

A Roomier Rental For Falmouth's Homeless

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Belonging to Each Other volunteer Dotti Schrupf dusts bedframes in the new home the group is renting for the winter as a refuge for those experiencing homelessness in Falmouth.

ELIZABETH SAITO/ENTERPRISE

An outreach group is upgrading to more spacious quarters to house women experiencing homelessness in Falmouth through the winter months. Belonging To Each Other has teamed up with Saint Barnabas's Church to offer a home with more bedrooms and common areas than they have had in the past as a refuge from November through April.

On Wednesday afternoon, November 1, as a steady rain fell, the house—a vacated building owned by the church—was abuzz with a bevy of volunteers hauling in furniture, linens and kitchen supplies. Gina M. Torielli, BTEO's executive director, moved from room to room with instructions and encouragement.

“Tonight it’s going to be 30 degrees,” Ms. Torielli said. “So we’re working like hell trying to get them in tonight.”

The “them” are seven women, all of whom are living in tents or cars in Falmouth. Once in the house, the women will be helped by a suite of social workers, with the aim of finding them stable housing ahead of next summer, Ms. Torielli said.

In the kitchen, a volunteer washed silverware in front of the large picture windows above the sink; another unpacked food donated from the Falmouth Service Center—peanut butter, pasta, pancake mix, soup. The fridge was stocked with eggs and cheese.

In the living room, a woman hung mirrors and paintings. Upstairs, the bedrooms’ shiny wooden floors smelled of citrus cleaner. BTEO volunteer Dorothy S. Schrumpf knelt dusting metal bedframes.

“This is going to feel like home, not just an emergency shelter,” Ms. Schrumpf said. “It shows respect that we as a community care about them. It says, ‘You deserve this.’ There’s nothing condescending about it.”

BTEO previously rented a house that could serve only four women; the Saint Barnabas’s property can fit a total of eight.

Tina L. Rood, the owner of the previous house and also a BTEO volunteer, paused on the stairs of the new house to say how pleased she was. “I love that they’re growing,” she said. “Who can say enough about what they do?”

Ms. Rood rented her house (one of two she owns in Falmouth) to BTEO for the past three winters and had family or vacationers stay in the summer. She said she did not feel it was appropriate for her to visit her house while the women were staying there; they might feel uncomfortable, as if the landlord was inspecting or judging them. But now she plans to come visit the women to have tea and do puzzles.

BTEO has a 75 percent success rate of placing its residential program participants in stable housing, Ms. Torielli said. In addition to the two houses it rents—one for men, one for women—the group pays for short-term, emergency stays in motels. Last year it provided 2,292 meals to those experiencing homelessness in Falmouth, she said.

Will H. Mebane, Saint Barnabas’s rector, said the concept for BTEO grew out of an earlier program at the church, where parishioners would go into the woods and invite the homeless to sleep on cots in the church’s function room. He feels BTEO is now “coming back home.”

Mr. Mebane said he is excited to integrate the BTEO women into services the church already provides, including visits from mobile health vans and free hot lunches on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“And the lunches are good,” he said. “No heating up of TV dinners.”

The church had long wanted to find a mission-driven use for the house, which had been rented to a single individual for the past four years, Mr. Mebane said. That mission is to follow the teachings of Jesus “to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, care for the sick and welcome the stranger,” he said.

“This is what the church is about,” he said. “It’s not just what happens on Sundays. It’s about what we as followers of Jesus are doing in the world every day.”

BTEO provides a full complement of social supports, known as “wrap around services.” For example, many women in its programs have endured partner violence, Ms. Torielli said, and so counselors from Independence House, a domestic violence group whose shelter is regularly maxed out, will come work on site.

BTEO also helps its participants find work and open bank accounts. Although, Ms. Torielli noted, several of the women to be housed this winter already have jobs—but they live in their cars in their employer’s parking lot.

Thursday morning, Elyse D. DeGroot, BTEO’s director of development and community relations, said one of the women moved in Wednesday night, some of the six remaining women already had temporary plans for the night, and others BTEO was unable to reach. In total, 23 volunteers helped prepare the house on Wednesday.

BTEO is funded by a combination of private donations and grants. Last year its budget was \$350,000; this year it grew to \$480,000 because the group is hiring an additional caseworker and also a part-time volunteer coordinator.