

## **Door of Hope**

### **Empowering Families to End the Cycle of Homelessness**

*Celebrating her completion of the Door of Hope program, one mother said, “My family and I have stayed in many different shelters, and while we were always treated nicely, we felt that we were just a number to them. But you people here, you really love us and care for us.”*

Homelessness is one of the most daunting social challenges of our day. In recent years, the Los Angeles Housing Services Authority (LAHSA) reported an increase of more than 12 percent in the number of chronically homeless families on the streets of Los Angeles County. Adding to the difficulty of families finding affordable housing options are high rents, reduced benefits programs, fewer living wage jobs and the fact that one in four families in California live in poverty.

Homelessness is more than being without a stable, permanent home. It is a symptom of a complex, multi-faceted web of entanglement that involves all areas of life – physical, personal, social, cultural and spiritual. The experience of homelessness is unique to each person and family. Some people may become homeless after falling on tough economic times or when a relationship breaks down due to substance abuse, or the strains of a mental illness. Others may be escaping an abusive relationship or have legal issues that hold them back. Most often, however, homelessness is caused by multiple issues that compound until a breaking point is reached.

Door of Hope believes that there is no single solution to homelessness that is right for everyone. We shape and reshape our program and methods through continuous learning but our goal remains the same: to empower homeless families to rebuild their lives and minimize the negative impact of homelessness. Our faith and our Core Values are the key to the positive impact we have on the lives of the families we serve.

### **History of Housing Services**

Emergency shelter programs have been available for decades as a way to provide a short-term nighttime residence for people who are homeless, but clearly more was needed. Transitional housing arose as a program to provide a safe place to live for a longer period, typically three months to two years, to allow individuals and families to stabilize and work on the issues that caused them to become homeless. While living in transitional housing, residents agree to abide by the housing program’s rules, which may include sobriety, curfews and attendance at meetings. During their stay, residents look for permanent housing and take steps toward obtaining it.

In the early 1990s, Pathways to Housing in New York and Beyond Shelter in Los Angeles helped spur what became known as the Housing First movement. Housing First takes the approach that obtaining permanent, secure housing, ideally within weeks, should be the first step in addressing homelessness. One way this is accomplished is through short-term subsidies (3-12 months) while a person or family becomes self-sufficient to take over their rent. Another is by placing the person or family into subsidized housing such as Section 8 or Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). Once housed, case management is then offered to help them process traumas and build habits that will lead to self-sufficiency. There are no barriers to eligibility such as requirements for sobriety or participation in mental health treatment.

Rapid Re-Housing is a subset of Housing First that maintains most of its principles, such as securing permanent housing before working on other aspects of a person's life, removing eligibility barriers and offering optional case management. It differs, however, by giving government-subsidized financial assistance for a shorter period, typically up to six months. The subsidy gradually reduces to zero with the goal that the family can sustainably pay for housing on its own at that time.

### **The Door of Hope Program**

At Door of Hope many programs and program components come together with one aim - to help families achieve self-sufficiency and permanent housing. Housing First has been a tremendous program for many families experiencing homelessness. However, Door of Hope has identified a subset of the homeless population that is better served by the kind of resident program offered by Door of Hope. Our resident program for families is the original program foundation upon which Door of Hope was established in 1985. Equipping families to rebuild their lives has been a consistent mission even as our methods have adapted over time to become more efficient and effective. Families who come to Door of Hope feel like they have lost everything. They are depressed, stressed, worried about their children and desperate to have a chance to get their lives back on track. The lack of stability, and the trauma of being homeless often takes a toll on a child's educational performance and behavior. Adopting a compassionate, Christ-centered approach, Door of Hope first works to stabilize each family and then guides them toward healing and learning that will help them move forward.

