The Story of Homelessness

It’s Thursday afternoon. You have been told you have till the end of the day to vacate your apartment. How did this happen? Where did you go wrong? You were sure you would find another job after the layoff. Times were tough but you had always managed to stay one step ahead of the bills and rent. Then your unemployment ran out. You began to skip eating on some days to save money. You sold your car to pay your rent. You borrowed from friends. That was hardest of all. Your faith in yourself was gone. You began to doubt your ability to work. You have nowhere to turn.

Nowhere To Go

You leave your apartment with what you can carry. It’s cold out and you’re hungry. You call an old friend and ask if you can stay with him for a few days. He is hesitant but says yes. You sleep on his sofa trying to make yourself as scarce as possible. You ask if he has any job leads. You help around the apartment. You are in the way. After a few days your friend tells you he has company from out of town coming. He is sorry but you have to go.

You leave on Monday and carry what you can. Where do you go? Your family ties are not good. Your friends all have their own lives and many of them are also struggling. You go to the train station to stay warm. The smell of coffee from the coffee stand is overwhelming. You have $1.85 in your pocket. You buy a small coffee and a donut. What good will it do you anyway? You watch the trains going by and wonder why you continue to live. It would be so easy to throw yourself in front of one of those trains. No more cold. No more hunger. No more pain.

The First Night On The Streets

A policeman approaches. You have been sitting at the train station for several hours now. He asks you when you are moving on. Moving on to where? You can’t tell him you have no place to go. It’s too embarrassing. He could arrest you for vagrancy. You leave and begin to wander aimlessly around the city. You’re cold and tired. You would give anything for a warm bed. It’s not going to happen tonight. You end up downtown and find a doorway to curl up in. Hopefully it is dark enough to keep you out of sight. You begin to cry. How did you get here? You doze off and on all night but never really sleep. When daybreak comes you need to move on before the police come.

Officially Homeless

You are so tired you don’t think you can go on. But you do. You look terrible. Your clothes are dirty. Your hair is greasy. Your hungry. You go back to the train station. Hopefully the same policeman is not on duty. He is. You are now
recognized as a homeless person. He tells you of the “shelter.” He even offers to drop you off down there. You are horrified. Shelters are for drunks and the mentally ill. You don’t belong there no matter how bad things are. You don’t need help. He tells you to move on then.

You find a quiet place under the bridge nearby and cover yourself with all your clothes. You finally pass out. When you wake it’s freezing and raining. It’s dark out. You are too weak to move. The pain in your stomach is excruciating. You go back to sleep and drift into a dream about food. The next day you feel sick and dizzy. You go to the bathroom a little ways from where you slept. This has become home. You begin talking to yourself just to hear a voice. You collect cans to get enough for a sandwich. You want to eat the whole thing but need to save half for tomorrow. The people you pass stare at you. You are now an outcast. Why bother looking for a job now? Who would hire you looking like this? You don’t have an address or phone number to give them anyway. You go back to your little spot under the bridge.

**A Ray Of Hope**

As you lie there in hopelessness a car door slams. Someone is approaching you. He says hi and walks very slowly towards you. He says his name is Chris and he is there to help. He offers you a baggy filled with food and a juice box. You take it. You talk for a little while and he tells you he is from Lowell Transitional Living Center. He tells you of hot meals and a warm bed. He tells you they can help. You are sad, angry and feeling hopeless. They can’t help you. Chris stays a little longer then gives you a blanket and some socks. He tells you to come by the center if you change your mind. You thank him and devour the food.

**Not What You Expected**

After several more days of cold, rain and hunger you are ready to give up. You have two choices. Either end it all or try the shelter. You decide to go there for a look. You walk through the wooden fence and enter from the side as the sign says. As you walk into the yard you see a few people sitting at picnic tables smoking and talking. Some are even laughing! You go in the door. Inside is warm and people are sitting around on couches listening to the radio. Two older men are in the corner playing dominos. Some others are reading the newspaper. There is the smell of food being cooked in the air. At the desk are two people. One of them smiles at you and asks if he can help you. A door opens behind you and Chris comes out of the office. He looks at you and recognition comes over his face. He tells you how glad he is to see you. No one says that to you anymore. It feels so good to hear it. He introduces you to the man at the front desk. He welcomes you also. No one is staring at you.

