To ward off the frigid cold, people had blankets and sleeping bags completely covering their heads. Still, once they heard the word “UNITY,” they peeped out of their cocoons to answer questions about where they’ve slept recently, their health history, substance abuse and military service. People don’t typically have frank discussions like this with strangers.

“These are extremely sensitive topics. But people speak with us because they want to be housed,” said UNITY deputy director Angela Patterson, who helps to guide both volunteers and seasoned outreach workers whenever UNITY of Greater New Orleans plans a major street-outreach push, to do assessments, annual surveys, or to canvass specific encampments.

Permanent housing was rarely the outcome Patterson saw 27 years ago, when she began to work with homeless people, offering them snacks and blankets.
Dear Friends:

I am amazed by the power of partnership. UNITY of Greater New Orleans is a collaborative of 60 organizations, all working together to house the homeless. Because of our partnerships, hundreds of professional staff, volunteers and community leaders work tirelessly together every day. Thanks to this partnership, I am proud to share with you our next big goal: Spring Into Housing. Bolstered by the success of our past housing campaigns, which you read about in our last newsletter, our Spring Into Housing campaign will successfully house an additional 300 chronically homeless people by June 30.

You may remember that the national 100,000 Homes campaign, of which we are a key part, set out to house 100,000 vulnerable and chronically homeless people by July 2014. We aim to ensure that 2,500 of those will be New Orleanians who are no longer suffering. That’s a huge accomplishment for our relatively small city!

In order to end homelessness, another partner is critical to our work — those who support us financially. Thank you for being a part of the solution to homelessness. We work in an environment where resources for the poor and vulnerable are scarce. The charitable contributions of people like you, who truly care, make all of our accomplishments possible.

I look forward to keeping you up to date on our efforts to help our vulnerable neighbors “Spring Into Housing.” Thank you for your support!

Sincerely,

Martha J. Kegel,
Executive Director

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Home Work … from page 1

and a place to rest. “Now we call that managing their homelessness instead of ending it,” she said. “Because research and experience now show that what homeless people most need to thrive is a home.”

Today, in a process that’s more cost-effective and successful, the UNITY collaborative places chronically homeless people directly into what’s called Permanent Supportive Housing: affordable apartments paired with the services needed to stay housed.

Because of this new approach to homelessness, Patterson is now helping to house people whom she had seen on the street and in homeless-service centers for decades. In other cities, these “chronically homeless” people – disabled people who have been homeless repeatedly or for long periods of time – generally make up a small proportion of the overall homeless population, maybe 10 or 15 percent. But, in New Orleans, because of the lingering effects of Katrina, the proportion of chronically homeless is much higher: 29 percent.

The churn of homelessness

UNITY research shows that, on any given night last year, 2,337 people were literally homeless, sleeping on the street, in a shelter, or in a place unfit for human habitation. But, over the entire year, at least eight times as many people – 16,701 including 1,824 children – received help from the UNITY collaborative and its 60 member agencies because they were homeless or at risk of homelessness.

That’s because homelessness is what some call “a revolving-door crisis,” due to the constant churn of people who are moving in and out of homelessness. Most end their homelessness quickly, with little assistance. Others need significant help.

“You have to listen”

UNITY street-outreach worker Travers Kurr spends his days talking with mentally ill and disabled people who prefer to sleep on the street or in abandoned buildings rather than enter a homeless shelter. They don’t like the rules, the claustrophobia, the noise that surrounds them whenever they enter a shelter.

So, even though the mercury was falling one recent night, Kurr entered the homeless camp knowing that few of its residents would want a ride to a conventional homeless shelter.

Every day, Kurr and his co-workers do Vulnerability Assessments of people to determine how likely they are to die if left living on the streets. The resulting score is plugged into a constantly updated registry. Those with the highest scores are
housed first when there’s an open Permanent Supportive Housing slot that fits their needs.

Still, homeless people often feel like they are met with roadblocks and setbacks at every turn. So many days, outreach workers spend time listening. On the recent visit to the camp under the overpass, Kurr ran into a man who needed to vent.

“He was super frustrated,” Kurr said. His possessions had been stolen. He hadn’t been homeless a long time, but he’d had a rough childhood and rocky relationships with family and loved ones. Recently, he’d been diagnosed as bipolar.

Kurr kept the man talking. “Normally, I’m just letting them share their story,” he said. “If there are blanks, I poke and prod.” He asked questions that will help him guide his strategy to house the man, asking when he’d first hit the streets, whom he’d stayed with, and why he was still out there.

After they finished talking, a young man motioned to him. He was 19, far younger than the people Kurr usually sees in camps like these. He said he was taking anti-psychotic medication and that he’d recently been released from foster care. He too had a story to share.

