

Pathway HOME gives homeless residents a hand up

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LAWRENCEVILLE – A single mother of three children juggled the rigorous demands of childcare with a full time job. But then she had to move from the home they occupied because of unsanitary living conditions. She continued to work but needed help.

Then she found Pathway HOME, a new nonprofit initiative by the Lawrenceville Housing Corporation (LHC) which is a nonprofit arm of the Lawrenceville Housing Authority (LHA). Pathway HOME helps employed parents work toward home ownership. It combines affordable rental housing with individualized support services allowing homeless families with children the opportunity to work toward permanent housing through self-sufficiency.

The single mother and her children are the first family served by the 12- to 24-month program started by the Gwinnett County Commission in January. It offers financial counseling, employment readiness and higher education opportunities.

"We're extremely excited to be able to offer services and support to hard working Gwinnett families that have fallen on hard times," said Lejla Slowinski, Chief Executive Officer of the LHC. "We can only break the cycle of homelessness and poverty in Gwinnett County by breaking away from the traditional 'handout' approach to a more 'management-by-objectives' perspective that shows that the investment in ending homelessness will ultimately profit the entire community."

Slowinski said stable housing has an important and valuable effect for both families and communities. When children are forced to move multiple times, their educational achievement suffers. For homeless children, moving frequently is additionally stressful because of the fear of not knowing where they will sleep or eat their next meal.

"We were astounded to learn that there were 2,440 homeless children that Gwinnett County Public Schools accommodated in the last school year [2012-2013], an increase from the previous year," said Elizabeth Buckle, LHC Community Outreach Coordinator. "This was a sign to us that homelessness in the county is reaching crisis levels and that we, as members of this community, need to do what we can."

Buckle and Slowinski said the Pathway HOME project will reverse a "chain reaction" prompted by the downward mobility of disadvantaged workers and a trickledown effect it has on their children. Through an increase in earning potential, the taxpayer burden can be reduced through lower public health expenditures, lower welfare payments and lower criminal justice expenses along with an increase in tax payments.

"LHC recognizes this chain reaction, and through our Pathway HOME program individuals are first provided with safe and secure housing and then are able to work on the underlying and individual causes of their homelessness with a host of supportive community services," Slowinski said.

Pathway HOME now has 10 properties and hopes to expand to an additional 10 units in its second year. Its goal is to increase family earnings to a livable wage so families can move into permanent rental housing at a fair market rate, or into homeownership.

When a Pathway Home family establishes permanent residency, they will vacate their Pathway property to another family referred to the program by Family Promise of Gwinnett Inc. which helps displaced women and children with up to three months of temporary housing. Pathway Homes is also supported by Infiniti of Gwinnett which provides families with household gifts including laundry and cleaning supplies.

"The goal is to get people completely independent of government assistance," Slowinski said.