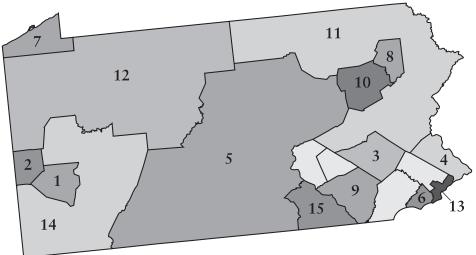


Neighbors Helping Neighbors:

Stories of People Who Overcame Homelessness and Programs That Helped Them Succeed



34,004 Persons Experiencing Homelessness Served in Pennsylvania (2011)



Regions Served*

1	Allegheny County	3,937
2	Beaver	186
3	Berks	1,395
4	Bucks	811
5	Central	1,363
6	Delaware	1,431
7	Erie	1,512
8	Lackawanna	795
9	Lancaster	2,132
10	Luzerne	984
11	Northeast	1,254
12	Northwest	519
13	Philadelphia	14,467
14	Southwest PA	1,574
15	York	1,645

TOTAL 34,004

^{*} Three regions could not be included due to data usability issues at the time of publication.

Introduction

Last year, more than 34,000 Pennsylvanians – men, women, and children – experienced homelessness. That's the same number of people as live in Bethel Park, Mt. Lebanon, Monroeville, Norristown, State College, and Williamsport.

With services, jobs and an affordable place to live, people are able to change their lives. Who are Pennsylvania's homeless and what are their stories?

The narratives collected here tell the stories of just a few of the many remarkable people who have experienced hardship and homelessness and have worked to reclaim their lives. Their experiences reflect not only the diversity of people who become homeless, but their strength and resolve in changing their lives.

These stories are examples of neighbors helping neighbors.

These are stories of hope and promise from rural, suburban, and urban Pennsylvania, of how individuals find the strength to overcome – with help. These are stories that show the complexity of ending homelessness and the effectiveness of helping professionals.

The people who have shared their stories here have been helped by social service and faith-based organizations – concerned citizens, civic and business leaders and volunteers throughout Pennsylvania who work every day with support from by partnerships with local, state and federal government.

Neighbors Helping Neighbors is our story. We are the members of HAPPN, the Homeless Action and PA Provider Network, a network of homeless providers, volunteers, consumers, and advocates working together to prevent and end homelessness in Pennsylvania.

Joyce Sacco and Joe Willard HAPPN Co-Chairs

Story 1:

Being Homeless in the Suburbs

Montgomery County
Program
Inter-Faith Housing Alliance

Inter-Faith Housing Alliance of Ambler

Submitted By

Laura Wall 215-628-2334 laurawall@i-fha.org Althea's time in the Inter-Faith Housing Alliance Emergency Shelter program did much more than provide her with a new home. "It made me more patient, more understanding, and more open," she says.

Althea and her son lost their home five years ago when she was laid off, along with forty other employees, from a well-paying job at a frozen food factory in West Chester. A diligent worker forced to live paycheck to paycheck, she soon became unable to pay her rent, so Althea's son lived with friends and she stayed wherever she could. Their lives improved when a counselor at the Veterans Administration told her about the Inter-Faith Housing Alliance in Montgomery County.

While in the emergency shelter program, Althea accessed essential services: therapeutic counseling; a two-year transitional housing program; intensive case management; and the Educational and Life Skills program, which included support for parenting skills, stress management, and job readiness. The stability and support at Inter-Faith enabled Althea and her son to reunite in their own apartment at Hope Gardens. She has found full-time employment at McDonalds and a second part-time position at a nursing facility. Her son, now attending college, is thriving with support from a post-graduate program that provides him with textbooks, school supplies, and holiday food and gift baskets.

Literally hundreds of volunteers participate in Inter-Faith's shelter program, and their kindness and support had a positive impact on Althea's life. The months Althea spent with Inter-Faith proved to be an enriching experience for her and her son.



Story 2:

From Homeless Teen Mom to Bank Teller

Lehigh County Program Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley, Sixth Street Shelter

Submitted byJennifer Hernandez-Reyes
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Jillian has grown from a teen mother with no home or employment to a homeowner and Supervising Teller at Lafayette Ambassador Bank. None of this would have been possible without the support she received from the Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley.

