

Welcome Home links 'friends' with the formerly homeless

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Debbie Jodoin is getting help adjusting to her new life through the Welcome Home program.

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RAMON GONZALEZ

WESTERN CATHOLIC REPORTER

Debbie Jodoin spent a year living in a shelter and begging for change on the streets. Her situation improved dramatically five months ago when she moved into a brand new apartment through the Housing First program.

Jodoin, 55, is one of about 1,800 people who have made the journey from homelessness to home since Edmonton began its 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness three years ago.

But as Jodoin knows, adjusting to a new life off the streets takes time and is usually a lonely experience. In the beginning, she spent a lot of time alone in her new home, except for casual visits from her children.

Now, thanks to Catholic Social Services' Welcome Home Program, Jodoin receives weekly visits from a Christian couple who spend quality time with her. She is happy with the arrangement because the couple talks to her, and takes her out for movies and dinner or simply for coffee.

Welcome Home is a volunteer-based program that provides companionship to individuals and families making the transition from homelessness to home. The goal of the program is to reduce the loneliness and social isolation faced by

many newly-housed people.

Jodoin calls the Housing First program a "real miracle" and thanks Mayor Stephen Mandel for her new apartment. One day, after spending hours sitting on the concrete under the wet rain, Jodoin entered a coffeehouse and asked the mayor for change and told him of her situation.

In addition to giving her \$20, the mayor invited Jodoin to contact Housing First. She did and in a matter of weeks she got her new apartment. It is a one-bedroom apartment with a fully-equipped kitchen, a den and small living room with a sofa and TV set.

NEW NEIGHBOURHOOD

Jodoin was happy there but said she began to feel lonely in her new neighbourhood. She uses a walker so she can't go far; plus she doesn't know the neighbourhood well. So she signed up to have volunteers from the Welcome Home program visit her.

She hadn't seen anybody for months, except for social workers, when the volunteers, a married couple, showed up. "They are a very good Christian people. I do enjoy their company."

Catholic Social Services has the contract to run the Welcome Home Program, which trains volunteers from various faith communities and then partners them with recently housed individuals who agree to participate.

So far, nine matches have been made – two fully-trained volunteers per participant – and four other matches are pending, said Sister Mary Clare Stack, CSS's manager of parish relations and the "promotions person" for Welcome Home. Volunteers must undergo nine hours training and clear a police record check before they are matched.

The matches work together for six months and then they are evaluated. If things are okay, they can continue for another six months, Stack explained. At that point, CSS ends its involvement.

Participants and volunteers may continue the relationship after that if they wish, she said.

Stack said the Welcome Home team continues to do workshops in churches to engage more volunteers and to let congregations know about Welcome Home. "We have 15 participants waiting for a match," lamented Stack. "We need more volunteers."

Sister Roseanne Favreau, a Sister of Charity of Evron from Pickardville, near Westlock, and Eunice Bland, an Anglican woman from Bon Accord, were matched last July with a 50-year-old man who lives in a one-bedroom apartment in the west end.

The trio meet in a small restaurant every week and spend at least two hours together, when the participant shows up. For his birthday, Favreau and Bland wanted to take him to the Imax Theatre for a movie but he didn't go.

The next time they asked him why. The man said he just wanted to be with them at the restaurant. He has a bad back and the medication makes him tired and sleepy.

"We have a cup of coffee and we talk and he is happy," Favreau said. "Last week he just poured out his heart but we don't ask anything; we just accept what he says."

The women asked the newly-housed man if they were helping him by coming out every week and he said, "Oh, yes." The man has no friends in the area and said he looks forward to his weekly meeting with Favreau and Bland.

Favreau said he is afraid to take a bus because he may meet one of his old friends and return to his former life.

Favreau, a religious sister for 52 years, is well suited for her volunteer position with Welcome Home. She spent 34 years in mission, including 26 years in the Ivory Coast and eight in Peru.

PRESENCE, FRIENDSHIP

She came back from Peru in 2010 and wanted to do something. One day she accompanied a sister to a Welcome Home meeting and was hooked immediately.

She loves her new ministry. "My thing in mission was to be friends with the people, visiting, listening to the people. Here too. (Newly-housed people) need to feel they are not alone. It's important just to be there with the person. This is a ministry of presence – presence and friendship."

Jane, who didn't want to use her last name, is a well-educated woman who grew up affluent but ended up homeless following her mental health diagnosis and her subsequent divorce.

MAGNIFICAT

Her homelessness ended about 18 months ago when, thanks to Housing First, she moved into a two-bedroom apartment in southwest Edmonton. The apartment is clean, nicely furnished and has a pleasant view of a nearby farm. Jane shares her home with Magnificat, her rag doll cat.

The 54-year-old woman had lived in Castledowns for years so she didn't know many people in her new neighbourhood. She has been attending an Anglican church nearby but hasn't made any solid friendships yet.

"It's actually quite lonely here," she lamented.

But she said the two volunteers from Welcome Home who have been visiting her for the last three weeks have made life much more bearable. "It's a great program," she says. "These people have improved my life."

FARMERS' MARKET

Two weeks ago the volunteers took Jane to the Farmers' Market and they were planning a visit to the Muttart Conservatory. "It's a nice match," she said of the volunteers. "It has worked quite well for me. It's nice to know that at least once a week I'll see them."

Those interested in volunteering with Welcome Home can contact Jacqueline Bass at 780-378-2544.



**Sr. Roseanne
Favreau**