

# Agencies launch new program in Worcester helping homeless young adults

Posted Oct 14, 2016 at 6:00 PM

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WORCESTER – “Turi,” as the 21-year-old Worcester resident asks to be called, didn’t transition into adulthood, as most young people do: she was thrust into it.

“I didn’t have much support,” she said, when she was ejected from California’s foster system at age 18 and traveled across the country to stay with a family friend, an arrangement that didn’t last long. “I had to learn everything on my own.”

Homeless young adults like Turi now have an alternative in Worcester, with the launch of the Transition Aged Youth program, a new government-subsidized service developed by multiple public and private agencies that provides housing, case management and health care for those individuals. Since launching in July, the program already has 12 people it is helping, and coordinators expect it to reach its 40-client capacity by the end of the fiscal year next June.

James Cuddy, executive director of the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, which is helping to run the program, said expectations for the effort are it won’t stop there.

“I think all of us in this room are envisioning a Commonwealth-wide scenario,” he said, addressing dozens of people at a launch event for the program at SMOC’s Martin Luther King Jr. Opportunity Center on Chandler Street Friday morning.

Unlike other government-funded homelessness prevention programs in the area, which either focus on the chronic homeless or provide limited targeted support for a younger demographic, the TAY program intends to create a comprehensive system of services for 18- to 24-year-old homeless men and women, said SMOC’s Susan Gentili. Previous counts have estimated there could be hundreds of such individuals living in the city, she added, people “who really have no other resources” to help them.

The TAY program steps in to provide housing vouchers paid for by the state government as well as case management services, health care, recovery support, and access to other opportunities. Funding for those latter services comes from the Massachusetts Behavioral Health Partnership, according to Ms. Gentili, who estimated the entire bunch of services offered through TAY costs around \$300,000 a year.

Other agencies that were involved with the planning and development of the program include the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, whose president and chief executive, Janice B. Yost, was specifically credited by Mr. Cuddy with spearheading the effort; the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development; the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, and the city of Worcester.

In addition, Brandeis University has agreed to study the initiative, officials said – an important role in possibility validating the program for further rollout in the future.

Representatives from the various involved organizations who spoke at Friday's event said getting the program's services to fit within the complicated regulatory framework for homeless services was a difficult task. State Sen. Harriette L. Chandler, one of two lawmakers along with state Rep. James O'Day who spoke at the launch, said achieving progress in the effort to combat homelessness is an exercise in patience.

"You wonder if you're ever going to get to the end, and what the end is going to be," the Worcester Democrat said. "We're not at the end yet, but we're off to a very good start to it."

Matilde Castiel, the city's commissioner of health and human services, reminded attendees at the event that homeless people can be easily dismissed by society, despite the fact the reasons they became homeless can happen to anyone.

"We fail to see the individual," she said. "At one point, (a homeless person) was no different from you or I."

In Turi's case, she had to decide between continuing her education as a nurse at Worcester State University or dropping out to devote her time to working to support herself. She chose the latter, and eventually ended up at a local shelter, where she was introduced to the TAY program.

Today, she is waiting on a housing voucher from the program while she works for a telecommunications company. Her ultimate goal is to one day go back to school and save up enough money in her career to return to her native country of Kenya to help people there.

"It's helped," she said of TAY's role in assisting her toward that goal. "I didn't have a support system I could turn to – they definitely fulfill that part."

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