

Mercy Diversion Center

We have previously shared with all of you, our friends and supporters, about the great work at Mercy Housing and Shelter Corporation's Diversion Center. We wanted to be sure to update you on the work and progress of the Diversion Center. What is happening over there is incredible. As a system, we are addressing homelessness in a much different way. The work of the Diversion Center is proof of that. We asked one of their board members, Don Shaw, if we could share an article he wrote about the Diversion Center. Interestingly enough, Don also served as an analyst in developing "Hartford's Plan to End Chronic Homelessness by 2015"; and he represented Hartford Area Habitat for Humanity in the development of a subsequent implementation plan called "Journey Home -- The Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness in the Capitol Region"

On July 5, 2016, Mercy Housing and Shelter Corporation (Mercy) welcomed its first clients to its newly created Diversion Center at St. Elizabeth House on Main Street in Hartford. Faced with diminishing federal and state financial support for Mercy's long-established transitional housing programs, Executive Director Dave Martineau, now retired, and current ED Judith Gough led a nine month multi-organization collaboration to develop an aggressive "up front" program designed to immediately divert people away from homelessness.

The Diversion Center's goal is to find its clients safe, stable housing rapidly. "Nearly thirty percent of people in this situation [of being homeless] can be diverted from this tragic outcome with minimal mediation," according to Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness workshops. "Often the solution can be overcome with little or no money to reverse the events leading to homelessness," saving Hartford and Connecticut thousands of dollars.

According to Stephanie Corbin, Mercy's Shelter Diversion Coordinator, the diversion process is best described as highly responsive "front door triage." It provides personalized solutions with accompanying emotional support aimed at mitigating the problems leading to a client's crisis. It's all accomplished at the Center in centralized coordination with several Hartford based agencies serving the homeless, including Journey Home, the Salvation Army, Community Health Resources, and the City of Hartford. Corbin emphasized that the key to successful client outcomes is case manager creativity. The solution for each client must address the direct question, "What do we need to do right now to keep you out of the shelter system?"

To counsel people in crisis quickly and directly, a collaborative team of case managers from Mercy, the Salvation Army, and Community Health Resources staff the Center every week. People seeking the Center's support first call the 211 Infoline, which initially assesses the caller's need for services, and then, as deemed appropriate, schedules an appointment for them to see a Center case manager within 24 to 48 hours.

Opened just twenty months ago, Mercy's Diversion Center is still in its formative stage, yet its results to date are encouraging. In fiscal year 2017, 2,577 individuals were seen by a case manager. During that period 456 were diverted from homelessness, sixty-two of whom were between the ages of 18-24, and 124 required limited financial assistance that helped them avoid homelessness. Further, 1,244 people, whose cases were not readily resolvable, were referred directly to city shelters, and the remaining group were either referred to other area programs, or were deemed ineligible for assistance.

With one full year of experience, and a second well underway, the Diversion Center has charted a path for other agencies serving the homeless to follow, and to improve upon collectively. It's a path the Connecticut Department of Housing strongly endorses. It's a path leading to life saving diversions.