

Unique homeless housing option opens

'M Station' offers hope to homeless families

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- Jim Swift

AUSTIN (KXAN) - Jennifer Johnson fights back the tears as she recalls how her life came to this.

"I'd ended up getting laid off in December. And that was my second layoff and I had an eviction before," she said.

Fortunately, Johnson and her year-old son landed at the Texas Baptist Children's Home where they had their own bedroom and shared a common room with several other families.

There was a caseworker there who helped her begin the long search for a job and a roof.

"It's embarrassing when you go to jobs and they ask for your address and it's a shelter or when you go and you're looking for help and you have to write, 'Homeless' on every single paper," said Johnson. "Emotionally, it just breaks you down and makes you humble."

It was at the group home that the young mother learned about Foundation Communities , a nationally known Austin nonprofit organization that uses green building techniques to construct or renovate housing. The organization makes it a point to include space for working class families and for the struggling homeless.

It's Children's Home Initiative offers not just brand new green-built housing on a sliding scale, but child care and programs to help residents find jobs, learn English, save money, go to college, get needed physical and mental health care or substance-abuse counseling.

There's even a free income tax preparation service that has claimed millions of dollars in refunds for low-income residents in all of the Foundation Communities developments, in Austin and in the Dallas/Fort Worth area.

"It's not an easy program to get into," said Foundations Communities executive director Walter Moreau. "Folks have to meet with their case manager every week and really work on employment and education and child care issues, you know, really get back on their feet."

The group's latest project is M Station in East Austin, next door to a Capital Metro Rail stop, bus routes and a major bicycle lane thoroughfare.

"M Station's really designed as mixed-income," Moreau said. "There are 150 apartments; 15 of them are for extremely low-income or homeless families."

With help from her fiancé, Wayne Dungey, Jr., Johnson and her now 1 1/2-year-old baby moved into a third floor apartment at M Station. Dungey only wishes he could help more, but he, too,

despite a B.S. degree from the University of Texas and a Master's from the University of Phoenix, is unemployed.

"It's tough to see her going through the things she's going through and you want to help; you want to provide," he said. "You know you could do it, but it's just getting the opportunity to do it.

"I look for work every day on Craigslist, Working Texas and different leads I get. I'm not the only person; other friends of mine are going through the same thing; they went to school."

Fortunately his fiancé was able to find a part-time job at a Round Rock restaurant and she's exploring the possibility of enrolling her son in a new child care center now under construction at M Station.

In the fall, she'll be taking classes through a nursing education program at Austin Community College .

"My actual goal is to have my own nonprofit pregnancy center and so the medical background is definitely going to help," Johnson said.

"I went through so much in my whole life dealing with a miscarriage and a second pregnancy. I didn't know the resources that were out there. So I want to provide those for other people who are struggling, who need diapers or formula or maternity clothes or just somebody to talk to."

For now, though, Johnson is happy to simply have a home. As a part of the Children's Home Initiative, she will have the opportunity to stay in that home after her 18-month CHI program ends. At that point, she'll have to pay higher, but still below market rents.

Her odds are pretty good. Moreau said the effort has a 90 percent success rate.