

Introduction

The word “home” conjures up visions of safety and security. It is supposed to be a haven from the storms of life; the place where we regroup and recharge and renew. Now imagine how life would be turned upside down if “home” no longer meant any of those things. Imagine that “home” became an endless cycle of imposition and displacement as you moved from place to place, unable to put down roots because you couldn’t afford a place of your own.

Imagine the gut-wrenching, stomach-churning instability that would come from not knowing where you are going to live from day to day, or month to month. Imagine what it would do to your marriage, your children, your job, and your outlook on life.

Everyone needs - and deserves - a consistent, stable, comforting place to live. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. Stable housing does not, as they say, “grow on trees.” It is not achieved by making people dependent on an organization or a system, or just “putting them somewhere.” It involves money, discipline, availability, planning, encouragement, resources, opportunity, and a vision of what could be.

Open Doors knows that creating a stable housing solution involves first providing a physical “place” to live, one that will put the brakes on the cycle of fear and worry. But then the real long-term work begins, as Open Doors meets people at their point of need; helping them envision a different reality, and then partnering with them as they learn the skills needed to achieve that dream. It’s complicated. It takes time and it requires patient, caring perseverance. But it is also essential for a long-term result.

It is said that “home is where the heart is.” A stable home is the bedrock of life. When it washes away, everything else falls apart too under the load of worry and fear. Open Doors creates a refuge for the body and soul of people who, through financial hardship or life’s circumstances, do not have a place to call home. They provide a secure place to live, and a secure relationship that people can count upon as they create a new reality for themselves. Open Doors partners with people to help them create a long-lasting solution to the question of “where will I live?”

The miracle of this work is that lives really do change. Open Doors provides the structure, support and resources that awaken dreams and encourage aspirations, not only for housing but for life.

What is the Need?

Housing stability is a serious problem in Kalamazoo, and, as with many social challenges, the causes are interrelated. First, there is the challenge of a living wage. Our economy has shifted dramatically: from full-time positions to part-time, with an emphasis on low-wage, low-skill positions. This destructive economic storm leaves the “working poor” in its wake: people who work full time and yet cannot find financial stability, much less housing stability. Someone who is working 40 hours per week must earn at least \$13.60 per hour (almost twice minimum wage) to afford even a two-bedroom apartment in Kalamazoo. For families with children, the problem becomes exponentially worse.

Second, there is a severe shortage of affordable housing. More than 400 people in Kalamazoo spend the night in an emergency shelter every night; many of them because their precarious

financial solution suffered a blow such as an illness or accident that literally knocked them out of their housing. There are over 4,000 households in Kalamazoo that make less than 30% of the area median income (so roughly \$10,000 per year). The average one-bedroom apartment with utilities is \$558 per month, so even if these folks could find and qualify for housing, they would be spending more than 60% of their income on rent. That's simply not sustainable.

Why do people need stable housing? It's about more than protection from the elements and a place to store stuff. Stable housing is the cornerstone of emotional security and individual accountability for both adults and children. When people have stable housing, they know they can get to work each day. Stable housing means that kids can go to the same school and benefit from consistent attention. Stable housing means that parents can focus on raising their children instead of scrambling for a place to go each night. Stable housing is an absolutely essential ingredient for a healthy, independent and self-sufficient life.

The People We Serve

Who is struggling with housing instability? The short answer is: could be anyone. Open Doors sees residents who are male and female; young and old; married and single; black and white; some with high school educations; some with college educations or advanced degrees. With unemployment over 9% in Michigan, and the average person on unemployment for more than ten months, it's not hard to see why housing has become an unaffordable necessity for a vast swath of the population, including people who never thought they would have to worry about something as basic as a roof over their heads.

Open Doors has welcomed people who are working two jobs for minimum wage but just can't save enough to afford an apartment. They have embraced women who are fleeing domestic violence and have no resources with which to seek safe housing for themselves and their children. Families come to Open Doors after the parents have lost their jobs, lost their homes and eaten through their savings in a desperate search for work. Parents approach Open Doors for help when they simply can't find another friend willing to take them in for the night. College students come seeking help when the burden of school expenses and living expenses takes more than they can earn while trying to get an education. Mothers come in after a divorce has left them and their children without resources and without hope.

Some people come because they are paying the consequences for bad choices about alcohol or drug use. Some have made poor choices in relationships. But a great number of people who come to Open Doors are ordinary folks, driven to desperation by circumstances out of their control. They are spinning their wheels, and they need someone to help them get back on track.

What We Accomplish

What does success look like when it comes to housing stability? The best answer is "it depends." For some people, success might mean working 20 hours per week and living in a safe, subsidized apartment. Others might define success as getting a GED or a college degree so they can go from two jobs to one, or even someday buying their own home. Each relationship is a partnership; each answer is unique.

However, all the definitions of success have several ingredients in common. First, they require actual housing: a roof over the resident's head. Often that starts in either an interim housing solution or one of the Open Doors apartments. Open Doors operates two interim housing facilities and approximately 70 apartments, and the average rent charged is \$318. That is a reasonably affordable solution for people who can barely make ends meet. Open Doors has deliberately acquired housing units so that it can control the rent levels and make housing accessible for people who otherwise would not have any choices.

Second, housing stability requires opportunity. Every person who comes through the door is given the opportunity to define their own housing success, and all the support they need to achieve it. Opportunity is a gift that jump-starts the process.

The third common ingredient is self-confidence. Henry Ford once said, "Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right." The people who come to Open Doors have been broken in spirit and in heart. They don't believe in themselves any more. But when they receive encouragement and start to achieve small successes, their dormant self-esteem gradually blossoms. One resident says, "Once you know someone else believes in you, then you can start to believe in you too. Open Doors reawakened my power of belief." Stable housing is the goal; dependency is not. Open Doors helps people transition their mindset about their situation: from "help me," to "I can help myself," and ultimately to "I can help others."

For many residents, their encounter with Open Doors is the first time someone has listened to them. It's often the first time they have been treated as a person, rather than a number. The gratitude, determination and joy that flows from the residents has less to do with four walls and a roof than it does with self-respect and stability. Open Doors keeps its promises, and residents know they can take those promises to heart.

Conclusion

People who have been cast adrift from the solid moorings of stable housing struggle to see beyond their current circumstances to a brighter future. Many of the residents who come to Open Doors have been beaten down by life so many times that they no longer dare to dream. Changing this mindset requires steady encouragement from people who genuinely care.

Open Doors empowers people to dream their own dreams and achieve their own housing success. They do not do the work for the residents; they do it in partnership with the residents. Residents must learn to succeed on their own, but Open Doors offers every encouragement and resource needed for success. In the process, they offer a way out of the cycle of instability and despair, to safety, stability and self-respect.