

LARS Letter

Serving the Laurel Community Since 1987

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What Does Housing First Mean for LARS?

You've probably heard a lot in the news lately about the affordable housing shortage and the idea of "Housing First" as the proven solution to homelessness. What is the idea behind this buzzword, and what does it mean for existing housing programs in our community? Here's a bit of history...

At its core, Housing First is just as simple as it sounds: the cure for homelessness is homes. But the concept was never formally tested until the early nineties, when a New York University psychologist named Sam Tsemberis turned the simple idea into an equally simple, albeit risky experiment. Tsemberis and his group, Pathways to Housing, would give free apartments to 242 chronically homeless individuals—with no requirements, no time limits, no rules beyond those imposed by the apartment complex, and no strings attached. Additional services for mental health, drug treatment, and medical care were made available to residents, but their participation was completely optional. So how did it turn out? Surprisingly well. After five years, 88% of the study's participants were still in their apartments, eventually paying 30% of their income towards rent. Over the next decade, the study was replicated across the country and abroad on and larger and more diverse scales, with similarly impressive results. Federal government agencies began to take notice, realizing that the cost of caring for homeless people in their own homes is much less than the cost to care for them in emergency rooms, prisons, and temporary shelters.

This approach stood (and still stands) in contrast to transitional and other housing programs which provide temporary or time-limited shelter along with supportive services to homeless individuals and families while they build the needed skills and financial reserves for independent

living. The problem with this popular "continuum of care" approach is that very few chronically homeless people are able to meet the sobriety, mental health, and other program requirements without the foundation of a stable home. This goes hand in hand with recent neuroscience research showing the effect of chronic stress (i.e. prolonged homelessness) on a person's executive functioning skills (i.e. the skills needed to meet the prerequisites, paperwork, and ongoing demands of most housing programs).

Housing First shortens and simplifies the path from homelessness to stable housing, based on the central philosophy that housing is a basic right that should not need to be earned. In the words of Tsemberis, "Going from homelessness into a home changes a person's psychological identity from outcast to member of the community... Housing First provides a new sense of belonging that is reinforced in every interaction with new neighbors and other community members."

Of course Housing First is not without its critics, and there are serious logistical challenges that will need to be tackled first, namely the severe shortage of decent affordable rental units across the country. In Prince George's County, there are only 7,416 affordable, adequate, and available rental units for the 29,694 extremely low-income households who need them. That's 22,278 households left with no option but to bounce between county shelters, motels, substandard apartments, and the streets.

So where does LARS fit into all of this? Following the lead of the federal government, Prince George's County is evaluating its existing housing programs through the lens of Housing First. More funding is being focused on programs using the Housing First approach, and a collaborative effort to triage the

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unsheltered homeless population is currently underway. LARS and other service providers are completing in-depth assessments with all homeless individuals who seek their help. The county is compiling this data to ensure that when there are openings in permanent housing programs, those with the highest needs are being placed first.

LARS' Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) Program, which has provided long-term subsidized housing and ongoing case management to chronically homeless, disabled individuals since 2009, is already considered a Housing First program and is fully funded by the Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD). Our program has grown from 7 to 12 units over the past 7 years, and a 13th unit will be added next month. Residents contribute 30% of their income towards rent and receive weekly home visits and ongoing support to maintain sobriety, mental and physical health, and a sense of belonging in the community. LARS' Transitional Housing Program (THP), which typically serves single mothers and their children, is similar in many ways to the PSH Program, but does not use a true

Housing First approach. THP participants remain in the program no longer than 24 months and must be employed or enrolled in an education program at least part-time. The THP currently houses 8 families, but funding has been gradually cut over the past few years as the focus shifts to prioritizing immediate permanent housing for the most vulnerable. As of July 1, LARS will be adding 6 additional PSH units (for a total of 19) and begin phasing out the THP after all currently enrolled families have graduated from the program and located housing. We will continue to offer our support to families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness through our Emergency Services and Self-Sufficiency Programs, and will be working closely with Prince George's, Howard, and Anne Arundel Counties to ensure that sufficient resources remain available to them.

To learn more, check out:

<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/02/housing-first-solution-to-homelessness-utah>

<http://apps.urban.org/features/rental-housing-crisis-map/>

Volunteer Corner

It takes a very special person to handle the fast-paced job of managing the front desk at LARS. Lynette Greenwood, our wonderful office manager, works three days a week when LARS is open to the public. While she's away, we are lucky to have these four lovely ladies who volunteer each week to help us answer phone calls, sort mail, prepare mailings, and keep our files in order. Their compassion inspires our staff and clients in more ways than they know.



GAIL WHITMAN

Gail is a retired special educator in Prince George's County schools. She has lived in Laurel for 38 years and raised her family here. Since August of 2014 she has lent her organizational skills to staff in the LARS office and at special events. Gail says that learning about community resources and sharing her knowledge with those in need has become her passion.



MIMI NOSTRO

Before retirement, Mimi served on LARS' Board of Directors, representing St. Nicholas Church. In her role as a board member, she learned how important LARS is to the Laurel community. Mimi's family has called Laurel home since 1977, so volunteering at LARS after retirement was a natural calling. She is glad to have the opportunity to connect with the families and individuals who seek LARS' help each day.



BRENDA LEE

Mother of 7, grandmother of 21, and great-grandmother of 2, Brenda has always been an energetic and cheerful volunteer. When her children were in school, she frequently volunteered in the classroom, on field trips, and events. As an empty-nester, Brenda began teaching children at Grace Baptist Church. It was her

sorrow, after the loss of her daughter two years ago, that prompted her to join LARS as a volunteer. She finds that time spent in service to others helps the healing process.



