



## RESOURCE CENTER CASEWORK, CLIENTS, AND SERVICES

The Preble Street mission is 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.” This mission is grounded in the best social work practice, which prioritizes meeting basic needs and also helps individuals and families make changes that will improve their lives. The primary means of supporting clients at the Preble Street Resource Center is through casework, a practice that relies on building relationships and trust.

### Summary

An October 2017 review of Client Track records found open charts for 280 clients, who were assigned to 10 of the 13 full-time caseworkers. Of these:

- 235 clients were actively receiving casework services
- About two-thirds of casework clients were homeless
- More than half reported a history of mental illness, and just under half reported a history of substance use disorder

Casework at Preble Street consists of engaging with and providing crisis intervention, information, referrals, assessment, support, encouragement, and follow-up to a population of homeless and inadequately housed individuals whose lives have been filled with misfortune, disabilities, and years of instability.

The Resource Center casework population requires a level of service intensity that is not readily available elsewhere in the community. Caseworkers work with clients to:

- Find housing, conduct assessments and obtain needed documentation, prepare applications for rental opportunities and housing subsidies, and manage logistics
- Connect to community resources and/or natural support systems and assist with applications for benefits including Social Security, MaineCare, SNAP and TANF
- Address health concerns by providing referrals for mental health treatment and medical care, accompanying individuals to appointments, working to develop trust in health care personnel, and providing reminders and support related to follow-up or appointments with specialists
- Identify resources to alleviate other challenges such as educational deficits, lack of job skills, legal issues
- Stay in recovery or decrease substance use and risk taking by providing education, supportive counseling and referrals for substance use disorder treatment

The range of services provided at Preble Street reflects a response to the human services system that has failed to meet the needs of the most vulnerable among us.

The offer of low-barrier services, consistent outreach, cooperation with other shelters, and availability for crisis intervention has made Preble Street a unique and critically important component of the safety net in this community.

## The Resource Center

ON-SITE SERVICES

<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.2em;">BASIC NEEDS</p> <p style="font-size: 1.5em;">&gt;</p>	<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">FOOD</p> <p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">Soup Kitchen</p> <p>3 meals/day every day 300,000 meals/year</p>	<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">CLOTHES</p> <p>Weather-appropriate clothing as available: socks, underwear, coats, and more</p>	<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">SHOWERS</p> <p>4 private showers Towels &amp; hygiene items</p>	
	<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">Food Pantry</p> <p>Emergency grocery meals distributed to up to 190 households every week</p>	<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">LAUNDRY</p> <p>4 machines 138 loads/week</p>	<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">STORAGE</p> <p>For 150 people</p>	<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">MAIL &amp; PHONES</p> <p>Mailing address for 500+ people Access to phones, local and long distance</p>
	<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">BATHROOMS</p> <p>9 toilets 6 private bathrooms</p>			

<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.2em;">CASEWORK</p> <p style="font-size: 0.9em;"><i>13 full-time caseworkers (average caseload = 28) provide services &amp; connect people to providers</i></p> <p style="font-size: 1.5em;">&gt;</p>	<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">SERVICES</p> <p>Housing location Employment support Crisis intervention Family reunification Temporary shelter and food Financial stability counseling Supportive counseling Therapeutic activity groups</p>	<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">REFERRALS</p> <p>Health care Mental health &amp; substance use treatment Legal assistance Detox programs Medication Assisted Treatment Social services HIV testing Blood pressure, nutrition &amp; vitals Education</p>	
	<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">BENEFIT ELIGIBILITY</p> <p>SNAP, MaineCare, social security, Section 8, Shelter+Care, BRAP, etc.</p>		
	<p style="font-weight: bold; font-size: 1.1em;">RESOURCE ROOM</p> <p>Phones &amp; computers available for connecting with housing, MaineCare, employers, doctors, SNAP, family, and more</p>		

The Resource Center serves as the essential day program in a community that has several overnight shelters, a number of community support and mental health providers, and numerous interagency, collaborative efforts aimed at planning and developing strategies to meet the needs of homeless and struggling individuals.