Prior to the birth of Jillian's daughter, Jessamine, the baby's father, was imprisoned. (He was not involved in Jessamine's life.) As a student and new mother, Jillian found it difficult to sustain employment which led to tension with her mother, with whom she shared a home. She lived with various friends, moving every two weeks, but she knew that stable housing was essential for her newborn daughter.

In 2008, Jillian entered the Ferry Street long-term program while attending Northampton Community College. There she received intensive case management and supportive services as she learned to budget her income. She worked hard to further her education, find employment, and balance the roles of mother and student. During this time Jillian successfully cared for her ailing mother, which required her to manage two households simultaneously.

Jillian left Ferry Street with a Section 8 Housing Choice voucher in 2010 and was earning enough income to leave the program in 2011. She bought her first house in 2012 and lives there with her family: Jessamine, now a spunky first grader, and Layla, a four-month old baby.

The Community Action Committee program helped Jillian become an adult able to provide a stable home for her daughters, she says. "The program asks for a lot, but that is what you need to grow."



Story 3:

From Orphan to Inmate to Tax-Paying Citizen

Franklin County Program

South Central Community Action Program's Franklin County Shelter, Central Harrisburg Region

Submitted by

Trudy A. Wesley Program Coordinator 717-267-3669 twesley@sccap.org When Jake stops by the Franklin County Shelter from time to time, people there see a friendly and caring twenty-four-year-old man. But when he first came to the shelter, he was a young man who had spent time in prison and was estranged from his family.

Jake was adopted at age thirteen from an orphanage in a foreign country where personal freedom is limited. He was easily overwhelmed by life in America and had little or no help in adjusting to the culture. Upon entering school, Jake had trouble making friends. His grasp of the English language was severely limited, and when he asked fellow students for assistance in communicating, they gave him a wrong or inappropriate answer. Like many teens, Jake yearned to be accepted and fell in with the wrong crowd. Before long, he was incarcerated and abandoned by his adoptive parents.

Things turned around for Jake when he wrote a letter to the Franklin County Shelter. After reviewing his situation, the shelter accepted him as a Home Plan client. In addition to emergency shelter and food, the shelter provided him with life skills education, housing assistance, employment referrals, budgeting and savings support, referrals for intra-agency assistance, and post-discharge assistance and support.

The Home Plan was a perfect fit for Jake, who is highly motivated and cooperative; he possesses a strong work ethic and gladly accepts direction. Within two weeks after admission, he acquired a living wage job and later secured a second paying position. A rental home near his place of employment soon followed and he purchased an affordable car. Jake is well positioned to take advantage of better employment opportunities in the future.



Story 4:

A Seventy-Two-Year-Old Veteran Finds a Home

Lycoming County Program

Liberty House at the YWCA in North Central Pennsylvania

Submitted by Interns from Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

Education in Neurodevelopment Disabilities Ruth* loved and valued her family more than anything else, but she needed to change her relationship with them in order to become healthy and self-sufficient. The staff of the Liberty House Program at the YWCA in North Central Pennsylvania helped her do just that.

A seventy-two-year-old veteran of the U.S. Marine Corp, Ruth came to Liberty House from The Saving Grace Shelter in Lycoming County. She had become homeless when her mother died and the house they shared was sold to pay off the estate. She began receiving collection notices for delinquent utility and credit accounts she had not known existed; her son and grandson had opened these accounts in her name. In addition, Ruth was suffering from diabetes and cataracts in both eyes, leaving her almost legally blind and owing thousands of dollars in medical bills.

When Ruth entered Liberty House, she felt safe and welcome, but it took several months of working with a case manager before Ruth understood the connection between her devotion to family and her inability to regain self-sufficiency. She developed a payment plan with each collection agency involved, opened a savings account, and started depositing approximately \$200 a month.

As Ruth made progress in managing her finances, she could afford the strips for her glucose meter to better monitor her diabetes and began the process of having the cataracts removed from her eyes. Within a year, she moved into elderly housing. Today, Ruth lives alone happily in a peaceful one-bedroom apartment. She continues to do well physically and emotionally, maintains her monthly budget, and keeps in contact with Liberty House staff, whom she now calls family.