#### *Structure and Stability*

Our program is designed for single mothers, single fathers and two-parent families with children with the end goal of placing these families in permanent, sustainable housing as quickly as possible, depending on their individual circumstances. The families live at one of three housing sites, one of which provides a safe haven for families who have experienced domestic violence. Families also sign a Resident Agreement that establishes "house rules," the intent of which is to empower and coach the families. This approach allows us to be flexible in rule enforcement and to consider the individual circumstances. A community-based structure enables families to engage with the program and with one another on a daily basis. This includes eating dinner together each night and sharing the responsibilities of cooking and cleaning – life skills that will serve our families well once they are in their own homes. During the day, adults leave the site from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. to pursue full-time employment, if not already employed.

#### *Case Management*

Each family works with a case manager who is the lead advocate in assisting them with their goals. In step with trauma-informed care principles, the focus is on what is best for their lives and what they want to accomplish. We strive to understand and meet them where they are. Together the case manager and the family devise a case plan that enumerates personal goals in the areas of housing, finances, employment, time management, life skills, childcare, school, mental and physical health, and family relationships and character growth/spiritual development.

#### *Rapid Rehousing*

In addition to its resident program, Door of Hope has adopted the housing first philosophy as a part of the overall program leading to our becoming Pasadena's lead RRH agency. Through this program, our Rapid Re-Housing manager works with every family who stays at Door of Hope to obtain housing, in addition to outside families who are referred to Door of Hope from our partnering agencies in Pasadena. Funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is used to assist families financially when they are eligible. After the families are housed, they are given an opportunity to receive up to one

year of case management to enable them to continue to work toward their goals. This case management pursues the same goals as that done for our resident program. HUD only covers the cost of case management for the first six months, but we believe it is important to walk alongside families for up to a full year, and our generous donors enable us to do so.

### *Partnering*

Door of Hope leverages its own efforts by partnering with other organizations. These include, but are not limited to: Ascencia, Didi Hirsch, Families in Transition, Five Acres, Imagine LA, Options, Pacific Clinics, Union Station Homeless Services, Verdugo Job Center, Young and Healthy, Youth Moving On, and YWCA of Glendale. Many churches in the area partner with us, providing funding, volunteers and other assistance. We also partner with federal and state-funded agencies in our community and maintain a healthy relationship with them.

### **The Pillars of the Program**

Seven main pillars form the foundation of the Door of Hope program. They provide families with opportunities to learn new skills and develop positive behaviors that will enhance the likelihood of reaching their goals.

1. *Shelter and Food* – Before coming to us, many have been sleeping in their cars, under bridges and in unsafe conditions. The first priority is to provide quality, safe and dignifying housing for families. Unlike most shelters, our families live together in a room of their own that is clean and furnished and is given a key to ensure privacy and safety, and staff are available 24/7. In addition to the food they provide for themselves, families benefit from our generous meal donors, who frequently provide healthy, nutritious dinners and often stay to share it with the families.
2. *Employment* – We require all families to obtain full-time employment that will provide for their family. To address this critical need, case managers collaborate with local agencies and community partners as they work directly with each parent to find work and job training, build resumes, engage in an active job search and improve job skills. Parents gain job-seeking confidence through mock interviews and coaching on such topics as dressing for the workplace and highlighting their skills and work experience.
3. *Finances* – The ability of families to maintain financial stability is crucial to the ultimate goal of sustainable housing. Residents attend workshops to gain financial literacy and budgeting skills. Each family is encouraged to save as much money as possible while in the program to pay debts, save for rental deposits and establish an emergency fund. We assist them in obtaining their own bank account if they don't already have one, and help them manage their account and budget their expenses to build sustainable and healthy financial practices. Families contribute to the costs of the program in a small way, through minor program fees. These are intended to foster buy-in, self reliance and self-esteem.
4. *Emotional Health and Well-being* - Each adult receives one hour of onsite individual counseling each week as well as marriage counseling for all married couples. Through our onsite mental health counselors, families explore core issues that may have led to homelessness, learn to communicate better, find emotional healing and gain self-worth. Collaborative partners provide outside counseling resources if needed for a diagnosis or specialized treatment. In addition, our onsite staff counselors and others conduct two life skills classes each week that focus on parenting and stress management. Program alumni consistently testify to the value of the emotional and psychological support and

healing they have received while being in program. Individual counseling is available to alumni for one year after they leave Door of Hope.

