



What's Up?!

Housing First Success

By Priya Zander Fox

In 2016, at the recommendation of the Amherst Community Preservation Act Committee (CPA), Amherst Town Meeting approved a three year/\$150K budget for the Housing First Program (HF). HF is ACC's exciting, new grant based program aimed at ending homelessness. This program provides relief and support to our most vulnerable community members: chronically homeless individuals.



Paris Boice, the chair of the CPA, drawing names at the HF lottery with the help of her children.

Living without the safety and protection of a home takes its toll. Our participants in the HF program have slept in parks, in makeshift shelters in the woods, on friends' floors, in public shelters, and in their vehicles. They have been threatened physically, challenged by the elements, and robbed. Two of the biggest hardships they battle are the cold and living without easy access to running water.

Homelessness can happen to any of us in all walks of life. People encountering homelessness do not fall into a single category. They are mothers, daughters, sons, and fathers—many who serve as caretakers to friends and family, as well as being homemakers, workers, artists, and students; people seeking the same happiness we all seek. HF has come as a result of believing that the best way to end homelessness in our community is through providing the right services and support to enable people to find suitable housing and to help them stabilize their lives. HF works towards these goals by supporting three chronically homeless lottery recipients at a time to secure housing through a voucher program. If participants have a zero income, the voucher pays in full for rent and utilities. If participants have income through work, assets, SSI, or SSDI, they contribute 30% of that income towards rent and utilities. In addition, participants receive four hours of one-on-one support each week.

While a participant's time in the program may be temporary, our goals are long term. We offer support in searching for and (cont. on pg. 4)



Learn more about end-of-life care on April 5th with Anne Burton!

What's New?!

Wednesday, 4/5, 10-11:30 am @ ACC office, *Bringing Comfort: Reaching the End of Life*, Anne Burton, Hospice of the Fisher Home volunteer

Wednesday, 4/12, 10-11:30 am @ ACC office, *Sailing Around the World!* Jeanne Ballantine, educator

Wednesday, 4/19, 10-11:30 am @ ACC office, *Drawing for fun to Remember our Loved Ones!* Bella Halstead, artist/art teacher

Wednesday, 4/26, 10-11:30 am @ ACC office, *Living an Authentic Happy Life*, Richard Martin, Psychotherapist

Monday, 4/24, 4-6 pm @ ACC office, *Food-Music-Dance Reception by the Aspiring Home-seekers*, Free. All are welcome!

Family Values

By Abra Lipton



Fishing is one of Jerome and his son's favorite activities together.

Jerome is a single father who has spent 8 years fighting for custody of his son. He's a happy-go-lucky guy with a positive attitude and a lot of determination. Jerome was born in Waterville, Maine, but was raised here in Western Massachusetts. His battle with housing started in 2014, when he found himself with a landlord who didn't take his housing rights seriously. He was staying in a room that was supposed to include utilities, however his landlord refused to pay for them. He went without electricity for four months, even though he was paying the full amount of his rent. It was unfair and he had no way out, so eventually he had to sneak out of the apartment and put his things in storage.

After this experience, Jerome lived with and took care of his father until he passed away in 2015, which forced him to start living out of his car. He says that he went from having to take care of his dad fulltime,

to no responsibilities, "which was kinda nice." However, "it's moments when you're sleeping at of rest stop and a state trooper would knock on the window," that made him remember he needed to find housing.

Through everything, being a father has always been his priority. During his weekend visitations, Jerome would pay for himself and his son to stay at motels and do fun things. He says that in regards to getting custody, "it's been me against the world." When Jerome only had visitation rights on weekends, he had to work hard to keep everyone happy so that no one could take them away. However, they did end up getting taken away for two months over the summer because he got into a car accident and totaled his car. In September, Jerome received a call from DCF informing him that his son's step father was abusing him. Jerome immediately got his visits back every weekend and then, on January 11th, his son was taken out of the home because his step father had punished him by locking him out of the house in subzero weather with no jacket or shoes.

This was the tipping point for Jerome to get his life together, After looking for a place in Amherst for a year and half with no luck, "it felt like it was one road block after another." So, he started looking in Brattleboro, where his son was currently living, and found an apartment in only a month. Though it's been an uphill battle, Jerome received custody on March 3rd! Even though it felt like the world was against him, Jerome persisted. Jerome says he's very nervous to be a full-time single dad, but everyone at ACC knows that Jerome will do wonderful. He's worked very hard to get on his feet for his son's sake and is working even harder to be a great dad. He goes to weekly Dedicated Dad's group meetings and just finished a 13-week Nurturing Father's program. Luckily, his son will not have to change schools or make new friends since they are staying in Brattleboro.

