

A place to stay, a place to start

*Riverwood receives
 United Way grant
 to expand
 chronic homeless
 apartment program*

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For former Barrington resident Sheri Richardson, her apartment is a reality seen through rose-colored curtains. It is her tie to her family. It is sobriety. It is a balanced state of life. But without a bed to make and a place to put her things, Ms. Richardson would not be living as healthily as she does now.

In years past, she was convicted of using narcotics and found herself homeless. She did jail time intermittently at the ACI and picked up using. Her relationships with her family became strained and it was hard to map out how she would function each day. She slept in sober-only homeless shelters that were volatile and grated her nerves. People would steal possessions left out in the open and she was only allowed to stay during night-time hours.

"I hit a low place, a very low place," said Ms. Richardson.

However, through word of mouth, she heard about subsidized apartments that were being offered to the chronic homeless, those without a stable home on average of 330 days out of the year, by Housing First Rhode Island (HFRI) run by Riverwood Mental Health Services, a provider of community behavioral health services in the state with headquarters in Warren. All she had to do was sign up, stay housed, and give one-third of her salary to the pro-

gram. She shares her two-bedroom apartment with no one except her daughter who sometimes comes and stays with her.

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"I have a bed, a couch. I'm so grateful no one will take it away," said Ms. Richardson.

According to program advocates, Ms. Richardson is a success story. She has rebuilt relationships with loved ones, stayed sober for months and has plans to finish her degree at the University of Rhode Island. More amazingly, she has stayed there and abided by her lease, something that the chronically homeless often have trouble doing.

According to Dan Kubas-Meyer, executive director of Riverwood, there are 7,000 homeless people in Rhode Island; 1,000 are chronically homeless. But he said once a person is stabilized, they can begin to work on putting their life together. About 90 percent of their client base was still housed after 12 months. Moreover, because 40 percent of the those HFRI serves are dealing with drug addictions and 50 percent are dealing with mental health issues, a stable home is key for people to work out their road blocks, according to Mr. Kubas-Meyer.

"It's like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. You've got to have the basics: shelter, food. Without it, you have to think of everything," said Mr. Kubas-Meyer.

Once in the program, there are no requirements to stay sober, unlike other social-aid systems. Participants are encouraged to seek help from Riverwood counselors to avoid relapsing – but if they do, there are no consequences regarding the HFRI

lease. If there was a sobriety rule, participants may lie about drug use which is counter-productive in the healing process, said Mr. Boucher.

Ms. Richardson agrees with the program's philosophy because addicts often will leave a situation when their actions are tracked.

"Addicts rebel against authority. When they are told what to do, people leave, especially in the summer," said Ms. Richardson.

But the homeless problem is more than a social problem – it is a fiscal problem that drains from the state's tax base. According to Don Boucher, program director of HFRI, the annual cost of public service for the chronically homeless is about \$30,000 if the state does nothing to help. Some of those individuals find themselves in mental institutions or the ACI.

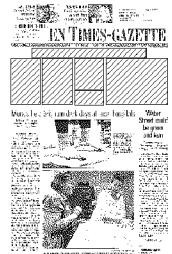
However, even when you add in the cost of the program and the housing subsidy to rent out the apartments, the total cost per client was about \$23,000, about a \$7,000 savings per person.

"You spend money on services one way or the other. If you do nothing it's \$30,000, if you provide everything it's \$23,000," said Mr. Boucher.

Programs like this have been tried in New York City, Denver, California and results have been the same, debunking an age-old myth that homeless people want to be without a shelter, say program advocates.

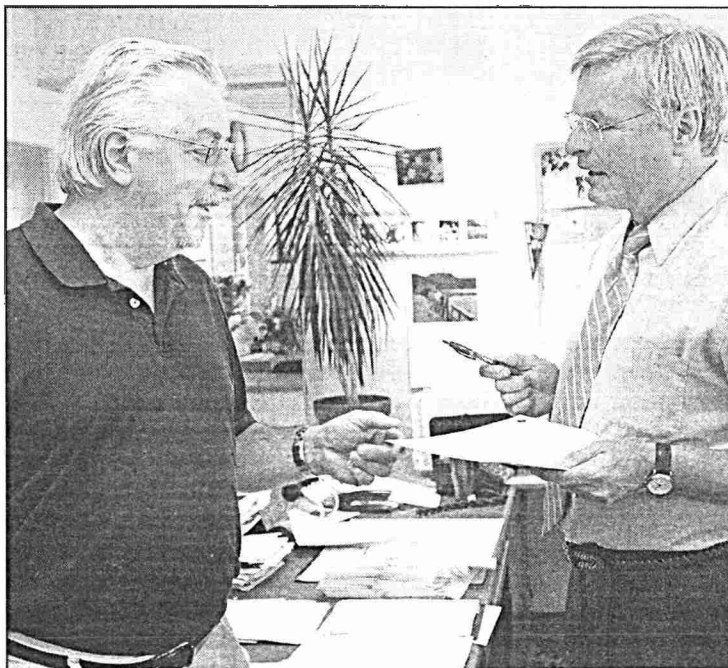
"People think that homeless are freer with no responsibilities. But in reality, they are the opposite of being free," said Mr. Kubas-Meyer.

At the end of June, Riverwood received a \$146,252 grant from



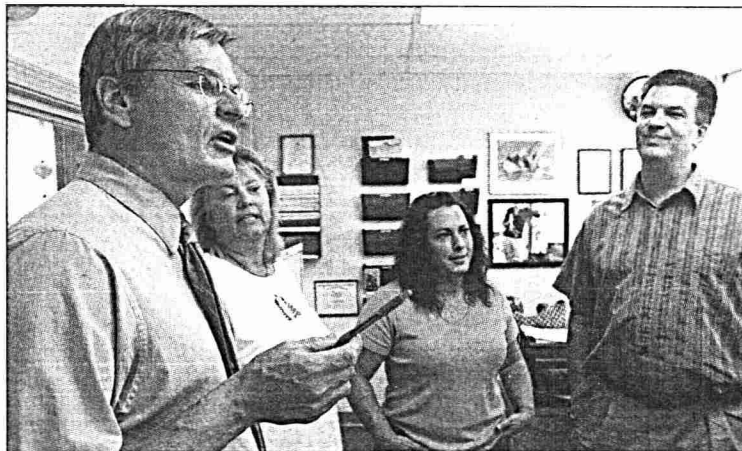
the United Way to expand its HFRI program. It will enable the program to help 200 homeless by the end of 2009. Mr. Boucher said the list for apartments is long.

"The need is huge. If you hear about a program giving out apartments, you're going to jump on it," said Mr. Kubas-Meyer.



RICHARD W DIONNE JR

Riverwood Executive Director Dan Kubas-Meyer (right) and Assistant Director Domenic Maglioni discuss the impact of the United Way grant that will bolster Riverwood's Chronic Homeless apartment program.



RICHARD W. DIONNE JR.

Riverwood Executive Director Dan Kubas-Meyer (left) meets with his staff (from left) Barbara Fournier, Sherrie Carreiro and Alan Machado at their office in Warren.