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Transitions at Devens provides housing for families needing help

By Paula J. Owen CORRESPONDENT

The shelter is filling a need in the area, as agencies see an increase in homeless families.

Judith E. Nest-Pasierb, executive director of Fitchburg-based Our Father's House, said that according to the state Department of Housing and Community Development, 814 families are in motels waiting for a shelter placement.

The 13-unit facility on Cavite Street, called Transitions at Devens, was full on Aug. 19, its first day.

“There is a great need,” she said. “I would say just given that we are full so quickly, the need definitely outweighs the demand.”

The two- and three-bedroom units provide families with transitional housing for four to six months, and longer if needed, she said. Most residents living in the shelter are single mothers, said Ms. Nest-Pasierb.



“We have a single mother with five children ages 5 to 13,” she said. “She was in an abusive relationship and was living in an apartment the landlord did not maintain. Those two factors, as well as lack of income, left her homeless with so many children.”

She said Transitions at Devens is helping the woman while she stabilizes her life, finds employment and gets back on track to move into her own apartment.

Paula I. Gonzalez, 30, moved into the shelter at Devens about a week ago with her 8-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter.

She and her children were living in her sister's three-bedroom subsidized apartment in Boston for

around a month, she said. She had moved to her sister's from her aunt's apartment in Rhode Island, where 10 people were crowded into three bedrooms, she said. Her sister also has two children and was contacted by the housing authority and informed she would be evicted if Ms. Gonzalez did not move out.

"They gave her a letter we had to leave," she said. "She cried and tried to help me out. I could not let her lose her apartment."

Ms. Gonzalez said she went to the welfare office in Boston, and within a few hours, she got a call that there was a placement available at Devens.

"I really don't know what I would have done," she said. "I would probably have been sleeping under a bridge with my kids. I couldn't stay there with my sister. The kids don't understand when there is no food. I do, but they don't."

Ms. Gonzalez said the program at Devens is helping her get back on track, go back to school and find a place of her own. She said she hopes to become a nurse.



"We're comfortable," she said. "There are good people here. We'll be here a few months, just until I get on my feet."

Our Father's House assumed management of Transitions at Devens, which ran a shelter there on Sherman Street called Sylvia's Haven, in 2006.

MassDevelopment, a state agency that works with the private and public sector to stimulate economic growth, renovated the building at 101 Sherman Ave. to temporarily house the program until the

new facility at 18 Cavite St. was built, explained Ms. Nest-Pasierb.

Our Father's House's former executive director, Barbara R. Garneau, oversaw the project from its inception until she died in March of lung cancer, said Ms. Nest-Pasierb.

"Barbara would be absolutely thrilled to see the doors open now," she said. "She started working with the architect on the design of the building. She had strong input into the design."

In Ms. Garneau's tenure, Our Father's House grew from just one emergency shelter at 55 Lunenburg St. in Fitchburg to offering a transitional housing program for homeless men in recovery at 4 Leighton St., Fitchburg; opened the third floor of the Lunenburg Street facility as a transitional shelter for homeless women; took over management and operation of Elizabeth House, a transitional housing program for homeless women in recovery at 76 Mechanic St., Fitchburg; and on Sept. 8, 2006, assumed the management and operation of Transitions at

Devens.

The program at Devens receives referrals from state agencies on families that are in need of shelter, she said, and takes families from the Leominster and Fitchburg area as well as from areas in Middlesex County including Lowell and Chelmsford.

“We work with each family on an individual basis and each family has a case manager who works with them and creates an individual service plan,” she said. “Our goal is to get individual housing for each family and we've had a lot of success stories in the past.”