

# Homeward Bound

## UNITY CONFRONTS CRISIS OF ELDERLY HOMELESS

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### UPCOMING EVENTS

- **SPPA Meeting—May 15, 2009, 10:00 am in 1st floor conference room, 2475 Canal St., NOLA 70119**
- **UNITY Katrina Anniversary Event, August 29, 2009. Time and Location TBA.**



UNITY's outreach team found John Bailey and several other elderly persons living in an abandoned garage in Central City.

They have been called the "abandoned homeless", the thousands of our community members who have resorted to living in the over 71,000 abandoned buildings that still scar our city's landscape three and half years after the levees failed. Increasingly, UNITY's Outreach Team has found that the homeless people they discover living in blighted buildings are elderly and disabled in extremely poor health. The lack of affordable housing and vastly increased rental rates in post-Katrina New Orleans have left our most vulnerable New Orleanians with few housing options. Before the flood, the average price of a one bedroom apartment in the New Orleans area was \$578 a month, just barely within the fi-

nancial reach of an elderly or disabled resident receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Today the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in the New Orleans area is \$846 a month, well over the maximum monthly SSI benefit of only \$674 on which a disabled person must live.

In mid-December after UNITY's Outreach Team had discovered a group of elderly people, including a 90 year-old man, living in an abandoned and partially collapsed Central City truck garage, UNITY convened a press conference to call our community's attention to the crisis of

elderly homeless. At the press conference UNITY Executive Director Martha Kegel asked community members for donations of bedding, and for landlords to contact UNITY. Given that several of the elderly homeless persons living in the garage suffered from such serious health conditions as liver, kidney, and heart disease, schizophrenia, HIV and AIDs, and dementia, the comments of UNITY's Welcome Home Director, Angela Patterson, which closed the press conference, were apt:

"Remember, a home is not only a home. For many, like those gathered here today, it is the gift of life."

Unlike the homeless encampments that had formed in front of City Hall and under the Claiborne overpass in late 2007 and 2008, this manifestation of the homeless crisis may be easily overlooked by many. UNITY is determined that those living in abandoned build-

ings not be abandoned. In the coming year Search and Rescue efforts targeting abandoned buildings will be intensified, as will our efforts to develop the housing resources to resolve the crisis of the "abandoned homeless."

*"A home is not only a home. For many...it is the gift of life."*

MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Our Outreach Team recently sent me a video they had taken of an elderly homeless woman named Jenny, living in an abandoned building in the New Orleans East that was filled with flood wreckage and debris, as though Katrina had just happened. It upset me so much that tears filled my eyes. To see a vulnerable human being so helpless and abandoned was heartbreaking, even more so because I know that our Outreach Team encounters people in Jenny's situation many times daily. It was just an accident of fate that we found her, she could have died there.

No human being should have to live like that. There are proven and cost-effective ways to provide safe and decent housing to our most vulnerable community members. UNITY of Greater New Orleans is committed to working with our stakeholders to implement such "best practices" to end homelessness in New Orleans, so no one will ever have to call an abandoned building "home." There are several best practices that UNITY will be working with our partners to implement in the coming year I want you to know about.

The first project is the new Rebuilding Communities Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) program, which UNITY worked so hard over the past three and a-half years to have Congress fund and the state to implement. UNITY will manage 875 of the 3000 Hurricane Recovery PSH vouchers, which will provide much needed housing for disabled homeless persons-but not nearly enough to meet the need. UNITY is working with the Common Ground Institute (see article p. 3) on bricks

and mortar projects to create 500 more PSH units to be owned by local nonprofits.

Another innovative project we hope to secure funding for is our community's first "Safe Haven" for chronically homeless men. A Safe Haven facility provides semi-private accommodations and accepts people exactly as they are, even if suffering from untreated mental illness and behavioral problems, and provides intensive services to stabilize residents on their way to permanent housing. Research has shown that such "low demand" environments are very effective in helping chronically homeless individuals achieve independent living.

