

Background and Experience with Managing Homeless Shelters and Related Programming

Since the mid-1980s, ServiceNet's Shelter and Housing Division has operated a network of housing and shelter programs in Western Massachusetts for homeless individuals and families. ServiceNet serves as the primary provider of homeless shelter services in Berkshire, Franklin, and Hampshire Counties. In FY'2019, we sheltered 997 unduplicated individuals in the Three County Region. The programs and services implemented by ServiceNet include three emergency shelters, a shelter for families and three expansion winter shelters; permanent supportive housing, which includes 50 units for formerly homeless individuals; and a community-funded Housing First program, Yvonne's House, which also houses formerly homeless individuals. Related programming also includes advocacy assistance, case management, housing search and post-placement stabilization, victims of violence services, and other supportive services, which are offered through three community-based 'Drop-In' resource centers. ServiceNet Inc, as a multi-service human services agency, provides integrated mental health and substance abuse treatment.

Street outreach and re-entry specialists provide housing search and stabilization for individuals *who live unsheltered* or who are being discharged from institutions. As the primary homelessness service provider in the region, ServiceNet also provides street outreach as part of our daily operations. We have an in-depth knowledge of the street population and engage regularly with them. We are often called upon by local communities to offer our expertise in resolving issues created by street homelessness.

In summary, ServiceNet provides a coordinated continuum of residential, treatment, case management, information and referral, and advocacy services, which address core issues that contribute to substance abuse, mental illness, poverty, and homelessness. Through working with these populations, who face myriad of challenges, ServiceNet has learned to be patient, creative and persistent to successfully engage people who are distrustful and highly mobile, and to truly meet people where they are at. For example, 18 years ago, we created an integrated system of care within our Shelter and Housing Division by providing outreach therapy from our Outpatient Clinics to individuals served in our shelters.

Highly Trained Staff

Our case managers are funded through Fallon Healthcare Flexible Services, CSPECH and rapid rehousing programs. Our highly trained staff are well versed in assisting people in accessing entitlements, health care, and other mainstream community resources. Over the years, we have incorporated national best practices into our staff training and related programming, which has resulted in our shelter operations running in an effective and efficient manner. Current required trainings and continuing education for staff members includes Motivational Interviewing, De-Escalation, Trauma Informed Care, Boundaries, Mental Health 101, Overdose Prevention, and First Aid and CPR. Staff experience and skill, relative to both outreach and shelter client management, establishes an environment in which program participants feel safe and supported in working toward goals of better self-care, securing permanent housing, job searches, and making progress on mental health and recovery. It is also the consistency and quality of our staff that allow the programs to keep pace with dynamic state and federal mandates.

Working in Downtown Areas

ServiceNet's homeless shelters operating in Northampton and Greenfield are located in each community's downtown, and the shelters are considered an integral part of those respective downtown areas, where they work with local businesses and municipal government to address community concerns related to homelessness. *As an example*, the Northampton downtown area had a sidewalk panhandling-like issue. Individuals were claiming they were homeless or assisting the homeless by selling trinkets, books and other like items. The business district initially thought it was the Northampton homeless population that was creating an aggressive panhandling environment that was negatively impacting the businesses in the area, and we were asked to get involved. We talked with the individuals that were claiming to be homeless and realized they were not even living in the Northampton. We worked with businesses to develop a flyer explaining that these individuals were not helping the area homeless and encouraging customers not to donate to them. This initiative led to those individuals relocating outside of the Northampton area.

Current and Proposed Pittsfield Shelter Operations and Related Staffing and Support

ServiceNet will operate between the hours of 4PM-8AM Monday through Friday, closing during the day with exceptions for inclement weather and holidays. We are open 24 hours on the weekends. Once a guest enters the shelter at 4:00 PM they are not allowed to leave unless they work, have a medical appointment or activities related to housing search. The Shelter provides two meals a day and the kitchen and dining areas will be accessed from inside the building. The facility will be staffed, during the shelter's operating hours, and the Program Director will be on site on certain days when it is not. Additionally, ServiceNet staff are available to address community concerns on a regular basis, which includes the following hours and days: Monday - Friday 9AM-5PM. In case of emergency the after hours on-call can be reached by calling the shelter.

Upon entry into our shelter program, the individual makes a commitment to 60 days in the program. They go through a comprehensive assessment and case managers engage them to solve the barriers to securing permanent by housing creating a housing plan that is reviewed with the person each week. The housing plan also encompasses a person's health and mainstream resources they may be eligible for that contribute to breaking the cycle of homelessness.

As part of the intake process, each shelter guest is given a set of policies and expectations. These expectations cover how you act toward others and the facility. We do not allow drugs or alcohol on the premises. There are designated supervised smoking times. Each guest signs a set of policies they are expected to adhere to. Shelter orientation includes an overview of shelter policies which set forth behavioral expectations and shelter procedures; an inventory and storage of personal belongings; establishment of a mailing address; tour of building; fire drill procedure; and the provision of toiletries and clothes, if needed. We make it clear that appropriate behavior in and around the shelter is an important part of being in the shelter program. This has resulted in minimizing conflicts within the shelter and around the shelter's immediate surroundings.

The specific staff positions that will support the shelter operations at the First Methodist Church site include 8.2 FTE's, encompassing the following positions. Program Director, Case Managers and Direct Support Staff. Two staff on during the most active hours to oversee 15-20 guests from 3PM-10PM. Overnights are staffed by one person and there is 24/7 on call at all times.

In the mornings, the Program Director or a Case Manager are on site to organize an orderly closing of the shelter and talk with individuals about tasks they need to do for rehousing.

St. Joe's Operations

Our temporary move to the St. Joe site this spring was a remarkable mobilization in an extraordinarily challenging environment, which involved a collaboration with the city to ensure the safety of our most vulnerable citizens. We had to learn quickly what worked and what did not, often on the fly. Although we did not have time to develop the staffing and operational structure that is typical of our more traditional shelter operations, we are proud of the fact that we were able to literally prevent a public health crisis from evolving in our community. With the rapid development of this temporary program, we realize some of the operations may have been suboptimal, especially relative to our more typical shelter operations. The St. Joe' site was a nightly shelter as opposed to Barton's, which is usually a lengthier program, with a 60-day time-period of sheltering residents. Many of the individuals at the St. Joe site were unfamiliar to us, which is unlike Barton's or our other more traditional shelter programs, where we contact people on the waiting list to engage them and conduct a more extensive assessment. Even though this was an emergency, temporary and novel program for ServiceNet, we continued to engage the community, which included meeting with the owners of the Greystone block and to create a crew of residents from the shelter to clean their block. We did this by meeting with shelter folks to ask if they wanted the community to have a negative perception of them. Shelter residents were willing to pitch in and take some ownership around cleaning-up the block. Dottie's also indicated that they were concerned that the proximity of the St. Joe's operation would stop people from patronizing their establishment, which appears to be unfounded, as we observed that their tables were full, with customers. Additionally, it is important to note that for over two decades we have had no complaints from the residential or business neighbors around the Barton's Crossing site, which demonstrates the efficacy of the ServiceNet's more traditional shelter operations.