

Homeless

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Help comes at a price.

Residents must abide by a series of rules, pitch in around the facility by doing daily chores and work through a program geared toward long-term solutions, said Jenna Sharpe, executive director of PATH.

"The goal is to get people to be productive and self-sufficient," Sharpe said.

PATH's program is the only resource of its kind in the area if homeless people in San Juan County want to get off the streets, Sharpe said. The next closest homeless shelter is in Durango, Colo.

PATH's facility also is the only facility in the county that accepts male residents, Sharpe said. Other centers typically accommodate women and children and are geared toward domestic violence and sexual assault victims.

"Ours is designed to get people back on their feet, back in the community and productive citizens," she said.

Nearly 1 million people are homeless each year in the United States. In New Mexico, roughly 17,000 people were homeless in 2008, according to statistics from the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness.

The program

PATH helped 322 people from April 2008 to April 2009, Sharpe said.

The shelter can act as a temporary place to rest or people can complete the full program.

The full program runs for 90 days and is designed to assist people with basic budgeting, finding a sustainable job and preventing future bouts of homelessness.

"Those that are serious will stay for 90 days," Sharpe said.

People who come to the shelter decide whether to participate in the program, she said.

The rules of the program are basic.

Residents at the dorm-style shelter cannot watch television during the day, Sharpe said. This helps the staff complete administrative tasks during the day without the distractions of various programming.

Each day they also must search for at least three jobs. Moreover, residents must find employment within 10 days if they

don't have a job already.

There is a nightly curfew of 6 p.m. unless a resident is working the night shift.

A breakfast is available for the residents which they must prepare themselves. A dinner, which is prepared by some of the residents as part of their daily chores, is ready nightly at 6 p.m.

"Everybody pitches in," Sharpe said. "It's a very communal-type living environment."

Also, the facility has a zero-tolerance stance with regard to alcohol and drugs, Sharpe said. People who choose to stay at the facility must submit to regular Breathalyzer tests and random drug tests.

To help change the tide of poverty that afflicts many of the shelter's residents, the program requires those who stay at PATH's facility to deposit 50 percent of their wages into a Wells Fargo savings account managed by PATH. When they leave the shelter, they take the savings with them.

"That's basically to ensure that they are working toward the goal of getting permanent housing," Sharpe said.

And it's been a tremendous success, she said. The 65 people who completed the 90-day program last year saved more than \$40,000.

"It's really structured and organized, so it can work," Sharpe said of the program. "It's proven to be pretty beneficial."

While the rules of the program may seem strict, PATH individualizes much of the specifics while the overall concept of the program remains the same for each resident.

"People are not robots, they have different needs," Sharpe said. "Our goal is to get them back on their feet."

One resident, who wished only to go by the name Phillip, worked through the program successfully and is taking more time at the shelter to ensure he won't come back as a resident.

"It's really been a lifesaver," Phillip said.

Phillip, 50, fell ill and had no insurance to cover his hospital expenses. He barely could walk when he entered the shelter several months ago.

For him, the structure of the program wasn't a burden, rather a benefit.

"There's a reason you knock on the door," Phillip said. "You have nowhere to go."

Through his several-month stay at the shelter, Phillip has recovered from his injuries and started his own business, which he hopes will blossom into a mainstay in the Farmington area.

"Without this place, I don't know where I'd be," he said. "I probably would be dead."

The program guided Phillip through recovery and launching a business while providing him a stable place to stay.

There often is a stigma attached to being homeless, said Allan Nass, director of human services education at San Juan College.

"People get blamed a lot for being homeless in our culture," Nass said.

Homelessness often is linked to poverty and affects the most vulnerable segments of the population, he said.

Women, children, veterans and people with substance abuse problems or mental illnesses often fall into homelessness. But, struggling to pay for medical bills, prolonged loss of work or inability to find affordable housing often cause the same situation, Nass said.

"That's why homelessness has become such a growing blight in our society," he said.

It's a problem that affects people in major metropolitan areas as well as smaller rural communities. But resources can help change many homeless people's situations.

PATH tries to help the whole individual rather than just provide a roof and bed for the night.

"If you want to, you can pull yourself up," Phillip said.

The facility

By definition, someone who is homeless has no home anywhere and lacks the resources to immediately get a home, Sharpe said.

The reasons for homelessness are as varied as the people who make up the demographic.

The emergency shelter has people who arrive from jail, come straight from the hospital, fled an abusive relationship or people who were transients for years, Sharpe said.

To accommodate the multitude of situations the staff encounters, the facility has a donation room. The room is stuffed with blankets, jackets, shirts, clothing for interviews and other items for the men, women and children who pass through the doors.

There is an Internet room available for residents to search for jobs, send e-mails to family members or study. But residents only are allowed one hour per day on the computer, Sharpe said. This keeps the computers available for all the people in the shelter to use.

An outdoor patio area is a favorite with the residents. "They do a lot of barbecues," she said.

Residents also can smoke in the patio area, which keeps the inside environment clean for the others, Sharpe said. Tobacco is the only substance that's permissible on the premises.

Most of the rooms are dorm-style, with sets of bunk beds lining the walls to sleep 10 or more. Some residents, who have proven to be role models in the facility, are able to share a room that sleeps three.

Those rooms are for people who need more time than the 90 days given in the program.

"Most people don't make it that far," Sharpe said. "They don't need that much time."

The facility has two separate living quarters, one for men and the other for women and children. There are 23 beds available for men and 13 for women.

There are more beds for men than women because it is easier for women to find someone to take them, Sharpe said. As the only shelter that serves men, the extra beds are a must.

There also is a laundry facility on site. Residents can wash their clothing

twice a week on specific days.

All these rules keep the facility operating smoothly, Sharpe said.

"It's a continual process," she said. "It's like running a big household."

And it's something that always is in demand.

"If there's a bed empty, there's two or three looking for that bed," Sharpe said.

The space is so limited people often cannot stay the night.

"I'm not going to turn them away and say no," Sharpe said. "I'll fix them a sandwich and do whatever I need to do."

More space would help the group save more lives. When the shelter is full, Sharpe and the other staff have to turn away people, who then have to find alternative places to sleep for the night.

Typically, the staff at the shelter will hand out a blanket or food to temporarily

help those turned away until space becomes available at the PATH house.

"Ideally we would love to have a new shelter," Sharpe said. But in the meantime, PATH is making do with what they have.

"You just work and do the best you can," she said. "We're maintaining, but it would be nice to have more rooms."

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