Story 5:

From Homeless and Pregnant to Responsible Mother Building a Better Future for her Children

York County Program
Bell Bridge Housing Program

Story By

Interns from Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Education in Neurodevelopment Disabilities

Akosha West is someone people instantly like. She is friendly, sincere, and confident that she is going somewhere in life. The Bell Bridge Housing Program in York County is helping her get there.

During the spring of 2010, Akosha was homeless, pregnant, and the mother of a young daughter. She was disappointed in herself and believed her dream of becoming a journalist was slipping away. When she entered the Bell Bridge Housing Program in 2010, her passionate desire to become a journalist in a large city was apparent to the staff there; they supported her as she worked to make progress toward her goal.

The Bell Bridge Program allowed Akosha to have a home of her own for the first time in her life, which gave her peace of mind and security. She was able to focus her attention on her pregnancy and learn new skills, such as budgeting, which allowed her to pay outstanding bills and save money. For her daughter, Akosha obtained a referral from the Program for art therapy needed to address her mental health issues in a therapeutic and fun setting. After Akosha gave birth to a healthy baby girl, she enrolled in online journalism classes.

Akosha successfully transitioned out of the Bell Bridge Housing Program in only a few months and is now living in a private apartment nearby with assistance from the Section 8 program. She appreciates the apartment's proximity to Bell Bridge, including the support of the Program's staff, the ability to maintain close friendships with Bridge residents, and the opportunity for her daughter to remain at her school.

Akosha's accomplishments may seem modest, but Bell Bridge has helped raise her self-esteem and put her on the path to realize her dreams.

Story 6:

A Woman's Life Literally Saved

York County Program
Bell Bridge Housing Program

Story By Interns from Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Education in Neurodevelopment Disabilities The Bell Bridge Housing Program in York County saved Fawn's life. When she entered the program she was suffering from severe depression and struggling with suicidal thoughts. Her father had committed suicide when she was a child, so Fawn knew how horribly her death would affect her children, yet she continued to struggle with thoughts of suicide. With support from her family and the caseworkers at Bell Bridge, Fawn gradually overcame her depression and turned her life around.

A twenty-seven-year-old mother of two, Fawn left a physically abusive relationship with her children's father, even though the decision left her unemployed and homeless. She and her children entered the Bell Family Shelter, but left without being able to find housing. After staying with family for a few months, Fawn, her five-year-old daughter, and eleven-year-old son entered the Bell Bridge Housing Program.

With the support of caseworkers at Bell Bridge, Fawn took the necessary steps to develop life strategies, address her mental health, and overcome her negative feelings. A dedicated mother, she excelled at budgeting, successfully completed the program, obtained a job, and moved her family into public housing in the northern section of York County.

Fawn continues to work on her mental health issues and has been successful at her retail job, where she received a promotion to shift manager only a few months after being hired. Her children are thriving too; they perform well at school and are involved in outside activities such as the Girl Scouts.



Story 7:

From Domestic Violence Victim to a Career in Culinary Arts

York County Program
Bell Bridge Housing Program

Story By Interns from Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Education in Neurodevelopment Disabilities When Ms. Shomper arrived at the Bell Family Shelter in York County in January 2013 with her two-year-old daughter, the only financial security she had was food stamps from the Department of Public Welfare in Harrisburg. She had left everything behind in order to escape an abusive relationship. Now, with the help of a caseworker at the shelter, she is pursuing a career in the culinary arts.

Soon after entering the Shelter, Ms. Shomper learned that her case would take thirty days to transfer to York, which left her without funds to secure child care for her daughter. Her caseworker at Bell Family Shelter worked with Ms. Shomper to expedite the transfer of her case, so she was able to leave her daughter in daycare and begin looking for work. She also helped Ms. Shomper apply for the Bell Family Shelter/Bridge Housing Program.

During her month at this transitional housing program, Ms. Shomper worked closely with her caseworker in developing a plan and taking her first steps toward achieving her career goals. An employment assessment identified Ms. Shomper's strengths and weaknesses, while revealing a passion for the culinary arts. With the help of her caseworker, she completed an application for a culinary arts institute and visited the school. As Ms. Shomper prepares to take the next step toward building a career in the culinary arts, she knows she could not have done it without her dedicated caseworker.

