

Efforts by Portland, state navigate path out of chronic homelessness

[pressherald.com/2019/04/21/headlineheadlineheadline/](https://www.pressherald.com/2019/04/21/headlineheadlineheadline/)

By Randy Billings Staff Writer

April 21, 2019

Steve Bowie thinks back to the two years he spent on Portland's streets and remembers the feeling of hopelessness.

For 28 months, he battled with a longtime addiction to alcohol and spent nights on floor mats at the city-run Oxford Street Shelter or at Milestone Recovery, a smaller shelter for people with substance use disorder.

Then, in 2017, Bowie was one of 30 homeless people selected to live in an unusual new supported housing facility in Portland called Huston Commons. Based on a philosophy known as housing first, Huston Commons had a collection of small, furnished apartments with 24-hour staff support and a community kitchen and laundry.

That 350-square-foot furnished efficiency proved to be the break Bowie needed to begin putting his life back together.

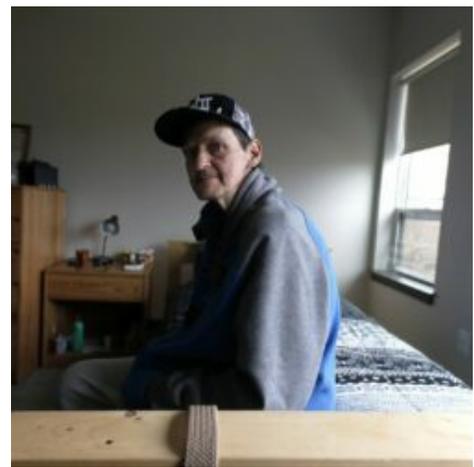
"When I first got here I was pretty much dragging my knuckles on the ground with my head down kicking stones," said the 47-year-old Portland native. Now, Bowie said, "I'm completely drug-free and alcohol-free for the first time in 30 years."

Experiences like that and widespread support for the housing first approach led Maine lawmakers to introduce a roster of bills to create more supported housing projects for the homeless, not just in Portland but also in communities around the state.

The proposals come at a critical time for Maine's largest city, which is struggling to support overflowing homeless shelters that are used by people who come from communities around the state.

And lawmakers and advocates say the election of a supportive governor and Legislature means the time is right to reduce long-term homelessness in Maine.

But one other challenge may be more difficult to overcome. Communities outside Portland have so far been reluctant to support such housing projects.



Steve Bowie, 47, sits on his bed in his furnished efficiency at Huston Commons in Portland. Formerly homeless and using local shelters, the Portland native credits the "housing first" facility with helping him pull his life back together. *Staff photo by Ben McCanna*

“Clearly with a new governor and new Legislature, I’m optimistic we will be able to make progress in an area we have not been able to in the past,” said Rep. Michael Brennan, D-Portland. “Chronic homelessness is a problem we can deal with, and funding more housing-first housing units, especially in underserved areas in the state, is the best way to do that.”

The majority of people who become homeless are able to get back on their feet after a short time. But the longer someone remains homeless, the more difficult it becomes for him or her to regain stability, health and independence. Mental health issues and substance use disorders go unaddressed. People become more difficult to reach.

Providing supported housing for chronically homeless adults as a first step back to independence is widely seen as the most effective intervention. The premise is simple: Give people a safe and stable place to escape the stress, anxiety and uncertainty of living on the streets. Then they can begin to work on the issues that contributed to their homelessness in the first place. Thus the name: housing first.

“When somebody is homeless, they’re under a great deal of stress, and symptoms of things like mental illness are very apparent when somebody is under stress,” said Cullen Ryan, the executive director of Community Housing of Maine, a nonprofit that provides housing to people who were homeless.

“When you subtract that stress, people no longer are symptomatic,” Ryan said. “They’re much clearer from their mental illness and they do extremely well in housing, as long as they have adequate support.”

Housing first is endorsed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and studies have shown that permanent supportive housing costs less than relying on traditional shelters, because people use fewer emergency services after they are housed. Housing first projects can vary from new developments dedicated entirely to housing the chronically homeless to converting existing apartments or including units for the homeless in traditional market-rate projects.

Portland has three site-specific housing first projects: Logan Place, Florence House and Huston Commons. Each was developed by Avesta Housing and Preble Street provides the staffing. Each project is funded through a variety of sources, including tax incentives, grants and loans. Each facility has income limits for residents, who are expected to pay up to 30 percent of any income toward rent. The balance of the rent – or in most cases all of the rent – is covered by housing subsidies.

Community Housing of Maine, meanwhile, uses both a scattered site and inclusive housing model throughout the state. Danforth on High in Portland is an example of inclusive housing. Eleven of the 30 units are dedicated to people who have experienced long-term homelessness.

CHOM is housing 1,000 vulnerable Mainers statewide. Of those people, nearly a third have experienced homelessness and 114 were considered long-term shelter stayers, according to the agency.

Brennan is sponsoring several bills aimed at reducing homelessness. He has proposed a \$15 million bond to help build more housing first developments such as Huston Commons. And he has also submitted a resolution directing the state Department of Health and Human Services to seek a federal waiver to use Medicaid to fund housing first support services, such as caseworkers and other support offered by Preble Street.

The cost of those services ranges from \$500,000 to nearly \$1.4 million at the three existing housing first projects in Portland, according to Preble Street's most recent tax forms.

In addition, Rep. Richard Farnsworth, D-Portland, has sponsored a bill that would create a new pool of permanent housing vouchers for the chronically homeless and long-term stayers at emergency shelters.

