

Homelessness is a problem no one in San Francisco seems able to solve. One most successful approach is to help families get off the street and into stable housing they can afford. Here is one mother's story of how the Tenderloin's newest homeless-family housing helped her get what she needed:

A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

Karen Oberdorfer

Angela Johnson opens her front door and beckons her guest inside of the first home in years that she can call her own.

Johnson, 35, has a wide, little-girl's smile and big eyes. With her straightened hair pulled back into a bun, her

city. (SFFD's new offices are at Second and Townsend.) The story in the neighborhood is that the building was seismically unsafe for emergency personnel, but okay for homeless families.

The city turned the empty building over to the Depart-

room and bedrooms for families cost \$2.8 million and took about two years, Menjivar says. It joins four other Hamilton Family Center programs for homeless families — an emergency center in the Haight, a transitional housing program, a child care center at the transitional

I don't know what I would have done," says Johnson, as she recalls her homelessness. When she came to the Hamilton Family Residence she and her family had been homeless in Vallejo and San Francisco for five years.

A mother at 12

Johnson's story starts on Scott Street in San Francisco, where she grew up. She was molested as a child and had her first baby at 12 years old, she says. At 14, she left home. She married an older man, but was divorced a year and a half later.

She was with her second husband for 13 years. "The first three years were heaven and the last 10, hell," says Johnson. By 21, she had four children and a crack habit that took years to quit. During one of her many attempts to stop using, she got pregnant, she says. Withdrawal catapulted her into an early labor, and she gave birth at 26 weeks. Her son has severe asthma, she says, but otherwise is healthy.

Johnson first became homeless in Vallejo. After an argument with another tenant in her building — a relative of the landlord — she and her family, including her current husband of eight years, got evicted, thus ushering in a period of living in and out of hotels.

"Pride at first wouldn't let me go to a shelter," Johnson says. Vallejo had only one shelter, and "after 30 days kicked us back out to the street," she recalls.

They returned to her hometown, San Francisco, where the children lived with relatives and she and her husband slept in their car. Their only income was the SSI benefit check for her asthmatic son.

Fast track into Hamilton

Johnson heard about Connecting Point, at Market and Mason, a nonprofit emergency and shelter referral service for homeless families. Except for Hamilton's 24-hour emergency shelter in the Haight, which can house up to 17 families night-to-night, family shelters do not take in anyone right off the street. Families must go through Connecting Point (see sidebar).

Johnson and her family got on Connecting Point's waiting list and were placed at Hamilton Family Residence sooner than most because of her severely asthmatic son. Families often wait up to five months until Connecting Point can place them.

"Homeless families face difficulties

that single homeless people don't," says Menjivar, whose Hamilton Family Center has always served only families. In 1985, churchgoers at Hamilton United Methodist Church in the Haight noticed a nearby encampment of homeless families. They opened up the church's dining room/social hall for them to sleep in when the church was closed. Within two years, they couldn't cope with the burgeoning situation and started the nonprofit Hamilton Family Center.

Transforming the space

The Hamilton Family Residence retains aspects of the large municipal office space it once was. The floor is linoleum: mottled green edging around rose rectangles. The walls are a shiny off-white and mostly bare.

At the entrance, against one wall, are a bench and plastic chairs. Opposite is a four-foot counter with a sign-in book and a friendly, mid-20s African American woman in charge. Two women wheel baby carriages up to the counter, joke with the woman, grab bag lunches from behind the counter, and sign out. They might be on their way to counseling, a job, job interview, or on the trail of a rental tip from the weekly Housing Clinic each family is required to attend.

Just off the foyer is a room the community can use. AA has held meetings there, and there have been Gentleness Training seminars for the shelter children run by a licensed clinical social worker. Also on the ground floor is a high-tech laundry. The steel machines look as if they can withstand constant use.

Two to three residential counselors are on duty at all times, said Hamilton Executive Assistant Michelle Rehbein.

The second floor is for family bedrooms, interspersed with common bathrooms. Each bedroom has at least one window. The furniture varies, depending on the number of family members. There are double beds for adults and bunk beds, desks and chests of drawers. The furniture is kept at the ready in a central storage area, much as a hotel does, says Menjivar.

The teen room, also on the second floor, features three new Dell computers.

On each floor are several large bathrooms with multiple stalls and showers and bathtubs. Most are unisex, but some are smaller for one family to use. They smell of disinfectant, and no one leaves personal effects in them.

The third floor houses the case managers' offices, counseling rooms, Housing Clinic meeting room, and the area where res-



The Hamilton Family Residence at 260 Golden Gate looks like any other address on the street — only it's newer.

face does not show the long and rutted road she has traveled, from sleeping in cars to her role today: hostess in her own home. She's dressed casually — cotton Capri pants and a T-shirt. On her feet are black velvet slippers sporting silver moon and star appliques and a fringe of fake black fur. The slippers are like trophies she awarded herself for having found a home.

Her story resonates with the themes and circumstances so familiar among the homeless. What is unusual is her new lease on life.

Five of Johnson's nine children live with her and her husband in their three-bedroom San Francisco apartment. Colorful posters, figurines of African Americans and a striped couch with comfortable chairs grace the living room, belying the fact that the family moved in only six weeks before.

Johnson and her family are part of the first wave of the formerly homeless coming out of the Hamilton Family Residence at 260 Golden Gate, the city's newest and largest family shelter, able to house up to 40 families.

Why did SFFD leave?

The renovated building, previously the Fire Department's administrative offices, was vacated four years ago. Hamilton staff say the SFFD left because new state criteria for disaster planning required central command operations to be out of the Tenderloin's web of congested streets and into an area where managers could travel easily throughout the

ment of Human Services, which then asked Hamilton Family Center to open a new shelter for homeless families there. The city would cover all of the costs.

"We took a building that sat empty for a long time and have been in it providing opportunity to 35 to 40 families every day to have a better life," says Hamilton Family Center Executive Director Salvador Menjivar.

Not welcome

The service-weary Lower Eddy/Leavenworth Task Force had not wanted the shelter, voting almost unanimously against it. Only Roscoe Hawkins, St. Anthony outreach worker, spoke strongly in favor. The Task Force beseeched Mayor Brown to make good on his promise to them that the residents could veto any new city-funded services in the Tenderloin. But Brown ignored their pleas. (The Tenderloin already had Compass Family Center at Turk and Taylor, and nearby was Raphael House on Sutter between Larkin and Hyde.)

EXIT Theater, however, welcomed the shelter with a benefit performance of a new play in April, shortly after the shelter's March 8 grand opening.

Transforming the offices into a shelter with restaurant-size kitchen, many bathrooms, a laundry

building, and a housing and aftercare program that serves families at all three sites.

Hamilton's newest facility provides more than "just a place to crash and three meals," says Menjivar. It also gives families "the tools and the support so they can become independent and, hopefully, break the cycle of homelessness.

"From the moment they get in, we put together an action plan to get them housing, jobs, child care, health and mental health services — anything preventing them from having an independent life. That plan looks different for each case," he says.

The shelter only takes in families, which means each single adult or couple housed must have custody of a child, or the woman be pregnant.

"Without Hamilton House



Chef Elmer Smith prepares a meal with residential lead counselor Dave Friedman on the phone in the background.

PHOTOS: LENNY LIMJOCO