

# FLORENCE HOUSE

CENTER FOR HOMELESS WOMEN

A “Home for Good” Initiative



A program of



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## MISSION

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“We can no longer shuffle our homeless neighbors around. We need to end their homelessness.”

Philip Mangano, Director  
United States Interagency Council  
on Homelessness



### Avesta Housing

The mission of Avesta is to promote and provide housing opportunities for Southern Maine people in need.

Avesta advocates for affordable housing, develops and manages high quality rental housing, and helps residents access other supportive services.

### Preble Street

The mission of Preble Street 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.

*Florence House is named after Florence Young, a social worker, who played many roles at Preble Street for over 20 years: intern, staff, and board member. Florence helped create and continues to embody the agency's philosophy and values, bringing incredible compassion and commitment to her work.*

## WHY IT WORKS

In developing Florence House we are replicating the hallmarks that assured success at Logan Place:

### ***Removing Barriers***

Minimizing obstacles for the most psychotic and vulnerable women who cannot sign lease agreements and complete the paperwork required by the financing of traditional housing subsidies.

### ***Building Trust***

Many of the staff from Preble Street Adult Day Shelter and the Women's Shelter will participate in months of outreach and engagement to develop relationships that will help women prepare to take risks, encourage their interest in being part of a new community, and offer them trusted liaisons as they work to get through the transition process.

Once people have a home and are off the street and no longer worried about day-to-day survival, they will be able to work on improving their lives. The stability of having a home is the key.

- Portland Press Herald  
"Solution for homelessness: Homes"  
July 19, 2005

### ***Creating Community***

Florence House will include common space for tenants who are afraid of isolation and need to be around staff and other tenants to feel safe. The most psychotic and fearful individuals spend much of their time in shared spaces but by themselves with little connection to others. At the Day Shelter, many chronically homeless women sit in the same place each day and have created a safe protected environment within a crowded day room. A Safe Haven must include a common space that can provide safety and community even for women who simply do not like to be alone or are afraid of closed doors.

## THE FACTS

With a dramatic loss of boarding homes and other affordable housing options, homelessness in Portland has increased 100% increase since 1993. As shelter counts rose, women represented the fastest growing group.

By 2005 the Oxford Street Shelter—the only emergency overnight shelter for adults—was overflowing; and women there were outnumbered by men 4:1.

Then in 2006, when the YWCA closed its doors, a long brewing crisis turned into a catastrophe as the city lost 25 shelter beds and 35 single room housing units for homeless and poor women.

Preble Street stepped in and has been operating an overnight women's shelter since 2007 for our mothers, sisters, grandmothers, and daughters whose troubled lives are awash with domestic violence, illness, trauma, educational and vocational deficits.

They are as young as 18. As old as 85. They are women who have lost everything including their families and their homes. Some of them stayed with friends temporarily. Some slept in the woods, others in a bus station or a car. For all of them, the Women's Shelter is a better place than any they have been recently.

But we need to do more; and Florence House, a comprehensive women's center that will open in late 2009, is that place. It will be a real home for women who have not had a home for a long, long time. Women who have spent every hour of every day for months and years trying to survive on the streets, alone.

Women like Diane . . .

*. . . She's been on the streets since she was 15. In and out of hospitals and shelters . . .*

- No one wants to be homeless
- Supportive housing helps people live more stable and productive lives
- Supportive housing is cost-effective

## THE NEED

Women who live in shelters and on the streets are more vulnerable to assault, have a higher rate of active psychosis, are more fearful of service providers, and are more negatively affected by shelter and street survival than men.



**No one's mother should live here . . .**

Frequently victims of abusive relationships, 70% of the women report that they have stayed in domestic violence situations in the past because they had no other place to go (and 44% have been sexually assaulted while homeless!).

With limited life skills, and struggling with low self-esteem, these women need housing that offers opportunities for onsite supports and without eligibility requirements that present barriers to safe housing.

*She struggles to keep track of her medication, get to the doctor, stay healthy . . .*

Some of them are severely impaired women who spend days and nights at shelters interacting minimally or inappropriately with other shelter guests and staff. Others are women who are higher functioning but have mental health and, in many cases, substance abuse issues that impede their ability to leave the shelter.

**"Let's build a safe and nurturing center for homeless women. And let that be the most magnificent building in Portland"**

*Portland Press Herald*  
"Affordable Homes Would Be Magnificent"  
December 27, 2005

## THE RESULTS

Evidence showing that our approach can work comes from national research on best practices to impact homelessness and our experience at Logan Place, where we have seen amazing results. Among the 30 tenants there:

- Many have accepted mental health treatment for the first time
- Several are working on recovery from decades of substance abuse
- Some have reconnected with family from whom they have been estranged for years.

