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## Living Under a Roof of One's Own

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Under City Program, Homeless Get Support For Housing, Services

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Walter Johnson's caseworker took him back to the scruffy patch of dirt under a freeway in Washington, where for several decades he and other homeless men and women lived, seven blocks from the U.S. Capitol.

On a good night, Johnson shared tent space. On spring days, he enjoyed fresh tomatoes and figs from a community garden. Then, about a year ago, Michael Barton drove up in a van and offered him a new life in his own apartment.

"It was hard sleeping in that tent. I always wanted my own home," said Johnson, 63, who lives in a one-bedroom apartment in the Randle Highlands neighborhood of Southeast.

Johnson is benefiting from Mayor Adrian M. Fenty's \$19 million effort to place most of the city's chronically homeless people into "permanent supportive housing," providing rent and access to counseling and other services. Fenty (D) plans to move up to 2,500 homeless people into permanent housing over the next five years.

But the plan is not without controversy. Homeless advocates say the mayor implemented his Housing First initiative last month as a smokescreen while closing the Franklin Shelter for men at 13th and K streets NW, a downtown property that is prime for development. And some members of the D.C. Council have questioned the program's cost. Fenty said it will cost less than running large shelters.

Johnson is in a Catholic Charities program called Fortitude Housing. Denise Capaci, director of Anchor Mental Health Association, a division of Catholic Charities, said that Catholic Charities has a contract with the city to accept 100 new clients.

"Arguably, the program has been very successful on a small scale," Capaci said. "What remains to be seen is how we do in the long term."

Capaci said that there is no single reason for chronic homelessness.

"There are many reasons -- mental illness, loss of jobs, you can't find work or you get into a routine of being homeless," she said. Some people need help with basic tasks of daily living, such as grocery shopping and laundry. Others need drug and alcohol counseling.

Capaci said that her organization learned last October about the people living under the freeway. Capaci said she will never forget one man she met there:

"He said, 'I haven't made food for myself in 14 years.' Can you imagine not making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in 14 years?"

Catholic Charities is one of eight nonprofit organizations with city contracts to coordinate moving homeless

people into permanent housing.

"Every person should have a place to be able to close the door and call their own," said Chapman Todd, director of housing development for Catholic Charities.

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Some members of the D.C. Council, supported by residents and activists who tried to save the now closed Franklin Shelter, say the city is moving the homeless out of downtown, where they have benefited from social services, soup kitchens and panhandling.

"We welcome homeless people, but let us not stand by and let them put all of the homeless people in Ward 7 and Ward 8," said D.C. Council member Marion Barry (D-Ward 8), who introduced legislation to open another shelter downtown. Franklin was classified as a "low-barrier" shelter, meaning that anyone in line when the doors opened at 7 p.m. got a space.

At one time, Franklin housed 300 men a night, but during the first week of September the city decreased the number of beds while starting to move men into permanent housing. Although the D.C. Council passed emergency legislation to keep the shelter open, city officials continued to decrease its bed capacity.

On Sept. 26, the shelter closed. Peter Tucker, an organizer in the effort to save it, said that when the final 30 men left the building at 7 a.m., the doors were locked and the beds were removed. Since then, most of those who had sought shelter at Franklin have spent nights at the city's two other low-barrier shelters, at St. Elizabeths Hospital and at one on New York Avenue. Some have slept under the stars.

\* \* \*

In far Southeast, it is quiet. Walter Johnson says he is thankful that he is no longer on the streets. He was born in the District and plans to never leave.

His struggles began after his parents died in the 1960s. He said he moved out of the family home and found odd jobs. "I wanted to be on my own, so I left."

He ended up under the bridge and with an alcohol problem. He fell in love and had two children, but his alcoholism kept him from maintaining a permanent relationship with his family.

Anthony Green, 41, Johnson's son, said, "He has been out there under that bridge for at least 20 years. He refused to come in. He said he didn't want to be a burden on me."

Johnson was homeless when he met his future daughter-in-law, Janeen Green. "From time to time, I would meet him under the bridge and he would be in and out of the shelter," she said. "He was in a couple of shelters, and then they would shut them down, and he would go back under the bridge."

Green said she tried to help her father-in-law many times. He went to her house for dinner. She gave him clean clothes. When he had knee surgery and heart surgery, it spurred him to look for somewhere else to live.

"Then one day he showed me his keys," she recalled. "I called my husband and said, 'Pop got his apartment.'"

Anthony Green said the apartment has improved his father's outlook immensely.

"When he was out there on the street, he didn't care about keeping clean," he said. "But now he is clean; he keeps himself clean."

Fenty and Catholic Charities say they consider Johnson and 11 others who went from the freeway to permanent supportive housing as justification for expanding the Housing First initiative. Green said that although her father-in-law is doing well, the program is not for everyone.

"You got people who you probably can't help," she said. "I know three or four of them who went back out there. Everybody can't make it. They are out there so long, they can't handle the change."

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