5. *Childhood Development* – Many children in our resident program have experienced the emotional distress that accompanies housing instability and family upheaval. For those of school age, lack of daily structure and supervision over their school work often results in educational setbacks. Each child in our program is enrolled in local schools and activities for youth and teens. In addition, we provide an innovative onsite After School Program for all elementary age children that offers them enriching experiences and a sense of normalcy. Programming includes tutoring and homework help as well as other activities to address their spiritual, emotional, social and physical needs. These range from games, outdoor play time, hiking field trips, and visits to local colleges, to healthy snacks, story time, arts and crafts and computer use.

At the site for families affected by domestic violence, additional childcare is provided during the week while women attend life skills workshops. This helps stabilize children coming out of a crisis situation. Workshops for parents to improve their parenting skills and assistance in helping them connect their children with childcare, extracurricular activities, tutoring and special events further support the children's emotional well-being.

6. *Housing* - With permanent housing as the end goal of our program, a full-time housing coordinator works alongside each family throughout their time with us. As each family works on their personal goals that will lead them toward achieving this ultimate goal, staff help connect them with potential housing resources depending on the needs and interest of the family. The housing coordinator assists them with the housing search, advocates on their behalf with local landlords and property managers and emphasizes the family's improved budgeting and money management skills, all the while providing encouragement and guidance as families search for the right situation for their family.
7. *Alumni Support* - When families complete the program and return to the community, a case manager provides optional follow-up care, checking on the progress of money management, housing maintenance and the family's emotional health, typically for a year. Included in this optional follow-up care are families that do not pass through the resident program, but are housed through RRH. Twice annual alumni reunions allow for continued engagement with the program, and each year dozens of families attend.

### **What Makes It Work: Our Core Values**

We believe our six core values are why our program enables families to escape the cycle of homelessness. Staff seek to live these core values daily as they work with our families and plan with them how best to achieve their goals. These values are inherent in all we do.

- **Christ-centered** - All staff share a call to do the work of Door of Hope and approach what they do as a mission to serve, assist and love families with the love of Christ. Without discrimination or prejudice, we strive every day to imitate Christ's love to the families and children in our program through action and service. We provide a place where families can experience God's love in tangible ways. Families have opportunities to participate in optional Bible study classes, prayer and other spiritual activities to explore faith. Children with a painful past have a chance to heal, take joy in the present moment and have hope for a bright future. Although we are Christ-centered, we do not require faith or participation as a condition of families receiving services.

- **Compassionate** - We seek to deliver services from a compassionate, trauma-informed perspective that guides all of our policies, decision-making and interaction with families. The staff care for the families we serve with dignity and respect. Rules and structure keep our program focused, but they are applied with discretion as circumstances warrant. Our goal is to be restorative with the families, not restrictive. We recognize that behaviors can be indicators of past traumas, hurt or negative patterns of functioning and therefore seek to develop responses to negative behavioral patterns that address the underlying needs of the family. Mistakes are used as learning opportunities. We believe demonstrating God’s compassion is transformational for our hurting children.
  
- **Holistic** – We care about the whole person and the whole family. Our program is tailored to meet the individual needs of each family because we recognize that each area of our families’ lives impacts their overall functioning. Using a team-oriented approach, we address these multi-faceted needs with specialized services including case management, individual and family therapy, life skills and after-school programming for school-aged children. Our program provides structure and a stable, safe home that provides a solid foundation of peace. Families can then focus on gaining needed skills and achieving crucial goals such as going out and obtaining a job. Our holistic approach extends to our After School Program where children are provided with opportunities for growth through such experiences as interacting with peers, learning about budgeting and finances and gaining conflict resolution skills, with the goal of breaking the cycle of homelessness for generations.
  