Even brief episodes of homelessness have been shown to have profound impact on the mental and physical health of children. The Rapid Re-Housing Program for Families we are implementing this spring will provide up to six months rent to families who have fallen into homelessness or are in imminent danger of homelessness, in order to get them back in

homes as quickly as possible. Support services will ensure that the family stays housed.

Volunteers and donors from New Orleans and across the country were critical to the compassionate and effective resolution of the homeless encampments crises in late 2007 and 2008 (see article p. 5). We will be working to tap into the energy and creativity of volunteers in new ways in 2009 with UNITY's Community Engagement Project.

Compassion, innovation, commitment to best practices, as well as dogged advocacy on behalf of the most vulnerable members of our community, have been and will continue to be the hallmark of our work. We are thankful for the generosity you have shown for our neighbors in greatest need, and we look forward to your continued support as together we rebuild a more just and vibrant New Orleans.

*Martha J. Keigel*

UNITY HOUSINGLINK SEEKS PARTNERSHIPS WITH LANDLORDS

A key component to preventing, reducing, and ending homelessness is affordable housing. UNITY realized soon after the storm that what affordable housing still existed needed to be made known in an easily accessible way to low-income workers, the elderly, and people with disabilities. In 2006 UNITY developed UNITY HousingLink, a web-based housing locator which allows renters to search on-line for affordable rental listings and landlords to post affordable (80% or below the Fair Market Rent level) for free. UNITY staff works closely with landlords to make this partnership work for all concerned. This important initiative was made possible in part from grants from the Keller Family Foundation and the Greater New Orleans Foundation. Area landlords with affordable rental properties are urged to list their vacancies at no cost at [www.unityhousinglink.org](http://www.unityhousinglink.org). For additional assistance, please call the UNITY HousingLink Director Pam Callahan at 899-4589 ext.114 or Housing Search Specialist Michael Galathe at ext. 111.



HousingLink Director Pam Callahan looks on as landlord John Carthane presents John Bailey, who had been living in an abandoned garage in Central City (see picture on page 1), with the keys to his new West Bank apartment.

## MEETING WITH DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT GENERATES SUPPORT FOR PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING



Common Ground Institute President Rosanne Haggerty discusses PSH with downtown stakeholders

Without a stable place to live and a support system to help chronically homeless persons address their underlying issues, many homeless people bounce from one emergency system to the next- from the streets to public hospitals to psychiatric institutions and detox centers and back to the streets. This cycle of homelessness is extremely costly, in both human and economic terms.

Permanent supportive housing (PSH) combines affordable rental housing

with supportive services such as case management, mental health and substance abuse services, health care, and employment. Chronic homelessness can be ended with PSH and implementing better policies to prevent homelessness among people at high-risk.

Since 2006 UNITY has been working in partnership with Common Ground Institute- the nation's leading nonprofit developer of Supportive Housing- to educate the New Orleans community on

the causes and solutions to homelessness, and to assist nonprofit groups in New Orleans and Jefferson Parish develop Supportive Housing sites.

Many cities have come to realize that ending homelessness is critical to improving the downtown business environment. This is especially true for New Orleans, which is struggling with a 100% increase in street homelessness since Hurricane Katrina. UNITY and the New Orleans Downtown Development District have been working together to address homelessness in the city since 2004. In March 2008 the New Orleans Downtown Development District (DDD) Board of Commissioners adopted a resolution calling for the DDD to assist UNITY of Greater New Orleans and the Common Ground Institute in exploring opportunities to develop a housing project that includes sup-

portive housing units in or near downtown.

