

Ingenuity finds homes for families

In Fitchburg, social worker brings landlords, homeless together

By Sarah Snyder
Globe Staff

FITCHBURG — This blue-collar city witnessed a small miracle this week: After two years, its last homeless family has been housed.

The at-least temporary end to one of the state's worst family homelessness problems cost no money and required no new programs. It was the result of a dynamic social worker, a sympathetic bureaucrat and a network of private landlords and public service workers deter-

mined to lick the problem.

Since 1985, this group has found private housing for 132 homeless families from Leominster, Fitchburg, Bolton, Groton, Shirley and other nearby cities. The crusade was led by Annie DeMartino, a housing specialist and social worker hired by the Massachusetts Department of Social Services in Fitchburg to attack the problem.

She did not hold long meetings, suggest studies or spend time complaining about lack of enough government mon-

ey. She went instead to the people who could most obviously help: landlords.

Family homelessness was largely caused, she decided, because many families who would not or could not keep up with their rent had been evicted.

So DeMartino brought landlords to the motels and shelters where families were living to impress on them the wrenching results of evicting families with children.

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Fitchburg tackles homelessness — and wins

■ FITCHBURG

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She augmented this approach by also looking at the landlords' side. Her agency helped start a new system where the state Department of Public Welfare sends a welfare recipient's rent check directly to the landlord.

She also became so well-known in Fitchburg as a reconciler of tenant/landlord disputes that housing court judges would routinely advise landlords to call her, as a less costly alternative to pursuing evictions.

"Then I let nature take its course," DeMartino said. "Landlords are human beings, after all."

She found many of them "willing to take people who had been evicted, to take a chance on them. They were a resource that hadn't been tapped."

In less than five months, she found housing for 40 families with 80 children who had been living in motels subsidized by the state. Next came the women with children living in the Salvation Army Booth Home in Leominster and Our Father's House shelter in Fitchburg.

"Light at the end of tunnel"

Last Tuesday, "We found an apartment for the last lady on my caseload," said DeMartino. "It does not mean [family homelessness] is over, but we have seen the light at the end of the tunnel." She noted there remain single homeless men and women in Fitchburg.

Edward Madaus, area director of the Department of Social Services in Fitchburg and DeMartino's boss, said the key to taking care of homeless families was transforming what had been a disjointed, scattered effort of several agencies into one, single-minded effort headed very visibly by DeMartino.

He held a meeting with every homeless provider, from Catholic Charities to shelters to two state agencies and several others. "I told them instead of studying the long-range solutions, the need for more housing stock, etc., etc., let's talk specifically about Mrs. Jones at the Thunderbird Motel."

As attention turned to each homeless family individually, the effort to find housing — and just as important, prevent evictions — was under way.

Larry Waterman, a Fitchburg landlord who has tenants on welfare or housing subsidies in two-thirds of his 25 apartments, said the appointment of DeMartino as the clear head of the homeless task force lured many landlords into helping with the problem.

Speaks 'language' of landlords

"The reason Annie is successful is that she speaks the language of the landlord as well as the tenant. I've heard her dress down the tenant; typically one might say to the landlord, 'You didn't fix the toilet' and the landlord says, 'If you'd paid your rent for the last 18 months, I would have.' Annie is not typical, in that she'll say to the tenant, 'You'd better shape up or you'll be off welfare. You get one more chance — and the landlord has to receive his payments.'

"The problem is, I feel it's her personality that has made the difference. If Annie gets a promotion or goes somewhere else ... I'm afraid things would crumble."

Last Thursday, Gov. Dukakis singled Fitchburg out for praise when he announced new housing initiatives in Boston, calling it "an example of what can be accomplished by combining state and community resources ..."

Fitchburg Mayor Bernard F. Chartrand said he was in Boston last week for a meeting of several mayors with the governor. "One mayor said to me, 'Bernie, we're inundated with the homeless situation,' and I said 'Gee, we finally got our last family in an apartment.' The governor jumped right on me and said, 'That program really took care of them, didn't it?'"



City of Cambridge

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COUNCILLOR D. SULLIVAN

IN CITY COUNCIL
January 26, 1987

- WHEREAS: Long-term solutions to problems of homelessness result from careful work to meet the needs of individual homeless persons and families for permanent housing; and
- WHEREAS: While ultimately these solutions will require substantial additional housing construction and additional social services for homeless persons, some initial steps can be effective at once; and
- WHEREAS: In response to a previous Council order, the Rent Control Board staff is already working on a proposal to pair landlords of vacant apartments with needy families; and
- WHEREAS: The attached January 17 newspaper story indicates the success of a similar program in Fitchburg; therefore, be it
- ORDERED: That the City Manager request the Assistant City Manager for Human Service Programs to assign someone to work intensively with individual homeless families, individual landlords who express interest, the Rent Control Board, and other city and state officials, to place homeless families in available existing housing when this is appropriate for their needs.

In City Council January 26, 1987.
Adopted by the affirmative vote of 9 members.
Attest:- Joseph E. Connarton, City Clerk.

A true copy;

ATTEST:-

Joseph E. Connarton
Joseph E. Connarton, City Clerk.

Order #5

P-14

C.D. Sullivan order re: City Manager to request the Asst. City Mgr. for Human Service Programs to assign someone to work with individual homeless families, landlords expressing interest, the Rent Control Board & other city & state officials to place homeless families in existing housing.

In City Council,

January 26, 1987

C.D. Sullivan
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