

## **MetroWest Outreach Connection, Inc.**

### **Homeless Prevention Program**

As a result of the elimination of government funding for homeless prevention programs due to policy changes, MWOC has made the decision to develop a community-based Homeless Prevention Program to help fill this void. MWOC will concentrate on the MetroWest area with Framingham as the primary focal point. The program will assist our low and very low-income families, including the homeless.

In order to place the Homeless Prevention Program in relation to other services and agency functions, we will use the *Continuum of Care* process as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development. This process contains *seven components: prevention, outreach and assessment, emergency shelter, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, permanent affordable housing, and supportive services*. MWOC is concentrating on homeless prevention and reacquisition of housing for those who are homeless. We will work with other agencies and organizations that provide the other six components. These other organizations include South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC), Catholic Charities, MetroWest Affordable Housing Coalition, MetroWest Housing for All, local Housing Authorities and many others.

*Our objectives will be to provide funds to families for rent arrears and to assist families attempting to secure permanent housing.* With the stability of a permanent residence, the children are less likely to move from school to school. They will have a better opportunity to gain the education necessary to escape the cycle of poverty and homelessness.

We intend to serve the maximum number of families possible with the available funds obtained from grants, donations, and fundraising. MetroWest Outreach Connection and referring agencies will work together to select recipients that best meet the criteria for housing reacquisition and stabilization financial assistance.

The referring agencies we will work with collaboratively include: South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC), South Middlesex Legal Services (SMLS), the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), and Catholic Charities. In addition, we will accept referrals for assistance from rabbis, priests, and ministers for members of their congregations. We will not always provide 100% of the funds required to assist a family. We will seek to leverage our funds through collaboration with other funding sources such as SMOC, Catholic Charities, and houses of worship. Thus by combining funds with other groups, we will extend our funding and be able to assist more families. We intend to work closely with the referring agencies to make sure that the recipients of this funding have documented and verifiable needs – rental arrears, or a need for security deposits – and have the financial resources to pay their rent once they have received financial assistance.

This prevention program provides an economic safety net for families who, for legitimate reasons, are unable to make rental or mortgage payments. Unfortunately, there are insufficient financial resources available for these families when they have a financial crisis. Organizations growing out of faith-communities, SMOC and Catholic Charities have continued to assist these families but their levels of funding are not adequate. What we have now is an absence of a safety net that would keep many needy poor families in permanent housing. State programs that support family placement in shelters and motels rather than payment of rental arrears are not the solutions to the housing crisis. At triple the cost or more, how can this approach be a better one than funding rental arrears?

Currently, there are nearly 200 families statewide who do not have permanent housing and temporarily reside in motels. This is virtually the same number of families who were in motels in December 2001. We have not made any apparent progress to resolving the homeless crisis in this state. There are approximately 30 families recently lost their housing in Framingham. Each month, additional MetroWest area families face the loss of housing due to rental or mortgage arrears, or imminent eviction. The Department of Transitional Assistance and South Middlesex Opportunity Council have documented the many families who need support and financial assistance to maintain their housing or to secure housing. In addition, there are approximately 1100 families housed in shelters in Massachusetts.

The Department of Transitional Assistance has provided us with Framingham rent arrearage figures for 2001. There were 68 cases that year with 201 months of arrearage. The total amount paid to Framingham residents was \$70,973 with the average level of financial assistance being \$1,044 and the average per month \$353. Recent figures provided by SMOC indicate that the average financial assistance has increased to approximately \$500 per family per month.

### **Program Goals**

We anticipate that we will be able to help 45 to 60 families stay in their current homes or acquire new housing if they are homeless now. Based upon the February 2, 2004 South Middlesex Opportunity Council homelessness count, for the Framingham/Marlboro area, there were 73 homeless families consisting of 81 adults with 133 children and 173 homeless individuals.

### **Evaluating the Success of the Project**

We will develop and maintain a database of the clients served and the funds allocated to these clients. All clients will be required to sign a release form that will give MetroWest Outreach Connection permission to contact them, their landlord and their children's school system to check on the family every six months to see if they are still in permanent housing. We will use proven methodologies employed by SMOC and Catholic Charities to assess the effectiveness of our financial interventions. At all times, we will respect the confidentiality of our clients.

An article based upon recent studies, written by Dr. Rachel G. Blatt, Department of Urban and Environment Policy and Planning at Tufts University, indicates that homeless children's nutrition suffers significantly and affects their mental and physical health. Their ability to sustain friendships is impaired and their self-esteem is adversely affected.

*The cost of housing a family in a motel or shelter can be three to six times more expensive than providing that same family with rental arrearage assistance. Our program **saves** money and helps families in many other ways.*

*Families in permanent housing support our local merchants and have children who do not require extraordinary transportation or special after school programs. The McKinney-Vento Act requires that communities where children resided prior to becoming homeless transport children back to that community for their education if the parent requests. How does a child benefit from a long ride to school then back to "home" where he or she must study in a motel*

room or some crowded space in a shelter? Testimony of administrators, teachers and parents support our premise.

Homeless children are victims of an inferior education. They are at-risk of becoming the next generation of undereducated people unequipped to enter the workforce. *The vast majority of children with stable housing and educational continuity will make positive contributions to their communities. They will pay taxes rather than consume state tax dollars. This program offers the children a chance to obtain an education by keeping them in permanent housing.*

HomeStart is a Boston-based organization that began as a component of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance. This organization focuses on meeting the housing needs of people experiencing homelessness. Over the past nine years, more than 1900 people have been placed in permanent housing. *Eighty-six percent (86%) of the participants they placed into housing in fiscal year 2002 are still housed one year later. This Homeless Prevention Program helped 52 at-risk households stay in their housing and avoid homelessness from October 2002 through September 2003.* This statistic shows the effectiveness of the financial intervention that MWOC is going to provide with the donated funds.