Story 8:

Overcoming Addiction and Homelessness

Allegheny County Program

Community Human Services Pittsburgh

Submitted byJon Hoffmann
Community Human Services

Sometimes, a phone call can change your whole life.

John M. was forty-three-years-old, working and attending classes toward his Bachelor's Degree in Kentucky, when his ex-wife telephoned from Pittsburgh stating she would no longer care for his seventeen-year-old daughter. John immediately moved to Pittsburgh, but was unable to find a job, forcing him and his daughter to live with relatives, a temporary arrangement because they had to sleep on floors or couches.

A family member referred John to Community Human Services (CHS) in Pittsburgh, which determined that he met criteria for the Families United program; John suffers from Major Depressive Disorder and Anxiety Disorder. With a letter from his family stating he was at risk of street homelessness because they could not provide a home for them, John began the process of looking for housing. With apartment listings provided by CHS caseworkers, he found a two-bedroom apartment that fit within HUD's guidelines of Fair Market Rent and allowed his daughter to continue attending her high school. CHS provided them with new furniture and other household goods with funds from a supportive service budget. John was excited and grateful; he had never had a new bed in his life.

A CHS caseworker was instrumental in finding John stable employment. When he became frustrated and depressed during the course of his job search, his caseworker gave him "pep talks" and helped him focus on taking one step at a time toward accomplishing his goals. With this support and encouragement, John obtained a part-time job and returned to his schooling online. He also initiated mental health treatment at the suggestion of his caseworker and enrolled his daughter in mental health treatment for her anxiety issues as well. Sometimes, with a little support, you can make a new life.



Story 9:

Affordable Housing Was All She Needed

Allegheny County Program

Community Human Services Pittsburgh

Submitted by Jon Hoffmann Community Human Services Affordable housing has been the key to stability and achievement for K.T. and her daughters. After enduring many years of verbal and physical abuse at the hands of her children's father, this thirty-nine-year-old mother of three made the important decision to leave this abusive relationship and relocate with her children to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the home of some members of her family and acquaintances.

Upon arriving in Pittsburgh, K.T. and her daughters moved into a domestic violence shelter; she was unemployed, with no means of income. There she learned about and entered the Rapid Re-Housing Demo (RRHD) program with the help of a case manager from Community Human Services.

Within one month, this family was living in their own home and thriving. K.T. enrolled in college where she currently maintains a 3.0 GPA, and her two oldest daughters have received certificates of achievement for their behavior and academic performance at school. Living in a stable and safe home has made all the difference



Story 10:

From Down and Out to Giving Back

Somerset County Program Community Action Partnership for Somerset County/ Tableland Services, Inc.

Story By

Interns from Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Education in Neurodevelopment Disabilities

Unemployed and living in a state park, Mark Pollini was battling serious health problems, depression, and alcohol addiction. His wife had left him and winter was coming. Just as he began to lose hope, a phone call placed by his daughter to the Community Action Partnership for Somerset County/Tableland Services, Inc., started making the future look better for this fifty-four-year-old resident of Somerset County.

Years earlier, Mark had a successful career in Pittsburgh in the computer and technology field, but industry downturns left him without a job. Selling real estate proved fruitless and he became depressed and started battling alcoholism and health problems, including blood clots in his legs that often made standing and walking nearly impossible. Unwilling to burden his son and daughter, he ended up living in a tent in a state park with his dog, Bandita.

When Mark was diagnosed with a rare bone marrow/blood disease, he once again became depressed. That is when his daughter called the Community Action Partnership. Working with a housing case manager, Mark was placed in an emergency shelter. He was linked to supportive services to help him become self-sufficient and directed to the local food pantry, welfare benefits, medical assistance, and other local resources. He located a safe and affordable apartment and was enrolled in the Supportive Housing Program. In April 2012, Mark learned that he would be receiving income benefits.

"I'm convinced Tableland saved my life," says Mark.
"Thanks to them I had a warm place to stay and was able to get the assistance I needed. God blessed me by guiding my daughter to Community Action
Partnership for Somerset County/Tableland when I so desperately needed help and had nowhere to go."

