Homeless families say supporting housing offers them a fighting chance

By Alexandra Hutzler

Jennifer Edwards is often up before the sun. The 41-year-old single mother wakes her three youngest children as early as 5 a.m., shuffling them out the door in order to get them to school on time.

The daily commute to Brooklyn from 1605 Nelson Ave. — a temporary shelter for homeless families where Edwards is currently living — can sometimes take more than two hours on public transit. But for her family, the borough is their home. It’s where Edwards had lived with her husband for more than two decades, raising their five children, getting a college education, and creating a career.

When she first moved to New York City from South Carolina, the then 17-year-old Edwards never imagined one day she’d be living in a homeless shelter.

But when she was pregnant with her second son in 1995, Edwards’ husband moved them into a homeless facility in Brooklyn. They had a comfortable life there until Edwards and her husband went through a difficult time and separated. Suddenly, Edwards was the sole breadwinner of the family, and it was just too hard to afford housing and a decent standard of living on one income.

"People should bear in mind that it doesn’t matter what you make," Edwards said. Before entering the shelter in April, Edwards made about $30,000 annually. But as rent soared, her income stayed the same. She needed a supportive housing program to get back on her feet.

Many of the families in the homeless shelter are hard-working people who just need some assistance, Edwards said. According to Scott Auwarter, the executive director at BronxWorks, half of the 236 residents living in family homeless shelters are employed and earning an income. Most folks living in a homeless shelter, he added, are about 6 years old.

"The assumption is that it’s a bunch of lazy people who don’t want to work or pay rent," she said. "People should ask themselves, 'Where would you want to be or what resources would you want to have in order to re-establish yourself?'"

Those are questions some in Kingsbridge might be thinking about as well as they learn more about a planned transitional homeless center at 5731 Broadway. More than 300 people turned up for a recent Community Board 8 meeting to either protest or support plans to bring in 83 families on the brink of returning to independence.
Family environment

Living in the BronxWorks residence has been good for her family, Edwards said. The facility has child care services and educational opportunities. All residents have a curfew of 10 p.m., and the facility boasts 24-hour security.

"It's a clean environment," Edwards said. "It doesn't have any of the horror stories I have heard. People are polite and respectful. There's no fighting going on."

Edwards is on the hunt for a more permanent living situation and has been looking at apartments all over the city. Her hope is to be out of the shelter by the time school starts again in September.

Though the supportive housing program has helped Edwards back on her feet, it hasn't come without its challenges.

"There's certain freedoms you don't have," Edwards explained. Not many visitors are allowed in the complex due to strict security, which means their life has been cut off from family and friends.

Little things are missing

"You can't celebrate your birthday with your friends and family over," she said. "Those little things that make things good for kids, you just can't do it, and I understand that."

It's difficult to make a temporary situation feel like a home, Edwards said. But when asked where her family might be if opportunities like this didn't exist, Edwards went silent before giving a response.

"I really couldn't tell you," she said. "I don't know. That's a scary thought."

Another resident at the homeless shelter on Nelson Avenue shared Edwards' sentiments.

Grace Newberns, 61, lives in an apartment with her three sons Shaquille, Michael and Jeremy. Also originally from Brooklyn, she has been in the shelter for a little over three years, and feels cut off from her previous life with family and friends. Every six months, she has to renew her application to stay with updated medical records.

Before moving into the family homeless shelter, Newberns and her sons were living in a "cluster site" — shelters placed in hotels and private apartment complexes that have been used to house a growing homeless population.

Cluster housing problems

Her particular cluster site was poorly maintained, Newberns said. She actually spent at least part of the winter without any heat.

Her son Shaquille is 22, but has autism. Newberns wants him to live in a constant, safe atmosphere that the supportive housing program can provide.

"It's very important for him to have a stable environment so I can get him the programs he needs," she said. One day, she would like him to be involved in an independent living program, but says that it is difficult to get access to those opportunities while living in a shelter.

"I'm not going to be here forever," Newberns said. "I need some type of plan so he can get a future for himself."

By sharing their stories, both Edwards and Newberns hope communities facing new centers like the one planned for Kingsbridge might be armed with more knowledge about the kind of people who move in.

"The community can help," Edwards said. "They can be more mindful of the situation. I think that would be a more positive way to look at the situation instead of being afraid."

Correspondent Liz Sanders contributed to this report.

Keywords

Jennifer Edwards, Scott Auwarter, Homeless, Grace Newberns, Alexandra Hutzler, Liz Sanders

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Muhheakantuck

Thank you to The Riverdale Press for excellent, thoughtful reporting on this issue. There is a petition urging CB8 Board members and local elected officials to welcome the families with children who will be living at the 5731 Broadway petition. Please sign and share:


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