ACC wishes their family the best of luck and we are here to help if they ever happen to need it!

ACC'S MISSION

ACC's mission is to empower, advocate for and assist those in need. We strive to provide help with issues affecting individuals' abilities to lead a stable and productive life. We can assist in...

- Disability Applications
- Housing & Job Searches
- Free Cell Phone Applications
- Food Stamps & Fuel Assistance
- \$ for rent, meds, utilities, etc.
- SSI/SSDI Benefits
- Debt/Credit issues
- CORI issues *and more!*

Ending Homelessness in Western Mass

By Kimya Hedayat-Zadeh

While some headway has been made to end homelessness among families in Massachusetts, more than double the number of individuals experiencing homelessness reported in 1990 are in need of housing. A point-in-time count of homeless individuals between January and February 2015 numbered 21,135 people experiencing homelessness in Mass., according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Annual Homeless Assessment Report. The state law that exists to require housing of families does not apply to homeless individuals, who comprise one third of the homeless population.



Housing First allows homeless individuals to get on their feet without having to worry about housing.

The Coalition for Homeless Individuals, a statewide entity, calls for policy language that would ensure the direction of HUD funds for homeless individuals to the 40 organizations, collectively called the Continuum of Care, contracted to address the problem. Among these are the Friends of the Homeless in Springfield. The program Vice President, Bill Miller, commented on the discrepancy between state support for homeless families versus homeless individuals. “I hate to say money is the answer,” said Miller, “but the state probably spends 5 or 6 times the amount on family homelessness than it does on individual homelessness, and, believe me, we think it’s wonderful the state has a goal of ending family homelessness, but they don’t have a similar goal of ending individual homelessness.”

As it stands, the budget funds only 61% of the cost of Department of Housing and Community Development beds, and 47% of all beds in the Commonwealth. “The need to privately fundraise for coverage of basic assistance limits the ability of providers to do more work in the areas that return people to self-sufficiency,” reported the Coalition. Housing vouchers is a key way to address the problem. As of 2013, eight regional non-profit housing agencies and 112 local housing authorities administered the Massachusetts Regional Voucher Program to some 5,100 households under lease. A voucher allows an individual or family to rent and, in some rare cases, to buy a modest home by relinquishing the subsidy and paying for the difference. But it is not a perfect solution, according to Miller.

“The cost of housing is expensive in Massachusetts. Land is valuable, and so people are building expensive housing,” said Miller. “It makes sense from a business perspective, but from a public policy perspective, we can’t just be giving out vouchers. The bulk of what we need to do is affordable housing.”

Hwei-Ling Greeney, Executive Director of ACC, qualifies however that vouchers might still be a homeless person’s best bet and that there should be more of them because of the high cost of so-called affordable housing. “Affordable housing is not so affordable for the people who are only getting \$750 a month for a disability check,” said Greeney. “Even if a homeless individual used every penny of their monthly income on housing, a rent of \$1,200 might be considered ‘affordable.’”

In an area where at least 50% of the units must be designated as affordable, households earning no more than 80% of the area median income (AMI) are allowed to purchase the home. For a household in Springfield, income could not exceed \$46,000, and in Boston, it could not exceed \$51,000. The Massachusetts Housing Partnership, which promotes the retention of affordable housing, requires the percentage of affordable housing to be at least 20% in any given project. In this case, the project is geared towards people earning no more than 50% of the AMI; In Springfield, this is no more than \$29,150 and in Boston, no more than \$34,350. But these figures are still out of reach for many homeless individuals. And though an income (cont. on pg. 6)

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obtaining immediate suitable housing, while helping each person apply for long-term state and federally funded housing. Once housing is secured, we help participants realize their goals of creating a sustainable and fulfilling life. Our participants' long term goals are as unique and individualistic as they are, though the goals always include aspects of financial stability through work or subsidy. One of our current participants is a full-time student in the process of applying to be an Ada Comstock scholar, another received support to create an effective resume and cover letter, which helped her to land a job, and a third participant is taking time to process some losses before looking for satisfying part time work.

As the social worker for the HF program, I am dedicated to serving the needs of each person who comes through our program with the dignity, respect, and compassion that everyone deserves. Equal access to basic needs like housing, food, safety, and the ability to express one's potential is essential for our personal and collective wellbeing, as individuals, communities, and humanity. It is with this set of beliefs that I welcome each participant into the program.

