

# Homeless women offered medical care — plus a haircut, facial, and even a movie



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

**Cathy Corbett got her hair cut at HER Saturday, a weekly event from the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program.**

**By Elise Takahama** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 08, 2018

Linda Winn was addicted to crack cocaine for 10 years. She sobered up six months ago, but she's been battling homelessness for the past year.

Winn, a 51-year-old Somerville native, said she's working with a few organizations to

find permanent housing, but for now, she is staying at Woods-Mullen, a South End homeless shelter.

A few months ago, she discovered a haven of medical care — and free haircuts — just around the corner.

The quiet waiting room at the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program is transformed into a buzz of activity every Saturday, offering women, most of whom are homeless, free medical care and welcoming them to a day of fun — with haircuts, facials, arts and crafts, and board games.

“I started coming a few months ago. I love the staff. It’s been helping with depression, helping with any problem I might have,” said Winn, who’s now the president of the Boston Area Drug Users Union, an informal support group.

In one corner, a group of women played bingo, while others danced and sang karaoke in the middle of the room. A table near the back was filled with markers, beads, and nail polish. Movies were shown in a separate room.

All these activities are part of HER Saturday, a program that offers a medical clinic for women who have suffered abuse, are homeless, or are in need of health care services, said Melinda Thomas, the program’s associate medical director.

“We wanted to create a safe space for women to come to,” Thomas said Saturday morning. “Just a place they can call their own, a place where there could be some community building, a place to let their hair down in response to all this repeated trauma they experience every day on the street.”

The HER Saturday program was launched in February 2016, Thomas said. When it first started, about 30 to 50 women would wander through the doors. Now, at least 100 women — sometimes up to 200 — line up at 7 a.m. every week, she said.

The Saturday clinic not only gives the women a chance to get manicures and watch romantic comedies but also provides preventative health care services and cancer screenings, which include mammograms and Pap smears. Homeless women have higher rates of mortality from breast and cervical cancer, Thomas said. A medical provider, a nurse, a case manager, a social worker, and a behavioral health counselor are available every week.



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

**Dawn Young, 49, who got a facial Saturday, comes nearly every week.**

Dawn Young, 49, comes nearly every Saturday. She became homeless seven years ago after leaving Atlanta to escape an abusive relationship, she said.

“It helps me to interact with other women in similar situations,” Young said after she got a haircut and a facial Saturday. “It gives me a springboard, gives me hope.”

She was a cosmetologist back in Atlanta, she said, and is currently trying to renew her

license, while she stays at the Woods-Mullen shelter.

The goal is to make sure women feel comfortable enough to open up about their medical needs, Thomas said.

Because many of the women who cycle through the health care center are suffering from chronic illnesses, mental illnesses, or substance-use disorders — or sometimes all three — they often develop a “tough exterior” that’s hard to break, she said.

“We’ve found that by creating a space where people are relaxed and connect to our staff and build relationships that way, we’re able to find out and tap into what they need,” Thomas said.

Many women attend HER Saturday just to be a part of a community.

Chauncy Williams, 45, of Dorchester has been homeless for about seven months and just recently started showing up at the Saturday gatherings. She usually stays at Woods-Mullen, she said, but HER Saturday has a different energy.

“It’s something to look forward to,” Williams said as she sipped a cup of coffee Saturday. “Being here, playing bingo, doing karaoke, it keeps me productive.”

Shirley Berard, a case manager for the program, said she wants to expand the program further — she’s working to provide ESL classes, GED preparation, and resume workshops for the women.

“It’s all about empowerment,” she said.

Another woman, 67, who asked not to be named, said she started coming to HER Saturday in June 2017. She became homeless three years ago, after moving to Boston from New Haven, Conn.

“This gives me a lot of hope,” she said. “There’s freedom here, freedom from

everything we face at the shelter. . . . The shelter can be very depressing and draining, but you come here and it's super positive. You get recharged.”

Elise Takahama can be reached at [elise.takahama@globe.com](mailto:elise.takahama@globe.com). Follow her on Twitter [@elisetakahama](https://twitter.com/elisetakahama).

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[14beisbol35](#)

12/08/18 06:15 PM

There needs to be more of these type programs, ... for BOTH genders.



[Geo22](#)

12/08/18 07:43 PM

Sad statement, that richest country in the world can't house people.



[garymichael](#)

12/09/18 03:52 AM

The riots in Paris started out as a protest against a gasoline tax increase but now the demonstrations are spreading and the focus has moved from the gas tax to the ridiculous cost of living in the world today. It's not just Boston. When I read stories like this I just can only wonder what it must be like. A great hope is to know you're not alone and someday it will get better.

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[user\\_2565804](#)

12/08/18 06:30 PM

Thank you for shining a light on this beautiful program. I hope the report inspires generous donations and the birth of similar programs to serve all who would benefit.

