Preble Street and Maine Medical Center are pioneering an exciting partnership to ensure the most vulnerable underserved people in Portland have access to high quality, barrier-free healthcare.

The Maine Medical Center-Preble Street Learning Collaborative seeks to help fill the enormous void left by the closing of the City of Portland Healthcare for the Homeless Clinic in 2014; provide no-barrier access to health services, care-coordination and education; and create a new point of entry to the health system. Working together, Preble Street and Maine Medical Center hope to improve the quality of care and client access to existing providers and established medical homes, improve medical residents’ understanding and education of the needs and care of homeless and other vulnerable patients, and increase understanding of health disparities.

Preble Street Executive Director Mark Swann with former Preble Street caseworker Florence Young in the early 1990s.

BY MARK R. SWANN, MPSA

The following is an excerpt from a commencement address Preble Street Executive Director Mark Swann delivered this past spring during a graduation for Tufts University School of Medicine students completing their residency at Maine Medical Center.

This year marks my 25th anniversary as the executive director of Preble Street.

That’s a long, long time. I remember my first day on the job vividly. I can’t tell you who I had lunch with last week, but I can recall almost every detail of when I walked into the basement of the Preble Street chapel for the first time.

It was a dark, crowded, noisy place. A very small church dining room where we had a limited breakfast soup kitchen and drop-in center. The entire staff consisted of a wonderful social worker, Florence Young, and me.

I remember chatting with a client named Jerry. Born and bred in Portland, Jerry was a Korean War veteran who’d survived off and on the streets for many, many years. He was a bricklayer, a poet, a larger-than-life personality. And a chronic alcoholic.
BOARD MEMBER PROFILE:

YEMAYA ST. CLAIR

Yemaya St. Clair has served on the Preble Street Board of Directors since 2011. A graduate of the University of Washington with a bachelor’s of arts degree in environmental studies, she is currently studying counseling at the University of Southern Maine.

Professionally, she has managed the Student Conservation Association’s Seattle-based high school program for urban teens. Worked as a development manager for mental health agencies, served as a community mediator, and is a freelance writer. She co-authored the AMC Guide to Winter Hiking and Camping and is currently writing the AMC’s Outdoors with Kids New England guidebook.

Yemaya lives in Portland with her husband, Lucas, and their two small children. In addition to Preble Street, she serves on the boards of SPACE Gallery and the Quimbly Family Foundation.

From a reflection by Yemaya:

I first volunteered to help with a breakfast shift at Preble Street on a cold, gray March morning. All winter, I had been thinking about Maine’s homeless population, particularly on the streets—many days when I passed someone huddled against a building, freezing, or even wearing a coat and still shivering. My heart ached the most when my three-year-old daughter, who had just been born, asked me if she was going to be hungry and if there were people living in the woods because she was told that there might be families living there. I explained that some people have no food, no money, and no shelter. Each time she asked why, I found myself explaining, but for words.

I sent emails to elected officials advocating for the city’s homeless shelters. But still, I felt very detached from the day-to-day realities experienced by people on the streets. As I pulled up a little before 7 a.m., people were already waiting outside the soup kitchen for the doors to open. Inside, I got to work, setting out boxes of cereal, day-old pastries, and bowls full of generous peanut butter and jam, while fellow volunteers filled the hot trays with warm food.

When the kitchen opened at 8 a.m., the stream of people looked tired and worn. Many were obviously physically disabled. Some were old and others young.

“The moment struck me, reminding me there are people struggling around us all the time.”

Most were men. Some were New Mainers. A few wore work uniforms. Though I’d board it before, their situation hadn’t changed. They were working people who could not afford to meet their basic needs. Minimum wage is not enough.

When I asked one woman how she was doing, she gave me a small smile and said her day was better because I was smiling. “You don’t see that much,” she said. “It’s nice to see someone happy.” I felt a mix of emotions: on one hand, I was glad she welcomed my smile; on the other, I felt guilty about being on my side of the breakfast bar.

As I helped people fill their bowls, almost all said thank you. But, in so many ways, it felt as though I should be thanking them for exposing their need, their vulnerability and humanness.

A few days later, I was driving past Preble Street when I noticed a man crossing the street. My first thought was that I recognized him from the soup kitchen. But then I thought I recognized him as someone who worked at the library. From his clothing, it was difficult to tell if he was homeless or not, employed or not. Perhaps he was both employed and in need of a meal.

That moment struck me, reminding me there are people struggling around us all the time. We often have no idea what it is like sleeping in people’s lives unless we care to find out, to listen, and to serve.

More than a quarter of homeless adults first experienced homelessness as children or teens.

Thanks to a generous grant from the John T. Gorman Foundation, Preble Street was able to pioneer a new intensive approach to helping homeless youth break that cycle and succeed on their own.

First Place offers homeless youth a path to permanent housing, helping participants find affordable apartments and providing structure and support as young people develop the skills to live successfully on their own—from budgeting to cooking, from career planning to positive peer relationships.

First Place youth who are eligible may also enroll in the Opportunity Passport program, a financial literacy curriculum to help young people transition from foster care into independent living.

