

Pathway HOME transitional housing program near capacity, adding more houses

Joshua Sharpe Sep 3, 2014

Shocked by seeing the number of homeless families in Gwinnett County on the rise, employees at the Lawrenceville Housing Authority set out to work on the problem last year.

They came up with Pathway HOME, a housing program founded on the principle that given the right tools — and perspective and rules — needy families can forge out a better life for themselves without simply getting government assistance. As Lejla Slowinski, executive director of the authority, puts it, “We’re trying to get to the underlying cause of homelessness.”

To be accepted into the one- to two-year program, the families have to sign a strict contract with the authority, guaranteeing they will hold a job, pay rent — though the rates are slashed —, save money and work toward living without the need for assistance.

So far, it seems to be working, Slowinski says.

“The families, so far, everybody’s been compliant,” she said. “The hardest part is the first few months. They are in very fragile situations. (But) once they’re settled in, it’s smooth sailing.”

The program, run in cooperation with the Gwinnett chapter of Family Promise, has taken in six struggling families since it started in January, offering rock-bottom rent on homes in middle-class neighborhoods and resources for finding work, education and getting out of debt. Two more are set to move in this month, bringing the program to full capacity, though more houses are planned to be added in the coming months.

While the number of families in the program might not seem substantial, the results for people like Erica Ondoua do.

Ondoua, a 26-year-old single mother of three, is the latest parent accepted into the program. She and her kids, Ke-nyiah, 5, and twins Kyra and Kerston, 4, moved into their new home in late August. The house, a two-story, three-bedroom, sits in the Alcovy Falls subdivision, off U.S. Highway 29, where townhouses are planted on well-kept, winding streets.

Although the mother works a full-time job in the medical field, the family hadn’t had somewhere to call home since last September, when the bills got too steep and they were evicted. Before they moved into the new house, they bounced between the houses of whoever would take them in for a while.

“It’s a sense of relief (now),” Ondoua said, sitting at her kitchen table this week while her kids played in the living room and watched TV. “My first night here, I just cried. September would’ve been a year that we hadn’t had somewhere regular to stay. September would’ve been a year that my stuff was in storage. I just praised God.”

The mother said she had looked at other places to live before finding the Pathway HOME program, but couldn’t find anything in her price range that wasn’t in a crime-ridden area too dangerous for the kids. Now she, like others in the program, pays less than \$450 a month in rent for a nice home, on a quiet street.

But it isn't all easy.

Chuck Ferraro, executive director of Family Promise Gwinnett, which manages the residents, says the families have to be in contact with case workers regularly to show that they are working and making efforts to get to a point where, essentially, they no longer need case workers.

"Our end game is to get them into their own stable housing," Ferraro said. "That's (also) their goal. Not to be in transitional housing, not to have the case management."

Ondoua, for her part, says she's committed to just that, because she knows she has to. Her kids are too happy now. When they say their prayers at night, they thank God for their new "fridgerator," stove, microwave and, most of all, their new house.

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