

From homeless to homeowner remains the goal of Douglas County Housing Authority

Written by Megan DeBoer

Park benches, under bridges, inside cars. These are the places our homeless neighbors seek refuge from the streets. When much of their lives remain uncertain, the Douglas County Housing Authority works hard to ensure safe housing isn't.

Approximately 1,500 individuals in the Omaha metro area experience homelessness on any given night. DCHA collaborates with a myriad of organizations to provide stable, affordable housing for those in need.

Alongside the Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless (MACCH), DCHA works to reduce the homeless population and helps change lives one housing program at a time. Each program has the same end-goal: homeownership and stability for those who never dreamed of the opportunity.

Currently serving more than 1,000 families, the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program enables low-income individuals and families to rent a home from a private property owner with DCHA rental assistance.

"It takes a village," says Julie Katealo, DCHA coordinator. "That's what we are."

Katealo plays a vital part in making dreams come true as the program facilitator for family self-sufficiency and homeownership. As a voluntary five-year program, FSS assists Section 8 families with goals to secure employment that leads to economic independence.

DCHA establishes an interest-bearing escrow account for each participating family allowing them to save as much as possible during the entirety of the program. At the time of graduation, the money accrued is available and can be spent freely. Although most graduates continue to save or use the funds as a down payment on a forever home, Katealo says.

"When she came to us, she was a broken person," says DCHA lead housing specialist

Jean Mertz about a successful client. "Now she's graduated FSS, working full-time, newly engaged, happy and a homeowner."

The next step after FSS is the homeownership program. Here, each client receives a subsidy applied towards a mortgage on a home. For eligibility, participants must be part of Section 8 for at least 12 months, be employed full-time or 30-hours a week, meet income requirements and successfully complete a homeownership counseling program.

"Our people really lift their chins off the ground to become successful," says DCHA CEO Sheila Miller.

Among receiving support are homeless veterans, who make up roughly 6 to 7 percent of the Omaha metro area population. Through the Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program, DCHA and MACCH protect hundreds of vets.

The VASH program is the perfect combination of Housing Choice Vouchers, case management and clinical services through the VA. Made possible through collaboration with MACCH, the program has successfully expanded beyond its initial five years.

"MACCH needs us," Miller says. "And we need them."

While MACCH tackles referrals, DCHA assists in finding homes and inspections. Miller says the program's success is due to the "partnership environment" between DCHA and MACCH.

"I never dreamed or hoped of having my own home again," says Bong Chae, a VASH participant. "Although it was an upward battle getting the house that I chose, I can say now that I'm in my home and it was worth the wait. Thank you DCHA for your programs and giving me a second chance at life."

While life can be unpredictable, safe and secure housing shouldn't be. DCHA and MACCH work tirelessly to implement strategic solutions to protect our homeless neighbors in ways that almost seem too good to be true.

"It's not too good to be true," Miller says. "It's a blessing for our people and for us."