Four months from the inception of HF, we have already helped four individuals in ways that make a big difference in their lives. One has 'graduated' the HF program, by receiving an AHVP voucher (a state funded housing voucher) from the town of Amherst. HF supported him through the application process, including retrieving lost documents necessary to apply for emergency housing. The three current participants have all found housing— two with yearlong leases and one who has found temporary housing and is now searching for a long-term rental. All are applying for public assisted housing while making enormous headway and moving forward in their lives. Other areas of significant life progress include gaining access to healthcare, attending to medical issues, and clearing debts.

At ACC, we thrive as a collective. Along with myself, we have Lillian Coleman, case worker and office support on staff, Hwei-Ling Greeney, our committed Founder and Executive Director, and the support of a tremendous staff of bright and caring college interns and volunteers who bring their commitment, wisdom, and specialties to support the program and our participants. It is with deep gratitude to the CPA committee and Town Meeting that the HF program has been established. Consistently supporting our homeless residents, who are amongst the most vulnerable members of our community, is an expression of the best of Amherst, making a positive difference in the long-term health of our community.

Valley Gives 2017

Amherst Community Connections is participating in Valley Gives 2017! Valley Gives hosts a 24 hour giving day for people to make online donations to registered organizations. This year's giving day will be May 2. Our goal this year is to raise \$5,500 so that we can continue to provide support to the homeless population in our community. We need your help so we can achieve our fundraising goal and continue our services. People come to us daily looking for help with various tasks including applying for housing, jobs, public benefits, or even writing a resume. Our one stop resource center gives people the opportunity to get help with whatever they need at the time. Many of our participants rely on public transportation, so to be able to stop in our office during drop in hours and have one-on-one assistance makes our service valuable to them. Our

easy access and ongoing support helps people get back on their feet and move to having a home and a job. Our staff and volunteers form relationships with our participants and the majority continue to come in for help. With your donation this May, we can carry on with our work and continue to assist individuals in need. Our community is responsible for assuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to live in a safe environment and achieve their goals. By donating to ACC, you can give back to your community! Please visit our Valley Gives page to learn more at <https://valley-gives.org/designee/amherst-community-connections>



Turning a Troubled Past Around

By Abra Lipton



AJ, pictured, drawing in his sketch book.

AJ is a bright and creative man who is currently trying to find housing in Amherst. He's had many ups and downs during his life, starting with his childhood. He was born in Rhode Island and stayed there till he was seven-years-old, when he moved to the Boston area. His biological parents couldn't care for him—he says that he's been told his father was a known sex-offender and his mother was a drug addict. He was taken out of the home with nine other children and was adopted. He says that he doesn't have many memories from before he was adopted, but sometimes remembers sleeping in basements and shelters.

Even after being adopted, he says that he was a troubled child who was often caught stealing things from the house. That's when he was put into therapy and was eventually put into programs around the state for troubled children.

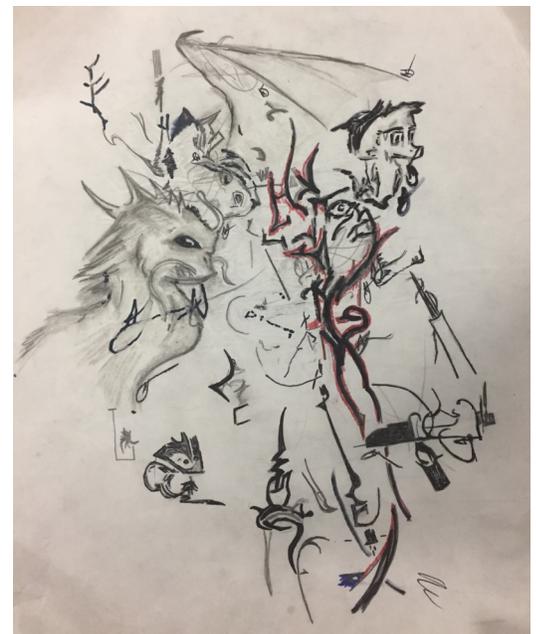
He spent years bouncing around Massachusetts, but managed to graduate high school with his original classmates in 2010.

After graduating, he moved to Western Massachusetts to go to college, as the state agreed to pay for a public in-state institution. It had always been his dream to become a veterinarian, so he decided to study animal science. Unfortunately, AJ found himself getting back into trouble and was incarcerated for short period of time. Because of this, he ended up homeless with low job prospects. Though, when he got out, he says that, "I decided to change for the better."

