

Support helps faith-based transitional housing expand

Todd McMahon, Press-Gazette Media 3:17 p.m. CST February 5, 2015



Photo: Photo from Ecumenical Partnership for Housing

The outreach for EPH, in collaboration with The Salvation Army of Brown County, to provide transitional housing for homeless families expanded in the last year.

Its partnership churches, which have greatly subsidized the program, increased by four to 20. On top of that, EPH purchased another home in Green Bay, opening the front door for another needy family to work toward getting back on its feet with a roof over its heads.

As a longtime advocate, Dave Pietenpol likes to spread the good news of Ecumenical Partnership for Housing.

Pietenpol has made several presentations to local churches and groups. On Sunday morning, when he gives a similar talk during a program at Union Congregational United Church of Christ in downtown Green Bay, Pietenpol will have more news to share.

"It's been interesting that we have grown, historically, kind of in proportion to the number of homes that we have," said Pietenpol, who has been involved with EPH for 10 years, the last four as its executive director.



Dave Pietenpol (Photo: Todd McMahon/Press-Gazette Media)

"Right now, we can support 21 families at any particular point in time," Pietenpol said.

The nonprofit EPH and The Salvation Army have served 468 families in the transitional housing program since its inception in 1992. In 2014, 42 families that encompassed 47 adults and 109 children received long-term housing.

More is to be done, however.

According to EPH data, it provided for only 28 percent of the homeless families who were eligible for its program. The waiting list has 20 to 30 families, which is significant considering the average stay for a family in a housing unit is seven to eight months, Pietenpol noted.

"Our preference is that our families stay with us for at least nine months," he said. "We believe that if we can keep them for a full nine months you have a better chance to get them to a point where they have a much better chance of maintaining their self-sufficiency once they leave."

Pietenpol will delve into the history and current state of EPH in his 9 a.m. presentation at Union Congregational on Sunday.

Its transitional housing program is one of many in the area. What makes it unique is the shelter made available to qualified homeless parents (typically single mothers) with children essentially becomes their own for the duration of their stay in the fully furnished homes.



This is one of about 20 homes in the Green Bay area owned by Ecumenical Partnership for Housing and designated for transitional housing for homeless families in the organization's collaboration with The Salvation Army. (Photo: Photo from Ecumenical Partnership for Housing)

Case managers from The Salvation Army handle the intake process, providing assessments and background checks on a family when considering placement in one of the housing units, all owned by EPH.

"They determine if there's a fit between what we believe we can offer and the readiness of the family to start working on the things they need to get toward self-sufficiency," Pietenpol said.

Most, if not all, of the families who are approved for transitional housing in the EPH/Salvation Army program are on referrals from one of three local shelters: Freedom House, Golden House and House of Hope.

The houses where families are placed are scattered throughout Green Bay and Allouez.

"They are in neighborhoods," Pietenpol said. "We want our families to feel that this is their home, they are part of a neighborhood."

The families live rent-free and have their utilities covered, thanks to funding from the partnership churches as well as The Salvation Army. In return, the parent(s) in a home must be employed or actively seeking employment.

"Most of the families come in with some level of debt," Pietenpol said. "We expect them to use what would be rent money (from wages), so to speak, to get their debts cleared up so they can re-establish a credit rating and then be able to secure a place of their own."

Budget counseling also is mandatory for the adults living in the homes. The case managers, who regularly check in on the families, further work with them on securing a job, education options, future housing, setting personal goals and spirituality.

Volunteers from the churches care for and maintain the homes, which have two or three bedrooms to accommodate families, many of whom have three or more children.

"When we have a family that moves out and becomes self-sufficient, then the volunteers within that church come in and work to prepare that unit with cleaning and stocking (an initial supply of food and basic household items) and everything to get ready for the next family," Pietenpol said.

"Last year, we had over 2,000 hours of volunteer service by our churches," he added.

Each of the homes has a biblical name with a corresponding passage from Scripture displayed in the house.

"We do believe that being on a spiritual journey is important but that spiritual journey really is up to the individual in terms of what that looks like," Pietenpol said. "I really believe that when people are on a spiritual journey it makes the rest of this so much easier."

The success stories have followed. Pietenpol cited a handful of families who went on to become homeowners through Habitat for Humanity in recent years.

In a testimony from an anonymous parent of a previously homeless family, "I have never doubted that there had always been an end to the somewhat dark and lonely tunnel of life. But the long-term supporting housing program showed me the light is there and how to take control of my own future for myself and my children."

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