A spokesman for Gov. Janet Mills said the governor supports efforts to reduce homelessness but did not yet have a position on the bills being considered by the Legislature.

"Safe and reliable housing is fundamental to living healthy and productive lives. Gov. Mills recognizes that for too many Mainers quality and affordable housing is often out of reach, if not completely unavailable," spokesman Scott Ogden said. "The governor continues to review these bills, but she is committed to identifying the underlying causes of homelessness in Maine and working with the Legislature in a productive way to develop strategies that can help address chronic homelessness, create housing opportunities, and lift people out of poverty."

Advocates say the proposals could ease pressure at existing emergency shelters by helping create more dedicated supportive housing in urban areas such as Portland, while also making it easier for the rural homeless to stay closer to home.

Portland's primary adult shelter routinely exceeds capacity, forcing the city to convert space at a nonprofit into a sleeping area and sometimes also opening up a city office. Now, the city manager is proposing to turn people away once the first overflow space fills up, a potential reversal of a 30-year commitment to provide shelter to anyone who asks.



Huston Commons on Bishop Street is one of three site-specific "housing first" projects in Portland. The others are Logan Place and Florence House. State lawmakers want to create more supported housing projects to fight homelessness, not just in Portland but in communities around the state. *Staff photo by Ben McCanna*

That discussion comes after the city tried and failed to collect money from surrounding communities based on the number of people who leave those cities and towns to seek shelter in Portland.

CHALLENGES

While Community Housing of Maine has provided housing for the chronically homeless at scattered sites throughout the state, larger-scale dedicated housing first projects have only been built in Portland and no other community has yet embraced the idea.

Officials in Greater Portland have been discussing the benefits of creating new housing first projects in neighboring communities. In July 2017, some officials from neighboring communities participated in a tour of Huston Commons organized through the Metro Regional Coalition by Portland City Councilor Belinda Ray.

The fact that such regional discussions about homelessness and housing are even taking place is a sign of progress, said Chris Hall, director of regional initiatives for the Greater Portland Council of Governments.

“The other communities aren’t there yet, but they’re trying,” Hall said. “It’s a conversation that hasn’t borne fruit yet. If you look back five or 10 years there wasn’t even that conversation happening.”

Westbrook Town Administrator Jerre Bryant did not respond to interview requests.

Officials in South Portland did not attend the tour of Huston Commons, but said they may include a discussion of the housing first concept at a future City Council workshop about tiny homes.

South Portland City Councilor Sue Henderson, who is a member of the metro coalition, laid out the difficulties of the decision-making process, saying the city must service all citizens and encourage attractive, environmentally sustainable developments that “promote positive social interactions.”

“There are bodies of knowledge about how pieces of this puzzle could work, (and) the challenge involves pulling them together in a manner that is politically, socially and economically acceptable,” she said. “I think we will be talking more about these issues.”

Town officials in Scarborough were impressed with the tour. Town Councilor William Donovan said it was a “moving experience to see how grateful the new residents were.” Donovan supports Brennan’s bond proposal, which could free up money to develop more housing first projects, but he wasn’t sure his town is ready for that type of development.

"The Metro Regional Coalition has not gotten far enough along to allow Scarborough to evaluate its interest. For that reason I have not yet put any proposal in front of the council," Donovan said. "Scarborough's most active efforts recently have been focused upon workforce and affordable housing" for families earning up to 80 percent of the area median income.

Falmouth officials seemed equally impressed, but they too are holding off. "There are no plans to investigate whether it would be allowed or collecting information about housing first for the council. It is not on their annual work plan," Town Manager Nathan Poore said.

Ray, the Portland city councilor, said she was "certainly disappointed" that other communities are slow to embrace housing first, but "I understood where they are coming from." She noted that many communities, including Portland, face opposition to change, especially when it comes to increasing residential density.

"Just as we have stigma associated with mental health and substance use disorder, there's a lot of stigma around affordable housing," she said. "We have a lot of work to do to reduce that stigma so people understand that bringing affordable housing into a community does not mean adverse impacts."

She is optimistic that progress can be made in surrounding communities and said she plans to continue the conversations at a regional level. "I don't for a minute doubt their sincerity in wanting to be a part of the solution," she said.

Avesta Housing President and CEO Dana Totman said the agency's housing first projects have had a deep impact.

"We literally are saving lives," he said. "The way it has changed people's lives is like no other housing program I have experienced."

Back at Huston Commons, Bowie apologizes to a reporter for the lack of seating in his 350-square-foot efficiency, which includes a full kitchen, bathroom, a twin bed and nightstand containing a small Bible with a cross necklace coiled on top. He talks about how surprised he was when he was suddenly given the keys to his new apartment and he fondly recalls the barbecue they had on move-in day.

He seems to take nothing for granted, especially his sobriety, which he credits to the staff and structure at Huston Commons. Someday, he would like to secure a housing voucher so he can move out of Huston Commons and into another apartment. But he's in no hurry.

"Right now, I don't feel too comfortable just jumping off the hook," Bowie said. "Once I get a little more strong and a little more secure, which I have been doing a really great job on, I will be able to leave and feel like there's no problem. I won't have to worry about relapse."

"It's a choice to not use," he added. "I never thought I had that."

Randy Billings can be contacted at 791-6346 or at:

[\[email protected\]](#)

Twitter: [randybillings](#)

[< Previous](#)

[Janet Mills vows more than just hot air on climate change](#)

[Next >](#)