Chris gives you some papers to fill out. Where did you stay last night? How did you come to be homeless? Do you have any income? Who can they contact in an
emergency? This last one is tough. You put down your mother and hope that if something does happen she will take the call. You really wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t. You finish the forms and give them to George at the desk. He asks for an ID and takes a copy of it. He tells you supper is at six. He gives you a towel, soap, shampoo, toothbrush and toothpaste. You wait in line to take a shower. People are talking and joking all around you. This is not what you expected. Where were all the crazy people? Where were all the drug addicts?

**Fitting In**

After a hot shower you go to the dining room. There are several large round tables in the large room. You get in line and pick up your dinner. The lady behind the counter smiles at you as she serves you. No one smiles at you anymore. You sit at one of the tables with a dozen other people. The guy next to you starts talking to you. He asks about your life and tells you about his. He is a heroin addict. He has been clean 12 days he tells you. He has lost everything just like you. He wants to get better. He wants a job. He wants his family back. He is just like you! After dinner you help with cleanup. It feels good to have a purpose.

You and your new friend go out to the yard for some air. He offers you one of his cigarettes. He tells you about the center and how much they have helped him. You talk some more. When you go back inside the tv is on. People are laughing at some comedy. You get your bed assignment and are told where to get clean linens to make it up. Others are dong the same. Some are lying on their bed reading, others are in the yard and others are watching television. This is not what you expected.

You are very tired and fall asleep almost immediately. This is the first time you have slept on a bed in over two weeks. Despite the noise you fall sound asleep. The next morning you wake to people getting dressed. Some are going to work, others to school. There is coffee and muffins in the dining room. It feels so good to not go hungry anymore.

**Help is Here**

You are set up to see a case manager in the afternoon. You go to her office at the back of the building. She smiles and tells you her name is Robin. You begin to tell her your whole story. She suggests several things including training programs and job placements. You begin to feel hope. After she gives you a list of places and programs she asks you to talk to Laurie. Laurie is the mental health clinician. You are shocked but agree. Laurie is warm and speaks in a soft voice. As you talk to her things you haven’t dealt with come tumbling out. It feels so good to let it out! She tells you that all is not lost and sometimes relationships can be repaired. You begin to feel hope. She suggests that you see an outside counselor and offers to set
up an appointment. You agree. She inquires about your physical health and asks about the cough you have. She suggests you see the shelter nurse.

You knock on the shelter nurse’s door and she greets you with a smile. Her name is Claire. She gives you a check up and some cough medicine. She asks when the last time was that you saw a doctor. It has been years. She offers to help you see a doctor at the health center. You agree. There is hope.

After several days at the shelter you realize that as bad as things can get there is always hope. There are people who care. You are working on your resume. You are eating three times a day. You have a place to sleep. You have a hot shower every day. You are feeling better and looking better. You even have a few dollars from doing day labor. You’ve come a long way to get here. You never imagined you would end up in a homeless shelter. Shelters are for other people. But here you are. This is not what you expected. There is hope. There is help.
What is Lowell Transitional Living Center’s History and Mission Statement?

The Lowell Transitional Living Center began in August of 1986 as the Middlesex Shelter. The “Shelter” as it is frequently called began as a direct response by a group of citizens to the plight of individuals and families living in their cars as the temperatures frequently dipped below zero. Their challenge began with “How can we as a community eliminate the need for individuals to live in their vehicles?” Their response resulted in a 20-bed night shelter that also provided hot meals, clean clothing, and a shower to homeless men and women of Greater Lowell. There were already three family shelters in Lowell meeting the needs of many homeless families within the community. This was the first single persons shelter in the area, however.