With financial stability, Mark has made Somerset County his home with an apartment in the country. Mark was so touched by the generosity of Community Action Partnership that he has become a volunteer. He hopes to continue with his community work and to support the homeless in Somerset County gain self-sufficiency in their own lives.



Story 11:

One Paycheck Away from Homelessness

Spring City, Montgomery County Program Coordinated Homeless Outreach Center (CHOC) Bruce Heller is a sixty-two-year-old ad salesman who believes in the value of a hard day's work and the strength of making good connections, but his story begins when he was twenty-four and barely survived a motorcycle accident. With grit and determination, he healed his severely damaged body and learned to walk again. As Bruce has aged, he suffers constant pain, does not sleep well, and is unsteady on his feet. Bruce is waiting for a hip operation that may ease some of his knee pain. Nevertheless, he continues to walk everywhere he goes and maintains valuable friendships.

In 2005, the building in which he lived was sold and converted into luxury apartments. Bruce and five other tenants were forced to move out. He took what he could carry and moved into the Coordinated Homeless Outreach Center (CHOC) in Montgomery County. "Carrying my belongings with me each day and sleeping on the floor on mats or a cot physically wore me down. I didn't have any health care and it became harder and harder to work."

Later, Bruce stayed with the Ministries at Main Street mobile homeless shelter, operated by Still Waters Grace Brethren Church. With the help of staff at CHOC and Ministries at Main Street, he survived on cash and general assistance while waiting for approval for Social Security Income (SSI). After being denied three times, Bruce was approved in the spring of 2008 and paid back all his cash assistance.

The Robert P. Smith Towers, where Bruce currently resides, is a HUD subsidized housing unit managed by the Montgomery County Housing Authority. It is one of the few places that Bruce can afford and is handicapped accessible. Because of reductions in his SSI, he is barely scraping by. Still, he is an active volunteer and keeps his finger on the pulse of local politics. He is a faithful member and lends his advice and support to the TCN Homeless Services Program Committee, which builds partnerships and collaborates with local social service agencies, the religious community, and community members to reduce homelessness.

"I could not have found a home again without the local, county, and federal assistance I received," says Bruce. "I want that support to be there for those who are struggling now. The numbers in the local shelter are increasing and more folks are struggling to get by."



Story 12:

Aspiring Nurse Realizes her Dream

Erie County ProgramCommunity Shelter Services

Submitted by Pat Herr 814-314-8021 x126 pherr@communityshelter.org Renee Richie believed that pursuing her own education would open doors for her and her seven children. So she decided to return to nursing school and earn a degree in order to provide a more financially secure environment for her and her family.

Planning to support her family (four girls and three boys) with financial aid money until graduation, Renee enrolled in nursing school. However, her financial aid check arrived late causing her to fall behind on paying rent. Renee was not eligible for rental assistance in Erie County, having received aid earlier in the year. Within days of being evicted, she secured a family room at Community Shelter Services.

Renee and her children lived at the homeless shelter for three months while she worked with a case manager who helped transition them into the Lighting the Candle program at Community Shelter Services. With the support provided there, Renee was able to complete her nursing program, find employment, and save money so that she could secure a permanent, safe, affordable apartment for her family. While in the Lighting the Candle program, she also participated in Community Shelter's Financial Social Work program that taught her how to manage money, balance a budget, and pay off debt.

Renee graduated from nursing school in August 2011. She is employed as a nurse and lives in an apartment that accommodates the needs of her family. Through the supportive, holistic services provided by Community Shelter Services and the Lighting the Candle program, she was able to accomplish her goals; she earned her degree and now sustains her family through gainful employment.



Story 13:

Housing Stability and Homelessness Prevention Transform a Life

Dauphin County Program Shalom House

Submitted by Tara Stevens 717-433-8816

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Jennifer and her family clearly illustrate how coordinated services better serve homeless families.

Permanent employment was difficult for Jennifer to maintain; her two young children both have mental health issues and behavior challenges that manifest at school. She thought she could maintain a position at a temporary employment agency but missed job assignments when called to school to deal with her children's behavioral problems. Life was stressful for her and her children, as they "couch surfed" with family and friends with no positive support system or consistency.

