



Talking turkey: In 2010, Connections hosted its 25th Annual Thanksgiving Client Luncheon. Volunteers served more than 800 traditional meals.

In the Wilmington, Del., area, pervasive homelessness and the high cost of housing are taking their toll. Soaring chronic homelessness, waiting lists for supportive housing, and even deep-freeze winters are all going to show that it pays to have ...

Good Connections



Safe place: Judy's House resident Aaron Wilkins, safely off the street, and case manager, Raimyia Wheeler.

By **REBEKAH C. ROBERTSON**

Aaron Wilkins is one of the lucky ones. After being on a waiting list for housing for more than a year, he now lives in his own apartment in Judy's House, a permanent affordable housing residence located in Wilmington, Del. Judy's House is owned and operated by Connections Community Support Programs, Inc. (Connections).

Connections serves vulnerable and disenfranchised individuals, families, children and youth in Delaware with 55 program locations in New Castle, Kent, and Sussex Counties.

Homeless since 2006, Aaron

had experienced it all. He used motel vouchers; stayed in area emergency shelters, but refused to return after his personal items were stolen on multiple occasions; got himself admitted to hospital psychiatric wards just to get off

the street; and slept on benches on the Wilmington Riverfront or in the back of empty U-Haul trucks. Feeling increasingly unsafe in those environments, Aaron had begun sleeping on bus stop benches on Dupont Highway near the New Castle County Police building, where he felt he would be safer and could at least run for help in case anyone tried to harm him.

This past winter, with the weather so bad, Aaron was becoming even more desperate and says that he had considered getting himself arrested just so he could get off the street. Fortunately, there was an opening at Judy's House, and Aaron moved into his own apartment in January 2011. Aaron is not able to work so to stay active and busy, he volunteers at an area soup kitchen.

Aaron's story is one of thousands in Delaware, where, like other states, homelessness is a serious problem. According to the Homeless Planning Council of Delaware, on any given night, there are more than 1,800 homeless individuals living on the streets of Delaware and over the course of a year, nearly 7,000 Delawareans will find themselves homeless. Ultimately, the greatest causes of homelessness are the barriers to safe, decent, and affordable housing.

Delaware has an acute shortage of affordable housing. In New Castle County, where the majority of homeless persons and persons in poverty are located, the HUD Fair Market Rent for a one-bedroom apartment is \$900 and \$1,077 for a two-bedroom apartment. According to the Delaware Housing Coalition, an individual would have to earn \$19.31/hour or \$40,163 per year to afford the average 2-bedroom unit in Delaware without spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing. More than 43 percent of Delaware's renter households are "cost-burdened," i.e., paying housing costs in excess of one-third of their monthly income.

In Delaware, Connections is helping individuals and families with extremely low incomes obtain and keep affordable housing. It owns and/or operates more than 500 beds of permanent supportive housing. Connections' housing and supportive services programs

By the numbers

The Homeless Planning Council of Delaware conducts an annual point in time survey from which data is published reporting the incidence of homelessness on a given night in Delaware.

In 2009, homeless individuals and families were counted on January 29. On that night 1,479 individuals were counted. Of those:

260

were children below the age of 18

59%

were male

57%

were African-American

31%

self-reported substance abuse

30%

reported a disability

38%

reported jail time in their past

9%

were veterans

34%

had no income of any kind

26%

were chronically homeless



Expressions: A consumer at Connections' Homeless Café shows off his watercolor painting.

operate in all three counties in Delaware and offer comprehensive wrap-around support services that help homeless families and individuals to remain in housing and improve their financial condition.

But even with that many beds, there is a waiting list. Supply does not meet demand. And so, Connections is always working to raise funds to provide even more permanent supportive housing where individuals can be both housed and receive the assistance they need to stay housed.