From hours of personal stories, a larger picture forms, of what causes homelessness. Foster care, for instance, is a key predictor of homelessness; one national study found that 27 percent of homeless people had been placed in out-of-home care during childhood. Also, one-third to one-half of homeless people nationally suffer from physical illness that can make it impossible to work. One in 10 fled their homes because of domestic violence. And in this city, one-third of homeless people suffer with mental illness.

Kurr and his outreach colleagues have found that simple compassion demands that they pay attention to the stories, to a point that goes far beyond their work. “They’re at the lowest point in their world,” Kurr said. “You have to listen.”
When Walter Johnson, 52, walked into his new apartment, a large chest of drawers by the window caught his eye. He really liked the top of the dresser. “This is my showcase spot,” said Johnson, a disabled man who suffers with both physical and mental illness.

For more than 10 years, Johnson had gathered beautiful trinkets. He had no place to display them, because he was sleeping in abandoned houses in Central City. But he was fascinated by small, interesting objects: sparkly costume jewelry, a brass pin adorned with a red rose, a brass moose memo-holder, and a few rhinestones, maybe from Mardi Gras Indian suits, he thinks.

“As I was walking, I found pieces there. I found pieces here,” he said. “I’d pick them all up and put them in a backsack.”

If he ever again had a place to call home, he’d pull those objects out of his backsack and let the world see them, he said. So that was the first thing he did when he walked into his new apartment in UNITY’s newest structure, the Dr. Everett and Melva Williams Building, named for the city’s first African American superintendent of schools, who was a principal founder of UNITY (see story, page 6).

During his first hours in his apartment, Johnson didn’t take a nap on the new soft bed or make food on the stove. Instead, he curated his exhibit, documenting the sidewalks he’s trod and the houses he’s slept in since around 2002, when he left a crowded, contentious family apartment in Mid-City, deciding that he was better off homeless.

UNITY’s outreach team met Johnson through another squatter in the neighborhood, but his situation wasn’t typical, said UNITY outreach worker Travers Kurr, noting that neighbors often call UNITY to complain about squatters. “But Mr. Walter is special. He’s awfully charismatic,” Kurr said. “He was sort of like the neighborhood mayor. Everyone loves him. Nobody pointed him out to us and said, “This man lives in squalor.””

Sleeping in a closet

Johnson’s situation was dire. The abandoned house on Delachaise Street that he called home since Katrina had no floors in most of the building. To go to bed, he crawled along planks to get to what he calls “my room,” a closet. No one except neighbors knew where he lived, because he was everywhere during the day, helping people with chores.

He still has a strong attachment to the street where he lived, about a dozen blocks from the Williams Building. And Johnson heads back to the house like clockwork in the morning, to make breakfast for his 93-year-old next-door neighbor, Ms. Ruth, and to feed his adopted, jet-black cat which he named Mineau, or “little one” in Creole.

The other day, searching through the house with a flashlight, Johnson
Walter Johnson had gathered beautiful trinkets for more than 10 years, but he had no place to display them. Now in a permanent home, Johnson showcases the objects in his UNITY apartment.

found his birth certificate. With that, he can get an ID and apply for needed support. He brought the document back to the building, to caseworker David Lewis, who is working closely with Johnson as he accesses consistent medical and mental-health care for the first time in his life.

Services in the Williams Building are provided by Belle Reve, a UNITY member agency that began its work in New Orleans 20 years ago serving clients with HIV/AIDS. Seeing a pervasive need for effective case management in our community, Belle Reve expanded to serve people with a full range of disabilities.

Lewis, an employee of Belle Reve, gave Johnson bus tokens and directions to the Social Security office downtown. Johnson once had a Social Security number, but he forgot it. But now, armed with his birth certificate, he can get a copy of his Social Security card, which he can then use to apply for Medicaid and Social Security disability benefits so that he can stay stably housed.

A dream come true
Johnson adores his apartment in the Williams building. “It’s real quiet,” he said, noting that solid construction makes the building a peaceful place. “The walls are so heavy you can’t hear a TV or anything else,” he said.

He also likes the view of the Superdome from his windows and of Central City from his front door, which opens onto a balcony overlooking the courtyard. At night on weekends, people grill and serve food in a corridor not far away and so Johnson will sometimes stand at the balcony and listen, as people order hamburgers and laugh and socialize.

But these days, when he’s ready to go to sleep, he just walks over to his bed and crawls in. And when he wakes, he looks over at his collection and realizes that he now has a place to call home.

“Many mornings,” he said, “I wake up and I think I’m still dreaming, after all those years I was homeless.”
Honoring a Humanitarian
New building to be named for Dr. Everett Williams

UNITY’s newest apartment building will be named in honor of Dr. Everett Williams and his wife of 58 years, Melva Williams, who dedicated their lives to serving others.

“Their love for all humankind and passion for helping those who are too often ignored embody what UNITY strives to do,” said UNITY head Martha Kegel.

