

Helping Up, Article from Units Magazine

Helping Up

by Nicole Upano

NAA Member's "New Moves" Partnership Program Reaches 100-Family Milestone.

In the multifamily housing industry, it's rare that a story about a family asking to be let out of their lease would be characterized as heartwarming. This particular family, however, had obtained their apartment through "New Moves"—a program led by NAA member Lori Trainer, CAPS, CAM, —after their daughter's liver disease diagnosis, transplant and subsequent medical bills left them homeless.

The family saved enough money, thanks to the reduced rent offered by New Moves, and was now buying a house.

Because of medical bills and extended hospital stays, the family was forced to move out of their home and into a motel. After gaining an apartment through New Moves, their daughter is on the road to recovery and was able to obtain a job. The family moved into their new home in June.

Trainer, Vice President of Public Relations for Southern Affordable Services Inc., truly is a champion for homeless families in Florida. Through her connections in the apartment industry and local community, she has built the New Moves Partnership, a program to ensure homeless families find safe, affordable housing as well as provide other tools to get them back on their feet.

The program (first featured in the October 2011 issue of units, "Home At Last") has gained rapid success and continues to grow with Trainer at the helm. As she advocates for homeless families, she also highlights the good works the multifamily housing industry does to help those in need.

Ninety Percent Success Rate

The New Moves Program recently reached a milestone: Trainer moved the program's 100th family—LaShawn Johnson and her two daughters, Breanna and Nikiya. Johnson, a single mom, lost her insurance coverage at work when her employer cut back her hours and fell behind in her rent while paying for the family's medical expenses.

Her former apartment manager—wanting to help the family—held out for as long as possible but eventually had to evict the Johnsons. When a resident is evicted in Florida, he or she is given a final, 24-hour notice before the local sheriff does a "set out" and removes his or her belongings from the

property. On the day of the set out, Johnson went to obtain a truck to move her belongings and by the time she returned, all of her possessions had been stolen—leaving her with nothing.

With the help of the New Moves program—and donations from CORT Furniture and Westgate Resorts—Johnson moved into a furnished apartment on May 22. Johnson was also able to find full-time employment.

Such is an example of the program's many success stories. New Moves has a 90 percent success rate of families keeping to the terms of the lease and renewing the following year.

Partnerships Grow

Since the program's inception last year, New Moves has grown exponentially to help the homeless locate stable housing and provide families with all the tools necessary to prevent them from reverting into homelessness.

With Trainer's help, the program—which began as a partnership between Southern Affordable Services and Concord Management—has grown to include 12 companies encompassing approximately 100 apartment communities across Florida. The program has expanded into Michigan and is expected to continue growing nationwide.

Trainer has created a network of apartment management companies, service partners and other local businesses eager to lend a hand. Companies have donated carpeting, fire alarms, gently used furniture and washers and dryers. Recently, Trainer forged a partnership with Westgate Resorts to use their buying power to purchase welcome packages for homeless families moving into their new apartments. The Florida Apartment Association has created a task force to assist with the efforts. Members include company representatives and suppliers all offering time, money and connections to assist the families. After having lived in a motel, in an emergency shelter or on the street, a family often comes into the program and moves into an apartment with very little—and often, only bare essentials. Using Westgate's bulk purchasing rate, Trainer has been able to purchase household items, small appliances, linens and toiletries to be used in welcome kits for families, including towels, cups, plates, detergent, utensils, glassware, pots, pans, paper towels, a toaster, a DVD player and a television.

Using Westgate's bulk rate, Trainer is able to purchase these items—which have a retail price of \$500 to \$600—for \$120. She says that she often receives calls from companies in the industry wanting to help.

Companies that do not have items available to donate have offered monetary donations. A private donor has offered to cover the cost for several welcome kits.

Westgate Resorts has also partnered with Trainer on her jobs initiative through the Hospitality Helps program. This is an industry-wide initiative started by Westgate Resorts that includes other hospitality companies, such as Universal Studios and Sea World, that are located in central Florida. Similar to New Moves, Hospitality Helps works on referrals and provides employment opportunities to homeless families based on each candidate's skill set.

Ellen Tatich, Director of Westgate Foundations, said she and Trainer found common ground in wanting to help homeless families. The two work hand-in-hand as referrals from both programs often intersect. A family referred to Hospitality Helps by a social service agency may be given a job through the program and need housing assistance and vice versa.

"We see this as a grassroots effort," Tatich says. "It doesn't take big dollars and major government funding. All it takes is people who care—people like Lori—getting together to help."

Trainer has used her sharp business sense and her ability to bring people together to help homeless families get back on their feet.

"Lori has lots of energy and compassion for those who are having a tough time and she's been able to use her gifts and experiences to make a difference in the community," says Mark Stanakis, President of Jobs Partnership of Florida. "She has business savvy that's married with her passion to help those in need."

Trainer forged a partnership with Stanakis' organization to provide New Moves recipients with job- and life-skills training. Jobs Partnership offers a 12-week training program that includes tips on creating a résumé, balancing a checkbook and interview preparation. Following completion of the course, program graduates gain access to Job Partnership's job bank, a database of approximately 250 employers including Concord Management, Ltd. and Riverstone Residential Group. The partnership has been very successful. Cross-referrals often happen through New Moves and Jobs Partnership as finding stable housing and employment go hand-in-hand.

New Moves recently celebrated its first anniversary. The program has helped 127 families in Florida. Trainer has received a groundswell of support from the apartment industry for her programs to help those in need in her local community and interest continues to grow, expanding into a network that spans the country.

Through her charitable work with Concord Management and her continued support for the New Moves Partnership program, Trainer has made a significant impact in central Florida and across the state as the New Moves program grows. She continues to shine a light on the importance of giving back to the local community through her good works and has inspired others to do the same.

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Program Participants Inspired to Help Others

Lori Trainer has inspired people—and not just within the industry. Even former New Moves program graduates want to give back. Last year, Northland Church recommended the George family—single-mom Molene and her three children, Adrian, X'Zayvian and Garyan—for the New Moves program. The George family, which was featured in the October 2011 issue of units, became homeless after a house fire left them with nothing. George struggled to find a shelter that would take her family because she was employed. She also faced opposition because she did not want to be separated from her young children. Many facilities separate men and women, including families with children of the opposite sex. After living in a hotel, George and her family moved into Charleston Club Apartments in Sanford, Fla., in July 2011. Almost a year later, she has remained at Charleston Club and recently renewed her lease for another year. George says the help she received last year helped her regain stability. She now works to do the same for others.

Every Friday George prepares food and drives around with her three sons to feed the homeless. She attributes the idea to her sons, who wanted to help the homeless on a more personal level.

"It was actually my sons—Adrian and Garyan—who came to me with the idea," she says. "We were feeding the homeless through and with Northland Church and they said they wanted to do more."

George has developed relationships with those living on the street, which helps her find homeless camps after they have been moved or disbanded by police. In addition to food, she hands out clothing and personal hygiene products—items that have been donated as well as items she has purchased with funds from her own pocket.

George says she does as much as she can, depending on the amount of donations she has received and the amount of disposable income she has in a given week. She feeds between five to 10 people per week. Her goal is to reach those who are living on the street and have no resources at all. Inspired by the situation she was in and the difficulty she had in receiving help, George has been inspired to create her own charity, Mission Possible Outreach Services.

“The experience helped me value my relationship with my children and people like Trainer who helped me become self-sufficient,” she says.

As she works on fundraising and finding office space for Mission Possible, George says she will continue to do what she can on her own. “Even if I have to be a one-man show, it will go on.” —N.U.