Changing lives

So how is Connections helping individuals stay housed, especially those who have been chronically homeless? Enter Raimyia Wheeler, who has been the case manager at Judy's House since it opened in August 2010. She says the most important part of her work is building trust and rapport with the residents. For some, establishing that relationship is immediate while for others, they have had so many personal challenges and painful experiences that it can take time.

The most important part of building a relationship with each

This winter, Connections anticipated it might see, on average, 25-30 homeless individuals staying all night long at its Homeless Café. But there were 85 people each night, seeking respite from the cold, sometimes as many as 125.

resident, she says, is that it enables her to identify early on if someone is displaying signs of a relapse, so she is able to provide immediate intervention. In addition, Raimyia says when trust has been established a resident is more likely to come to her when they feel they are at risk of participating in activities that could endanger their stability, allowing her and the client to plan together to maneuver through those situations.

Raimyia also helps residents of Judy's House learn life skills like cooking and cleaning, and she helps residents focus on the future, encouraging the development of hobbies and lifelong learning, so residents stay active and engaged. All of Connections' housing programs employ case managers

to help residents stay stable, self-sufficient and successful.

Delaware has a high rate of chronic homelessness, compared to the national average (26 percent in Delaware vs. 10 percent nationwide). This is significant because chronically homeless individuals, such as Aaron, tend to consume costly resources such as emergency room services, beds in general and psychiatric hospitals and jail/prison beds. They use these resources episodically, without any long-term solution to their problems.

Studies have consistently shown that these costs can be avoided when chronically homeless people are provided with permanent affordable housing, like Judy's House, and support services,

provided by a case manager like Raimyia, that help them to address their problems.

The Homeless Café

While homeless individuals wait to be placed in permanent affordable housing, and in an effort to reduce the utilization of costly resources like emergency rooms and jails as shelter, Connections is providing the services of the Homeless Café.

The Homeless Café is open 24/7 during the cold winter months from Dec. 15 through March 30 and daily from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. during the rest of the year. Last year, it was used as a "cooling center" for members of the community and homeless individuals and families during the extreme

Another chance: Individuals seeking respite at the Homeless Café play bingo, thanks to a Girl Scout troop.



Connections Homeless Outreach Center

Connections provides homeless outreach, referrals for shelter and food, and help to obtain Social Security and other benefits to homeless adults in New Castle, Kent, and Sussex Counties

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www.connectionsdcsp.org

summer heat. The Café also serves people who stay in emergency shelters at night but have to leave during the day, as well as unsheltered homeless people who live in places not meant for human habitation.

The Homeless Café helps those who are homeless but who will not or cannot seek assistance in traditional emergency shelters. The Homeless Café is not a shelter, but it does provide respite, fellowship, food and much-needed medical and financial assistance, including help to get and keep employment for people whose options are extremely limited. There are no beds, but individuals are provided coffee, water, soup, a chair and a blanket.

This winter, Connections anticipated it might see, on average, 25-30 homeless individuals staying all night long. But the numbers were much higher. On average, there were 85 people each night, seeking respite from the cold, sometimes as many as 125. The users of the Café are a diverse group, about 70 percent are men; 7 percent are under the age of 18; more than 50 percent are over the age of 50.

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Among the users of the Café are individuals who are unable or unwilling to use the existing emergency shelters because they have mental health problems and are scared or confused, have had a bad experience at a shelter, or are unable to adhere to shelter rules.

For others, they simply do not like the environment of emergency shelters. Edward is one of those consumers. He says he has been homeless for a year. He moved to Wilmington from New York City and was staying with family but he had a falling out and had to leave. He's been on the streets ever since.

Edward stayed in an emergency shelter a couple times, "but I won't go back," he says. He explains that he understands that emergency shelters need to have rules and structure, but that for him, "it's too much." He says he's quiet and doesn't cause any trouble, but he feels "watched and harassed" at the emergency shelters. So to get out of the elements, he comes to the Homeless Café where he feels he is able to be left alone.

