

cover story

Cuts

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County (MHA), based in Mountain Lakes. It is one of 17 agencies in New Jersey—and the only one in Morris—to receive the threatened Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH) funds.

“We’re the last stop for people,” she added. “We start over with individuals who may have tried recovery when they weren’t ready. We take you back. We wait till you’re ready and start over, and that’s unique for a social service agency.”

One formerly homeless MHA client, a 23-year-old man who now has a job and his own apartment in Mount Arlington, explained he started life in an orphanage in South America, where he’d been neglected and abused before he was adopted by American parents.

But the relationship, in part because of the young man’s mental health issues, didn’t work out and he was left without a family at the age of 18.

“The MHA is the water that gave me life,” he said. “It accepts everyone in any shape or form. The staff understood that I was crying out for help and has never given up on me. The MHA is the fam-



Lisa Falcone, program director of HOMI, said that the agency is unique in the sense that they will wait with their clients until they are ready to start over, and will not give up on them.

TANYA BREEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

ily of the homeless community of Morris County.”

PATH funds, an allocation of the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration budget, are earmarked for homeless people with persistent and serious mental illness. Its approach is to find people housing first and then support them with case management services to help them negotiate their illness and their life.

15 to 38 percent cuts

The program’s fully authorized funding level is \$75 million, though in fiscal year 2015, when it reached 186,000 Americans, it was funded at \$65 million, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness. But Appropriations Bills for 2016 from both the Senate and House of Representatives show steep cuts: the Senate proposes cutting PATH by \$25 million, or 38 percent, while the House proposes a cut of \$10 million, or 15 percent.

When asked where he stood on the issue, Congressman Rodney Frelinghuysen, R-Morris, noted that he has long been a supporter of programs like PATH.

“The bill that funds PATH, and numerous other programs, is a ‘work in progress,’” he said, adding that there are sure to be changes as talks progress.

In the meantime, Falcone and her team already are stretching to meet the local need. The PATH portion of its budget totals \$125,000 — enough to pay for four of the 12 homeless outreach case managers.

Last year, the team reached 1,293 people who were homeless or almost homeless in Morris, according to Lou Schwarcz, president and CEO of the MHA. Of that number, 174 qualified for the association’s case management services, which are all geared toward helping people with mental illnesses.

In New Jersey, a total of \$2.1 million in PATH funds reached 6,000 people in 2014, according to state figures. A 38 percent cut would mean a loss of more than \$800,000.

That’s a shame, especially considering that the program has been working well, according to Debra L. Wentz, CEO of the New Jersey Associa-

tion of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies.

A point-in-time homeless count, conducted on one winter night every year for the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency, gauges levels of homelessness. The New Jersey 2015 Point-in-Time Count found 10,211 homeless men, women, and children statewide.

“That was a decrease of 13.9 percent from 2014,” Wentz said. “It shows that, with vouchers for housing and homeless assistance, we’re making inroads. These funds put a roof over people’s heads and engage them with services that help them succeed with their other issues. Most people who are homeless have physical, mental health, and substance use issues.”

“If these cuts go through,” she added, “we’ll lose the ground that we’ve gained, and a lot more.”

Wentz said she commends New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio for committing \$100 million in annual spending to help alleviate homelessness. The New York Times reported the money would go toward rental assistance, anti-eviction efforts, and more.

Started in 1989

The MHA got its first PATH funds in the summer of 1989, according to Schwarcz.

“In the beginning, every night, we sent an outreach van to either Morristown or Dover and gave hot food, blankets, and toiletries to people who were homeless on the street,” he recalled.

“We figured we’d be able to identify the people who were homeless but who also had a serious and persistent mental illness and needed access to psychiatric and medical care,” he added.

A year-and-a-half later,

in July 1991, MHA hired its first case manager to follow up with people who’d been identified the previous night.

Since then, the project has expanded. In 2007, Falcone said, her team took on 36 new clients. Then the recession of 2008 struck.

“We have one more case manager now than we had then,” she said, “and we opened that many new cases last quarter.”

The case managers, she explained, operate like a crisis team, almost like triaging in an emergency room.

Team members, each equipped with a cell phone, spread throughout the county, handling referrals from psychiatric hospitals, other programs, and soup kitchens and doing intake assessments on each individual to see where they best would be served.

In the meantime, other case managers are placing people in motels, rooming houses, shelters, or apartments; meeting clients at the Office of Temporary Assistance to advocate for them; helping clients apply for Social Security or rental assistance; connecting clients with food, medications, and other existing services; and aiding homeless people who show up at Edna’s Haven, a privately funded center operated in a partnership between MHA and Trinity Lutheran Church in Dover.

“PATH allows us to work with people once they’re housed, voucher or no voucher, for six months to a year,” Falcone said, “and that’s important because that transition is a tough time for people.”

The big shock

MHA Outreach Case Manager Jessica Gigantino said case managers are even crucial in helping

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- » U.S. Senators Robert Menendez and Cory Booker, www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm?State=NJ
- » U.S. House of Representatives directory, www.house.gov/representatives/find

formerly homeless people become used to having a home.

“It’s shocking for people to go from 20-plus years of homelessness to having their own home again,” she said. “You have to help guide them: This is how you’re going to pay your bills. This is how you need to budget.”

Case managers become knowledgeable and skilled helpers to newly housed people, who are traumatized because, Falcone said, homelessness causes trauma.

At Edna’s Haven, Outreach Case Manager Sean Fortner said he spends time helping people understand their paperwork.

“We have people who still have difficulty reading,” he said. “Just sitting with them for five minutes and reassuring them that we can get through this together really calms a person down.”

Perhaps no one more than the case managers worry about the effects of budget cuts and leaving their clients to fend for themselves. For one thing, the MHA team would lose two homeless outreach case managers, which would mean at least 100 homeless people under its care would be dropped.

But there would be other expected effects as well.

“I would have to believe that the crime rate would increase,” said Case Manager Chimere Baisden-Clay. “We would have these people on the streets, trying to survive and protecting the only assets they have.”

Certainly, Falcone said, more people would be cycling in and out of emergency rooms and they’d be in shelters for a longer period of time, which is more costly than housing people in the community.

MHA figures show that the cost to house a person in a Morris homeless shelter is \$113 per day and \$41,600 per year. The cost to house a person in a Morris motel is \$85 per day and \$31,000 a year.

In contrast, the cost for MHA to provide permanent housing for a person in the community is an estimated \$40 per day and \$14,650 per year.

Rising stigma

Outreach Case Manager Gregory Wolf worries about the stigma associated with mental illness getting worse.

One formerly homeless MHA client, a 51-year-old recovered alcoholic man now working and living on his own in Butler, said he is amazed to think of any funds serving the homeless being cut.

“I’ve seen so many people out there. They get up in the morning. They’re in the library washing up in the sink,” the man said. “I don’t know if they’re afraid to ask for help but they don’t. I did. I was 150 pounds when I came here. I’m 215 now. I got my life straightened out and turned around.”

He sees an MHA psychiatrist monthly and gets the antidepressants and anti-anxiety medication he needs. Life is good for him now.

“Before, I was living without those meds,” the man said. “I was living with alcohol ... If it wasn’t for this program, I wouldn’t be alive.”

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