During the years between 1986 and the present, the “shelter” has grown from 20 to 90 beds yet even with this larger number of beds frequently experiences overflow in the winter months. Additionally, the agency has opened its meal program to the community at large. Since 1986 hundreds of individuals have been placed in housing, hundreds died from their substance abuse problems, and many hundreds lingered in and out of homelessness. Simultaneous to this evolution, was the breakdown of many community resources such as the Department of Mental Health, Department of Social Services, Division of Youth Services and many more. Young adults began flooding homeless shelters, creating a new generation of homeless, disenfranchised individuals. Furthermore, as the population has aged, many elders on fixed incomes and without family support, began appearing in homeless shelters. Times were definitely changing.

In 1996, after a decade in existence, the vision of the organization was moving from “three hots and a cot” to a multi-service agency providing a broad scope of services to those in need. The staff of the Middlesex Shelter began to discuss with board members, community leaders and other like agencies alternative ways to meet the changing needs of the growing number of people.
In December 1998, after much local and national research the Middlesex Shelter adopted a “sober” policy. Thus they changed from a “wet shelter” which they had been for the past 12 years to a “dry shelter.” The board, staff, administration and clients all came to believe that in a sober environment much more could be accomplished. Visits to several programs in Vermont, Maine and Utah proved this theory to be correct. The shelter has since operated under this policy with good results. The adoption of a sober policy set the foundation on which they could begin to build a program of services geared toward assessing, addressing and resolving issues that led towards an individual’s homelessness. The shelter is just that... a shelter form the madness of the streets. It is a home to those with no home.
What Makes LTLC Unique?
Lowell Transitional Living Center Today
A Multi-Service Agency

Today Lowell Transitional Living Center, (LTLC), provides individuals with many services they would otherwise go without. LTLC is the only homeless shelter in the city of Lowell for individuals 18 and over. In addition to serving as a place to sleep and eat, LTLC has grown to provide clients with a chance to make life better. The Center offers clients the following services all free of charge.

- Case management
- Nursing care
- Detox referrals and transportation
- Mental health care
- Representative payee program
- Support groups
- 1:1 Substance abuse treatment
- GED Program

Description of Services and Programs

Case Management- The case managers at LTLC provide an assessment of client’s needs, refer clients to other agencies, help in filling out forms and provide guidance as needed. The role of the case manager is to direct the person to the programs and services most needed by the individual. The case manager serves as a kind of traffic controller of the center. Many clients come to depend on their case manager to help them sort through the often confusing and frightening times. In many cases, the client has no one else to go to. The main thing case workers always keep in mind is the importance of listening. For some of these individuals, there is no one else to hear them.
Nursing Care- Many residents at the shelter have little or no contact with the medical profession. Many are scared and untrusting of doctors and hospitals. They often feel like they will be kept against their will or placed in a residential facility. Additionally, few have medical coverage of any kind. Access to treatment and medications is difficult. The nursing staff at LTLC provide individuals with someone they trust to help them with medical needs. The nurses do assessments and provide clients with medications that are ordered by a nurse practitioner. They also set clients up with medical appointments at Lowell Community Health Center. Many individuals would not receive any kind of medical treatment if not for the nursing staff at LTLC.

Detox Referals and Transportation- Many people come to the center to seek help for their substance abuse issues. The first step for many is to enter a detox unit. The center has a full-time detox counselor who works with detox units all over the state to try and find placement for individuals. A good part of the counselor’s day will be spent on the phone trying to track down empty beds. This can prove to be a very trying experience. Many clients have no insurance and this makes it difficult because there are only so many “free” beds on the units.

Once a bed has been found, the center provides transportation to the detox site. This is one of the toughest jobs at LTLC. Often times the clients are irrational and argumentative. The driver must remain calm and clear-headed while trying to transport one or more clients. Some sites are as far as two hours away! This can make for a very long day!

