

A Place of Our Own

After Cathleen Feldman and her two children were evicted from their run-down apartment, Feldman's Wyandotte County case manager put her in touch with reStart, Inc., an interfaith ministry in downtown Kansas City, Missouri.

While reStart provides emergency shelter for the homeless, their primary mission is to "provide time, space and resources in a supportive environment for homeless persons seeking to move toward independent living."

During the month she and her family spent in reStart's Family Emergency Shelter, Feldman learned more about reStart's Family Transitional Housing Program. She applied for admittance and after she was accepted, Feldman and her family moved into a small 2-bedroom apartment on the third floor of the reStart facility at 918 East 9th Street.

Transitional or supportive housing programs, as opposed to emergency shelters, are "designed to be longer-term solutions and go beyond the overnight roof, bed and a meal provisions of the emergency shelters," according to Becky Johnson, Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Homeless Coordinator for Kansas and Missouri. "Basically, their purpose is to provide more intensive support to homeless individuals and families so they can learn the skills necessary to become self-sufficient, either once again, or for the first time."

She added, "When homeless youths, single individuals and families are admitted to transitional housing programs, they receive assistance through intensive case management services, life-skill training, educational and support groups, referral to health care and vocational and employment programs. A participant of HUD-funded transitional housing programs receives six months to one year of follow-up case management."

As part of reStart's Family Transitional Housing Program, Feldman and her children now live in an apartment on a floor with four other families. Even though they don't have a stove or locks on their doors, she says, "we feel blessed reStart took us in. But more than that, I'm excited they have programs to help me move toward finding a place of our own."

The numbers reflect how fortunate she was, not just to find shelter in an emergency situation, but to find temporary housing for a month – or even up to two years – in which to get herself and her family back on track.

Cynthia Larcom, Director of the Homeless Services Coalition (HSC) of Kansas City, noted that a “point-in-time” survey of transitional housing held in Kansas City, Missouri on November 6, 2000, showed an inventory of 112 available units for families with a documented need for 417 units, representing 1,168 people. That meant that over 300 families could not be served.”

reStart has been doing what they can to fill that need for over 18 years. To help raise funds for its programs, reStart joined the HSC. The Coalition coordinates and prepares the paperwork for the annual Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Application to HUD, which is allocated among the 60 diverse local organizations who belong to the Coalition.

As a participating member, Larcom noted, “reStart will receive funds from the recent \$4.8 million in homeless assistance grants awarded to the Kansas City Metro Area and just announced by HUD on Wednesday, November 28, 2001.”

Last year, reStart reported total funding of \$1,216,047, up from \$911,256 in 1999. “Around 43 percent of those revenues,” said Allen Powell, Director of Fiscal Services, “comes from federal, state and local grants, including almost 25 percent from governmental HUD grants.”

As a requirement of any governmental funding, Powell spends the majority of his time documenting reStart’s spending against each of these grants. “The grants are reimbursable, which means we spend the money first, then apply to the government for reimbursement under the grant. The government requires monthly, quarterly and annual reports,” said Powell. “My responsibility is to track how many people are being served in each of the different programs the center offers so we can justify the costs of our programs.”

“An almost equal amount of funding – about 41 percent,” said Powell, “comes from private donations. We also earn about 11 percent of our revenue from a \$10 monthly rent and maintenance fee we charge to families in the supportive housing area, and we receive other revenues of 5 percent.”

While private funding doesn’t require specific governmental reporting, the reStart Board of Directors, a cross-section of Kansas City professional people

including former mayor Emanuel Cleaver III who serves as Secretary, does require extensive reporting on program expenditures.

Powell noted a major change in resource allocation that took place in August of this year because of just such reviews. The reStart staff, in analyzing the data they keep on numbers of people served, found “occupancy in their youth programs continued to be very low, and we felt the costs were out of line with the numbers we served.”

They discovered youths did not want to move into a structured environment, and reStart’s Executive Director, Stuart Whitney, recommended changes, which were approved by the Board of Directors.

As noted in their annual newsletter, reStart “converted the resources and facility space we had been using for youths to expand services to families, increasing both our family emergency shelter and transitional services for families. The changes allow us to provide shelter and resources for an additional 27-31 families, including at least 50-60 children and youth.”

Some of the resources reStart provides for individuals and families in transition include on-site health care, special care for those diagnosed HIV+ / with AIDS, family mentoring connecting “graduate families” with current residents, and an education/retreat center available for group use. They also invite volunteers to help residents update their resumes and develop interviewing skills.

As Cathleen Feldman found, admittance to the transitional housing program requires a commitment on the resident’s part, which is closely monitored by case managers like Nancy Ashline. Ashline is one of three case managers at reStart and has been there for over nine years.

She said that although reStart’s goal is to “move families beyond a state of dependence, our first priority is seeing that the children are taken care of. Then we move onto helping the parents get their lives in order so they can take care of and support their own families.”

A good deal of Ashline’s time is spent documenting the eligibility of the residents to participate in the program She considers it a “necessary evil” because although it assures reStart maintains its funding, it takes away time she can spend working with the residents.

Every week, residents have a face-to-face meeting with their case manager to go over the past week's efforts. Sometimes there is not much progress, but according to Ashline, the main thing the case manager looks for is a "good-faith" effort in order for the resident to remain in the program.

New resident Cathleen Feldman knows the reStart guidelines by heart. "Each resident has to meet certain rules. We set goals for finding a job and a place to live, we have to sign in and out each day with a explanation of where we're going and what we'll be doing to reach our goals, we have an 8 p.m. curfew, and absolutely no drugs, alcohol or smoking."

Feldman understand these expectations and that "it's up to each of us to decide how much or how little we want to do. But if we don't make the effort, we won't be here long." She now works part-time as receptionist for reStart. "It makes me feel good that I'm doing something to help myself, plus my case manager sees that I want to do better."

In 2000, reStart served over 1,040 people like Feldman. The numbers include single males, females and families in transitional and supportive programs as well as emergency shelter facilities. That translates into nearly 52,000 bednights throughout the year with an average stay in the emergency shelters of three weeks and an average stay in the transitional programs of about two and a half months.

The Form 990 tax returns reStart filed with the IRS for 1998 through 2000 show that, on average, reStart spends a significant portion of its funds – 72 percent – directly on those program costs, with an additional 3 percent on fundraising. All of reStart's emergency and transitional or supportive housing programs are handled by a full-time office staff of 12, plus an additional 33 people who work in various capacities.

reStart's tax returns also show no employees with salaries over \$50,000. When you talk with the people who work at reStart, you quickly realize they come to their jobs each day because they care for the reStart residents, not for the financial rewards. And at least some of the residents they are trying to help appreciate their efforts.

Ask Cathleen Feldman as she proudly sits at the reception desk and dreams of finding a job and home of her own.

Or ask Allen McCray, reStart's MIS technical assistant. Allen found himself in the reStart Emergency Shelter over seven years ago, homeless and addicted to alcohol and drugs.

"I can't tell you how much it meant to find a supportive environment here. They're strict, but fair. I hope that by being part of reStart's mission now, I can show residents that no matter how hard it may be to overcome homelessness – with help and support – it can be done."

Cindy Tsutsumi
November, 2001