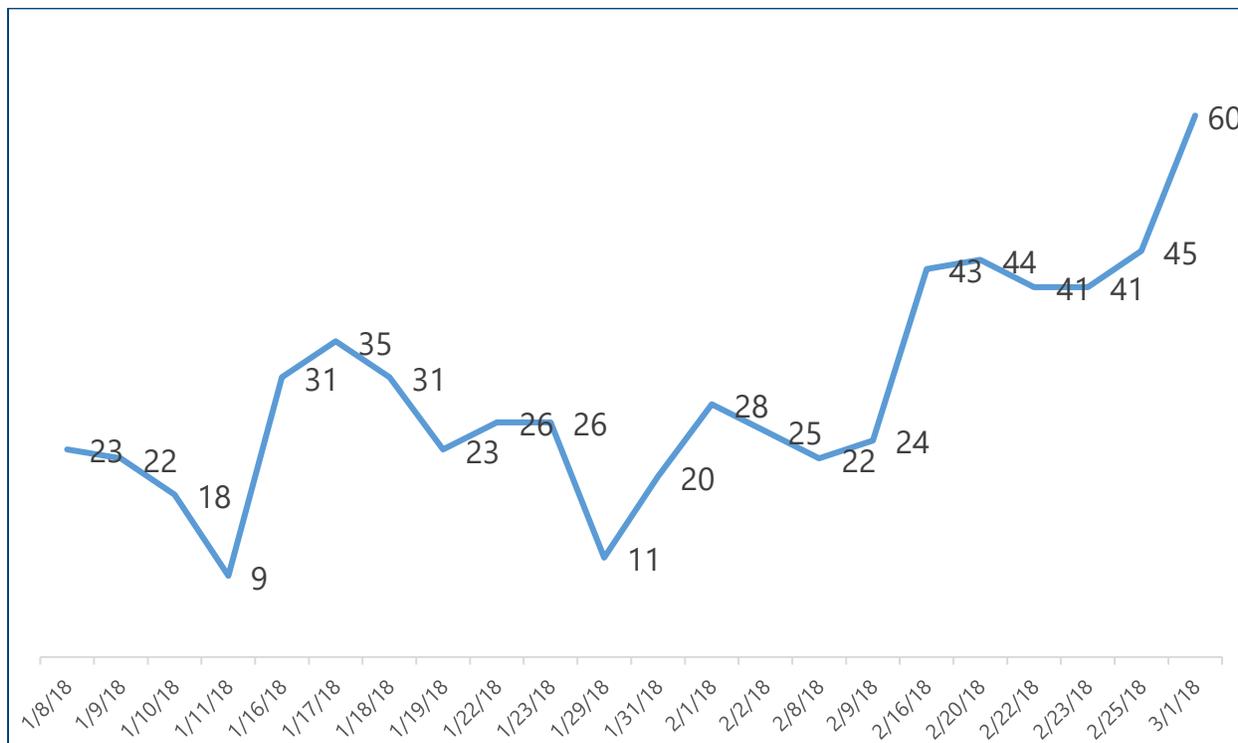
Preble Street food services staff and the 6,000 community volunteers that share Preble Street’s mission serve **three nutritious meals a day, every day**, to as many as 400 individuals and run a **food pantry** that serves up to 190 households each week.

As relying on the soup kitchen or food pantry is a sign of greater needs, Preble Street is committed to staffing meal programs with caseworkers who can assist people in finding solutions to crises and moving beyond hunger.

Responding to the fluctuations in emergency food needs in the community requires coordinated and careful planning at the Resource Center by both the food services staff and the casework teams. Crowded soup kitchens create potential for conflicts among hungry people. Casework staff manage the space, assist clients and ensure a welcoming and safe environment.

A recent example of a huge challenge faced by the Resource Center is the increase of families struggling with homelessness as shown below:

City of Portland Family Shelter Warming Center Emergency Food Relief  
Number of children & parents at Preble Street Resource Center Food Programs January–March 2018



After meeting with the City and community stakeholders to plan how to meet the needs of additional homeless families staying in the Warming Center—the overflow space for the City of Portland Family Shelter, where there are no cooking facilities—Preble Street offered to provide meals for families, often with very young children, in the Resource Center dining room, adding a second seating, given space and staff limitations in the Dining Room, to accommodate the needs of the unserved families.

The Resource Center day shelter offers showers and storage, a safe space to get out of the Maine weather, and access to coats, hats, gloves, socks, and personal hygiene items.

When the Resource Center is open, 13 caseworkers are available to work directly with clients on a variety of needs including housing, employment, benefit acquisition, multicultural support, advocacy, and family reunification as well as to provide referrals to area providers for services including health care, education, mental health and addiction counseling, and legal assistance. In addition to the Resource Center staff, caseworkers from other Preble Street programs including Anti-Trafficking, Veterans Housing Services, Maine Hunger Initiative, and the MMC-Preble Street-Learning Collaborative work on-site providing services.

The primary means of supporting clients at the Preble Street Resource Center is through casework, a practice that relies on building relationships and trust.

