



Photo by Erynn McInnis

Good To My Hood

February 3, 2012

FEED THE BOX. HELP THE HOMELESS.

THIS IS THE MESSAGE PRINTED ACROSS TWELVE BRIGHTLY PAINTED BLUE BOXES LOCATED THROUGHOUT LOUISVILLE'S CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT. AT FIRST GLANCE, THESE HUNGRY BOXES INVOKE CURIOSITY, AND ARE UNLIKE OTHER FAMILIAR OBJECTS ENCOUNTERED BY PEDESTRIANS ON LOUISVILLE'S SIDEWALKS: ARTSY, WELDED BICYCLE RACKS (CHECK); CHERRY-RED PENGUINS (CHECK, TOTALLY NORMAL); COLONEL SANDERS (ALSO, CHECK); A STRIKING LITTLE ROBIN'S EGG BLUE BOX-LIKE PIGGY-BANK? INQUISITIVE PEDESTRIANS ARE REWARDED WITH THE DISCOVERY OF A NEW APPROACH TO LOUISVILLE'S HOMELESS OUTREACH EFFORTS: DOWNTOWN LOUISVILLE'S POSITIVE CHANGE PROGRAM.

The Louisville Downtown Management District's Positive Change Program utilizes a multidimensional approach: encourage pedestrians to deposit their well-intentioned dollars and cents into Positive Change boxes to benefit the needs of the city's homeless.

The program began in July 2011 as collaboration between the Louisville Downtown Management District (LDMD) and The Coalition for the Homeless as a way to save lives, raise community awareness on issues of homelessness within our city.

In December 2011, LDMD announced that the Positive Change Program had collected over \$800.00 from the twelve metal boxes positioned throughout the Central Business District since the beginning of the program in July. All of the money has been donated to The Coalition for the Homeless and designated for the benefit of its Rx: Housing Campaign, the goal of which is to house up to 75 of Louisville's most vulnerable homeless by the end of this year.

Natalie Harris, executive director of The Coalition for the Homeless, said that the Rx: Housing Campaign has raised almost \$30,000 through \$18,000 in public contributions and a \$10,000 match from the city.

"We are placing the first two program participants into apartments this week, which we're very excited about," she said.

In September 2011, a survey was conducted by volunteers who interviewed 250 homeless people to identify those who are most vulnerable of dying on the streets. The survey used criteria such as the presence of chronic illness: heart disease, diabetes, and HIV/AIDS—conditions that are exacerbated by living outside; the presence of mental illness; how long a person has been on the street; and age. The survey found that the average amount of time spent living on the street was four years and that some individuals had been living outside on their own for 30 years. Six people were older than 65 and one person interviewed was 89 years old.

As a result of the survey, 75 people were identified as eligible for Rx: Housing participation due to their vulnerability and need for permanent housing and services.

"Our goal is to save lives as well as community costs," said Harris. "The most vulnerable in the homeless population incur the use of public services such as law enforcement, first responders, emergency rooms, and hospitals because they have no other alternatives for care in emergencies or to deal with chronic health issues," she said.

Harris cited a recent University of Louisville study, which concluded that if housing was provided to these 75 most vulnerable homeless people, Metro Louisville would save \$1.2 million in service costs. The Coalition's Rx: Housing Campaign is part of a larger national campaign to house 100,000 homeless Americans by December 31, 2012. The Rx: Housing approach addresses the root causes of homelessness, not just the symptoms, by placing the issue of homelessness within the larger context of poverty and the lack of affordable housing for many people living within the United States who continuously struggle to make ends meet and are in danger of dying on the streets due to their limited resources.

Once a homeless person is housed through the Coalition's Rx: Housing Campaign there are services and tools available to them to help keep them in their homes.

"We're fortunate in that the Phoenix Family Health Center has a Homeless Health Clinic for the participants' use. Additionally, Phoenix was awarded a federal grant of \$1.5 million over three years just to serve these 75 clients," said Harris.

Program participants have access to case managers who spend an extensive amount of time helping them set goals, apply for programs and benefits, and to ensure that they are receiving benefits for which they are eligible. Case managers also help identify ways in which participants can find work or volunteer so that they become involved in the community. Chemical dependency and mental health issues are also monitored.

“If a person suffers from disabilities severe enough to preclude them from employment or volunteer work, there are day activities available so that participants can interact with others, and service providers can maintain relationships to help identify any problems and health concerns before they become serious,” said Harris.

Both the Rx: Housing Campaign and the Positive Change Program have benefitted from increased community awareness.

Deb DeLor, LDMD executive director, said that there have been a number of individuals since the December 2011 press release who have come forward wanting to contribute money to help more of Louisville’s vulnerable homeless move into permanent housing through the program.

“Responses from the public have ranged from, ‘Oh, how terrific,’ to ‘How can I do more to help,’” she said. “We’re always trying to do better, so the community’s interest and response has been very encouraging.”

The money collected through the Positive Change Program to date has been enough to help pay for the initial costs of securing and furnishing apartments for two members of Louisville’s vulnerable homeless and will assist them in leaving an unpredictable and dangerous life on the street so that they can work towards building a better future.

“We have an intense involvement in this program,” said Harris, “but we think that it will make a big difference over a short period of time, and instead of costing the community money, the people served by this program will be investing themselves back into our community,” said Harris.

LDMD and The Coalition for the Homeless are assisted in this effort by the Louisville Metropolitan Housing Authority and through extensive services provided by the Phoenix Family Health Center and other community partners.

–Erynn McInnis

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