

**FAMILY PROMISE**

**Program helps families in need of a fresh start**

**It provides them a place to stay, meals and help finding work**

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Special Correspondent

Dianelle Handy credits the Family Promise of Charlotte with helping her and her three children get on their feet when they fled Maryland on a train in the middle of the night to get away from an abusive relationship last October.

They landed at the Battered Women's Shelter in Charlotte, where they stayed for about six weeks.

A local pastor and his family then took them in for a while, but they still needed help while Handy worked with Community Link to find housing, and tried to get her life back on track.

Just as she was about to give up and head back to Maryland, Community Link put her in touch with Kathy Bolster, the director of Family Promise.

It's a network of churches that help folks in need of transitional housing, part of a national program. It uses community resources and church volunteers to help families on the brink of homelessness get back on their feet.

Families are referred to it by other local agencies, and undergo thorough screening. They must be employed or employable, free of active substance abuse problems and must undergo a criminal background check and comprehensive psycho-social evaluations, among other criteria.

Handy qualified to enter the program, and soon she and her family joined 10 other families that were housed in area churches for a week at a time.

Participants either have jobs or get help finding work. Bolster helps them find permanent housing, and they get financial and other counseling so that when they graduate from the program, they have a better chance of success.

The program has helped 14 families since it started here in September.

Ben Hill and his church, Christ Episcopal Church, brought the nationwide program to Charlotte after he saw it in action at his brother-in-law's church in Memphis, Tenn.

"I was lamenting the fact that the kind of things we were doing in Charlotte to help the homeless were probably doing us more good than the people we helped," said Hill, board president of Family Promise of Charlotte.

"My brother-in-law, Bob Lassiter, took me to his church to see the program. I got some of my friends from different churches together, we talked about it, and we were able to start a Family Promise Network here."

Bolster, whose office is at Providence United Methodist Church, is the only paid employee and volunteers do most of the work so the budget is much lower than other homeless programs. For instance, they say that each day at an average homeless shelter costs \$40 per person. In the Family Promise network, that same stay costs \$11 per day per person.

"People think about the indigent as those folks we see at major intersections asking for money, but the majority, 85 percent, are episodically homeless, just finding themselves in difficult situations," said De Cordell, a Family Promise board member. "There are many who are hard-working, very capable people, but due to one catastrophic event find themselves homeless."

As with Room in the Inn, churches take turns providing food and shelter to the families. In fact, most churches in the Family Promise network host Room in the Inn client families during the winter.

But instead of staying only one night, as in the Room in the Inn program, families stay a week at each church and the program operates year round.

Each family is assigned a trunk on wheels in which to store belongings. They sleep on portable beds and each family has a nightstand and alarm clock to help them live as normally as possible while in the program.

The church provides the space to sleep, and breakfast and dinner each day.

Families go to the Day Center at Providence United Methodist Church during the day. Adults either go to work or are out looking for jobs. Children go to school by special arrangement with CMS. Infants and preschoolers go to prearranged day care.

In the evenings, the families go back to the host churches for dinner, fellowship, and a safe place to sleep.

On Sundays, a van comes to load up the furniture and trunks and take the families to the next church in the rotation.

The average family stays in Charlotte's program for 42 days, and they graduate once they have jobs and housing.

After a cake, balloons and well wishes from volunteers, the families are taken to shop at a warehouse stuffed with used furniture and other household items. The families choose a houseful, and volunteers deliver everything to the family's new residence, for which the program helps guarantee the rent.

"Graduation day is an amazing thing. You take a family (that), two or three months ago, had nothing, and transform (it) back into the mainstream," Hill said.

Bolster said Handy is a good example of someone who just needed a little help to start over.

"With Dianelle, we saw the program working exactly as it was meant to do. She already had a job and had her kids in day care. She just needed a little extra support to get housing in place. All the hard work paid off, and now she's able to live on her own and support her children," Bolster said.

Handy said the program helped save her family.

"If it wasn't for Family Promise, I would probably be back in Maryland trying to figure out how to leave again," Handy said.

"Kathy and the volunteers took such good care of us, and they make sure that when you leave you can take good care of yourself and your family. If I had to say anything negative about the program, it would be that I picked up 5 more pounds because the volunteers are such good cooks."

### **Want To Know More?**

Family Promise of Charlotte says the need is great and that more churches are needed to form a second or even third network to help more families. Family Promise volunteers are available to come to your church to make presentations about the program. For details, call 704-780-1624 or e-mail Bolster at [kathybolster@yahoo.com](mailto:kathybolster@yahoo.com). You may also go to [www.familypromise.org](http://www.familypromise.org), the national group's Web site.

### **Participating Churches**

*These are the churches actively involved in Family Promise of Charlotte, and their volunteer coordinators:*

**Christ Episcopal** -- Mary Katherine Black, Lisa Seaton.

**Cross and Crown Lutheran** -- David Cox, Cindy Pembleton.

**First Presbyterian** -- Sally Davis.

**Forest Hill Church**-- Tammy Medlock.

**Good Shepherd United Methodist** -- Charlie Bowers, Anne Robinson.

**Matthews United Methodist** -- Eric and Nancy Keziah.

**Myers Park United Methodist** -- De Cordell, Lauren Marsh.

**Providence Baptist** -- Eric Cochran.

**Providence United Methodist** -- Gayle Wylie.

**Sardis Presbyterian** -- Donna Hudson, Lyn Sutterlin and Peggy White.

**Myers Park Presbyterian** -- Al and Elizabeth Dickens.

**Park Road Baptist** -- Melissa Lamm, Peggy McIntyre, Cynthia Stone.