## Point-in-Time Profile

In a review of casework records conducted in October and November 2017, Preble Street analyzed its electronic database including intake data, assessment data, and case notes that reflect goals and activities. The chart review process captured basic client characteristics as well as complex client situations and histories and the availability of community resources.

On October 25, 2017, **10 of the full-time caseworkers had 280 individuals on their caseloads.** Among them were 235 individuals who were actively receiving casework services. The remaining 45 outreach-only clients were known to the staff and were using the Resource Center for meals, mail, phone, storage, showers, bathrooms, etc. Many of these outreach clients struggle with severe mental illnesses and/or substance use disorders, which impair their ability to complete in-depth intakes and assessments. As a result, the caseworker's engagement must begin with interactions such as offering assistance at meals or in the day shelter where trust is formed and becomes the foundation for casework.

**Of the active casework group, 96 cases were randomly chosen for in-depth review.** The chart review captured such client characteristics as age, housing status, MaineCare coverage, mental health history and treatment, and history of substance use disorder.

## Who Does the Resource Center Serve?

### Age, Race, and Ethnicity

- Clients ranged in age from 22 to 78
- Three-quarters (75%) were under the age of 50
- One-fifth (21%) were minorities, a higher percentage than in the state's population as a whole. The group included new Mainers as well as U.S. citizens. This finding confirms the importance for caseworkers to understand the connections between poverty, race, and homelessness as well as the specific challenges facing asylum seekers and refugees.

### Housing Status

Of the group actively engaged in casework:

- Over two-thirds (70%) were homeless at the time of the chart review
- Half this group (34%) reported consistently staying in one of the Portland shelters
- An additional 13% staying at times but not consistently
- The rest were couch surfing, sleeping outside, or some combination of these

Among Preble Street community partners are the **Oxford Street Shelter**, which has 154 beds and **Milestone Recovery**, which operates an emergency 41-bed shelter for homeless men struggling with alcohol and drug dependence. Preble Street caseworkers collaborate with Oxford Street Shelter and Milestone staff to house individuals, often dividing responsibilities when situations are complex.

Of those clients who were housed, nearly all were considered vulnerable to a return to homelessness, as they continue to struggle with stability in other life areas.

Of those clients who were housed at the time of the chart review (30%), nearly all were considered extremely vulnerable to a return to homelessness, as they continue to struggle with stability in other life areas, including with mental health, substance use disorders, and/or other health issues.

## Mental and Physical Health

The chart review found that 53% of casework clients presented with some history of mental illness. Even with this high percentage, there is reason to believe that

the incidence of mental illness seen at the Resource Center is higher as mental illness is commonly under-reported. Of this group with debilitating illnesses:

- Only 9% had a mental health community support counselor or Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team currently in place
- 6% previously had one but were no longer receiving these services
- An additional 19% were deemed eligible and had been referred for community support but were not receiving those services

MaineCare/Medicaid was in place for 42% of casework clients. Common physical ailments included COPD, heart disease, diabetes, liver disease, injuries and infections. Serious infections were a particular risk for IV drug users.

## Substance Use

Nearly half (46%) of clients reported some level of substance use disorder, which is most likely an underestimate as most of this information is based on self-report.

While 11% report struggling with substance use disorder but not mental illness, the majority of those (57%) who reported mental illness reported substance use disorder as well. Thus, **at least one-third of casework clients likely have mental illness and co-occurring substance use disorder.** At best, only 16% of these people with mental illness and co-occurring substance use disorders were receiving mental health services.

Over half of casework clients report having mental illness and at least one-third likely have co-occurring substance use disorder.

In Portland, as elsewhere in Maine and across the U.S., the types of addiction and substance use in the client caseload continues to evolve, as the number of older individuals who primarily use alcohol declines and opioid users take their place. **For clients who are in recovery from addiction disorders, the negative impact on recovery of living on the street or in shelters is well known.**

## What Does Casework Accomplish?

Casework is a core component of social work, focusing on empowerment and reflecting an understanding of the impact of systems on individuals. In recent years, the importance of low barriers and harm reduction have received increased emphasis in social work best practices.

Casework at Preble Street consists of engaging with and providing crisis intervention, information, referrals, assessment, support, encouragement, and follow-up to a population of homeless and inadequately housed individuals whose lives have been filled with daily challenges and years of instability. Caseworkers help clients:

- Move forward in seeking housing and services, connect to community resources and/or natural support systems
- Address health concerns
- Stay in recovery or decrease substance use and risk taking

They develop and implement action steps with clients based on mutually developed service plans and the priorities of each client. Preble Street caseworkers also staff the day shelter, courtyard, and meal programs, offering support that meets basic needs and ensures universal expectations of safety and respect.