Mental Health Care- A good many of the individuals who come to LTLC suffer from serious mental health issues. The center employs a full time mental health clinician. Her job is to provide 1:1 care, make referrals to outside agencies, make assessments for benefits clients may be entitled to and handle crisis situations that may arise.
**Representative Payee Program**- If an individual is incapable of managing their money due to mental health or other issues, an agency such as Social Security may require an individual to have a responsible party look after their financial affairs. A representative from the center will keep the client’s money in a special account. The client is given the money in small amounts and based on their needs. This often insures that the money is not spent on drugs or just mismanaged leaving the client with no funds.

![Money Image]

**Support Groups**- There are several groups that operate within the Center. One of the most utilized is the AA group which takes place daily. Additionally, there have been many volunteers that have come to the center and offered everything from craft classes to yoga and meditation. These types of programs give individuals a sense of community and belonging.

![Support Group Image]

**Substance Abuse Treatment**- Case managers as well as other members of the staff provide residents with substance abuse material, referrals, and guidance. They will take the time to do a full assessment of an individual’s abuse history and try to provide the best solution for their needs.

**GED Program**- The center has an education coordinator who provides daily classes and tutoring for those seeking to obtain their GED. Many clients have utilized this service and gone on to further their education.
What Are Best Practices of LTLC?

The center has operated under the philosophy that a focused, client-driven approach toward the problem of homelessness is the most effective way of dealing with this problem. So what has LTLC found works best? Each member of the staff that was interviewed stated the same thing. The problem has to approached from a multi-service concept. Their belief is that you can’t just treat the symptom; rather you have to treat the whole problem. The center could just provide a place to stay and something to eat but all agree that this will not lead to any type of transition. What the center offers is hope. Hope for a second chance and a better life.

By far some of the most successful programs have been the detox program, the GED program, and the outreach program. The outreach program is designed to find homeless people who will not come to the center. The outreach workers provide these individuals with clothes, food and blankets. Occasionally the outreach worker is able to persuade the person to come inside. This program has saved many lives since its inception.

Funding has evolved in many ways for the center. What the center does not rely on is one source. Financial support comes from many places. This makes it less likely that funds will completely dry up. When one source has a cut back often times another source will be able to make up the difference. LTLC’s two main sources of funding are the Department of Transitional Assistance, (DTA), and the Stewart B. McKinney Grant which is a federal grant. In the last two years both of these sources have had drastic budget cuts. This has had a tremendous effect on the Center. At one point, two case managers had to be laid off, nursing was cut back and breakfast was no longer served. Fortunately, some of the funds have been restored and private donations and fundraisers continue to make up the difference.

Volunteers are a big part of the center’s success as well. Many church groups volunteer weekly or monthly to help serve meals. This keeps employment costs down. Many students from local colleges come in to do internships. They are able to help in many capacities including paperwork, client interactions, kitchen and front desk help.
Without these dedicated unpaid individuals the center could not operate. They are one of the center’s greatest assets.
They were able to make the bunk beds fit the mattresses. The following story reflects the reaction of a 19 year old Vietnamese resident.

One evening, when I went back to the Shelter from my school, I saw that something had changed inside the building. There were many regular beds changed to bunk beds, the new kind beds I just saw the first time in this Shelter. I like these new beds very much, and the staff was very happy because they can have more people come to live. Another benefit is that the residents have a little more space between two beds. I think that was a great idea to use the bunk beds in here. Not many people know where these bunk beds came from. These beds were gifts from student donations from the high school. With humane intentions and an upright heart, these student work for many days and spent a long time assembling these products for people less fortunate than themselves. They want to help poor people and improve their community.
TLC has formed many partnerships over the past several years with many community agencies. Some are informal links in which another agency will help with a client at LTLC as part of their own job and a sense of professional courtesy amongst the staff from each program. Many of these people know each other quite well from long working relationships as well as networking at seminars, lectures and city meetings. These agencies often receive funding from the same places. Therefore there can be competition for money. Most, like LTLC, have private donors as well. When it comes right down to it they are all trying to accomplish the same things and depend on one another to do this. Some of the Middlesex Community Partners in addition to LTLC are:

**House of Hope Inc.** The House of Hope provides shelter advocacy and education for homeless families. They can accommodate from 12 to 15 families. LTLC will often refer people with children to the House of Hope as they are not equipped to or licensed for children.

