

La Crosse launches 'Eviction Diversion' program

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The referral-based program will direct clients to community providers.

By Jared McKiernan –

In a fickle economy, many homeowners are susceptible to foreclosure. Though less publicized, renters can face their own form of crisis: eviction.

The Salvation Army of La Crosse, Wis., launched a new Eviction Diversion program to thwart these crises and keep families in their homes through financial counseling and referrals. A \$50,000 startup grant from the Otto Bremer Foundation will assist La Crosse residents who are at-risk of losing their housing, but have not yet received eviction notices.

Tennille Spears, outreach case manager, will work with eligible clients in La Crosse to direct them toward financial management, employment and child care resources offered by community providers such as The Salvation Army, Catholic Charities and The Parenting Place.

“What I ultimately hope is to be able to prevent a small, short-term crisis into becoming something large and having people lose hope when there are so many community resources out here to help them,” Spears said. “I hope to empower these individuals with knowledge and skills so that in the future, they can utilize them.”

The program is modeled after a similar project developed by Major Paul Moore, La Crosse Corps officer, during his appointment in nearby Madison, Wis. According to Moore, Madison’s Eviction Diversion program boasts an 85 percent success rate for keeping graduates in their housing six months after finishing the program.

Clients in La Crosse will be grouped into one of three levels of case management, based on the severity of the situation. The Eviction Diversion program can provide emergency rental assistance directly, but its primary function is a referral and skill-building resource, Spears said.

“We do have funding available, however we want to be clear that it’s not a financial program in that if someone is in need of rent or a security deposit, this really isn’t the program for them,” Spears said. This is more of a skill-building, self-sufficiency, independence, learning program.”

Moore said he expects the program to free up space at The Salvation Army’s emergency shelter in La Crosse, which is the only emergency shelter in the eight nearest counties nearest. The shelter was originally designed to house 38 individuals, but it’s since outgrown its designated space and invaded

other parts of the corps. It now holds around 75 a night.

“The shelter’s basically killed a lot of our other corps programming and we simply don’t have more room,” Moore said. “We’re now using the gym to house people so I can’t take my Sunday School kids anywhere. We can either become bigger or we can become smarter.”

The Salvation Army separately offers a rental assistance program as well as an emergency shelter in La Crosse, where 23.5 percent of residents live below the poverty line. Wisconsin’s state average is just 12.5 percent.

The city also faces a shortage of affordable housing. This is further intensified by the demand for student housing in La Crosse, which is home to three colleges.

“La Crosse is inundated with students,” said Kelly Bundy, director of social services for The Salvation Army of La Crosse. “Most of that affordable or low-income housing is really geared toward students so it’s very difficult for people in our shelter or low-income people in general to find housing in La Crosse. It forces our people to look outside the community in these outlying communities, but then it puts them in a bind because most of them utilize the bus system for transportation.”

Many of these residents then cannot access the jobs and services they need because the city’s bus line is inconvenient for them. They then opt to move into higher-rent places near downtown La Crosse.

“Then, we’re getting people into housing that they can’t afford in the first place,” Bundy said. “They can afford it for maybe a month or two but after that it’s just not sustainable. A lot of people that come through our shelter doors are actually people that had housing and were evicted from housing.”

In Wisconsin, landlords can begin an eviction on the basis of non-payment of rent, as in any state. In addition, they can take action on the basis of a violated rental lease due to damage to the property, criminal activity or even failure to maintain a yard. Landlord foreclosures have also contributed to tenant eviction in La Crosse as several residents who entered The Salvation Army’s emergency shelter were unknowingly paying rent to a house that was already in foreclosure, according to Bundy.

The grant from the Otto Bremer Foundation will fund the program for one year. The program’s success during that period will determine its future beyond the one-year mark.

While the Eviction Diversion program figures to decrease the demand for The Salvation Army’s emergency shelter, Bundy said she expects the program to spark a slight uptick in demand for other Salvation Army services such as its food pantry and vouchers for its thrift store.

Spears will work with 10-12 people at a time for a minimum of 90 days each. She will follow up with those who complete the program to monitor their success in maintaining housing. Qualified residents can be referred by a landlord or case manager. They can also contact The Salvation Army directly. Bundy said the program has already begun working with several clients.

“We’re really excited about it,” Bundy said. “The community has responded incredibly to the program so we’re excited to start changing some lives very quickly.”