The range of needs and requests at the Resource Center is vast, and the volume of demand can appear overwhelming. Caseworkers deal regularly with individuals in crisis and, in shared spaces, must address the impact of individual behaviors on others seeking services. They react immediately with a planned and practiced team response to a drug overdose or use well-honed crisis intervention skills when mental illness or intoxication leads to aggressive behavior. Embedded in all of these activities is intentionally building a relationship with each person that will lead to a mutual plan to make positive life changes.

Initial intakes and assessments along with subsequent case notes indicate the specific services Resource Center caseworkers have provided each client.

## Housing Assistance

The majority of clients had received assistance with housing. Activities include

- Preparing applications for subsidy programs such as Section 8, Shelter Plus Care, BRAP, HCV, STEP, and local housing authority's apartments
- Obtaining, or if necessary applying for, specific documentation needed to complete applications
- Assessing suitability for and applying to supportive housing projects, mental health housing programs, specialized health needs housing, and recovery housing
- Applying for private housing

### ON-SITE COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Catholic Charities Maine Assertive  
Community Treatment / Support &  
Recovery

DHHS Adult Protective Services

Family Crisis Services

Frannie Peabody Center

Greater Portland Health (GPH)

GPH SMART Recovery Group

Maine Behavioral Healthcare  
Assertive Community Treatment

Maine Homeless Legal Project

Maine Vocational & Rehab Associates

Opportunity Alliance PATH

Portland Needle Exchange

Portland Police Department

Sexual Assault Response Services of  
Southern Maine

Shalom House

Spurwink Portland Help Center

University of Southern Maine  
School of Nursing

- Searching for apartments and advocacy with specific landlords who have a working relationship with Preble Street
- Acquiring financial support for housing either through General Assistance or requests to faith-based organizations
- Support with tenancy issues including advocacy or referral

Individuals who have recently become homeless because of lack of income or job loss, family breakup, or medical costs arrive at the Resource Center seeking housing assistance, employment referrals, training or educational programs, volunteer opportunities, or simply a welcoming community.

Preble Street works with community partners to secure appropriate temporary and permanent housing for homeless clients.

Homeless individuals receiving casework services at the Resource Center vary dramatically in strengths and challenges, services sought, and history of homelessness. Optimal housing solutions vary just as widely.

Working with community partners to secure appropriate temporary and permanent housing for homeless clients, Preble Street casework is coordinated with the work of Oxford Street Shelter. While Oxford Street Shelter counselors provide housing location assistance, Preble

Street caseworkers accompany clients to look at apartments, to interview with prospective landlords, and to assist them while moving in to a new home.

This review also sought to document the case management services Preble Street provides to individuals after a basic housing goal had been met. The specifics of the clients' housing situations are often indicative of their other service needs.

By definition, transitional living arrangements provide for only temporary tenancy; the risk for a return to homelessness is high, and case management continues during transitions. When clients are housed in programs that emphasize abstinence and treatment such as recovery houses, for example, caseworkers monitor their progress to ensure successful transition to more permanent housing. Programs such as the **Bridge**, some **Shalom House** programs, and the **YMCA** rely on Preble Street caseworkers with longstanding relationships to continue to support individuals during transitions and beyond.

Recently housed individuals are offered follow-up support during the adjustment period. Caseworkers help secure household items and provide referrals. Recently housed clients also seek assistance at the Resource Center to meet with and get support from their caseworker as they adapt to the isolation that can come with independent housing.

Independently housed individuals may be vulnerable to return to homelessness even after several years of maintaining housing. As the cost of rental units continues to increase, finding and maintaining affordable housing becomes an ever greater challenge for those with limited financial and personal resources.

The most vulnerable individuals among the housed are those who have a history of homelessness as well as mental health and substance abuse issues. Independently housed individuals who struggle with addiction and are in early recovery or are in and out of recovery seek support from caseworkers who understand the challenges that make it difficult for them to consistently keep appointments and adhere to treatment plans. Along with behavioral health issues, these clients

may have chronic medical conditions. Caseworkers provide support for getting to treatment appointments, planning for evaluations or medical procedures, and addressing issues that impede mobility.

Regardless of housing status, individuals with severe issues and no other support come to the Resource Center for basic needs, a sense of community, and the support of a caseworker with whom they have an established relationship and who can assist in managing anxiety and intervening in crises. The harm reduction approach Preble Street staff take to helping clients both enhances their safety and supports their efforts at independence.

