Giving homeless more than just a home

Want to end homelessness? Just give the homeless a home! It sounds like a joke. That was the tone of “The Daily Show” recently when it ran a segment about the Housing First approach to solving homelessness: giving apartments to people living on the streets.

The point of “The Daily Show” was that Housing First is humane, economical and effective. They showed one formerly homeless man who had gotten a job and reconnected with his family, a welcome scene of happiness.

Housing First in fact is a revolutionary method of fighting homelessness. Of course, Jon Stewart’s comedy program oversimplifies things. Tossing someone a set of keys doesn’t mean they’ll turn their lives around.

The chronically homeless — the most visible ones who sleep in doorways and on park benches — are mostly on the streets because of mental illness, alcoholism or drug addiction. Housing First works because the homeless receive treatment for these issues.

Why Housing First? Because people simply cannot deal with substance abuse or mental illness while trying to survive on the streets. Placing them in a safe environment gives them the stability to address the problems that led to their homelessness.

At BronxWorks, we were pioneers of the Housing First movement. New York City contracted us to perform all of the street homeless outreach in the Bronx. Our caseworkers canvass the borough night and day, earning the trust of the homeless. It can take months of interaction before they’ll even consider coming inside.

After being set up in an apartment, they receive continuous help from social workers and medical professionals. Without supportive services, Housing First would not be so effective. But 95% of the formerly homeless people we’ve placed into permanent housing have stayed housed.

You can see that in the story of Marine Corps veteran Marvin Shepard, who lived on the streets for 10 years addicted to crack. At first he resisted help. Now he’s sober, has an apartment and has re-entered his daughter’s life.

Between 2005 and 2011, street homelessness in the Bronx dropped 80%. But with budget cuts, the number of homeless is rising again.

Housing First needs to keep getting funded because its success pays for itself. Each chronically homeless person on the streets can cost a city hundreds of thousands of dollars in hospital costs. But the benefits go beyond that.

Hunts Point in the Bronx was once overrun by homelessness. The neighborhood is now much more livable. Businesses and investors see Hunts Point’s economic potential. Let’s resolve to continue Housing First. It’s no joke.

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