Seven First Place clients have graduated from the program, taken over the leases to their apartments, and are doing exceptionally well. Youth like:

- Ivan, an asylee from Burundi who earned his high school diploma through the Portland Street Academy, received a college scholarship, and is now working for a local social service provider
- David who grew up in foster care and suffered a major depressive episode when he was discovered by his grandparents for being gay. Now he’s working, practicing good self-care, and earning straight As at Southern Maine Community College.

Others are poised to follow them in making the leap toward greater independence.

The program has been so successful, the federal government’s Family and Youth Services Bureau recently awarded Preble Street $625,000—one of only 11 such awards in the entire country—to create the Maine Transitional Living Collaborative (TLC) with community partner New Beginnings in Lewiston. TLC will offer intensive case management services, including rapid re-housing and supported housing, for LGBTQ youth.

First Place staff have also branched out to assist dozens of other young people at the Preble Street Teen Center with their housing goals through the TLP Plus program, using Maine State Housing Authority Home to Stay housing vouchers and providing incentives to work on life skills development.

Homeless youth are smart, talented, thoughtful, and hard-working. They have the potential to be enormous assets to the community if given the opportunity to focus their energy on building skills rather than struggling to survive on the streets.

They have the will and the drive to succeed. First Place gives them the tools.

OUTSTANDING CITIZEN AWARD

The Portland Police Department awarded Bill Burns, Preble Street Health Services Director and former Resource Center Coordinator, with an "Outstanding Citizen" commendation at its annual award breakfast in 2016.

In presenting the commendation, Mayor Donald Knier, who has worked closely with Resource Center staff, observed that police officers and social workers might approach things differently, but Bill has been instrumental in helping officers understand that social work values can help ensure positive community relations and fair and respectful resolution to community problems.

Here’s what Portland Police Chief Michael Sauschuck had to say:

In recognition of your cooperation and unflinching commitment to the citizens of Maine, you are hereby commended and recognized as an outstanding citizen.

Bill Burns has served as the Coordinator of the Preble Street Resource Center since 2011. Upon his arrival, Bill reached out and introduced himself to all of the neighborhood stakeholder organizations. He emphasized open lines of communication and demonstrated a desire to work together on common issues rather than take separate paths.

Bill also took it upon himself to get to know officers assigned to the Bayview Neighborhood as well as officers who frequently work the area’s broader overtime detail. This relationship facilitated a greater trust between Preble Street and the Police Department and allowed employees from both organizations to better understand and appreciate each other’s role and contributions. This, in turn, has improved the delivery of services to the Bayview Neighborhood.

The Portland Police Department commends you and thanks you for your assistance."
We shared a favorite poet, Charles Bukowski, and Jerry and I tried to crack each other up with different Bukowski stories and rhymes.

Jerry would stay at the shelter for months at a time. Then we’d find him a room somewhere, he’d last a few months, and then end up back in the shelter again. This went on for years. Until he died. His heart exploded, was how it was described to me, one night as he lay on the floor of the city shelter trying to sleep.

We had a memorial service for him in the Resource Center. We have lots and lots of memorial services here, more than two per month, on average. Balanced on some file cabinets, we have a cardboard box with the words “memorial service stuff” scrawled on the side. It’s filled with candles, some plastic flowers, a clean tablecloth. We have it down in a system, how to host these sad little services in our soup kitchen dining room.

I distinctly remember thinking that day that there must be a better way. Not just that we have to do better than these sad-ass funerals in a soup kitchen. But that there must be solutions, even for hardcore, really challenging people like Jerry. Real and sustainable solutions.

So we set out to find that better way.

We opened Logan Place with Avesta Housing on March 24, 2005. The best day of my career. What we did differently starting on that day was offer housing with no strings attached. We didn’t demand sobriety. We didn’t demand medication compliance. We didn’t demand a psychiatric label. We didn’t demand a Medicaid number for billing purposes. Instead of saying you need to deal with your mental illness and addictions first, we offered them housing first.

That very night shelter numbers went down by 10% and stayed down for the next four years until the recession hit.

Preble Street and Avesta followed up the great success of Logan Place by opening Florence House five years later.

And we’re hard at work at opening our next one, on Bishop Street, where we hope to target not just chronically homeless people, but those who are medically compromised, those who are among the highest users of the health care system in the state. People like a never Logan Place tenant who spent over 1,000 nights at the hospital.

To do this we will need lots and lots of champions.

All of us need to be saying that homelessness is not okay. It is not enough to feed people at soup kitchens and feel good about it. It’s not okay for people to sleep and die on mats on the floor. It’s not okay to hold makeshift memorial services, over and over again.

You can be a part of that.

THE LONGEST NIGHT OF HOMELESSNESS

In 2016, 33 lives were tragically cut short by the hardships of homelessness.

Hundreds of people came together on Wednesday, December 21, during an annual vigil to remember homeless friends in Greater Portland who have died.

