

# Spotlight on Supportive Housing



## Crisis Point in the Commonwealth

Homelessness among individuals and families is reaching a crisis point in Massachusetts. According to the 2005 “point-in-time” homeless count, over 15,000 Commonwealth residents are homeless at any given time. Given time and adequate resources, many people who become homeless can find their way back to a permanent home of their own. However, for some, homelessness is intertwined with chronic health issues, long-term poverty, a history of trauma, lack of education and poor independent living skills. These individuals and families can cycle in and out of homelessness, accessing services as a last resort to crisis situations, or not at all. They may return repeatedly to emergency shelters or transitional programs simply because they lack other resources to maintain a stable, permanent living situation.

As we enter the second decade of welfare reform, many vulnerable families have reached their limits under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Although some families are moving from welfare to work, many are faring poorly due to low wages and inadequate work supports. The National Low Income Housing Coalition’s 2006 report, “Out of Reach,” found that a worker in Massachusetts would need to earn \$22.65 per hour to afford the average two-bedroom apartment. Yet, only a small fraction of entry-level jobs pay wages above the minimum wage. Some 74% of low-income families pay more than half of their incomes toward their homes, compared to 26% in other income groups. This crisis promises to grow if unchecked by systems change, placing individuals and families with low incomes and special needs at significant and increasing risk for homelessness.

## Supportive Housing as a Viable Solution

Supportive housing is a practical, proven and cost-effective solution to the problem of homelessness. There are two main components to supportive housing. First, it provides high quality, safe and secure rental housing that is affordable to people with very low incomes. The housing offers independent apartment units (as opposed to congregate or group living) and, unlike shelter or transitional living, is available for the long-term. The other key feature is the availability of support services by skilled and responsive case workers. Services are designed to be flexible and responsive to the needs of the individual; workers also help build independent living skills, connect people to employment and financial resources, and assist with getting treatment and counseling services as needed. By providing permanent, affordable housing in conjunction with services that deal with individualized health, support and employment needs, supportive housing addresses homelessness at its root causes.

## The Positive Impact of Supportive Housing

Supportive housing works. It can result in **considerable cost savings to the state AND significantly better outcomes for homeless individuals and families**: The research supports it:

- Supportive Housing in Boston has the lowest cost per person per day compared to other options being used:
 

Supportive Housing:	\$33.45/day	Psychiatric Hospital:	\$541.00/day
Homeless Shelter:	\$40.28/day	In-patient Hospital:	\$1,770.00/day
- In Massachusetts, a study of 119 chronically homeless individuals found that, over five years, total health care costs for this population exceeded \$12.5 million, or \$21,000 per person annually. The average annual health care cost for formerly homeless people who were housed in permanent supportive housing was \$6,000 annually, for a savings of \$15,000 per person annually.
- According to studies by the Corporation for Supportive Housing, supportive housing results in the following tenant outcomes:
  - A 50% increase in earned income when employment services are provided in supportive housing;
  - A decrease of 72% in the use of public health services;
  - A 23% decline in shelter use.

## Local Examples

The Women's Institute has been a leading developer of supportive housing properties for homeless individuals and families for over 25 years. Our successful approach is to partner with local service providers to create complementary housing and services that benefit the specific needs of a neighborhood or community. Examples of this model include:

- ***Acushnet Commons***, 12-units of affordable housing targeting the lowest income families in New Bedford, MA, with an average annual household income of \$15,000. Four units are reserved for homeless families, and over a dozen local agencies utilize the community room. Sponsor/owner: Women's Institute. Service partner: NorthStar Learning Centers.
- ***Dunmore Place, Familias Unidas, and Nueva Vida***, a variety of permanent housing options for homeless individuals and families in recovery. Located in Roxbury, Mass., residents have access to counseling services, employment training, and other community resources. Sponsor/owner and service provider: Casa Esperanza.
- ***Soromundi Commons***, 48 transitional and permanent units for very low-income individuals in Hartford, Conn. Residents have access to significantly enhanced services, including employment and training. Sponsor/owner: YWCA of the Hartford Region. Service provider: The Chrysalis Center.

## Recommendations

The policy discussion in Massachusetts regarding homelessness is taking a refreshing shift away from “managing” homelessness, and seeks to end it. Supportive housing can play a key role in reaching this vision. Massachusetts leaders need look no further than the state of Connecticut to find a highly successful model of integrating capital, operating and service dollars for the creation of permanent supportive housing in affordable housing and mixed-income developments. In light of our experience in developing affordable housing in partnership with strong local service providers in both states, the Women's Institute strongly urges the following action steps:

- **Prioritize partnerships to develop and operate supportive housing.** High-quality supportive housing combines three important elements: a non-profit housing developer experienced in the creation of affordable housing and the use of public-sector financing; a service provider who is experienced in providing case management and “wrap-around” supports to the population to be targeted for tenancy and who has strong linkages with mainstream service programs; and a property manager willing to work in partnership with the service provider on an ongoing basis.
- **Utilize the current momentum around ending homelessness to create a state financing mechanism** that packages service dollars with development dollars and rental subsidies so that housing development in Massachusetts includes sound supportive housing models. Adequate funding for necessary pre-development costs is also essential.
- **Increase the availability of tenant-based rental vouchers** to assist low-income individuals and families to afford existing, privately-owned housing. Vouchers have significant impact in moving people out of shelter and preventing homelessness in the first place, and provides a significant incentive for private property owners to rent to vulnerable populations.

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The Women's Institute is proud to partner with the Corporation for Supportive Housing, the Partnership for Strong Communities, and the Connecticut Housing Coalition in promoting supportive housing as a viable option to ending homelessness in the state of Connecticut. Please take a moment to view their strategies and successes in this work:

***Corporation for Supportive Housing***  
[www.csh.org](http://www.csh.org)

***Partnership for Strong Communities***  
[www.ctpartnershiphousing.com](http://www.ctpartnershiphousing.com)

***Connecticut Housing Coalition***  
[www.ct-housing.org](http://www.ct-housing.org)

**Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development**  
Massachusetts: 617.367.0520      Connecticut: 860.343.9000      [www.wihed.org](http://www.wihed.org)