

Lives in Transition



Transition House's emergency shelter provides lodging and meals for up to 70 people each evening.

Santa Barbara's Transition House Gives Homeless Families a Path to Independence

by Carol Ward

Feature articles in UNCENSORED often take a broad view of issues involving poor and homeless families, briefly highlighting a variety of people and organizations working on a specific aspect of the homelessness crisis. In something of a departure, the following article focuses on one place, Santa Barbara's Transition House—looking in-depth at its mission, its nuts and bolts, and the bravery and determination of its residents, as well as the challenges they face. We think that readers will find here “the universal in the particular,” illuminations of common concerns in the stories of a few.

In the spring of 2012, Megan felt that her life was finally turning around. The single mother of a ten-year-old boy was regaining custody of her son after more than a year away from him; she was engaged to be married to a man earning a good salary; and she was working full-time while recovering from drug and alcohol addiction.

But in one weekend, the world she had carefully built shattered. Megan (not her real name) found drugs in her husband's possession. Fearful for her own sobriety and cognizant of her precarious position with regard to custody of her son, Megan made the difficult choice to cut ties to her fiancé.

“In the course of 48 hours I went from having my dream wedding to sleeping on the floor of my dad's trailer,” Megan says. A few days later, for the second time, she ended up at Santa Barbara's Transition House family homeless shelter.

In the autumn of 2012, Katie (not her real name) was also on her second go-round at Transition House. The 24-year-old grew up in what she describes as a “privileged family” but sought shelter for the first time shortly after having her first child as a teenager.

Like Megan, Katie thought she was building the ideal life, marrying a man who worked while she stayed home with the baby.

But “personal issues”—in the form of drug and alcohol abuse for both—“got in the way.”

During her second stay at Transition House, Katie gave birth to her second child. Her husband tried to enter the program as well but was refused because of continuing substance abuse, Katie explains.

Although still married, Katie is now questioning her commitment to her husband. “I really want to pull my life together, get a place and get my kids safe,” she says. “He was a liability and was bringing us all down.”

Megan and Katie are among the roughly 600 shelter, transitional-housing, and homelessness-prevention clients Transition House served in 2012. In September Katie was living at the group's emergency shelter, the point of entry for Transition House clients, while Megan had “graduated” to a second-stage, transitional facility called the Firehouse.

The first floor of the Transition House shelter includes a large dining room, a kids' room and library, a laundry and health room, and other amenities. Outside is a small, enclosed play area. Families are housed upstairs in rooms that vary in size but are usually just large enough to fit a bed for each family member, a chest of drawers, and a small television. At the Firehouse the



sleeping rooms are of similar size and style, but the large communal kitchen and living areas allow families to interact.

Transition House has been serving homeless families since 1984, when representatives from a variety of social-services groups and faith-based organizations came together to address the issue of family homelessness. From that meeting, 12 religious centers opened their doors to homeless families on a rotating, month-to-month basis. (Other than a prayer of thanks before the evening meal, there is not a strong religious component to the Transition House program.) Transition House found its first dedicated space in 1985. In the 1990s the facility moved to its larger, current home.

Transition House focuses on helping motivated families climb out of poverty through a strict program that includes infant and child care, employment development, three stages of housing assistance, and other services. Clients are considered to be motivated if they are willing to embrace the program—including the fairly rigorous rules laid out by Transition House, such as curfew, money-management requirements, and attendance of classes. Clients cannot use drugs or alcohol and are subject to random testing. Those who balk at the rules are not considered to be motivated.

Shelter clients are referred to Transition House by other local shelters (which serve primarily individuals), social-service agencies, County of Santa Barbara social workers, Child Welfare Services, the local school district, churches, and individuals who are familiar with the agency. Transition House does not employ “street outreach” workers, but those employed by the county can make

referrals to the facility. While there is not technically a maximum number of times that Transition House will serve clients, the limit is usually two, very rarely three; exceptions are made on a case-by-case basis, if the staff feels that a given client is motivated.

Kathleen Baushke, executive director, notes that Transition House is the only facility in Santa Barbara serving homeless families exclusively. At any given time there is a waiting list of 20 or more families hoping for spots in the program.

Even in this upscale community, “poverty is always the issue,” Baushke says.

In addition, “Maybe a quarter of our clients have mental-health issues within the family, although they might not be so severe that they are causing the homelessness,” she says. “Probably a quarter of our clients have a substance-abuse history. It may be in the past. They may not be actively using or needing to use, but it has helped define their situation.”

High Costs, Low Wages

The city of Santa Barbara is one of the most expensive places to live in the country. According to the Web site Sperling’s Best Places, the city of about 88,000 on California’s central coast has a median home cost of \$674,700. Santa Barbara’s cost of living is 104.7% higher than the U.S. average.

For all the wealth enjoyed by many of the city’s residents, those working part-time or at near-minimum-wage jobs find life in Santa Barbara to be challenging at best.