The Williams Building, located at 2101 Louisiana Avenue, is part of UNITY’s Permanent Supportive Housing Initiative, begun after the storm to house the most frail and service-needy homeless people. Like the initiative’s first structure, the Rosa F. Keller Building in Mid-City, the Williams Building uses an “income-integrated” model that both prevents and solves homelessness.

Half of the building’s 42 apartments are for low-income working tenants who are at risk of homelessness because of their very low incomes. The remaining half are for disabled, formerly homeless tenants who are housed through a concept called Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), which pairs affordable apartments with on-site case-management and services that have been proven to keep even people with challenging disabilities stably housed and moving toward self-sufficiency.

Dr. Williams, who served as chair of UNITY’s board, made history in 1985 when the Orleans Parish School Board named him the city’s first African American superintendent after a broad national search. When Williams died last summer, schools historian Al Kennedy told The Times-Picayune that Mr. Williams had the rare ability to garner community support because he moved easily between different worlds, “from classrooms to boardroom to neighborhoods,” Kennedy said. Williams successfully galvanized New Orleanians to pass the first property-tax increase for schools in more than 30 years, a much-needed increase for the system, which had long been underfunded.

A former school teacher who headed up the English department at Walter L. Cohen Senior High, he served as assistant principal at McDonogh 35 and as principal at Carter G. Woodson Middle School before moving into administration. He headed up the school system until 1992 and then worked as manager of community relations for Freeport-McMoran.

An ordained deacon, Williams also had strong ties to the Catholic church and its schools. In the 1960s, Archbishop Philip Hannan consulted with him about the desegregation of Catholic schools. In 1996, he served as the first African American chair of the Archbishop’s Community Appeal. In 2010, he received the Pope
Support UNITY and 
The Williams Building

Please support the lifesaving work that happens in the building named in honor of Dr. Everett and Melva Williams (see page 6) and become a permanent part of the rebuilding of New Orleans.

With your gift, a special memorial tile bearing your name or that of a loved one will become a permanent feature of the Dr. Everett and Melva Williams Building and will make possible UNITY’s continued work, housing the vulnerable homeless. Order form enclosed.

Tile options include

- Large memorial tiles: $250 each
- Standard memorial tiles: $100 each

John Paul II award from the Archdiocese of New Orleans' Catholic Foundation.

Williams served as a UNITY leader for 20 years. He also led many other educational, healthcare, community and religious boards, including Baptist Community Ministries, Catholic Charities, Touro Infirmary, and his alma mater Xavier University. He also chaired the education committee for the Patrick F. Taylor Foundation.

Williams’ strategies to keep at-risk youth in schools were cited in a New York Times piece about the issue.

He stressed intervening early with preschool programs that could give a better start to disadvantaged children and emphasized creating a positive school environment led by “strong committed leaders” who believed “that all students, including at-risk ones, are educable.” Williams also said that schools must look outside their walls and collaborate with the larger community. “We need the parents, the community, the businesses, the churches, the social agencies too,” he said, in a quote that reflects his holistic view of the world.
UNITY IN THE NEWS

On March 17th, New Orleans homeless advocates pushed the national 100,000 Homes campaign over the 90,000 mark! By the campaign’s conclusion in July, 245 cities will have housed 100,000 homeless Americans within the past four years. In New Orleans alone, UNITY, its 60 member agencies and government partners — HUD, the VA, city of New Orleans and Jefferson Parish — plan to house 2,500 disabled, chronically homeless people.

The following is excerpted from a New York Times’ blog regarding its series about 12-year-old Dasani Coates, a homeless girl living with her family in a city shelter.

Many who read the series found it heartbreaking — and wanted to know what could be done.

The question is timely. We have new, and better, methods to reduce homelessness. In the past few years, cities across the country have made changes in the way they’re responding to the problem.

Cities are moving away from long-term shelter and focusing, instead, on developing better ways to identify and prioritize vulnerable individuals and families to prevent crises.

The evidence is mounting that this works. Cities like Jacksonville, Fla., Nashville and New Orleans have made big strides providing permanent supportive housing to chronically homeless individuals.

This is excerpted from a January 13th New Orleans Advocate piece by Danny Monteverde:

Two people who apparently refused offers of help died this week while staying outdoors on nights when the temperature was in the low to mid-20s with a windchill in the low teens.

Martha Kegel, head of UNITY of Greater New Orleans, described the deaths as a “heartbreaking tragedy” that “makes us more determined to accelerate the pace at which our community permanently houses vulnerable people.”

Meanwhile, she said, UNITY will work to lower some barriers at shelters, hoping that might prod more people to move into them during hard freezes, as well as working more closely with hospitals to commit people whose mental disorders might make them unable to care for themselves during those times.

“By working together, we can solve this problem,” Kegel said.