

36 homeless people find new hope, places to live

By William Hermann

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Thirty-six chronically homeless people who also suffer from mental illness graduated into a new life on Wednesday and a place to call their own.

For many, it was a huge step after years of living on the streets.

"Having a place to live is great. I get to have my dog. I feel like a productive citizen again," Steve Brown, 25, said. "It's a new lease on life."

All successfully completed a program built on the premise that putting mentally ill homeless people into a house or apartment as soon as possible is the most effective treatment solution. Traditional approaches employ months and even years of counseling and therapy first.

It's estimated there are 3,000 to 4,500 mentally ill chronically homeless people in the Valley.

About 900 of those at any time are in jail for offenses such as trespassing, drug use,

prostitution or burglary.

Suzanne Legander is site administrator of the Washington House Clinic, which is operated by ValueOptions, a private company that provides mental health services for Maricopa County. The clinic, in central Phoenix, has been testing the "housing first" program for about 2½ years.

The program places clients in homes Valley-wide and provides them with support services until the client can live on his or her own.

"About two years ago, I was talking to a client about crystal

meth, and I said, 'Don't you understand how this is hurting you on getting off the streets?'" Legander said. "He said, 'My life is so miserable, using this gives me a few hours when I don't feel the pain.'

"So I've come to realize that by giving them housing first, we give them hope and we give them self-respect. It is so important for them to feel like a human being again."

One of Wednesday's graduates, Vincent Smith, 45, who has been homeless for about six years, said what he liked about being put into a home was simple enough:

"It feels normal," Smith said. "And normal feels good."

Legander said that the "housing first" idea has been tested for the last three years in New York City, Washington, D.C., Seattle and several California cities. Since 2000, Long Beach, Modesto, Sacramento and Santa Ana, Calif., have succeeded in moving about 2,100 homeless mentally ill people into supportive housing, more than tripling the number in such housing to 2,966.

Washington House Clinic has tracked the progress of 99 individuals who graduated and transferred out of the program in the past 12 months and had previously been homeless an average of 3.8 years. Of this number, 91 were still successfully maintaining independent housing.

The Day Resource Center, a private agency that operates as part of the new Human Services Campus in downtown Phoenix, also has found that housing the homeless first, then providing support services, is effective in keeping them off the streets. They re-

port a 90 percent rate of chronically homeless people staying in housing after 18 months.

Part of the cost of housing a mentally ill homeless person is paid through the approximately \$600 each receives monthly through Social Security Medicaid benefits.

ValueOptions provides

counseling, therapy and job and placement services and connects the client with non-profit organizations that help defray other costs, Legander said.

Legander said that a woman named Pat (who asked that her last name not be used) is typical of the about 307 graduates of the "housing first" program at Washington House over the last 2½ years.

Pat, 51, has for years suffered from severe depression and since she was a teenager lived a life of one misadventure after another. Early on she became a drug abuser and then served 12 years in prison. Finally, about three years ago, a

friend referred her to the new Washington House program.

She says she could hardly believe it when at the very start of the program she was given a decent place to live.

"It was a clean, decent apartment like I hadn't lived in for years," Pat said. "They gave me sheets, towels, mixing bowls. I kept walking around the apartment saying, 'Mine, mine, mine.'"

Pat said a Washington House psychiatrist helped her get on the right medication. And a financial counselor helped her get Medicaid benefits.

Reporter John Faherty contributed to this article.

