

City Targets the Homeless, Addicted and Mentally Ill — For Help



April Hinkle and JR discuss everything from con ed bills to parenting skills.
(Cindy Rodriguez / WNYC)

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As the Mayor struggles to reduce homelessness and manage a chaotic jail system, there's been a small, targeted effort underway to identify and house some of the most marginalized people in the city. Most are men, more than a third are over 50. Several have been homeless their entire

adult lives. They struggle with addiction and mental illness and go from jail to shelter to the streets with no end in sight.

49-year-old JR had been homeless for 10 years when the city offered him a place to live about 10 months ago.

“I had people look at me in my eyes and say, ‘We don’t care what you were in jail for,’” he said. “‘We don’t care that you were an addict, that you were homeless. We’re here to help. Do you want help? And we have an apartment for you’”.

"I still was like, where is the detective, is somebody coming out of the back room to get me?" he said. "Do I have a warrant? I don't know I just didn't think it was real."

JR was 21 years old when he was convicted of burglary, sex abuse and attempted robbery and sent to prison for 18 years. WNYC agreed to identify him by his initials because he's worried about anyone knowing he was incarcerated. At the time, in the 1980's, he was a high-school drop-out and a drug addict who first experimented with PCP at age 15.

“That spiraled me out of control, using drugs and committing crimes to support my drug habit,” he said.

In prison, any support he had on the outside slowly disappeared — first his parents died, then his brother was murdered — and so in 2006, when he was released from an upstate prison, he was discharged to Bellevue men’s shelter in Manhattan and remained homeless for the next ten years.

“In the shelter system I had no therapy, no counseling, no meds, no doctors, literally nothing,” he said. “Just in and out, a revolving door into the system.”

JR has a mental illness. He’s been diagnosed with schizo-affective disorder and PTSD. He described homeless shelters as violent and chaotic and said that he often lived in fear of being stabbed or robbed. When the situation was unbearable he would leave and search for a place that felt safe, such as the stairwell of a housing project, or a basement or a park. But living on the streets also made getting arrested more likely.

The city says that over the last five years, JR went to jail nine different times for minor crimes, most of them drug offenses. In all he spent roughly 600 days in a homeless shelter and 250 days behind bars. The city knows this because they’ve been searching their databases for people like him — in and out of jail at least five times in our four years, and the same for homeless shelters. The idea is to intervene in this expensive cycle of recidivism by offering people social services — and a place to live.

Call it precision social work: targeting scant resources at a high-need population that may not have the wherewithal to get through a standard housing-application process that can be complicated and time consuming.

“There’s a piece of that that is a little bit arbitrary and more arbitrary than I think we should be comfortable with as government,” said Trish Marsik, who until recently was director of the Mayor’s Task Force on Behavioral Health and the Criminal Justice System.

Marsik said the city found 1500 people that met the criteria of a chronic recidivist. Right now, there’s funding to house 120 of them. To shrink the mentally ill population at the Rikers Island jail complex, the city has prioritized those who went to jail the most frequently.

Caseworkers from different non-profits have been looking for people in jails, court rooms and homeless shelters like the Skyway Hotel near the noisy Belt Parkway, where Carolyn Slade from the Fortune Society recently searched for a man who frequently stays there. She missed him, so Slade left her card and moved on. Earlier, she was scheduled to talk on the phone with another man at Rikers, but a judge gave him a 90-day prison sentence, so his eligibility for the housing program had to be put off. Fifteen others also went to prison before they could be helped. Slade said she would keep in touch with the man and he would still be eligible once he got released.

“I don’t want him to feel that he actually missed out on an opportunity, because the opportunity still presents itself to be housed,” she said.

Like JR, the man was skeptical the offer was real because it is so rare for an inmate being released from jail to receive housing assistance beyond what’s known as a three-quarter house, which are often unsanitary, overcrowded and dangerous operations. While some doubt the offer, others reject it. The city said 13 had refused services. Seven people could not be found. But caseworkers continue to search.

Angeles Delgado from the non-profit CAMBA has placed 30 individuals in housing. Delgado said people are glad not to have a shelter worker or a jail guard telling them what to do, but they are also overwhelmed by their new-found independence.

“We have taken people to teach them how to do the laundry, how to clean their house, because only four of the 30 clients ever reported having a home or an apartment before,” she said. “And that is big.”

The city said it costs an average of \$27,000 a year to provide one person an apartment and a caseworker. That total includes a small contribution by the client. But they save about \$15,000 a person from less frequent shelter and jail stays. That figure comes from a study conducted in 2012, when the Bloomberg Administration experimented with this program. Back then, researchers from Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health evaluated a pilot project spearheaded by the Corporation for Supportive Housing and found that people spent 115 fewer days on average in shelter, and 20 fewer days on average in jail, per year. More than half never went to jail again. Savings also came from fewer ambulance rides, emergency room admissions and psychiatric hospitalizations. JR hasn’t been arrested, hospitalized or in shelter since he moved to his new apartment. As a result, he feels less anxious and depressed.

“I was able to get rid of about three different medications. I’m down to a depression, an anti-psychotic and a mood stabilizer,” he said. “But it’s not the medication that keeps me striving, just

feeling alive and wanting to move and get up and wake up and do something. That's just having a place to stay."

JR gets visited twice a month by Fortune Society caseworker April Hinkle. She's 25-years-old and the two have been working towards keeping him stable for about 10 months. She checks the bathroom and kitchen to make sure everything is working properly.

"I see you have lots of food," she said. To which he replies, "That's nothing. "

The two are comfortable with each other. She notices the small changes he's made to his new home, like a simple shade in the living room.

They discuss doctor visits and how to get JR's medical records transferred to a methadone clinic closer to his new home. Hinkle said she would drop-off the records herself.

Hinkle also administers a drug test, and JR's urine is clean. But staying clean isn't a condition for keeping the apartment. The city said they want to help people reduce any drug or alcohol use, but the main goal is keeping them off the streets and out of shelters and jails. JR wants to eventually stop using methadone. Hinkle asks about everything from the electric bill to JR's 21-year-old daughter. Her life has been difficult too. She's a single mom with two young disabled children, and he feels overwhelmed by how much she needs him.

"Being away and out of her life for so many years — she has a lot of questions, wants a lot of answers," he said. "She has a lot of feelings, a lot of emotions, and I'm not the best person dealing with my needs coupled with her needs."

He plans to take part in a family counseling program. Building relationships with family members is a way to combat isolation but it can also be painful and complicated.

Hinkle compliments his perseverance and how he showed up in a suit to their first visit together.

Funding for the program expires in three years. The city said it would find another funding source by then. In addition, it's trying to get another 147 beds online.

JR tells Hinkle he never wants to regress to where he once was.

"That's not what I am. I am not a street person," he said. "I want a new life. I'm getting much older and I want a normal life."