Through all of the hardships in his life, AJ has always had a passion for drawing. His future goals are to get an apartment and to use it as a studio for his art. Right now, he has a large binder with all of his drawings packed inside. Unfortunately, his last notebook was stolen and he lost many of his old drawings. He quickly got back to work and already has many loose pieces of paper with small, intricate drawings done in pen. He says that he takes inspiration from tribal designs and that when you flip the paper around there are many different designs within the larger scheme.

He traces the patterns over again and uses them to make new drawings, so he can make a unique version of a past design if he wants. Though his images are mostly in black in white, they are vibrant in another way—they are very detailed and are almost like puzzles, filled with many different images to find within. Right now, he's working on what he calls his tattoo book. He says that he would love to become a tattoo artist in the future. However, when asked if he'd ever go back to college he said, "School's always an option for me... There's always that opportunity to say, 'Hey I want to sit in a classroom again.'" AJ is very open to what the future holds for him.

Outside of his time spent drawing, AJ spends much of his time at ACC looking for job and housing opportunities. He has made progress since first coming to ACC and is on the waitlist for the Amherst Emergency Housing Voucher. His next step is to find housing, which is a very difficult process. However, with diligent work and the help of caseworkers at ACC, he is on his way to a more stable future.



One of AJ's illustrations, if you look closely you can find many different images.

Ending Homelessness in Western Mass

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below the said figures does not preclude a homeless individual from having access to the affordable housing, it does mean that they have less money to work with, if they have any to begin with, and even less or no money left over for covering food and transportation costs.

Gerry McCafferty, the Director of Housing for the City of Springfield, believes a model called Housing First, which covers the cost of housing for chronically homeless individuals, must be expanded and adopted by more cities and towns. Springfield was one of the first adopters of the Housing First model. McCafferty has seen the positive impact of Housing First first-hand, as the city's point-in-time count of homeless unsheltered individuals went from 98 per 10,000 individuals in 2004 to 22 individuals this year. As of 2014, there were 3,275 individuals experiencing homelessness in western Mass.

"I would say what got our city to create a plan and to rethink about how we were responding to homelessness was because we had a very large homeless street population. We know that our street population has been reduced because of this," said McCafferty, adding, "When we first did it there was enough impact that a lot of people noticed downtown." Housing First does not require sobriety or the acceptance of social services by homeless individuals; it has no preconditions. Tenants can only be evicted if they disturb neighbors or fail to pay rent. However, McCafferty stresses that the Housing First initiative is a philosophy, not a program, and its impacts will only be seen when more cities voluntarily adopt it.

"There has been some resistance. I think there are people who think that this population is too hard to house, and they don't have a lot of faith that they'll be successful in housing. So I don't know that there are a lot of cities that are sort of as all in as we are..." said McCafferty. HUD has been pushing the concept of Housing First, and some of their funding, given on a competitive basis, is secured when communities adopt Housing First, like Springfield has. As time has gone by, however, Springfield has seen it's point-in-time count of homeless individuals creep up. McCafferty attributes a rising national opioid addiction and more extensive outreach.

Within the last year and a half, Springfield has started tracking every chronically homeless person by name. "Doing so has made us more aware of where people are at a given time, and so it made us better able to find people when we did this year's point-in-time count." Putting a name to each individual face of homelessness might also prompt other cities and towns to prioritize the Housing First model with dollars and cents. As part of this effort, a national campaign is underway to eradicate veteran and chronic homelessness. The campaign, comprising 75 communities across the country, is sponsored by the national agency Community Solutions, Inc.

Originally, the campaign was called Zero 2016, but it was renamed Built For Zero because, while some communities have been able to eradicate veteran homeless populations, none have yet brought the chronically homeless populations to zero. "I think that there is more of a hidden population than we knew, so we have more chronically homeless people than we thought we had, and I think that's true in a lot of communities," said McCafferty. "I think our goals are not as high as they needed to be, and we're understanding that better."

Built For Zero aims to identify vulnerable people before they become homeless, a condition that an individual without family may find even harder to get out of, and stay out of. The campaign is a small movement to bolster models like Housing First, which provide the support that homeless individuals need to fight the cycle of poverty. Greeney, Miller, and McCafferty hope that it will turn into a large-scale movement towards housing the homeless.

ACC's Office Hours

- Monday—Friday: 8:30-noon walk ins; noon—5 by appointment at ACC's office
- Contact us at (413) 345-0737
- Located in the Amherst Unitarian Meeting-house, use the Kellogg Ave entrance.
- 121 North Pleasant Street, P.O. Box 141 Amherst, MA 01004