

A lifeline's fight to grow

By Adrian Walker

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Wanda Lugo has a big smile, a gregarious personality, and a list of ailments that would be daunting for anyone, let alone a woman who spends her life shuttling between homeless shelters.

“I have diabetes, sciatica, arthritis, and asthma,” she told me last week. “Before, I wasn’t taking good care of myself. I was out on the street trying to control my blood sugar as best I could. Since I’ve been here, it’s been in the normal range.”

We were talking at Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program’s headquarters in the South End. Through its Barbara McInnis House, this underappreciated organization offers short-term clinical care for homeless people whose ailments simply cannot be effectively treated in the course of life on the streets. People with diabetes qualify, as do cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy.

Dr. Jessie Gaeta is the medical director of the McInnis House, and she has seen firsthand how treatment and housing go hand in hand.

She has come to think of homelessness as a pressing medical issue.

“Diabetes is a great example,” she told me. “If you’re living outside, you don’t have access to a refrigerator. Even carrying syringes is a problem, because it makes you a target.

“People would come in and I would do my best, but no matter what I did, they couldn’t control their glucose levels or keep their blood pressure down. I began to realize that the single biggest thing they needed was a stable living environment.”

The average stay at the McInnis House is a few weeks, but for many patients the key to better health and longer lives is to find housing permanently.

That is the premise behind the organization’s proposed project in Jamaica Plain.

At the original site of the McInnis House, near Egleston Square, Health Care for the Homeless has big plans: a facility that would combine medical care and permanent housing for homeless people.

But there is also a battle brewing. Though the proposal has been approved by the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council, it has generated opposition from some residents who seem to believe that the presence of formerly homeless people could be bad for the neighborhood.

The project still has to be blessed by the Boston Redevelopment Authority, and opponents have quietly pressed City Hall to block it.

Health Care for the Homeless officials are so wary of conflict that they barely want to discuss it. And the conflict is especially strange because the same group ran a facility at the very same site for 15 years, before McInnis House moved to the South End a couple of years ago.

“We have had a lot of support from the neighborhood over the years, and I would rather focus on that,” said Bob Taube, the group’s executive director. “This project will greatly extend what we can accomplish.”

The opponents appear likely to run into a formidable foe of their own: the mayor.

“Of course I support it. It’s a space for people to rebuild their lives,” Mayor Thomas M. Menino said. “These are people who’ve fallen on hard times.”

He said he had been surprised that the project was meeting with neighborhood opposition. “People in Jamaica Plain are very sensitive to the human factor.”

The planned building would not be a shelter; the whole point of it is to get people out of shelters.

I met a man named Darrell Dupont at McInnis House. He is 47 and has multiple sclerosis, among other ailments.

He said he is healthier now than he has been in a long time, after a few weeks off the street, and he explained the importance of having a roof over his head very succinctly.

“Without this place, I’d be a goner,” he said. “I know that. Without this, I wouldn’t be here.”

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