

The Press of Atlantic City Editorial

Family Promise / Hands-on help

Posted: Thursday, June 6, 2013 12:01 am

Our View: Family Promise

- A new facility in North Cape May marks a milestone for Family Promise of Cape May County, which helps homeless families get back on their feet.

We all learned some hard lessons in the recent recession, and one of them is how fragile our lifestyles can be. One layoff, one illness, one unexpected event can lead to extreme changes - including homelessness.

This insight - that many people who find themselves homeless are not very different from anyone else - is the idea behind Family Promise, a nonprofit with a clever and effective approach to helping homeless families.

Family Promise is a nondenominational charity with chapters throughout South Jersey and 200 chapters nationwide. It recruits congregations to provide temporary overnight shelter for homeless families. A typical participating church or synagogue might provide meals and overnight lodging for families two weeks out of the year. Members of the congregation volunteer to cook or to be overnight chaperones.

During the day, volunteers work with families to help them get back on their feet, whether that means finding a job, finding an affordable place to live or banking money for security deposits.

Since 2009, Family Promise of Cape May County and its 34 participating congregations have helped 32 families. The program has an 83 percent success rate at finding jobs for clients. The charity only accepts families that are drug-free, and its emphasis is on keeping families together and getting them back into a home as soon as possible.

The group marked a quiet milestone this week, when it opened a new facility in North Cape May. The building combines office space for Family Promise with a base camp for its temporary clients. The facility gives families a home base during the day, a place for parents to do laundry or work on resumes and job skills and for kids to do homework and play. It contains the things we all take for granted in our homes, from showers to computers.

The work of Family Promise is important in Cape May County, which does not have a homeless shelter but does have a seasonal economy and high rents, a combination that can make it difficult for low-income people to find homes even if they are working. Many clients have incomes too high to receive government benefits but not high enough to afford rents and utilities.

The North Cape May facility is not a shelter. Client families still will be staying in participating churches overnight. But now, they will have a place to regroup and prepare for their next step.

At a time when it is all too clear that government resources are limited, and that hard-working people who need help can fall between the cracks of our social services, we are fortunate that there are groups such as Family Promise to fill the gaps.

Family Promise's hands-on, grassroots approach is an example of what can be accomplished when people put their time and muscle behind their beliefs.