“Santa Barbara has stratified, as much of the country has, in such a way that the distance between the top and bottom of the economic ladder gets bigger and bigger,” observes Jim Buckley, president of the board and a volunteer at Transition House. “Many people have worked here for years but have reached a point where the money they’re bringing in doesn’t equal what they need to spend to live here. Some crisis will hit and suddenly they need us, and we’re here for them.”

Finding and securing affordable housing is a crucial issue for the city’s lowest wage earners. “Even though the cost of living is so high here, it is a desirable area to be in, so vacancy rates are low, and that’s part of the challenge,” Baushke says.

Another, bigger challenge is simply cost. According to city-data.com, the median asking price for vacant rental units in Santa Barbara in 2009 was \$1,681 per month. At that average rate, roughly half of the before-tax income of a family or individual earning \$20 an hour, 40 hours a week, would go to rent. Those earning half that wage—still above minimum wage—find it nearly impossible to make ends meet.

Doubling up or settling for something smaller than desirable often is not an option for families. Because of the low supply of rental housing, landlords can put constraints on family size or on the number of inhabitants in individual units.

Jose and Juana, residents of the Transition House emergency shelter along with their two young children, feel that the program is working for them. “We’ve saved a lot of money,” says Juana, who notes that Jose’s current job has improved their financial situation. Still, they fear having to live without support; Juana gave birth to their second child while living at Transition House and was actively looking for work in October 2012, but the barriers to self-sufficiency are daunting.

“We’ll have to get a two-bedroom—they [landlords] won’t accept our family size in a one-bedroom,” Jose predicts. “I just don’t see how we can do that.”

Katie is facing a similar roadblock. “Santa Barbara is a tough town,” she laments. “It’s a beautiful place to live, but rents are so high it makes it hard for middle and lower-class people.” Even if she separates from her husband, Katie says, she and her two small children will likely be forced to rent a two-bedroom apartment, which is currently far out of reach financially.

Left: A family who resided at Transition House now have their own apartment.
Below: A local musician visits with Transition House children during evening enrichment to teach them about different musical instruments.

Taking On a Housing Role

Transition House is far more than an emergency shelter. For the past decade or so, the nonprofit has taken a pro-active role in developing affordable housing in a city that lacks options.

Baushke started as a volunteer at Transition House in 1992, when its resources for clients consisted of a 35-bed shelter and no support services. Since then, Transition House’s shelter has moved to a much larger location that can accommodate up to 70 residents. The organization purchased a 13-unit affordable-housing complex called Casa Marianna in 1999, expanding it to 19 units, and leases the Firehouse from the Housing Authority of the City of Santa Barbara.

More recently, in 2012, Transition House completed construction of a new “Moms” facility. The eight-unit apartment building—adjacent to the group’s administrative office, in downtown Santa Barbara—houses low-income families, with particular emphasis on those that include adults with special needs. The families can participate in case management. Within the same structure, Transition House added a new infant-care center to serve its clients as well as other low-income community residents.

The Moms’ project was fraught with challenges related to cost, tax credits, and issues involving building requirements and contractors. Those challenges and the uncertainty of funding going forward are forcing Baushke and Transition House to re-evaluate future plans. (More than one-third [34%] of Transi-



tion House funding comes from private individuals. Local foundations provide about 21% of funding, while rental income from owned housing accounts for 16%. Federal funding [16%] and local and state government funding [13%] make up the balance.) The Moms' project relied extensively on government funding, and the strictures involved with that money made the undertaking extraordinarily challenging, Baushke says.

"It's in our strategic plan to acquire more real estate, but we're at a point where it's very difficult to do that because of redevelopment-agency money going away, which we would rely on for local funding," Baushke says. "The only source, really, is tax credits, and they are so competitive. When we have a housing authority as great as the one we have here, why would we compete against them for money to develop affordable housing? They should do it."

"I think having a connection to more affordable housing in the future is definitely in the cards, but probably the structure is going to look different," Baushke continues. "Maybe it's a property they [the housing authority] would acquire; then we would do service delivery if we could find the funding."

Staff

Transition House employs 34 people, 23 of whom work full-time. This number includes case-management staff, shelter-facility managers, and administrative/fund-raising staff. For case-management positions, Transition House does not require specific education or training because the positions are not clinical.

"We are more concerned that case managers have past experience working with the population, knowledge of local

resources, and a commitment to Transition House's mission to provide families with tools and life skills to achieve financial independence," Baushke says. "We try to keep a variety of expertise in our case-management department. For example, we have someone with drug and alcohol counseling experience, someone with expertise in domestic violence, another with training in childhood development, and someone with experience working with clients with mental health issues."

"In particular, we look for people who understand budgeting and planning," Baushke continues. "If a case manager cannot balance their own checkbook, they aren't going to be able to train a family on how to manage their household finances."

The Full Package

Clients at the main Transition House shelter abide by strict rules of conduct designed to make sure families stay focused on their goal of living independently.