On November 10 the DDD and New Orleans City Councilmember Stacy Head invited key downtown stakeholders to a session led by Common Ground Institute President Rosanne Haggerty. The goal of the session was to educate the group on the business aspects of supportive housing, including how supportive housing has been shown to improve downtowns, and to address local not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) opposition based on misconceptions of what supportive housing really is. The group of thirty business leaders, downtown residents, and elected officials engaged in a lengthy conversation in which the Councilmember and DDD leadership reiterated their support of the Common Ground model and its ability to be a solution in addressing New Orleans' homelessness.

## ADVOCACY ON DHAP EXTENSION SUCCESSFUL



UNITY and our partners successfully advocated to extend for at least six months rental subsidies to an estimated 31,000 families who lost their housing due to the 2005 hurricanes, including 15,000 households in the New Orleans area. The federal Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP) was set to expire February 28. Given the acute shortage of affordable rental properties, the slow pace of rebuilding homes, and the continuing long wait for Road Home rebuilding funds, UNITY feared the termination of the program would have been catastrophic. UNITY, the Louisiana Supportive Housing Coalition, and the Louisiana Advocacy Coalition for the Homeless had been lobbying for an extension of the DHAP program since July 2008, when they secured a written pledge from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other national congressional leaders to extend the program.

Dr. Chandra Crawford, Director of Public Policy for UNITY of Greater New Orleans and the Louisiana Supportive Housing Coalition, spent three weeks in January and February full-time on Capitol Hill mobilizing congressional involvement in the effort to persuade the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to extend DHAP. She said that without the DHAP extension, "we may have seen a return of the homeless encampments we worked so hard to end last year." A UNITY study found that 31 percent of New Orleans' homeless lost FEMA rent assistance or were kicked out of a FEMA trailer prior to becoming homeless.

UNITY will be working with other housing advocates to ensure that the DHAP extension is an adequate amount of time for low income renters to transition to the permanent vouchers HUD has fortunately made available to address this crisis, and for homeowners to finish rebuilding their homes.

## HILTON FOUNDATION OFFICIALS TOUR ABANDONED BUILDINGS WITH UNITY OUTREACH WORKERS



Hilton Senior Program Officer Bill Pitkin exits an abandoned building in Broadmoor.

Officer; and Brad Myers, Program Officer.

New Orleans has a greater number of abandoned residential buildings, over 71,000, than any other U.S. city. More than 34% of all residential addresses in New Orleans are unoccupied, compared with 19% in Detroit.

UNITY's Outreach Team has found that the ma-

On February 2 UNITY Outreach workers Mike Miller and Shamus Rohn led a group of officials from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation through four abandoned properties in Mid-City, The Treme, Broadmoor, and Central City. Members of the Hilton delegation were in town to participate in a meeting with other contributors to the Greater New Orleans Foundation Community Revitalization Fund, and included Steven Hilton, President and CEO; Conrad N. Hilton III, Board Member; Bill Pitkin, Senior Program

majority of blighted buildings they have searched show signs of people living in them, and increasingly the homeless occupants are elderly. On the February 2 tour the Hilton Foundation officials saw first hand the deplorable conditions that homeless persons are resorting to for shelter in our community. Additionally, at an abandoned property in the Broadmoor neighborhood, members of the delegation engaged in a lengthy conversation with an elderly homeless man, Elton Thomas Mabry, whom our Out-



Steven Hilton with abandoned building resident Mr. Tommy

reach team recently encountered, and later housed at a supportive housing site run by UNITY member agency Odyssey House.

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation is committed to alleviating human suffering worldwide in accordance with the Last Will and Testament of Conrad N. Hilton. In 2008

Conrad N. Hilton. In 2008 the Foundation provided capacity-building grants to help UNITY to develop the broad and sustainable funding base it will need in order to significantly reduce the widespread homelessness that has developed in the New Orleans area since Katrina.

