Uncertain Future for New York Housing Program That Helps Mentally Ill Homeless People

By WINNIE HU   MARCH 24, 2015

John Beyhl did not have to gloss over his homeless years on the street when applying for an apartment at the Brook, a modern rental building in the South Bronx with a rooftop garden, a computer room, a live-in superintendent and 24-hour security.

It was the reason he got in.

Mr. Beyhl, 53, a recovering alcoholic who has panic attacks, moved into the building in 2011 through a New York City housing program that over two decades has placed thousands of homeless people with mental illnesses and other disabilities in their own apartments. The program aims to keep them off the streets and out of shelters, which are meant to be temporary solutions, by providing so-called supportive housing that combines rent-subsidized apartments with social services such as mental health counseling and job training to help them live independently.

Now the future of the program has come under debate, even as the number of people in the city’s homeless shelters has swelled to more than 58,000 in the past year.

The program resulted from New York/New York, a 1990 city-state agreement, and was twice renewed, in 1998 and 2005. But it is set to expire in June 2016 unless a new agreement is reached.

The program has created about 14,000 new and refurbished housing units. A grass-roots campaign waged by more than 200 advocacy groups, social service organizations and religious leaders has been calling for renewal and significant expansion of the program, with a goal of 30,000 more units of supportive housing created in the city over the next decade. The last agreement, in 2005, created 9,000 units.

“There’s no question that if there was more supportive housing, there would be
less people in shelters,” said Tony Hannigan, executive director of the Center for Urban Community Services, a nonprofit housing developer and service provider for homeless and low-income people.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio have indicated that they plan to renew the program, but each has proposed building far fewer than 30,000 units. Mr. de Blasio has called for the city and the state to build 12,000 more units in the city. Mr. Cuomo has proposed 3,900 more units in the city plus 1,100 units around the state.

The governor's proposal also seeks to shift a larger share of the operating and support services that go along with the housing to the city, which drew an objection from the mayor at a budget hearing in Albany last month. In the previous agreement, the state paid 80 percent of the cost of those services over all and the city paid the rest.

State officials emphasized that Mr. Cuomo, who previously served as secretary of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, has worked to expand affordable housing over all and implemented a $1 billion initiative called House NY, which is expected to produce more than 14,300 units of affordable housing around the state by 2018. Darryl C. Towns, commissioner of New York State Homes and Community Renewal, which oversees the state’s major housing and community renewal agencies, said that “this administration has made a deep, long-term and unprecedented commitment to housing affordability in New York.”

It was the governor’s father, Mario M. Cuomo, who as governor teamed up with Mayor David N. Dinkins in 1990 to start the supportive housing program for homeless people who are mentally ill. At the time, the city faced a homelessness problem, in part because the state’s “deinstitutionalization” policy in earlier decades had emptied state mental institutions that once housed scores of people, with the idea that they could be better treated close to home.

But the state largely failed to coordinate community mental health services, with the result that many former patients were unconnected to the supports they relied upon. Another complication was the widespread conversion in the 1980s of cheap, single-room-occupancy hotels into luxury apartments that left many with nowhere to live.

Mr. Hannigan said supportive housing emerged as one of the pillars of a new community-based mental health system that replaced the state psychiatric
institutions. Unlike group homes, where people could be asked to leave if they were disruptive or did not abide by rules, supportive housing helped people to live in their own apartments under lease agreements just like other renters and to reintegrate into their communities.

Kristin Miller, the New York director for the Corporation for Supportive Housing, a nonprofit group that provides funds and technical assistance, called such support services “the glue that makes it all stick together.” She said those services provide not only daily living assistance but also an instant social network to, say, celebrate a birthday with or fall back on if a pet dies. “The supports we all get, they don’t have,” she said. “It helps people experience better health and wellness so they can really thrive in their environment.”

The program’s supporters also point out that it saves taxpayer money, citing research showing that supportive housing helps to reduce the use of more costly shelters, hospitals and other institutions by homeless people.

City officials approved an average of 597 people a month for the supportive housing program in 2014, up from 506 a month in 2012, according to city data. In December, there were 3,256 people waiting for housing compared with 2,849 people at that time the year before.

For Akbar Parker, 45, the supportive housing program is his best chance of getting off the street. Mr. Parker, who has been homeless since 2000, said he stopped going to shelters because he used to get into fights. He stays with friends when he can or finds refuge in abandoned buildings and subway stations, and under scaffolding.

Mr. Parker, who is unemployed, said he has schizophrenia, diabetes, high blood pressure and back pain. He applied for the supportive housing program last fall, with help from the Coalition for the Homeless, and is waiting for an apartment. “It would be great because I could have my privacy, my freedom and peace of mind,” he said.

In the South Bronx, 120 of the 190 apartments at the Brook are reserved for homeless people with special needs. The building was developed by Common Ground, a nonprofit organization, and offers support services through BronxWorks, a social service agency that maintains a staff of 20 on site, including case managers, social workers, a psychiatrist and a doctor. Though residents are not required to use the services, nearly all of them do.

Megan Fogarty, who oversees social services at the Brook, said some newcomers have been on their own for so long that they are initially reluctant to trust the
building’s staff and other residents. Assessments are done for all residents to develop treatment plans that can include helping them manage their medications, get regular physical and psychiatric care, sign up for food stamps and benefits, and reconnect with family members.

“We’re creating a supportive environment for people to live independently and to move toward recovery,” Ms. Fogarty said. “We see them gaining these skills, we see them happier, we see them building social relationships and even having more insight into their own needs.”

Ms. Fogarty said that once the residents settle in the building, they rarely leave, and vacancies tend to come up only when someone dies.

Mr. Beyhl pays $235 a month, or about 30 percent of his income from disability payments, for a furnished studio that includes utilities.

Mr. Beyhl, who grew up in Woodhaven, Queens, said he could not hold jobs when he started drinking heavily. He wound up in a homeless encampment behind a catering hall. He said he felt so hopeless that one night in 2011 he tried to kill himself with an overdose of sleeping pills. He was taken to Jamaica Hospital Medical Center. An outreach worker for Common Ground showed him that he had other options. He gave up drinking and applied for the supportive housing program.

Now Mr. Beyhl spends most of his afternoons sitting behind a table in the lobby of the Brook, signing up other residents for daily social activities. He walks newcomers around the corner to the post office, the supermarket and the Burger King.

On a recent evening, he greeted neighbors by name as he turned the key to his second-floor apartment. Inside, family photos were displayed next to a new flat-screen television he had saved up to buy.

“I’ve got to fix it up a little more, but this is home sweet home,” he said. “I lost everything, and I’ve got it back now.”

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John Beyhl, 53, lives in a studio at the Brook, a modern rental building in the South Bronx. Mr. Beyhl, who had been homeless, applied for the apartment through a supportive housing program. Credit Yana Paskova for The New York Times

Photographs of Mr. Beyhl's family and of himself in the military. Credit Yana Paskova for The New York Times
The supportive-housing program aims to keep disabled individuals off the street by placing them into rent-subsidized units, like the ones at the Brook on East 148th Street in the Bronx. Credit Yana Paskova for The New York Times

Mr. Beyhl moved into his apartment in 2011 with the help of an outreach worker from Common Ground. Credit Yana Paskova for The New York Times