

New models emerging for ministry to homeless population_11204

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New models emerging for ministry to homeless population

By John Hall

Texas Baptist Communications

New approaches to helping the homeless population are giving hope to Christians who want to get people off the streets and into warm housing.

Jefferson Street Baptist Center in Louisville, Ky., which deals primarily with mentally ill and substance-abusing homeless people, is on the verge of offering a ministry organizers hope will meet needs and transform lives.

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In the next month, the ministry will launch an 11-unit permanent-support housing complex. It will give homeless individuals diagnosed both with mental illness and substance abuse issues a place to stay. Staff members will serve as secondary caseworkers for each resident and teach practical skills such as budgeting, hygiene and apartment cleanliness.

They also will be first detectors in case a resident regresses by not taking medication or abusing substances and will report to the person's primary

caseworker, provided by an outside agency.

“We will catch issues earlier. We will see them every day,” said Rick Brenny, executive director of the center.

The outreach goes beyond the scope of more traditional ministries that provide meals, clothes and temporary housing. While those are effective at meeting needs, a transformational element is needed, said Gerald Davis, consultant in the Baptist General Convention of Texas Missions Equipping Center.

Davis is looking to create an outreach network in Texas cities that will help churches work together to rebuild the lives of the homeless. The network would include feeding, clothing, training, housing, transitioning, rehabilitating and job placement.

This comprehensive approach is the key to fighting homelessness, according to Donald Whitehead, executive director of the nation's oldest and largest advocacy group for the homeless, the National Coalition for the Homeless.

Permanent-support housing is a more cost-effective way of serving the homeless, no matter how long they stay, Brenny noted. The service is cheaper than providing food, hospital care, substance abuse treatment and mental health counseling to people who remain on the street.

Jefferson Street Baptist Center clients, who receive a government subsidy for the mental illnesses, will be required to pay a minimum contribution of \$25 a month for rent and utilities. But they will have clean, safe housing to live in and improve their lives.

While residents can choose to stay in the apartment complex permanently, some will use the complex as a stepping-stone to self-sufficiency, Brenny said.

Homeless individuals are showing interest in this new approach to helping them. Without advertising, there is a 15-person waiting list to get a room, Brenny said.

“We could fill as many of these units as we could provide,” he added.