

Pilot program provides stable shelter for homeless

LaCanda Cousins is one of about 350 people who eat at the Beans & Bread Outreach Center in Fells Point each day, but she returned a few hours after her daily meal Dec. 13 to attend a public forum with the hope she would find a way to end her existence as a homeless woman on the streets of Baltimore City.

The small woman wearing layers of clothes, a worn jacket and a ragged knit cap has been homeless for the past five years and has yet to qualify for public assistance to move into a stable living situation.

She has slept in shelters, transitional housing and even city public parks, but has found that being homeless is a full time job, requiring all of her energy to survive, with little or none left over to fulfill the requirements that would get her a permanent roof over her head.

During the public forum, Ms. Cousins heard St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore and public policy advocates discuss a controversial pilot program called "Housing First" that cuts through the red tape involved in getting the homeless into a residence of their own.

In any given night, there are approximately 3,000 homeless people in Baltimore City, and as many as 30,000 throughout the course of a year, said Kevin Lindamood, vice president for external affairs at Health Care for the Homeless, a Maryland public advocacy group.

About half of the homeless are diagnosed with mental illness or as substance abusers, Mr. Lindamood said.

With a \$1.2 million, three-year HUD grant, Housing First currently has 25 people in apartments, and organizers of the program were able to place them without making them meet standard housing criteria, such as staying sober for a minimum of 90 days and living in transitional housing first, said Stephanie Archer-Smith, deputy director of St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore, which is co-sponsoring the program

with Health Care for the Homeless.

“The perceptions are that people should be worthy of housing,” said Ms. Archer-Smith. “The concept in this program is that housing is a right.”

The idea behind Housing First is if you take a homeless man off of the street and provide him with a stable home, he will be more willing to work with mental health, substance abuse, and job training professionals, she said.

“When you are on the street, you have to find a way to eat, find a place to sleep and find a way to protect yourself,” said James Bridgeford, a former homeless man who is participating in the Housing First pilot program. “Once I got an apartment, it made me want to do other things to improve my life.”

A similar program in New York City concluded that taxpayers pay about \$40,000 a year to support one homeless person, through shelters, hospital visits, soup kitchens, and time in jail, while it costs about \$25,000 a year to provide an individual with stable housing and utilities, Mr. Lindamood said.

Participants in the Housing First program are required to meet with case workers once a week, Ms. Archer-Smith said.