**Merrimack House and Pawtucket House.** These are also family shelters that operate through Community Teamwork Inc. Both shelters house up to six families and provide many support services.

**Merrimack Valley Food Bank.** This program distributes food to over 90 non-profit agencies including soup kitchens, food pantries and shelters. The food bank provides much of the food that LTLC uses.

**The Salvation Army.** They have been providing various services to persons in need in the Greater Lowell community for over 100 years. They offer food, clothing, fuel assistance and help at Christmas and Thanksgiving.

There are many other partners throughout the city including churches, universities and other organizations. In addition, many local businesses contribute on a daily basis. **Market Basket** and **Dunkin Donuts** are just two of these. Without these partnerships within the community most or all of these programs would cease to exists. Partnerships are one of the keys to sustainability for any non-profit of this size.
How Has LTLC Solved the Problem Of Sustainability?

S
o how has LTLC managed to stay open 24 hours day, 365 days a year for the past 17 years? The answer is complex and cannot be attributed to any one thing. The most important aspect is dedication. Most of people who are involved with the center have been there for several years. Mark Cote is the executive director of LTLC. He has been there for the past six years in that capacity. Transitions of leadership have always been handled smoothly and without much upset. This allows the program to continue to provide all the services that it does without interruption.

Funding is always in danger. In order to continue to provide care the center is always seeking new sources of funding. In order to keep ahead of cutbacks, staff members are always soliciting companies and organizations to help. Many times LTLC has been in very bad financial condition but somehow always managed to pull through.
What Barriers and Road Blocks Has LTLC Faced?

LTLC has encountered many roadblocks over the years. Funding is once again the biggest of all roadblocks. Beyond money issues are other problems as well, however. The case managers at LTLC will tell you their biggest problem has been follow-up with clients who have moved on. Once a client has moved out the caseworkers are too busy with incoming clients to be able to check on them. This has led to many clients “backsliding.” Many clients return to the center within months of leaving. Part of the reason is that there is no one to help them with this transition that can be frightening for many.

Another issue is resistance to the shelter on the part of the community. Although everyone agrees on the need for a shelter, no one wants to live near one. This means that the shelter remains located in and around drug-infested areas that make it hard for clients in treatment. At the left is an example of this issue.
What is The Future of LTLC?

The facility that LTLC is currently housed is too small to accommodate the ever-expanding program offerings. In addition, the increasing number of clients seeking services has reached record levels with no sign of letting up in the near future. Across the state shelters are at capacity if not overflow. LTLC has been at overflow status for over four years and is in need of new space in order to better serve those in need.

LTLC has recently purchased a building for the purpose of developing a new home for the existing ninety-bed shelter. In addition, the new facility will house twelve units of permanent housing for clients who are stable and working. This will prove to be a critical part in addressing the affordable housing crisis that has created a gridlock in emergency shelters.

The hope is that Lowell Transitional Living Center will be able to give people a hand up not a hand out. With a consistent focus, strong leadership and a dedicated staff they will move forward.

There is hope. There is help. At LTLC they end homelessness… one person at a time.
Resources

The following resources were used in order to put this article together.

1. The Lowell Sun Archives
2. The Daily Homeless news
3. The US Census Bureau
4. Mark Cote Executive Director of LTLC
5. Robin Brown Lead Case Manager LTLC
6. Chris Morency Out Reach Worker LTLC
7. The entire staff of LTLC
8. The clients and residents of LTLC
9. Resource materials compiled by LTLC staff