

AHA news: Best way to end homelessness and its health impact? Prevent evictions

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TUESDAY, July 16, 2019 (American Heart Association News)—The

cycle of homelessness can have devastating long-term repercussions on health. A nonprofit program in Boston is tackling the problem by trying to avoid evictions.

HomeStart focuses on ending homelessness, in part by preventing it from happening in the first place.

Living in an unstable housing environment can have a devastating impact on health. Life expectancy decreases significantly for people who experience homelessness. Children with a history of homelessness are more likely to have developmental delays and find themselves hospitalized. And once someone is evicted, it increases their risk of facing additional homelessness.

HomeStart tries to stop the cycle.

When a person or family living in subsidized housing faces eviction over rent payments, the organization acts as an intermediary between tenant and landlord. It negotiates and covers a portion of the back rent, and then works to find [social services](#) that can help stabilize tenant lives to ensure they can eventually pay off the rest of their debt while staying firmly put in their homes.

"We make an average of a \$700 payment to stop the eviction and buy some time. And we work with a family for 12 months and create a blueprint with them to mitigate against the risk of eviction happening again," said HomeStart president and executive director Matthew Pritchard.

The organization's Renew Collaborative is an eviction prevention program that helps connect tenants with agencies that can find less expensive childcare, or jobs that offer better pay. They locate organizations that can provide back-to-school supplies or ways to reduce

heating bills during Boston's fierce winter months.

"It's connecting them to these other services and then advocating, because if you just deliver \$700 to someone but don't fix the underlying problems, then they're going to be back in the same situation a month later," said Adam Hoole, a HomeStart [homeless](#) prevention advocate.

"So really what we're focused on is trying to solve the bigger-picture issues on top of solving the immediate problem, which is the money owed."

Hoole has worked with countless people who have been on the verge of losing their homes. They range from a 24-year-old single mom initially unable to work because of [pregnancy complications](#), to a 64-year-old retiree with growing health problems, including memory loss that led him to forget to pay the rent.

HomeSmart connected the man with an independent agency to coordinate future rent payments, as well as with services that found him an in-home health care worker to address his medical issues.

"We were also able to get him the back rent that was owed so he was able to pay everything off and stay in the home that he had been in for the majority of his life," Hoole said.

One year after initial intervention, 97% of the clients saved from eviction through HomeStart still live in their home. Four years afterward, 95% have avoided non-payment eviction.

The program has showed such success that some of the largest property owners in Boston, including those that manage thousands of subsidized apartment units, have retained HomeStart to provide eviction prevention services for their tenants.

"Now property owners are paying us to prevent the evictions from happening, which creates an economically viable way to scale the program and sustain it permanently," Pritchard said.

The American Heart Association recently awarded HomeStart a \$250,000 grant from its Social Impact Fund that helps local small businesses address social determinants of health—the environmental and social conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age.

HomeStart also helps find permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness. But a dozen markets outside Massachusetts want to replicate the organization's eviction prevention program.

"There's an increasing awareness around the eviction crisis and its role, not just as a consequence of poverty, but as a genesis and cause of poverty," Pritchard said.

It's also a recognition that preventing eviction takes more than just throwing money at the problem.

"If someone's trying to kick you out of your home, it's very easy to get frustrated," Hoole said.

"It helps to have someone translate what's happening and explain it in a way that makes sense, because often legalese does not make sense to people. Then, you also need to have an advocate who can help you access the services needed to get back on top of your life and get things under control."

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