Program to Prevent Homelessness Among Bronx Seniors at Risk of Closing Down

By Eddie Small | April 4, 2017 4:01 pm
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THE BRONX — A program that has helped prevent more than 400 Bronx seniors from becoming homeless over the past three years will shut down in June if it does not find a new source of funding, organizers say.

The Senior Homelessness Prevention Project (http://www.bronxworks.org/shpp), which is run by BronxWorks (https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/tags/bronxworks), was established in 2014 to help provide support and counseling for people who are 60 or older and end up facing possible eviction in Bronx Housing Court (https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/places/bronx-housing-court), and the group soon found it to be much more popular than it had anticipated.

"We were targeted to serve just 150 people for the entire year," said Julie Belizaire-Spitzer, director of BronxWorks' homelessness prevention department. "Within the first three months of the program, we got 150 people. We then identified this was a serious need."
The program helps seniors with issues like navigating housing court and identifying benefits that they are eligible for, and although its main priority is to help them avoid eviction, staff will also help find a new place to live if they are in unsafe or untenable housing.

Jose Alvarez, 62, said the SHPP saved him and his wife from becoming homeless, as they had fallen behind in rent after he lost his job and ended up in housing court in February.

BronxWorks arranged an emergency grant for them under the city's "One Shot Deal (http://www1.nyc.gov/nyc-resources/faq/339/how-do-i-apply-for-the-one-shot-deal-to-avoid-eviction)" program to cover the back rent, and his caseworker also helped him apply for the Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption (http://www1.nyc.gov/nyc-resources/service/2424/senior-citizen-rent-increase-exemption-scrie) program that would lower and freeze his rent at a more affordable price.

Without the program, "that wouldn't have happened," Alvarez said. "I would've been on the streets."

The SHPP requires $250,000 in annual funding, according to BronxWorks, and it has been largely supported since its inception by Oak Foundation (http://oakfoundation.org/), an international organization that focuses on issues such as homelessness, human rights and the environment.

However, the grant will end this year, as it was meant to support the SHPP as a pilot project that would raise awareness of issues seniors face in housing court and help spark public funding for preventing homelessness among seniors, according to the foundation.

BronxWorks staffers are trying to secure public funding for the program now.

"We need to redouble the efforts that we had initiated in the early part of 2016," said Ken Small, development director at BronxWorks. "Let's look to see what we can do this year in terms of perhaps swaying the City Council (https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/tags/new-york-city-council), perhaps continuing to move things along with some of the city government agencies."

The group has so far received some "encouraging feedback" from City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito (https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/people/melissa-markviverito) but has not gotten a firm funding commitment yet, according to Small.

"Keeping New Yorkers safe in their homes and protecting our growing aging population is a priority of this City Council," Mark-Viverito's spokeswoman Robin Levine said, "and this will be one of many budget proposals under review in the coming months."

Senior Linette Samuel, 60, said she hopes the program is able to continue, as she does not know where she would be without it.

"The program is helpful not only for me, but I guess for many other people, you know? For many other people," she said. "And I'm so thankful. I am so thankful for the help that I'm getting right now. I'm so appreciative."
Samuel fell behind on rent after her work hours were cut and wound up in housing court in March, but her case manager was able to help her with the One Shot Deal program to cover her back payments and helped her apply for food stamps as well to make her financial situation more secure, according to BronxWorks.

She said the program had made her feel very confident that she had someone to look out for her interests and helped alleviate her fears about losing her home.

"When I think about being homeless, it's very, it's just devastating, you know? Very devastating," she said. "You can't sleep. You're just thinking, what's going to happen to you?"

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