Sharon is another homeless individual seeking overnight respite at the Homeless Café. She has been homeless on and off for seven years and has sought treatment for drug and alcohol addiction but relapses. She does not seek support from her family. Sharon will not seek traditional emergency shelter and says that if she was not staying overnight in the Homeless Café, she would "be sleeping in the park."

Connections recognizes the importance of providing alternatives for homeless people in Wilmington who are unwilling or unable to utilize shelters. The Homeless Café is the only one of its kind in Delaware that is open all night long during the winter, every night of the week, offering safe refuge, food and access to restrooms.

The Quilter's Hive ... designs and constructs quilts with love and care for individuals who often feel rejected and abandoned by those around them. It has distributed nearly 100 quilts to those served by Connections.

Volunteers Bringing Hope

At the Homeless Café, Connections has been fortunate to have the support of area businesses, churches and social groups that volunteer and provide in-kind donations of blankets, toiletries and food.

Among them is the Quilter's Hive, an area business that has been donating quilts for Connections' homeless consumers since 2009. Their volunteer corps of approximately 40 people design and construct quilts with love and care. And for our consumers, who often feel rejected and abandoned by those around them, these quilts brighten their day and help them feel special and valued. Quilter's Hive has distributed nearly 100 quilts to individuals served by Connections across Delaware, keeping them warmer each winter.

During Thanksgiving, Connections hosts an annual Thanksgiving Client Luncheon at the Homeless Café where special Thanksgiving meals are served to those who would otherwise go without. Last November, community volunteers helped serve more than 800 meals, serving those meals restaurant-style. The luncheon was sponsored by area businesses and was prepared by recent graduates of Con-

nections' culinary training program, which provides work training for individuals with barriers to employment.

Individuals seeking respite at the Homeless Café can also participate in fun activities including bingo. Local Girl Scout Troop #838 hosts bingo games at the Homeless Café once a month on Saturdays and awards prizes to game winners including gift cards, backpacks, and, during the cold winter months, hats and scarves. And to provide a therapeutic, artistic outlet, students and teachers from Archmere Academy bring art supplies to the Homeless Café and work with consumers as they create works of art, including watercolor paintings.

As those of us close to the issue know, homelessness is not a simple problem affecting some of us but is part of a complex issue that has many causes, solutions and outcomes. Regardless of the cause of a person's homelessness, whether they belong to a family or are an individual, whether they have a disability or have recently lost their job, homelessness affects all Delawareans. Ultimately, there is no single solution to responding to community need in Delaware. The best approach will always be to bring together community efforts to address the needs collectively.

100,000 Homes project in Philly seeks volunteers for outreach

Local campaign will identify, help homeless into permanent housing in long term

You can join the team that refuses to accept that homelessness in Philadelphia is an inevitable part of our urban landscape.

The 100,000 Homes campaign is a grassroots effort to find and place the most vulnerable, long-term homeless individuals into 100,000 homes across the country by July 2013. In Philadelphia, we have an initial commitment to house 50 especially vulnerable homeless individuals in the first six months of our efforts.

The campaign is recruiting dedicated volunteers for Outreach Week May 15-20, a week-long effort to identify and help persons who are homeless obtain permanent housing.

Philadelphians from all walks of life will work in teams, with an experienced team leader, to canvass Philadelphia's streets and shelters to survey the city's most vulnerable homeless individuals and

**Interested in volunteering?
Go to www.100khomesphilly.org**

families.

At the conclusion of Outreach Week, on May 20, the survey findings will be presented to the community by Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter and other leaders.

The goal of Philadelphia's Outreach Week (May 15-20) is to create a by-name registry of people living on our streets and in shelters, so we can prioritize those who have been out there the longest and who are the most vulnerable. What we learn together during this week will help us create and implement a long-term strategy to reduce chronic homelessness in Philadelphia.

For more information, please visit www.100khomesphilly.org.

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Our Hours
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9 am - 4 pm
Friday
9 am - 5 pm
Saturday
9 am - 1 pm