Providing an avenue to stable housing from a foundation of safe shelter

Many in our community equate the Boulder Shelter for the Homeless with the building in north Boulder that shelters up to 160 homeless adults each night. And while offering services to those with immediate sheltering needs is still a big part of what we do, much of the Shelter’s programming is hidden from view.

These hidden programs are the housing programs the Shelter operates with Boulder Housing Partners (BHP). Over the 35 years we have been offering overnight shelter, we have come to understand that homeless shelters are, at best, a tolerable temporary solution to homelessness. Shelters are a bandage. The problem is homelessness. The solution is housing. And shelters are just a necessary step in the process.

That is why, for years now, in partnership with BHP, the Shelter has offered a permanent housing solution, with supportive case management, to chronically homeless individuals in our community. And why, today, we continue to focus on housing as the goal of Shelter services, and to the transformational approach of the Shelter’s ongoing singular focus: to make homelessness a thing of the past, at least for one person at a time.

The beds at the Boulder Shelter exist today to wean people off survival mode, to relieve the immediate desperation of finding a safe place to sleep, and to ensure that they have stable accommodation and meaningful support as a foundation for moving on from their challenges and into a stable housing solution.

Every person’s journey from the streets to housing will be different; because of our community of support, because of you, the Shelter will be here with them all along the way.

Ten years, housed

Bill* has been living in Boulder since 2002 and, like any of us, has been through a lot over the years. From 2004 to 2007 he fell into homelessness; they were tough but manageable years, he says, until his untreated Multiple Sclerosis (MS) became too much of a battle with the extremes of his life on the streets.

In 2007, Bill entered the Shelter’s Housing First program. The new program (at the time) was able to secure housing for Bill in a unit on the east side of town. He has been housed there since.

With the support of his Housing First case managers, he has mitigated his MS and he says his housing situation has led to the stabilization of his health. ‘Before being housed, I had trouble with things like my medications and doctors’ appointments,’ he said. ‘Now that stuff is mostly under control. An address really helps.’

While homeless, as his health declined, Bill would spend his days panhandling around town. But by night, he would curl up under a staircase behind the Boulder Public Library. At one point his health had declined to the point that he needed to be carried up and down the exterior library stairs by friends so that he could go about his daily life.

Now, 10 years after entering the program, Bill has gained a stable income through Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). He has also obtained valuable treatment for his MS and other ailments through Medicaid and even adopted a service dog named Spangle to help him navigate his way around town. He was also able to garner a motorized wheelchair, which gives him mobility both inside and outside his home.
**Director’s Dialogue**

RECENTLY, THE BOULDER SHELTER FOR THE HOMELESS HAS RENewed ITS EFFORTS TO GET HOMELESS PEOPLE HOUSED.

We have always believed that stable housing is, by definition, the cure for homelessness. However, working to meet individuals’ immediate basic needs for food and shelter can be an all-consuming task that leaves few resources for actually exiting people into stable housing.

We need to do both.

In partnership with our sister agencies, the City of Boulder, the City of Longmont and Boulder County, the Shelter is now retooling its efforts to help Shelter clients move from the Shelter into housing. We have not abandoned our primary mission of providing homeless adults with the basic necessities of life, but we also recognize that helping people get housed is the real goal. To that end, we are happy to be partnering with the City of Boulder and Boulder Housing Partners to add additional capacity to our Permanent Supportive Housing program.

In the coming months, ten more chronically homeless individuals will be moved off the streets and into permanent housing with case management support. Although ten people may not sound like a lot, these resources will be focused on Boulder’s long-term homeless; people who have struggled on the streets of Boulder, often for years. By housing these individuals, with supportive services, we not only dramatically change a life for the better, we also take a high utilizer of community resources out of the system. We are grateful for the City’s funding and for Boulder Housing Partners’ help in bringing these additional resources to Boulder.

The Boulder Shelter is still filled to capacity on many nights, but we are committed to ending each individual’s homelessness, one person at a time.

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He credits his stability mostly to housing. Yet speaking with Bill it is clear that his desire to live, and a little light heartedness, are also key factors to his longevity. “No matter how bad things got, humor got me through,” he said. “You can either cry…or laugh.”

According to Housing First staff, Bill’s success in the program provided impetus for getting more chronically homeless off the street. The program has since expanded, and the Housing First program currently houses 54 formerly chronically homeless; 31 in its Lee Hill residence and 23 in other units across Boulder County.

And, thanks to funding from the City of Boulder, Boulder Housing Partners and the Shelter are about to expand the program once again, so that we can house more folks like Bill.

See “Director’s Dialogue,” above, to read more about that.

*“Bill” is a pseudonym, created to protect his identity.*
Volunteer Spotlight

Ashley R.

- How long have you been volunteering at the Shelter and in which volunteer positions have you participated?
  I have been volunteering regularly since October, 2016. I currently help out in Dorm Supply and as a Staff Assistant at the check-in desk. I have also helped out in the intake area in the past.

- What inspires you to volunteer at the Shelter?
  I believe that any one of us could end up homeless if certain things went wrong. I enjoy being able to help out in whatever small way I can to hopefully bring a little bit of light and happiness to their day. And so often, many of them brighten my day with their positive attitudes. I always leave the Shelter in a better mood than when I arrived.

- What is your favorite part about volunteering at the Shelter?
  I love getting to learn about each person and their unique personality. My favorite position is in Dorm Supply where I can spend a little more time talking with people. I am working on learning names and do my best to greet the ones I know by name.

- Most unique/favorite memory or interaction/s? Any surprises?
  Last year when I helped with the Point-in-Time survey, one older gentleman I was talking to was being a little grumpy about answering questions. When I asked about veteran status he indicated he served as a Marine. My father is also a Marine, so I told him “Semper Fi”. His eyes lit up and you could tell how proud he was of his service. It really broke the ice between us and he happily answered the rest of my questions. I floated out of the building that night.

- What is something you like to do when you’re not at the Shelter?
  I love to hike! I recently completed the Boulder Hiker Chicks Winter Trifecta which included South Boulder Peak, Bear Peak and Green Mountain. I started hiking a couple months after I started volunteering and I truly believe that both activities have had a huge impact on my overall happiness.
24th Annual Boulder Shelter

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