Jennifer had been to the Shalom House emergency shelter in Dauphin before, but this last time she was accepted into the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP). This program addresses the needs of homeless women and children by helping them learn self-sufficiency and find permanent housing. Resources are coordinated, and Jennifer received services from other agencies as well.

With the help of HPRP, Jennifer was able to secure an apartment while receiving one-on-one intensive case management with Shalom House staff. This enabled her to focus on her own mental health, as well as her children's.

Today, Jennifer still maintains permanent housing. During a recent conversation with Shalom House she stated that she is currently receiving unemployment, but her family is doing well and her children were receiving mental health services. She is planning to move into a different school district in order to maintain a safe and secure setting for her children.

The services at Shalom House stand out in significant ways. The program is consistent and intensive, while holding clients accountable for meeting goals they set themselves. Jennifer was also able to remain in the HPRP program longer (up to 18 months) than she would have been in an emergency shelter (28 days). This allowed her to get the support that she needed to become independent and self-supporting.



Story 14:

A Young Mom Learning to Start Over

Philadelphia Agency Nurse Family Partnership

Submitted by Eudora Burton Housing Social Service Specialist eudora@nncc.us 267-761-1542 Asia Eliot was never the type of person who judged people who were unemployed or homeless. "But, I didn't really understand when people said they were on welfare or didn't have a job," she says. "I always figured there was a reason, something they didn't do."

Now she understands the real causes: a missed paycheck; an illness; bad luck; worse timing. "I'm learning to be humble. *Learning*," she stresses. "I'm not there yet."

Asia came from a stable home. Her dream was to own her own food truck, so she attended college and studied culinary arts. She worked two jobs, owned a car, and lived in an apartment. She and her son's father were living together and planning a future when she became pregnant. She believed she could support her son, Chace, but when he was hospitalized with a staph infection, and her car was totaled, and she lost her second job, she ended up living in a homeless shelter with her son and a handful of belongings.

The Philadelphia Nurse Family Partnership in Philadelphia, specifically Tosin Efunnuga, has helped Asia in many ways. She also referred her to Eudora Burton, a Housing Social Service Specialist. Tosin provides Asia with evidence-based structured support as a part of this program, working as a team with Eudora.

Asia is utilizing all the resources available to her and has set goals to achieve permanent housing. Her son attends daycare while she attends the Earn Center until she starts work. She also receives support through Utility Emergency Services Fund (UESF), which provides supportive services for families, especially for those who are in the Earn Program that need support with housing.

Asia now lives mostly on \$100 a month in public assistance. But on most days she is optimistic. "I have to be. I'm someone's mother."

AS12

OUR VALUES

No child should be homeless.

Veterans who have served this nation should be honored with real opportunity for prosperity when they return.

Older adults and people with disabilities should be able to live safely, accessibly and with dignity close to family and community.

No one should be homeless.

WHO WE ARE

The Homeless Action and PA Provider Network "HAPPN" is a network of homeless providers, volunteers, consumers and advocates working together to prevent and end homelessness in Pennsylvania. We take action to advance proven, local, cost-effective solutions to ensure that every Pennsylvanian has a home within their reach.

HAPPN is part of the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania, a statewide coalition that provides leadership and a common voice for policies, practices and resources to ensure that all Pennsylvanians, especially those with low incomes, have access to safe, decent, accessible and affordable homes.

WHAT WE DO

Network: We convene homeless providers from around the state to share their experiences, information and to learn from one another through monthly conference calls and periodic in-person meetings.

Take Action: Poverty and the high cost of housing are at the root of homelessness. We believe that only through partnerships that bring public and private resources together will we be able to prevent and end homelessness. At the federal level we are working for the expansion and the improvement of services provided through the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Program. At the state level for appropriate funding of Pennsylvania's Human Service Development Fund and the Homeless Assistance Program.

Educate: We organize public awareness campaigns to raise the visibility of homelessness and cost-effective, proven solutions that work.

JOIN US

If you are a homeless advocate or provider, join us by emailing joyce@housingalliancepa.org.





Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania



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