Highlights (below) from an independent evaluation demonstrates that Logan Place has helped tenants achieve a better quality of life with dramatic reductions in their use of emergency and law enforcement services:

JAIL TIME		
2 Years Before Logan Place	184 days	<b>88% Decrease</b>
1 Year Before Logan Place	176 days	
1 Year After Logan Place	21 days	
2 Years After Logan Place	13 days	
POLICE CONTACTS		
2 Years Before Logan Place	60	<b>81% Decrease</b>
1 Year Before Logan Place	97	
1 Year After Logan Place	19	
2 Years After Logan Place	11	
DETOX PROGRAMS		
2 Years Before Logan Place	71 bednights	<b>61% Decrease</b>
1 Year Before Logan Place	46 bednights	
1 Year After Logan Place	18 bednights	
2 Years After Logan Place	0 bednights	
EMERGENCY SHELTERS		
2 Years Before Logan Place	4,595 bednights	<b>99% Decrease</b>
1 Year Before Logan Place	5,127 bednights	
1 Year After Logan Place	134 bednights	
2 Years After Logan Place	1 bednight	

## THE APPROACH

The model that Florence House represents builds on current evidence-based approaches to homelessness and chronic mental illness as well as Preble Street's experience at its Day Shelter, Women's Shelter, and Logan Place.

**Housing First:** Assumes that housing for homeless persons needs to be its own end and that it should not present economic or treatment hurdles. Logan Place is demonstrating that if given a home and a sense of stability and safety, many individuals will be receptive to treatment, to working on skills, and to building a new life off the streets.

**Harm Reduction:** Assumes that it is of value to decrease the harm that can occur to individuals even if reducing harm is not providing a cure. For individuals with addictions and mental health, this can mean decreased substance abuse, intermittent willingness to take medications, or needle exchange. For chronically homeless persons it can mean having a safe place to live even if other risky or troubling behaviors continue.

**Safe Haven:** Is defined by the offer of a place to live, usually a room, with minimal expectations. It targets chronically homeless persons with mental illness who can view the housing as a permanent home. Services are made available, but not required.

**Assertive Community Treatment:** A team-based approach that includes aggressive outreach, shared caseload, and accessibility at all times. In the past year a variation of this model, funded by the Maine Health Access Foundation, has been operating at the Preble Street Teen Center. It targets homeless young adults with mental health and substance abuse issues who are most at risk and "resistant" to services. Its success at engagement and initial treatment as well as stabilization clearly indicates that a team located within a shelter can be effective.

*It all began the day she opened the door to her apartment and realized, "I have a bed to sleep in . . . a real bed. And best of all, it's my own bed . . . my very own bed."*

~ Diane

## THE RESPONSE

As the number of people who are homeless has grown in Portland and other urban areas, there is an urgent need to focus on permanent housing for those who are the most vulnerable and underserved.

To address that need Preble Street and Avesta Housing partnered to create Maine's first low-barrier permanent housing—Logan Place—targeting chronically homeless people for whom current services and housing options have not been successful.

In the years since Logan Place opened we have seen it work.

Some tenants have been able to go back to work. Others volunteer in the community. Connections to families have been re-stored. Tenants' health has improved and they are working on mental health or substance abuse problems.

In addition "housing first" has a dramatic affect on the shelter system. Since Logan Place opened, the City of Portland (in its *Point-in-Time Survey of Homelessness*) has reported the percentage of chronically homeless people down from 37% in 2004 to only 19% in 2007.

Preble Street and Avesta believe that the collaborative safety net that exists in Portland provides an excellent foundation on which to build a model program to move women into safe housing, one that can be replicated in other cities and homeless continuums around the U.S.

Our vision is that no woman will ever have to sleep on a mat on the floor of a shelter in Maine.

*Often barefoot, even in winter, she is chronically ill and her life is in danger . . .*

## THE PROPOSAL

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In partnership, Avesta Housing and Preble Street will construct and operate a women's center providing supported housing—including a safe haven, efficiency apartments, and emergency beds—that focuses on removing barriers for women in Portland who are chronically homeless. Housing that provides more than a mat on the floor for women who are looking for a dependable place to stay to avoid danger and more than a day shelter for women who need a safe warm place or social interaction.

Prior to Florence House, an interdisciplinary team will provide outreach, support, and opportunities for mental health, health, and substance abuse intervention to women at shelters, mental health facilities, and on the streets. They will build trust, assist women in moving from the shelter and streets to a permanent home as quickly as possible.

They will become the housing support team at Florence House, which will consist of:

- **Efficiency Apartments** for women who are ready to manage independently.
- **A Safe Haven** to provide a permanent private living space for chronically homeless women who are not quite ready to maintain their own apartments. With support many women will begin to develop trust, self-assurance, and skills to become more independent.
- A small number of **Emergency Beds** will be available for immediate, short-term housing for women who are temporarily homeless because of an economic or situational crisis.

*After being hospitalized, she was discharged to the shelter. Being on the streets was life threatening, but no appropriate placement was available . . .*

Florence House will offer:

- Emergency beds
- Outreach to women living in shelters or on the streets
- Assistance in preparing for transition from the shelter system
- Independent living in fully equipped efficiency units
- Education/vocational opportunities
- Community space for meals, groups, and recreational activities
- On-site laundry
- Convenient access to public transportation.

*Avesta Housing* will own, maintain, and manage the building.

*Preble Street* will provide 24-hour support services to:

- monitor the building
- assist in developing and enhancing life skills
- help with activities such as household management, shopping, use of transportation, and meal preparation
- facilitate access to community resources such as food pantries, health clinics, entitlement programs, and mental health and substance abuse services.

*At Logan Place, supported by staff, she faithfully takes her medication and builds relationships with her neighbors.*