For individuals with complex mental health and substance use disorder needs, these ongoing, post-homelessness relationships with Preble Street caseworkers can last years.

Income and health insurance are often the key to paying for housing and basic needs and for accessing specific supportive housing or transitional housing programs.

## Applying for SSI/SSDI, MaineCare, and Other Government Support

The second most frequent casework activity is assisting clients in securing Social Security and MaineCare benefits to help the individual achieve financial stability. Income and health insurance are often the key to paying for housing and basic needs or for accessing specific supportive housing or transitional housing programs.

Helping eligible clients who are homeless or at risk of being homeless apply for and access mainstream benefits is a core activity supported by caseworkers trained in SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery (SOAR). Casework includes:

- Gathering needed documentation
- Making referrals for psychiatric or medical evaluations
- Scheduling and helping with interviews and appointments
- Support, advocacy, and referrals related to denials and appeals

Caseworkers also assist in securing other entitlements including SNAP benefits, TANF, Unemployment Income and General Assistance.

The housing data also indicate that three percent of both the outreach-only group and the casework clients were incarcerated at the time of the case review. Most often homeless or potentially homeless individuals are jailed for petty public offenses and the consequence can be the loss of health insurance coverage and entitlements, including disability income. Upon release, Preble Street caseworkers help clients prioritize the time consuming and often complex bureaucratic work to have benefits reinstated.

## Providing Referrals

Preble Street casework clients include two especially challenging populations:

- Those who are aging and experiencing chronic and acute medical and mental health issues
- Those who are using opioids and adding a new level of desperation, risk, and violence to the homeless services system

**Health Care.** One-third of casework clients received assistance accessing medical care, including referrals for specific illness or injury; medical examination and primary care; medication management and medication-assisted treatment for addiction; and dentistry. Primary partners include **Greater Portland Community Health, Maine Medical Center,** and **Tufts Medical School** through the Preble Street Learning Collaborative.

Caseworkers:

- Accompany individuals to appointments
- Work with clients to develop trust in health care personnel
- Provide reminders and support related to follow-up or appointments with specialists

**Mental Health Treatment.** While Resource Center caseworkers do not provide clinical treatment for mental illness, its prevalence among the client population pervades their work. When clients have already stopped treatment, do not trust mental health providers, or do not acknowledge mental illness, relationships with caseworkers are essential to success in accessing treatment and have great therapeutic value.

Through active engagement and trust building, caseworkers are able to make referrals for their clients to mental health providers which can include any of the following:

- Initial psychiatric evaluation
- A return to treatment
- Medication assessment and medication management
- Specific individual or group treatment

**Substance Use Treatment.** Substance use disorder referrals can include detox, recovery-related programs and housing, and medication-assisted treatment and other treatment modalities.

Unfortunately, huge barriers exist in providing referrals. Lack of health insurance along with state mandated changes to the mental health and substance use treatment reimbursement allowances essentially eliminate many Preble Street clients from accessing services. Additionally, for those who do have insurance, the dearth of substance use disorder and mental health treatment is a prevalent, massive problem. Consequently, **Preble Street caseworkers often become the de facto mental health provider for this vulnerable group of people.**

## CONCLUSION

The Resource Center provides a huge breadth of services that is unrecognized by many in Portland. Intentionally given its name over 25 years ago, its purpose was to provide emergency assistance and solutions to community members who could not get help elsewhere by offering a

### ON-SITE PREBLE STREET PROGRAM PARTNERS

*Working with clients,  
survivors, and patients:*

Anti-Trafficking Coalition

Florence House

Homeless Voices for Justice

Maine Hunger Initiative

Maine Medical Center–Tufts  
University School of  
Medicine/Preble Street  
Learning Collaborative

Veterans Housing  
Services

place where an individual in need could come to find resources from multiple social service agencies. In addition to the City of Portland Health Care for the Homeless and their clinic for the uninsured, 15 social service agencies provided regular outreach and casework services on site. At the Resource Center individuals in need were connected to a particular agency on site or would be referred to the appropriate service provider in the community.

Over the years, many of these agencies closed down, merged, eliminated programs, and could no longer provide outreach services. Today, the number of on-site partners is much smaller and most community providers are able to come only when there is a specific appointment for a known client.

The individuals who come to the Resource Center seeking help in their community often have complex needs that reflect the years of diminishing social support, economic downturns, gentrification of historically affordable places to live and decreasing financial stability. The Resource Center is the only place in Portland that a person can walk in and get casework assistance without having a categorical qualification. It is the last stop for many in Portland when there is nowhere else for them to turn.