



A New HOME: Using Research to Better Lives

Christine Helfrich

In a Chicago YMCA, 86 once-homeless people are enjoying a stable life off the streets and out of the shelters, as they pay rent, keep house, and build community.

The 86 are part of an occupational therapy study that imparted life skills through empowerment and practical training, including experiences such as opening a bank account and joining a crime-watch group.

"The results show promise beyond curbing evictions," said Christine Helfrich, an assistant professor of occupational therapy.

"It's really an exciting project," said Helfrich. "Our overall observations are that people's life skills are definitely improving and eviction rates are decreasing."

Recent federal efforts to combat homelessness have focused on moving people into permanent homes. The moves are important, but without preparation they often prove unsuccessful because clients need to refresh rusty skills and build new ones to adapt. Helfrich's study has tackled the challenges

that emerge in the housing transition for people with a history of homelessness and sometimes mental illness, substance abuse, domestic abuse, and other trauma. It is unique because it tapped historically homeless clients from its design and included them in focus groups where they were consulted on the biggest obstacles in adjusting to independent residential life after being homeless.

Funded by a \$450,000 grant from the National Institute of Disability and Rehabilitation Research, the study was a demonstration of cost-effectiveness, especially when considering the cost of these services versus a shelter, hospital, or other treatment. Helfrich started it as a faculty mem-

ber at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and when the time came to complete her research, she brought the

grant with her to BU Sargent College.

The study has been so successful that Helfrich is seeking additional funding for a large nationwide study that would broaden the program to other settings, such as a group home, a day program, and a shelter, to further demonstrate its effectiveness.

"People need the skills to stay in housing," she said. "And this would help not only the people who are homeless, it would help the staff working in shelters and other settings improve their track record of placements, which helps encourage more landlords to accept people."

The study also exceeded expectations for the retention of the participants, all Emergency Housing Program participants from Northwestern Memorial Hospital or single-room occupancy residents of the Lawson House YMCA.

"No one had really done a study like this," Helfrich said. "We thought we'd lose a lot more people by attrition and we were really interested in looking at feasibility issues."

At the beginning, each client was thoroughly assessed for four to six hours on cognitive and motor function, substance abuse, trauma history, and readiness to change, Helfrich said. Then, clients each received a manual with the material to be covered in classes on money management, nutrition, community safety, cleanliness, and how to take care of themselves and their rooms. The life skills that were shared in the groups, however, came from group members themselves, who were considered experts based on their own experiences transitioning from

homelessness. That method of instruction, based on social learning theory, was found to be more effective than having the therapist or another authority figure serve as the expert instructor, said Helfrich.

The classes covered practical information such as how to eat on modest means. A group member, for example, pointed out the locations of soup kitchens and food pantries and detailed their practices, such as the three dozen eggs that one place gives to a single client, said Helfrich.

Groups also went to a local bank that agreed to let the clients open accounts with no fees. When homeless, the clients had prior bad experiences with banks and were wary of entering, but a bank official welcomed them, walked them through procedures, and some of them even signed up for direct deposit and other stabilizing programs.

The study also sought to create a positive experience with police, but no one showed up when they were supposed to go to a police station. So, they tried a neighborhood police beat meeting. At first, the clients were too intimidated to speak at the meeting in the YMCA's upscale neighborhood, but after they saw that neighbors shared an interest in reducing drug dealing and street crime, they chimed in. Soon, the clients were supplying valuable information to police, who stepped up patrols to good effect.

Throughout the study, participants had individual meetings with researchers to reevaluate the study and their progress; they also met three and six months after the study. Now, researchers are analyzing results and the role that mental illness diagnoses, history of homelessness, trauma, and abuse play in how well participants fared in the study.

At the end, certificates were presented to those who completed the study, and many bought frames and hung the framed diplomas in their very own rooms.

"They really wanted something to show for what they accomplished," she said. "They took a lot of pride in completing it."

Above Left: Christine Helfrich, assistant professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at BU Sargent College. Right: Helfrich's study helps once-homeless people enjoy a stable life off the streets. Clients receive instruction on cleanliness and safety and relearn how to take care of themselves.

