

PADS offers homeless more than just shelter

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Page: 1

Section: Neighbor

Most of us know a little bit about DuPage PADS.

Yes, PADS, or Public Action to Deliver Shelter, is the group that coordinates the overnight housing for homeless people that rotates among 31 churches in DuPage County.

But it's that and so much more.

The organization's efforts on behalf of the homeless reach much further than providing shelter on a chilly night. PADS offers a range of services, from long-term housing to counseling and life skills coaching — all designed to help homeless people get back on their feet and regain their self-sufficiency.

Kathleen Johnson, PADS director of development, reintroduces us to an organization many already know by name.

Q. What is your mission?

A. DuPage PADS Inc., or Public Action to Deliver Shelter, is an independent not-for-profit 501(c)3 human service agency serving men, women and families who are homeless. Its mission is

to end and prevent homelessness in DuPage County.

Q. How do you work toward accomplishing that goal?

A. DuPage PADS provides housing solutions for people in crisis in a setting that encourages responsibility and offers the opportunity for independence and self-sufficiency. This is accomplished in three ways:

- Housing, support services and a commitment to community action. The first point of entry for assistance is through the Interim (overnight) Housing Program, where participants find safety, meals and a network of supportive services that move them toward self-sufficiency.

Interim Housing is produced by 31 congregations, seven nights a week from October to April. Fewer locations are available through the summer months. The only daytime support center for people who are homeless provides lunch, supportive services and basic need assistance.

Case management (life skills coaching) assists participants to create a plan and steps needed to move toward self-sufficiency. Employment readiness services assist the unemployed, underemployed and hard-to-employ in finding jobs that lead to living as independently as possible.

- Transitional housing for single men and women, which serves as a pathway between homelessness and obtaining permanent housing.

- Permanent supportive housing for men, women and children who are chronically homeless

(homeless for a year or more) and who struggle with a disability that impairs independent living skills. Community action involves collaborating with more than 4,000 volunteers, over 130 congregations, volunteer mentors, professional services, faith-based and community groups, as well as sharing information about issues of homelessness with the community and advocating against barriers that cause homelessness.

Q. Who do you serve?

A. DuPage PADS serves men, women and children who are homeless in DuPage County.

Q. When and why did PADS start? How has it grown?

A. DuPage PADS began addressing the needs of people who were homeless in 1985. The Housing Task Force of the Human Needs Coalition of DuPage County identified the need for an emergency overnight shelter. Community partnership became an integral part of the program, with congregations providing night site locations and supplying teams of volunteers to maintain these sites from October to April.

Q. What kind of successes have you had?

A. DuPage PADS provides the only transitional housing program for single men and women in DuPage County. This is the story of a participant who moved from transitional housing into independent housing.

Mary's story: Mary came to DuPage PADS from a substance abuse recovery living program. A

year had passed since she freed herself from a history of substance abuse before entering our Transitional Housing Program. It wasn't solely her addiction that was holding her back. Twenty years of struggling financially had left Mary without a plan for her future — no savings, no checking account, only a mounting credit problem and, as she recalls, "not having but one pair of shoes at any given time." After nearly two decades of carrying the overwhelming burden of low self-esteem and a sense of hopelessness, Mary took a stand for herself and decided to change her life.

"At DuPage PADS, I learned that I could do anything and that I deserve it. I needed to hear that because, before DuPage PADS, I had no dreams, no hope, no life. But now I think I found me."

Since entering PADS, Mary has maintained stable employment at Target. She has grown a comfortable savings account and almost doubled her credit score. Mary has a closet full of clothes and shoes, at least four pairs. She has begun taking continuing adult education computer classes at College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn. "Not having to worry about finding a place to stay each night gave me time and freedom to take care of myself. I'm doing something I never thought I could do."

Mary has received a section-8 voucher from DuPage PADS and is currently looking for her own residence. Now picking out towels and pondering how to organize her closet, she quietly asserts, "Now, I feel there is nothing I can't do. Now I have a future."

Q. What challenges does PADS currently face?

A. The challenge of assisting a growing population of people in need with declining funds avail-

able for support. The current economic downturn has strained volunteer, in-kind and monetary support. Budget items have had to be eliminated because government funding was not realized. Transportation funding for participants has been eliminated or cut, as well as training for staff to effectively respond to the homeless population has also been eliminated.

Q. What do you wish the community at large knew about PADS?

A. DuPage PADS provides more opportunities than temporary emergency shelter. DuPage PADS is the suburban model committed to end and prevent homelessness. We have the solution: housing coupled with supportive services.

Q. How can readers get involved?

A. Readers can become involved with DuPage PADS by attending events such as the upcoming Wake Up Your Sprit Breakfast, making donations of gift cards to meet critical transportation and medical assistance needs.

They can join the Action League to strengthen our voice regarding legislation about homelessness. They can create their own fundraising events with friends.

We are always looking for teams of volunteers to help manage Interim Housing sites, as well as to help plan and present our fundraising events.

For a list of volunteer opportunities, visit dupagepads.org.

— Christie Willhite

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