

For five years, recovery housing at Bethsaida has helped women beat homelessness



BUY PHOTO

Patrice Chapman at the Bethsaida Community, Inc. recovery house in Norwich Thursday, Sept. 28, 2017. A recent graduate of the Bethsaida program, Chapman has turned her life around after surviving an abusive relationship and resulting alcohol addiction. (Tim Cook/The Day)

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Norwich — On Tuesday, 58-year-old Patrice Chapman captivated an audience at **the Connecticut Housing Coalition's annual conference** (<http://ct-housing.org/annual-conference/>) in Cromwell, her stark honesty leading the way.

She was one of those women who couldn't understand why women stayed with abusive partners — until she landed in an abusive relationship herself and began drinking to forget.

On Thursday, she told her story again, this time from a bright and cozy meditation room situated in a building rented by **Bethsaida Community Inc.** (<https://www.bethsaidact.org/about-us.html>), a nonprofit that works to empower women who are low-income, homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

The building is home to the Patricia's Place Program, a five-year-old Recovery Housing model Chapman said renewed her spirit after eight years of being beaten down.

Her words make it clear she knows the role she played, too.

"They give you all the information you need ... but you can't just sit around," Chapman said of the program's administrators. "They can hand you their blueprint and say, these are the rules and regulations, this is the structure. But if you don't put the footwork in, it's just a piece of paper."

Although the Patricia's Place Program is just one of three voluntary housing programs Bethsaida runs, it's the only one that follows **the Recovery Housing model** (<https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/4852/recovery-housing-policy-brief/>) for ending homelessness. That means a large part of the focus is on teaching the women who stay there how to live without using drugs and/or alcohol.

The model differs from **Housing First** (<https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/3892/housing-first-in-permanent-supportive-housing-brief/>), the federal government's preferred model, in that it requires its residents to maintain sobriety and seek treatment. As a result, it doesn't get funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Instead, **Patricia's Place** (<https://www.bethsaidact.org/recovery.html>) is sustained on donations, a grant from the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and the \$125-per-week fee paid by the six women who choose to live there.

Since August 2012, 53 women have come through the program, according to Bethsaida Executive Director Claire Silva. Forty-seven of them, she said, came from homelessness, while six were at risk for it.

Of the 47 who previously were homeless, 41, or 87 percent, have not returned to homelessness. And none of the six who were at risk of becoming homeless actually did.

Silva believes the program's success is due in large part to its structure and its holistic look at what's ailing each woman who comes through.

The six-bedroom, three-bathroom home features a large kitchen as well as laundry, computer, living and conference rooms. Working professionals regularly visit to talk with the women about money management, healthy relationships, cooking on a budget and more.

Clients are in close contact with Case Manager LaKisha Lee. Lee asks them where they realistically want to live after their three-to-six month stint with Patricia's Place is up. She connects them with employment opportunities. And she encourages them to do whatever brings them peace in their downtime — running, yoga, meditation, prayer.

Residents of the program aren't supervised 24/7, so admission is strict. Those with serious criminal records or recent suicide attempts, for example, don't fit the bill. Clients must have 30 days of sobriety under their belts, too, and a demonstrated commitment to keep it going.

"For many of our clients," Lee said, "this is life or death."

Of the 53 women housed so far, 26 were addicted to alcohol, 17 were addicted to drugs and 25 had a mental health diagnosis of some kind.

"A woman who is no longer allowed to live with her family due to addiction behaviors is homeless," Silva said, pointing out that about 20 percent of those who are homeless also struggle with substance abuse.

"Where can she live?" Silva continued. "Trauma needs to be part of the conversation, and ultimately she needs a safe place where her recovery from drugs and/or alcohol will be understood, valued and supported."

Chapman strongly believes that most who abuse alcohol or drugs have underlying mental health-related issues. For her, Bethsaida was a place where she finally could confront her own.

"Mental illness, it's different levels of it," she said. "Any time you're doing things to hurt yourself, whether staying in an abusive relationship or buying too many shoes, your thinking is off.

"Drinking is one of the last things to happen. The issues are already there."

Looking back, Chapman thinks she stayed in an unhealthy relationship for so long in part because she was getting older and didn't know whether she'd find a good partner. But she also began to believe the things her abuser said.

Chapman is lucky in that she had a pastor to call when she finally had had enough. It's because of that pastor that she found Bethsaida and turned her life around. Her advice for others in similar situations is to remember the people who said they would help and call them the moment you're ready to leave.

Now happily working in nursing, Chapman just a couple of weeks ago moved out of Patricia's Place and into a beautiful, wood-floored apartment overlooking the Shetucket River. She hasn't had a drink for more than a year and said having one is "not on my agenda."

Already visiting regularly to speak with current clients of Patricia's Place, Chapman one day hopes to join Bethsaida's board of directors or otherwise give back in a larger capacity.

"It is really important to have places like Bethsaida Community," Chapman said. "You can't solve anything or deal with anything if you're not getting to the meat of the problem."

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