

Shelter's leaders draw on well-to-do
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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

When 200 volunteers install a new slide, swings and climbing equipment at Little Rock's Our House homeless shelter this week, the children who stay at the shelter will have a place to play besides a rough vacant lot.

The new playground illustrates how Our House, a 19-year-old shelter for homeless men, women and families, has grown over the past year, adding 35 beds and extending its offerings, without substantial increases in government support.

Instead, the shelter's board and executive director have turned to the private sector.

Since becoming executive director in September, Georgia Mjartan has corralled wealthy donors, persuaded her husband to install a computer laboratory, lengthened the shelter's daytime hours and won a grant from softdrink maker PepsiCo to buy the new playground — all in order to combat Little Rock's homeless problem as the federal government shifts funding priorities away from such shelters.

Meanwhile, a newly expanded and energized board of directors is making fundraising a primary mission, hosting luncheons and parties to solicit donations and tapping rich acquaintances, board members say.

“We know what the drill is,” said board member Barry Mc-Daniel, a Little Rock financial adviser and husband of City Director Barbara Graves. “The drill is to go out and raise private money.” There are an estimated 3,000 homeless people in central Arkansas, but only 1,500 shelter beds, said Sandra Wilson, executive director of the Arkansas Supportive Housing Network, which provides rental subsidies to homeless people.

Homeless-shelter funds provided to central Arkansas by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development aren't growing — though costs are. So when shelters want to expand or add services, they have to find other funding sources.

“You have to grovel and come up with new ideas,” said Joe Flaherty, Our House executive director from its founding in 1987 until 2005.

About a quarter of the nonprofit shelter's \$610,000 budget this year — \$163,000 — comes from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. In 1990, by contrast, HUD gave Our House \$1.2 million dollars to use over a three-year period, including \$200,000 to refurbish its buildings, Flaherty said.

Under President Bush, funds aimed at putting the homeless into permanent housing have increased for five years in a row to \$3.9 billion this year, but most of the new money is intended for permanent housing for single, chronically homeless individuals, not families or single people who are temporarily homeless.

“The new priority from Washington is to invest in housing that ends people’s homelessness,” said Bush’s homeless czar Philip Mangano, executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness.

But the men, women and children living in Our House aren’t chronically homeless, which is defined by the government as unaccompanied people who have lived on the streets for a year or without a home for four stretches of time over the past three years.

Lamont Shaw, for example, moved into Our House’s 39-bed family shelter last month after the mother of his daughter was deployed to Iraq with the Army, leaving the girl in his sole care. Although Shaw, 31, saw this as an opportunity to raise the girl, he couldn’t afford a decent apartment, even working two jobs. And there was no room for the two of them in his mother’s Jacksonville house.

“We needed a good environment,” Shaw said, sitting on a soft couch in the tidy but sparse living room of the new building at Our House.

Residents stay at Our House because some circumstance left them without a roof over their heads, not because of a substance-abuse problem or mental illness.

“Something has happened to them, but they don’t want to be homeless,” McDaniel said. “Their desire is to become a taxpayer and a customer again.”

To accomplish that goal, Our House requires residents to find jobs within 14 days and holds in trust 75 percent of their earnings until they leave the shelter. Residents work in security, catering, construction and other low-skill professions.

The shelter staff serves more than 45,000 meals a year and teaches reading, GED preparation and computer and basic life skills, like managing a budget and English in the workplace.

The small campus directly behind the old Veterans Administration hospital on Roosevelt Road has 39 beds for homeless parents and their children. In December, a \$1.4 million building with room for 80 single men and women replaced the organization’s 45-bed emergency shelter on Main Street. Money for the new building came from the sale of the old one at 408 Main St., as well as from grants and from the sale of “naming rights” to shelter beds.

Mjartan, 26, joined the Our House board in September 2004 after completing a master’s degree in Ireland. A year later, the Little Rock native and University of Arkansas at Little Rock graduate replaced Flaherty at the helm of the organization.

Mjartan quickly threw herself into consolidating the shelter’s operations onto the Roosevelt Road campus. Learning that the Capital Hotel would be replacing its kitchen, she arranged with general manager Joseph Rantisi for the hotel to donate the equipment to Our House. Mjartan’s soccer team helped with the move.

When an insurance settlement bought 40 computers for a job-training laboratory, Mjartan persuaded her husband, Dominik Mjartan, who managed a computer lab at UALR, to install them.

Supporting Mjartan is a board that taps a network of wealthy Little Rock donors.

Three hundred people attended a party last month in the backyard of Beth Coulson, a board member for three years. The event — with several Little Rock restaurants donating the catering — raised more than \$25,000 for the shelter. It was the shelter's first fundraising party.

The 25-member board hopes to raise \$100,000 from a new "100 for the Homeless" donation drive, in which board members will hit up that many people to donate \$1,000 to the charity.

Despite the fundraising efforts, money remains tight, Mjartan said.

Our House has pared back efforts to find permanent housing for residents, and no longer pays a teacher to help children with their homework.

After hearing about the playground program, Mjartan spent two days writing a grant application to Kaboom, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that finds corporate donors to build playgrounds.

The playground going up on a barren lot behind the new shelter on Thursday won't bear a Pepsi logo, but will advertise the Purchase, N.Y.-based company's "Smart Spot" healthy-eating campaign, said Kaboom spokesman Sarah Pinsky.

Our House board member Van Tilbury, who will become president of the board in August, described the playground as "a godsend" to the children.

"They haven't had an adequate playground to play on and be kids," said Tilbury, president of construction company East Harding.

Kanesha Fields, 9, who lives at Our House with her father, said she's looking forward to the new playground.

"I won't get bored," she said. "There's nothing to do in that house. All you do is walk around the hall and watch TV."

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