

# Mercy program helps homeless find housing

It's not strictly health care but it's certainly a form of caring.

The Mercy Supportive Housing Program at Mercy Medical Center, Baltimore, helps homeless families obtain housing and then works with them for six months after they move in to make sure they don't end up back on the streets.

"Housing is a kind of health care - it's very unhealthful for people to be homeless," said Mary Catherine Webb, director of Pastoral Care and Social Work at Mercy.

The 11-year-old program was a natural outgrowth of Mercy's providing health care to homeless women and children in shelters.

The city was looking for an organization to help move people from shelters into homes, and when Ms. Webb saw that, she thought, "Gee, this would be a wonderful companion."

She started with a grant for three staffers to go into shelters, do housing assessments and identify people ready to get into housing.

The program has grown to eight staffers, who help shelter residents develop a plan to becoming housing-ready and provide housing counseling. They also teach clients to negotiate with the landlords, inspect the property for safety and decency, and they help clients find appliances, furnishing and supplies. Once the family is housed, they meet with them for six months, making sure the family is following a plan that includes health services and job training, and employment support.

Federal grant money pays for the salaries of the Mercy Supportive Housing Center staff.

"We have to reapply every year," Ms. Webb noted. The federal money also offers a small amount of client assistance funds, which can be used for security deposits or eviction notices.

The program also has gotten grants from FEMA and the Fuel Fund to help with energy bills because clients can get evicted if they don't pay utility bills.

To find space for the program's office, Ms. Webb jokes, "basically we work for rent." They have office space in the Baltimore City Healthy Start Inc. building on North Chester Street, and in return they provide eviction protection and housing readiness assessment on site.

In addition to working with families, the Mercy Supportive Housing Program gives workshops in schools, helping faculty understand the issues children who are homeless face. It also provides education and support groups at transitional housing, pre-release centers and substance abuse treatment programs.

The program used to help more than 100 families a year make the transition from being homeless to having their own address. But rising home prices and rents have made the job far more difficult, and the program currently is placing about 65 families a year in housing.