

Saving neighborhood: More than new housing

By Bobby Gates

Wed Jul 30, 2008, 05:58 PM EDT



Beverly, Mass. -

When a resident of the Gloucester Crossing neighborhood needs a helping hand, they can turn to the two-page Gloucester Crossing resource guide.

The guide lists a variety of help available to residents — from resume writing tips to healthcare — and phone numbers to call.

The guide can easily be tacked up on a bulletin board or hung with a magnet on the refrigerator.

That's just one of the tools that's come from the Gloucester Crossing Resource Group, a groundbreaking collaboration among about a dozen social-service agencies ranging from the elementary school the children in the neighborhood attend to the local, job-training board.

The resource group tries to connect Gloucester Crossing residents to many self-help services and other programs that can help them improve their lives and, by extension, their neighborhood.

This coordination among the agencies may be creating a new model for delivering social services and building safe neighborhoods and recognizes there's more to saving a neighborhood than new buildings.

"All of these organizations work in the neighborhood and have worked in the neighborhood for a while," said David Bresnahan, the BAHC staff member who was brought on to help establish the resource group and coordinate its operation.

Organizers say what the model they've created — and the lessons they have learned — could be emulated in other neighborhoods, cities or towns.

"We were all doing good work but we weren't all communicating with each other," said Andrea Jones, outreach coordinator for Beverly Bootstraps.

The Beverly Affordable Housing Coalition and the North Shore United Way formed the resource group as part of a \$20 million project to build 65 new, below-market-rate apartments on Mill and Grant streets in the Gloucester Crossing neighborhood.

The existing buildings, which are owned and managed by the BAHC and the YMCA of the North Shore, will come down and be replaced with new buildings.

A groundbreaking for the first phase of the work could come as soon as next summer.

The idea was to get the social service resources in place before the construction project begins and tie the new buildings together with a wider network of groups that can provide a helping hand to the residents.

“You can put up new buildings but if you don’t provide the resources, sooner or later the same problems will be there,” said Jones.

Much of the resource group’s work is already well underway.

“It’s pulling together multiple social service agencies,” that when unified, “can help fill any gaps there might have been,” Jones said.

The group, established last year, formally meets once a month. But phone calls and e-mails are passed weekly when one agency needs another or has a resident that needs another agencies help, tightening and expanding the social safety net.

Beverly Bootstraps is a long established organization that provides everything from a food pantry to GED classes. In recent years, the agency moved its offices within sight of the Gloucester Crossing neighborhood and tends to be many resident’s first contact point when they seek assistance. That’s because of its proximity and its established relationship with residents, Jones said.

Annually, Beverly Bootstraps helps about 500 families. Although they don’t have an exact count, Bootstraps says “a large percentage” come from the Gloucester Crossing neighborhood.

“Bootstraps does tend to be a bridge to other organizations,” Jones said.

As a result of the group’s meetings, North Shore United Way heard about the need to have somebody handle “ongoing case management” in the neighborhood and awarded Bootstraps a \$30,000 grant to hire a caseworker that will focus on the neighborhood. Somebody has been hired for the position and is scheduled to start on Aug. 18.

“That really came out of those meetings that identified we needed somebody to focus on that neighborhood,” Jones said.

The meetings promote such cooperation and cross-support among the agencies.

Kimberly Jones at the North Shore Career Center, for example, assembled the resource guide, with input with all of the resource group’s members.

Additionally, North Shore Community Action Program — which serves Beverly but whose office is in Peabody — was given space in the Bootstraps office at 371 Cabot St. to take fuel-assistance applications and help people file tax forms this spring.

Otherwise, residents would have had to go to the program's office on Main Street in Peabody — an expensive cab ride or long bus ride for somebody without a car.

The resource group has also drawn in at least one new member since being established.

Recently, the principal at Centerville Elementary School, Karla Pressman, has become part of the group. The elementary school students from the neighborhood will attend the school next year as part of the redistricting that will go in place in September.

There are 44 public school students who now live in the neighborhood, according to Beverly public schools.

“It's an awareness thing,” Bresnahan said about the inclusion of the school's administration.

Gloucester Crossing Resource Group

BeverlyAffordable Housing Coalition

Beverly Bootstraps Community Services

Beverly Police Department

Catholic Charities

Centerville Elementary School

Health and Education Services

North Shore Community Action Programs

North Shore United Way

North Shore Workforce Investment Board

Salvation Army

St. Vincent de Paul Society

Strongest Link

YMCA of the North Shore