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New trend in housing, supporting homeless

By *JEREMY HAY*

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Arthur Johnson has gone from drunkenness to sobriety, from grimy sidewalks, abandoned houses and crowded shelters to a two-bedroom apartment in an avocado and tan Santa Rosa housing complex.



Kent Porter / PD

Arthur Johnson, a Muslim, prays at his home Wednesday, Sept. 21, 2011. Johnson, who was living on the streets and addicted, was helped by Catholic Charities to right himself and found a place to live at Burbank Housing's Amarosa Village development in southwest Santa Rosa. Having found this place to stay, Johnson reunited with his children.

"My whole life story, it's pretty amazing," said the 46-year-old St. Louis, Mo., native, seated at the kitchen table in his new home.

The \$683 a month apartment is Spartan. There are mattresses on the floor; one for Johnson and one shared by his two children, whom he calls "my heroes." There's an L-shaped couch. The closets have little in them.

But Apartment E in the Amorosa development comes with much more: a battery of social services provided by a nonprofit group, Catholic Charities, that are crucial to keeping Johnson, who was homeless for three years, from backsliding.

The arrangement is known as permanent supportive housing and is intended to prevent or help people cope with setbacks that might otherwise derail their ascent out of homelessness.

It's an approach that has grown in favor during the past decade, as advocates and policy-makers wrestle with the social and fiscal costs of long-term homelessness.

"This is now a national movement because the research was so strong for how effective and cost effective this is," said Dennis Culhane, a professor of social welfare policy and expert on homelessness at the University of Pennsylvania.

He cites studies showing that 90 percent of permanent supportive housing tenants stay housed for their first year, while 85 percent are still off the streets after two years.

In Sonoma County, homeless advocates and service providers are trying to establish it on a widespread basis, especially to assist people who are in and out of homelessness or who remain homeless for extended periods.

"We're trying to build it out, we need so much," said Jenny Helbraun Abramson, coordinator of the Sonoma County Continuum of Care Planning Group, which organizes a biennial homeless census.

"What people have come to understand is that the older model in which we had people in shelters and then in transitional programs, it didn't work for everybody," she said.


At Amarosa, a 150-unit complex built by Santa Rosa-based nonprofit affordable housing developer Burbank Housing, 20 apartments are reserved for homeless

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people with disabilities from alcoholism to mental illness. The complex is off of Dutton Meadow, not far from Southwest Community Park in southwest Santa Rosa.

There are an estimated 1,000 people in Sonoma County considered “chronically homeless” and at whom permanent supportive services are largely aimed, according to the latest census.

Amarosa tenants in supportive services apartments had routine background and credit checks. They also had to have gone through Catholic Charities' shelters and assistance, training and counseling programs.

“The idea is that they're moving to a less intensive case management model but there is still that support there,” said Jennielynn Holmes-Davis, Program Manager at the Family Support Center, a 138-bed A Street shelter.

The services available to tenants range from counseling to child-care to budgeting advice — coordinated by case managers who make sure they receive whatever help they need to avoid slipping back onto the streets.

“You don't have to feel alone, or you've just been set here and left alone,” said Johnson, dressed for an interview in a crisp blue suit and tie.

“The support services are critical,” Culhane said.

“Many of these people who have been chronically homeless, wouldn't be able to find the housing themselves...they wouldn't necessarily be able to sustain without the services that are provided to them and tailor to their specific needs,” he said.

There are 230 permanent supportive housing apartments in Sonoma County for chronically homeless people, Helbraun Abramson said.

Now in his hown unit, Johnson led a visitor upstairs and on the way pointed out a small window that opened to a sunlit walkway.

“That's really nice,” he said. He reached the upper landing. “It's what dreams are made of.”

[END_CREDIT_0]You can reach Staff Writer Jeremy Hay at 521-5212 or jeremy.hay@pressdemocrat.com.

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