- **Empowering** - All of the services we provide are family-driven. Our emphasis is on listening to our families, giving them a voice, assisting them by advocating on their behalf and providing them with the tools they need to succeed. We ask their opinions and are mindful of their needs. Families set their own goals in case management and therapy. Life skill classes are based on their stated needs and desires. Our goal as staff is to foster independence within our families. Focusing on their strengths rather than their deficits allows us to concentrate on the abilities and resources they have at their disposal. Living in a shelter is difficult for anyone, but children can view it as their identity, feeling shame and embarrassment because of their circumstances. To counteract these feelings, we empower our kids to voice their opinions and we listen to their concerns and ideas. A staff member’s idea of adding a student council in the After School Program led to children running for the presidency and preparing a speech while others designed election posters and participated in the election process. At the end, our children had a wonderful experience of self-worth and wholeness.
  
- **Excellence** – A culture of learning fosters excellence in our programs, which are characterized by innovation and evidence-based best practices. Ongoing training keeps staff up-to-date. Excellence also comes from developing close collaboration with other community agencies. Our community partners and volunteers act as advocates, financial donors, providers of resources, consultants to staff, tutors to children and supporters of our residents. We continually look for ways to create opportunities for the community to participate in the life-changing work we do. We understand that children are our future and the more we invest our time and resources in them, the more we are likely to produce a generation of leaders in the home, church, community and the world. Every day our children’s staff work to ensure that each activity, outing or project is meaningful and purposeful to each child’s overall development.
  
- **Relational** – The families we serve are not just numbers or clients. We say that “Once a part of our Door of Hope family, always a part” and we mean it. We value and support the role of community and relationships that Door of Hope provides. Part of our work is to help create a sense of community not only for the organization but for those we serve. In two of our facilities, our families sit around

the dinner table each evening intentionally to operate as one large family. We hold house meetings weekly and have group classes where our families are frequently in partnership. Families interact with meal donors and volunteers. When families complete the program we have a communal celebration where the staff and other families say what the departing family has meant to them. We recognize that behavioral, academic and emotional success with our children is achieved relationally. Each day we pour love, patience and gentleness into each child and hope that it will change negative thoughts and behaviors. Our high ratio of staff to family size and the structure of our program reflect our emphasis on being relational as an agency. This allows for smaller caseloads, which enables staff to focus greater and more quality attention on families. We are a 24-hour staffed facility that gives our families constant access to staff in times of need. It is the relationships that we build with residents that allow us to develop effective, individualized case plans with each family. Our emphasis on community is extended outward through staff engagement with community sponsors, volunteers and donors.

### **Summary**

The Door of Hope program offers a distinct approach among efforts that seek to end the cycle of homelessness. Housing First-based programs such as Rapid Re-Housing put families in housing as soon as possible and then follow up with case management. Our resident model provides a bridge to permanent housing, at the same time providing case management and other services to empower families to achieve the ultimate goal of sustainable, housing. In their time at Door of Hope, families receive Christ-centered, individualized care, coaching and guidance. They leave with new skills and are ready to achieve their goal. Many are able to end or significantly reduce their reliance on government support. For those families in great need and eligible for government support, we are happy to connect them. Our program length depends on the family's needs, generally running from three to five months.

For those who enter and complete the program, the comprehensive and specialized care and support they receive at Door of Hope gives them a tangible pathway out of homelessness and into hope, independence, employment and housing. Continuous learning and best-practice principles such as Do No Harm and Trauma-Informed Care underpin the success of the Door of Hope model. Our faith and adherence to our Core Values is Door of Hope's "secret sauce" for success. Once our families are back in the community, more than 80 percent of them remain housed for the long term. For these families, Door of Hope has been a life-changing experience.