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[WSKW](#)

12/09/18 05:28 PM

<https://www.bhchp.org/tags/her-saturday>

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[Lynn1066](#)

12/08/18 07:25 PM

Yes, both homeless women and men need programs like these that help to restore some of their dignity. Many, if not most of them, also badly need mental health services and follow-up.

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[improvr](#)

12/09/18 12:35 PM

You hit the nail on the head. Treat people right and they will become better people.

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[SouthshoreRick](#)

12/08/18 08:18 PM

Blessings on those who provide this much needed service to these unfortunate people. Marty Walsh should visit to see how such a program could work and how he and the city could expand it for all homeless people. It is a national disgrace that we have so many people living in the streets in this day and age. And when corporate America is reaping huge largesse from both the strong economy and giveaway tax cash from our government.

It will be remembered in times in the future, perhaps, that we had the means to fix it. But didn't care enough.



[Banned Porte'](#)

12/08/18 10:27 PM

Rick,

i don't think its that people don't "care enough". Part of the problem/solution may be to make it known these organizations are out there.



[IncludeMe](#)

12/09/18 11:17 AM

Keep Marty away! The program runs fine without him.



[Billingsly](#)

12/09/18 08:37 AM

This is great



[Tigerwoman](#)

12/09/18 09:22 AM

Wonderful service. I am sure Health Care for the Homeless is involved, a fabulous program. Thank you to all the good people who offer their loving care to those who are often treated as non-persons. We need to be a more compassionate nation from the top down.

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[EastTraveler](#)

12/09/18 09:39 AM

At the end of the day, this country and it's riches should be able to figure out how it can help all of those that need and 'want' the assistance. Saving even one person is a wonderful thing!

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[MA413](#)

12/09/18 10:39 AM

The main reason for most of the homeless is mental illness. When the powers that be closed the mental hospitals decades ago they wanted the mentally ill to be part of society, not housed in wards. Well, this is what you get, people living on the streets, alcohol or drug addicted, sick in body and mind. There should be many hospitals built to care for these people but no one will spend the money to do this and mainly it wouldn't be politically correct to house them in psychiatric hospitals. So, this will continue to be a patchwork of small, temporary successes, because that's the way they want it to be even though it's no success at all.

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[hmmm100](#)

12/09/18 11:02 AM

The main reason is the cost of housing

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[junie24](#)

12/09/18 12:30 PM

hmmmm100: The main reason is not the COST of housing, it's the LACK of housing. Most of the homeless people in Boston either don't want to be helped or won't be helped because the Boston Housing Authority has made some HUGE missteps and now us residents in BHA properties are paying the price.

HUD will no longer grant funds to the Boston Housing Authority. The reasons for this are many and really murky. IMO, it's because BHA higher ups, who live outside the city in big expensive homes and drive expensive vehicles, are able to do this because the Housing Authority overpays them for doing nothing at all for the residents of BHA properties, while they are probably pocketing the grant moneys that were supposed to go towards the maintenance and rehabilitation of BHA properties. Maybe the SPOTLIGHT TEAM could do an in depth investigation into that? I live in a BHA property that's managed by an outside company. The management company is extremely attentive to the needs of the residents. BHA is trying to lease the building, not the property to an entity that is not BHA-affiliated so that they can apply for HUD grants to maintain and rehabilitate these old buildings. BHA would retain ownership of the property and continue receiving revenue from the property.

In the meantime, I have been paying rent to Boston Housing Authority since 2012. Where has my rent money been going that they are unable to pay for building maintenance? This is very worrisome.

My rent is very reasonable. It is 32% of my gross income every month. This includes my heat, hot water and electricity! There are people living on BHA properties that claim they have no income so they pay no rent, but they are driving Mercedes Benz's and BMW's and Lexus's. Meanwhile, I pay my rent every single month and haven't got a car and struggle to buy food.

In closing, it's not housing costs that are causing people to be homeless. Because 32% of 0 is 0. It's the Boston Housing Authority that's keeping people who want to be housed from

being housed. And I agree. KEEP MAYOR MAHTY FAR AWAY FROM THIS PROGRAM!



[dja61](#)

12/09/18 11:40 AM

Good job little things mean a lot.



[labonza](#)

12/09/18 12:15 PM

Looks like a good place to send a donation to. Great story, thank you.



[WSKW](#)

12/09/18 05:29 PM

<https://www.bhchp.org/tags/her-saturday>



[NSNancy](#)

12/09/18 02:27 PM

I wonder how much the Donald would donate to a program such as this.



[Banned Porte'](#)

12/09/18 02:53 PM

Well, I guess at least one moron had to do it, congrats NSNancy you are the lucky wiener!



[Opportunity](#)

12/09/18 04:25 PM

DJT says his check is in the mail, :) The @#\$%ing USPS is just

too ^\*&^in' lazy to deliver them. :(

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