

Supporting the Community: Silver Spring Interfaith Housing Coalition



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SSIHC came to being in 1991 when a number of people from various faith communities who were doing service work at

Shepherd's Table (a soup kitchen that offers numerous social services to the homeless in downtown Silver Spring) got together to discuss the ramifications for low income and homeless people with the revitalization of downtown Silver Spring. For the first 10 or so years of its existence it was an entirely volunteer run agency. Now in July 2008 with Ashley McSwain, MSW, MSOD, the new Executive Director, it is poised for growth in both programmatic services and numbers of families and single disabled men served.

Permanent housing is offered to 6 formerly homeless disabled men in collaboration with Shepherd's Table and the Montgomery County Housing Opportunities Commission in a 2 flat house called Shepherd's House. Each flat can house 3 men and is located on the perimeter of downtown Takoma Park. That collaboration includes case management and referrals to social services the men require by the two agencies SSIHC is currently working with. Plans are afoot to incorporate Shepherd's House more fully in the programmatic offerings that SSIHC offers families, which are explained in more detail below.

With the encouragement and support of the City of Takoma Park, SSIHC acquired a (4) 2 bedroom unit apartment building on University Boulevard nestled between Takoma Park and Langley Park. Zoned as a shelter this property provides 2 year transitional housing and services to four families. SSIHC also owns a single family home near University and Franklin in Silver Spring that can accommodate a large family. At the time of this writing there is a family of 7 working towards self-sufficiency in a 3 year transitional housing program in the house.

Additional housing in scattered sites with 2 and sometimes 3 bedrooms are made available to the 3year program in collaboration with Montgomery Housing Partnership and JBI Development. All of the properties depend on Montgomery County Housing Opportunities Commission Housing Choice vouchers for

rent subsidies requiring the men and families to spend just 30% of their income on rent while they get a new start.

Astoundingly, for those who don't know, if income drops the rent drops accordingly so that if an adult loses their job they are not required to pay rent until they find employment.

SSIHC's program has the distinct honor of being able to offer housing to several women coming out of the Montgomery County Pre-Release Center and its Welcome Home program. These women have gained some of the skills they will need to reenter society in this program in which they have shown a sincere desire to succeed and have retained custody of their children during incarceration. SSIHC's program allows these strong and determined women to be reunited with their children and form strong family bonds that they can carry into the future.

SSIHC serves the lower 30 percentile of families needing transitional housing that most other agencies do not serve. These families' position in our society don't tell their true story or encourage the public to see the amazing strengths they have despite their situation. It took a long time for most of these families to get into the position they are in and it takes time to build a different life. The true results of being in the SSIHC program can occur years after a family moves out on its own and often shows itself in the lives of the children as they experience different ways of approaching a multitude of situations and make choices that can break the cycle of generational or situational poverty. Currently being served are 13 families and 3 single men with the expectation that 3 additional families and 3 additional men will be welcomed into the program by fall. SSIHC is staffed by a full time executive director, one full time and one part time case manager (soon to be two full time case managers), a part time career counselor, an administrative coordinator working between 30 and 40 hours per week, a part time bookkeeper and soon a part time grant writer.

The position of SSIHC is that housing alone is an insufficient

aide to setting a family on the road to self sufficiency.

What SSIHC provides in an expanding model is the furniture and household goods it takes to make a home (which the family can take with them when they graduate from the program); enriched social services that include engaged responsible active professional case management, goal and self sufficiency planning and accountability; referrals to needed services in cooperation with county and nonprofit agencies; and the very important and fundamental support of volunteer family mentors. SSIHC has acquired additional office space that as of September 1st will accomodate a small computer lab for our clients, a meeting room that will accomodate workshops for clients, mentors and staff as well as donor outreach presentations.

Volunteer family mentors are the ribs on the backbone on the agency. Without one another the body would fall apart. Mentors are recruited from the 24 varied faith congregations that form the coalition, the friends and family of current and former mentors whose lives were transformed by their experience and through volunteer outreach tools like idealist.org and the Montgomery County Volunteer Center, among others. It is hoped that mentors will journey with the family through their entire time in the program but exceptions are made for those who can only commit to a shorter time but are dedicated to this kind of direct service involvement.

Mentors provide encouragement and support in a variety of ways. They serve in teams of 3-6 depending on a families size and needs as well as the availability of mentors. Resident families are required in their program agreement to be in touch with both their case manager and someone from their mentor team at least once a week. For mentors that may mean a phone call or it could be a more direct service like accompanying a parent to a parent teacher conference for moral support, picking a child up from school and taking them to a doctor's appointment so that a parent doesn't have to miss

work, taking the family to the food bank so that they save time and effort with the use of physical help and a car for transporting groceries, and it can also be getting together for a picnic, a trip to the zoo or a museum. Often it is the simple connection even by phone of hearing encouraging words like "you can do it" or "congratulations." Simple birthday and accomplishment celebrations may be more than the family has ever experienced before and reinforces their value in the world and the simple fact that they are cared for across economic, circumstantial, faith and racial differences. There are currently 47 mentors. If you are local and interested please contact Sandra @ 301.562.0520 or smiller@ssihc.org.

The families in SSIHC's program receive the message at every opportunity that they can succeed and that they are loved.