ANN CLAPP

Before joining LARS in June of 2015, Ann worked at a local credit union in member services. She wanted to use the strong interpersonal skills she had gained to make a difference in her community, and boy has she accomplished that goal! Ann is always ready to lend a helping hand, a hug, or a smile. You can find Ann working in the office at least twice a week. Ann's

outstanding work ethic and compassionate demeanor make her an invaluable volunteer.

Lending just a few hours a month of your time can help our small staff accomplish great things! Volunteers are needed Mon-Fri at LARS and at special events like the Spring into Summer 5K on Saturday, May 21st!

For more information about volunteer opportunities at LARS, contact Angelica Christian at achristian@laureladvocacy.org or 301-776-0442 ext. 34.

Board Members Wanted!

We are looking for people like you to join LARS' Board of Directors! Serving on the board is more than just sitting at meetings. It's a rewarding way to collaborate with others who share your passion for the work we do, and to make a real impact on the people we serve. While day-to-day operations are led by LARS' Executive Director, Leah Paley, board members meet every 2 months (with committee meetings in between) to provide valuable leadership and governance to Leah and the rest of the staff. Board members do not receive compensation, but their volunteer service is invaluable to the continued growth and improvement of LARS! Examples of board member duties include:

- Reviewing outcomes and metrics to help evaluate LARS' impact
- Approving LARS' annual budget, audit reports, and ensuring financial responsibility of the organization
- Serving on at least one committee or task force (ex. Fundraising, Finance, Board Development Committees)
- Representing LARS to stakeholders as an ambassador for the organization

Some of the qualities we're looking for in potential candidates are:

- Professional experience with significant executive leadership accomplishments in business, government, philanthropy, or the non-profit sector
- A commitment to and understanding of the population LARS serves
- Diplomatic skills and a natural affinity for cultivating relationships and building consensus among diverse individuals
- Integrity, credibility, and a passion for improving the lives of LARS' beneficiaries

Our sincerest thanks go out to Linda Bergofsky and Lewis Taylor, for their dedication to LARS as members of the board. After many years of service, Linda and Lewis have recently moved on to pursue other projects. We appreciate all that you've done and continue to do for the Laurel community!

For more information about joining LARS' Board of Directors, please contact Leah Paley, Executive Director, at lpaley@laureladvocacy.org.

LARS Staff

Leah Paley, LGSW
Executive Director

Stephanie Guzman
Director of Emergency Services & Community Relations

Lauren Cohen, LGSW
Permanent Housing Case Manager

Laura Wellford
Development & Marketing Manager

Lynette Greenwood
Office Manager

Janada Randall, LBSW
Transitional Housing Case Manager

Angelica Christian
Case Manager/Volunteer Coordinator

Kennesha Rodgers
Bilingual Case Manager

Alli Milner
Case Manager/Program Coordinator

To have your name & address updated or removed from our mailing list, please email lwelford@laureladvocacy.org

Subscribe to e-mail updates:
www.laureladvocacy.org

Help Us DO MORE on Thursday, June 2nd!

On Thursday, June 2nd, thousands of people in the Washington, DC area are coming together to Do More. Do More 24 is our region's biggest giving day, a 24-hour online fundraiser powered by United Way of the National Capital Area. Last year over 11,000 individual donors raised more than \$1.4 million for 600 participating non-profits in our area. The United Way awards cash prizes to non-profits who raise the most money in a variety of categories. Here's how you can Do More:



One day. Our community.

domore24.org

DONATE! > Mark your calendar now! On June 2nd, BETWEEN 10:00-11:00AM, go to DoMore24.org and search for "Laurel Advocacy & Referral Services." Your gift of \$24 or more will help us win the "Most Coffee Break Donations" prize (\$1,500!). Donations must be submitted through the secure DoMore24.org platform to be counted towards the prizes.

SHARE! > Follow LARS on Facebook and share our posts about Do More 24 (facebook.com/laureladvocacy).

SHOUT! > Tell your friends and family why you believe in our work and get them excited to give on June 2nd!

And remember, you can always set up a one-time gift or monthly gift through LARS' website: www.laureladvocacy.org, or by mailing back the enclosed envelope. No matter how you choose to support LARS, we appreciate it more than you know!

**LAUREL ADVOCACY &
REFERRAL SERVICES, INC.**

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Follow us on Twitter @laureladvocacy



Stay up to date with LARS news and events at www.laureladvocacy.org

Help Stock the LARS Food Pantry for Summer!

Help us prepare the food pantry for the busy summer ahead! Food donations tend to be less frequent during the summer months while requests for food assistance grow.

We encourage community members and organizations to consider donating food or sponsoring food drives for us as we prepare for the coming months.

Food donations can be dropped off at LARS during business hours:

**Mon, Wed, Fri 9am-2pm &
Monday 5-7:30pm**

Please remember to check expiration dates!

Shopping List:

Whole grain cereal
Pancake mix
Instant oatmeal
Tuna/canned meats
Peanut butter & jelly
Brown rice
Spaghetti & sauce
Mac & cheese
Fruit/applesauce cups
100% fruit juices
Pop-top canned soup
Canned vegetables
Shelf-stable milk
Vegetable oil
On-the-go meals/snacks



For more information on donating food or sponsoring a food drive, please contact Angelica Christian at 301-776-0442 ext. 32 or achristian@laureladvocacy.org