to Northeastern University, where she majored in journalism, and she and her husband owned their own home and a business. They took out a second mortgage to make ends meet, but the business failed, and they lost their house.

Barnard and her family moved into Wellesley public housing and lived there for about 18 years. She expressed little nostalgia for her home of almost two decades. "It was substandard housing," she said.

The Framingham apartment is well located, Barnard said, because it allows her son to take the train to his drugstore job in Wellesley. Though the house has lacked in upkeep and repairs, the apartment has more character than her previous home, she said.

"It's cozy," Barnard said. With the new apartment, she said, they can personalize it more, and unlike their old place, they're allowed to put things on the wall -- including three oil paintings of outdoor scenes. Barnard painted them herself.

"I haven't painted in a long time," she said. She fills her days by working part-time as



Janet Barnard and her family would have been homeless if not for a number of social service agencies. (Allan Jung photo)

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a bagger at the Market Basket grocery store in Ashland, taking care of her husband and getting him care at MetroWest Medical Center.

Many of the people who become MetroWest Outreach's clients had been getting by for a long time, but then experienced one major crisis, or a series of setbacks that they didn't have the money to fix, said president Len Dalton. Unexpected financial hits could include an illness, a lost job, or the need to take in and support other family members.

"When anything unexpected happens, they're at the mercy of -- whatever," Dalton said.

MetroWest Outreach says it tries to fill part of the gap. Dalton said last year's walk raised about \$10,400, and this year he hopes to raise at least \$12,000. Because the group is all volunteer, at least 97 percent of the money raised can directly help families, Dineen said.

Within the next year or so, Barnard hopes to find a nicer apartment somewhere in Framingham, so her husband can stay near the hospital. She also wants to get a car for her commute to work, because right now she usually takes a cab to get there.

People living on the edge face many obstacles, Dineen said, and the group tries to do what it can to help them and keep them from ending up on the street.

"They're all interesting stories," Dineen said. "But they're tragic stories."

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