"We're not just warehousing people," says Buckley. "If they're just looking to crash, they're not going to crash here very successfully. But if they're looking to change themselves and get back on track, we're going to be there 100 percent."

At the main shelter, all family members must leave the facility during the day—for work, job searches, or school—then return at 5 p.m. or so. Passes are issued in the evening for events such as religious services, substance-abuse recovery meetings, or job interviews, but otherwise clients are required to eat dinner at the shelter and remain there through the night.

Dinner is provided nightly by a rotation of volunteer groups, who also prepare sack lunches for the next day. Breakfast foods are available each morning. In addition to the laundry facility, there is a clothes closet on site. Bus tokens are available for travel to work.

Families incur virtually no expenses while living at the shelter, according to Baushke. "Our policy is that 80 percent of a family's expendable income is to be saved," she adds. "That's a really valuable part of our program, which came about out of necessity because people need a security deposit and first month's rent" when they leave Transition House.

The budget plan is the backbone of the Transition House program and, to many clients, its most difficult component.

"People say budget plans are more difficult to talk about than sex," program director Debbie Michael declares. "It's a really difficult part for a lot of people, especially those who have always spent and never budgeted. We have spending plans and weekly expense sheets to keep track, and we try to whittle down spending as much as possible."

Transition House's emergency shelter serves families with children.



Transition House even offers banking services to help those who can't open bank accounts due to outstanding debt, legal status, or other issues.

"We have a safe — only five of us know the combination," Baushke explains. "They come to us to do deposits and withdrawals, then we offload money from the safe into a bank account. It's an unusual thing to do but it works really well."

In addition to banking, Transition House offers a slew of support services, such as job-skills, computer, ESL (English as a second language), and parenting classes, as well as children's programs. Clients are expected to take part in classes and to meet regularly with caseworkers to assess progress.

Michael describes the transition to such a structured and crowded environment as being hugely challenging for many clients.

"They're living in a crowded situation with so many different cultures and languages and parenting skills, all just kind of thrown into this building," Michael acknowledges. "Then there are a ton of rules they have to follow, and on top of that all the program requirements."

"We know that if they can follow the program — and we really try to tailor it to individual families — they can get from point A to point B and be in a much better place," Michael continues. "Most people understand that, but still, to make those personal changes is really a struggle for a lot of people."

Jose and Juana acknowledge that living at Transition House is easy in that virtually every need is met, yet challenging in the day-to-day.

"Sometimes I just want to get out, take my daughter to the park or just take a walk," Jose says. He knows he can't do those things, though, and tries to keep matters in perspective. "They're helping us out, so we're going to do what we have to to move on."

The Next Step

Jose and Juana want to move on to the next step of the Transition House experience, the Firehouse. Katie does as well. Clients spend at least two months at the Transition House shelter, with most taking an additional two months before they are ready to move on. Because of limited space, only about 25 percent of shelter clients get the chance for the less intrusive Firehouse experience, while others are forced to rent on the open market or obtain Section 8 housing vouchers, according to Michael.

Families living in the shelter can apply for acceptance into the Firehouse. The family must have saved money for a security deposit and must have an income (through either employment

or entitlements) that will allow them to pay rent. They must demonstrate in the application that a stay in the Firehouse will provide the additional time they need to be ready to move into permanent housing. Because families must pay rent at the Firehouse, they need to include in the application a reasonable monthly spending plan showing the household income and expenses. Similarly, Firehouse residents can apply for the permanent supportive housing program, Casa Marianna. They must meet low-income requirements, demonstrate the ability to pay their rent, and describe how they will benefit from continued support services to ultimately achieve economic stability.

At the Firehouse, clients can come and go as they please but are expected to work, paying rents much lower than on the open market. Rules are far less stringent — but still there are no visitors and no alcoholic beverages allowed on the premises.

One Firehouse resident, Ellen (not her real name), is able to say that she, her husband, and their son are pulling their lives together after financial disaster.

"This allows us to save money, which is phenomenal," Ellen says. Her stay at the Transition House shelter forced her to "work through the anxiety of dealing with past debt," and her current situation allows her to address that debt head-on.

"It's because of them [Transition House staff] that I think living a normal life is really possible," Ellen adds. "We have to do the hard work but the motivation comes from them."

There are few affordable options for struggling families beyond the Firehouse. Space in Casa Marianna is limited. The newly constructed Moms' housing is already full, and priority is given to families with special needs that might limit the adults' ability to work full-time.

Even after her months at Transition House and the Firehouse, single mother Megan finds the prospect of living independently to be intimidating. "I look every day for a second job," she reports, noting the need to supplement the near-minimum-wage income from her current full-time position. "I just don't foresee myself making enough to live and support my son."

Megan's worry notwithstanding, Transition House has a remarkable success rate, with seven of every 10 families it serves successfully transitioning to independent living.

"One thing we try to repeat to our clients is that this situation is so temporary in their lives," Michael says. "There is a way out, and that really resonates with a lot of people. We tell them, just bite the bullet and live frugally, so you can get out of here and never have to see us again." ■