Portland's Annual Homeless Persons’ Memorial Vigil takes place on the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. For 22 years, Portlanders have gathered on the evening of the winter solstice to shine a light on the trauma of homelessness, mourn lives that are lost, and to reaffirm a commitment to ensuring that everyone who needs a home finds one.
VOLUNTEER PROFILE:

BETTY HAYMON

Betty Haymon is a retired educator who spent her working career as an elementary school teacher in the Gray-New Gloucester area. Teachers are heroes in their own right, educating and shaping the lives of our young people. But Betty’s contributions to her community did not end with her profession.

Betty has been volunteering at Preble Street for nearly a decade, serving in both the Resource Center and Teen Center Soup Kitchens. She is in the Resource Center Soup Kitchen early every Saturday morning—a shift that is one of the hardest to fill—helping prepare breakfast for 300-400 people who rely on emergency food services for meals. Betty is a force in the kitchen. She takes care of the dishes—hundreds and hundreds of them. It’s a project that typically requires four volunteers, but Betty handles it on her own.

On the first Thursday of each month—and any time when shifts are light—and extra hands are needed—Betty also volunteers for the dinner shift in the Preble Street Teen Center Soup Kitchen, warming, serving, and cleaning up for dinner without the assistance of kitchen staff. Competent and reliable, when Betty is volunteering, the caseworkers know the meal is covered and they can focus on the work of getting teens housed, connected with service providers, or making sure they are safe for the night.

Kitchen work is difficult and dirty work. But Betty is always willing to jump in and help out with the least desirable tasks, shifting the spotlight and often the thanks from herself to others. Her commitment is driven only by a will to serve those who are often left on the fringe.

“Once I started, I really saw the need,” she says of her years of service. “I saw how many people they feed and I saw how many teenagers they had at the Teen Center, and it just pulled at my heartstrings that so many people are in need of services. We’re all one step away, one breath away, from our lives. They come in and they’re hungry, they’re cold, they’re wet, and they just want a place to sit down, get warm and have a cup of coffee.”

“Every once in a while on a Saturday, I’ll say to myself, ‘Oh, I don’t feel like getting out of bed!’ And then I think, ‘You know, if I were sleeping out on the street, I’d sure want someone to be there to offer me a cup of coffee.’”

MAINE HOMELESS LEGAL PROJECT

The Gift of Respect

Each week, volunteer attorneys from the Maine Homeless Legal Project offer a free legal clinic to clients at the Preble Street Resource Center.

The project, spearheaded in 2014 by attorney David Siley, who leads the real estate litigation group at Bernstein Shur, represents a partnership of the American Bar Association, Volunteer Lawyers Project, Pine Tree Legal Assistance, and Preble Street.

MLHP attorneys from a dozen area firms offer pro bono legal services to close gaps in legal resources for people whose homelessness is caused or compounded by legal issues.

“People who are homeless often face a number of legal problems that need to be addressed or resolved before they can establish stable housing,” explains Preble Street Executive Director Mark Swanen. “And navigating the legal system is a daunting challenge that has been relieved by having a clinic on site at the Preble Street Resource Center. This exciting partnership connects vulnerable people with just the help they need to get them out of the shelters and back on their feet.”

Built on a model—Project H.E.L.P.—introduced in 2004 by Judge Jay C. Zaney in New Orleans, which has since been implemented in 23 cities throughout the United States, the project has made a serious impact in the lives of homeless Mainers.

After clients have been pre-screened by caseworkers, volunteer attorneys help clients resolve problems related to tenancy issues, drivers licenses, child support, bankruptcy, Social Security, asylum, court cases, immigration, restitution, protection from abuse, acceptable identification, and other obstacles to stability. Many cases are wrapped up during the initial consultation, while others require ongoing pro bono representation.

As one Resource Center case manager reported, “I watched this morning as (a volunteer attorney) provided hundreds of dollars worth of legal advice to a guy who was homeless. He was kind, thoughtful, and respectful. He translated the vagaries of the law into very clear statements, developed a plan of action in collaboration with the client, and was altogether terrific.”

But MLHP has offered some of the most valuable people in Maine much more than just legal advice.

Another Preble Street case manager added, “Clients are being met with respect, with active listening. They’re really feeling like they have advocates and allies. Their legal needs are being met. They’re being taken seriously.”

And the love goes both ways.

“Preble Street’s staff are amazing people,” said David Siley. “They are there to help you in any way needed. They’re a well-oiled machine. As an attorney, you literally don’t have to bring anything but your skills and expertise.”

One Formerly Homeless client, who worked with a volunteer lawyer in hopes of recovering money she lost through a disbursement, said the experience lifted her with a tremendous sense of empowerment. “I realized I’m not powerless. I do have a voice, and it’s being heard. Sometimes that’s all a person needs to feel important.”
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TO PROVIDE ACCESSIBLE, BARRIER-FREE SERVICES TO EMPOWER PEOPLE EXPERIENCING PROBLEMS WITH HOMELESSNESS, HOUSING, HUNGER, AND POVERTY; AND TO ADVOCATE FOR SOLUTIONS TO THESE PROBLEMS.