## MARTHA KEGEL RECEIVES ADVOCACY AWARD

*"This award represents all of the hard work of the 60 service providers in the UNITY continuum to re-house over 457 homeless persons in an eight month period."*

Martha Kegel

On October 17th, the Advocacy Center of Louisiana presented UNITY Executive Director Martha Kegel with their 2008 Professional Advocate of the Year Award. Honorees were selected for their efforts to protect and advocate for the human and legal rights of people living in Louisiana who are elderly or disabled. Awards Ceremony Emcee Marta Schnabel, immediate past president of the Louisiana Bar Association, commended UNITY's work rescuing and housing elderly and disabled persons who had taken refuge in two large homeless camps in downtown New Orleans in 2007 and 2008. Ms. Schnabel also recognized Martha's leadership role in successfully advocating for Congress to fund 3,000 permanent supportive housing vouchers for disabled persons living in the Louisiana disaster regions.

**VOLUNTEER AND DONOR EFFORTS ESSENTIAL IN RESOLVING HOMELESS ENCAMPMENTS CRISIS**



Students from University of Pennsylvania unloading donations to UNITY during Spring Break.

Homelessness is a community wide problem, and it can only be resolved with community wide support. Without the support of community volunteers and donors from across the country, the massive re-housing effort that eventually housed 457 individuals who had been living in two squalid homeless camps in downtown New Orleans in 2007 and 2008 could not have succeeded.

The first step in the re-housing process was placing the most vulnerable camp residents into hotel rooms until apartments could be located.

A hotel room, of course, is not a home. For one thing, there's no kitchen. Volunteers from churches and civic groups throughout the city came forward and prepared, packaged, and delivered hot and cold meals several times a day to over 400 people in eight hotels scattered throughout the city. Day after day. Week after week.

Then, as UNITY found affordable apartments for their recently homeless clients, volunteers played another unforgettable role in making an empty apartment into a home. Hundreds of community members donated sofas, dressers, tables, chairs and other household items. Volunteers organized school drives to collect toiletries; or filled plastic bags with linens, a pillow, a blanket, and towels.

The donations that poured in were stored in donated warehouse space provided by the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Volunteers from New Orleans and beyond helped accept and sort donations, take inventory, and engage in the joys and aerobics of transporting furniture and household goods from donor to client.

Volunteers are still needed in our efforts to reduce, prevent, and end homelessness in our community. Anyone interested in volunteer work with UNITY is encouraged to call Kathleen "Catch" Patton, UNITY Coordinator of Community Involvement, at 821-4496, ext. 116.

**UNITY of Greater New Orleans**

**Donation Form**

Yes, I am enclosing \$\_\_\_\_\_ to support UNITY's work to end homelessness in Greater New Orleans.

**Donor Information**

Name	
Address	
Telephone	
Email	

**Acknowledgement Information**

**Please use the following names in all acknowledgements:**

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\_\_\_ I (we) wish to have the gift remain anonymous:

*Please mail checks to:*

UNITY of Greater New Orleans  
2475 Canal Street, Suite 300  
New Orleans, LA 70119

Visa/MC Number	
Expiration Date	

Visit us on the web

[www.unitygno.org](http://www.unitygno.org)

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**UNITY HOSTS CHRISTMAS PARTY FOR JOHN'S PLACE RESIDENTS**



John's Place kids and case manager Tara Stewart (top left) enjoying time with Santa Claus

On December 23, 2008, Christmas came a few days early for the residents of John's Place. UNITY staffers each adopted one resident from the building, in lieu of an office Secret Santa exchange, and brought gifts for young and old alike. The Ozanam Inn toy drive and Trinity Episcopal Church also brought presents for all of the children, ensuring a memorable holiday for all involved.

John's Place is a Permanent Supportive Housing building owned and operated by UNITY. The building includes ten units for individuals and eight units for families, with a full-time social worker, Tara Stewart, providing case management services to all residents.

In addition to the gifts, UNITY arranged to host a Christmas party for the residents, complete with food, drinks, music and a very special visit from Santa Claus. UNITY staffers and John's Place residents alike enjoyed the festivities and vowed to make the party a new tradition.