

## From Housing to Home: Why is it so Hard to leave Homelessness?

Just imagine – being 18, or younger, and having to leave home. You're trying to escape rejection, conflict, addiction. You might be LGBTQ+, or coming out of services from the Dept. of Children and Families. You didn't finish high school, so it's really hard to get a job. You try to work under the table to earn money, but you're vulnerable to exploitation. You decide to trade sex for money, but are manipulated into working for a pimp. He decides when you can use a cell phone and keeps most of your earnings.

Maybe you try to move on, but don't have a license or Id. Card, or address, or something called "credit history". You don't have the money to keep minutes on your cell phone. You spend months trying to get a duplicate birth certificate and social security card. Money for the monthly mailbox fee is almost beyond your reach. But without all this, you won't be offered a lease, and those in charge of public "benefits" can't get in touch with you when there's something you might be eligible for. Housing is so scarce that some landlords and realtors want to charge you to visit a space, and housing scams abound.

You try staying with friends, moving on every few days because your inability to pay and the close quarters makes you wear out your welcome quickly. You run out of friends to do this with.

You go to a shelter, where you have to be in line by 5 pm for a potential spot. Another resident rifles through your belongings while you're eating dinner, and the little money you have is now gone. You have to leave with your belongings by 8 am.

You go to a homeless encampment, figuring anything's better than a shelter. But it rains, and your sleeping bag gets wet. It's also clear that some of the adults there want to "use" you for something. You're sexually assaulted in the night, and are too frightened to scream. You know you need therapy, for your family experiences and sexual assault, but that's a luxury at this point.

You get access to someone's junked car, and stay there at night. You feel lucky to have this, and to be without a chronic medical condition, or substance use, or severe mental illness, or being a new immigrant. It's a daily challenge to locate food, along with places to relieve yourself. Toiletries and showers and laundromats are unattainable comforts. You hear about services – for housing, mental health, primary care, etc. – and endless waitlists. Most of them are so long that they don't accept new names. Some people tell you to go back into a shelter in order to move up on a waitlist. Many places don't accept MassHealth, section 8 vouchers, or anyone with a pet.

You finally hear about a drop-in center for young adults in Gloucester, and get services there. It takes more than a year for you to secure stable housing with their support.

This story offers just one vivid example of why change and advocacy around housing barriers are so important. Please join us.

My name is Marianne Vesey, and have retired from a career in mental health. The Greater Newburyport Housing Coalition is a collaboration between the Newburyport YWCA and Citizens' Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA). We seek to increase housing options in Amesbury, Newbury, Newburyport, Salisbury, and West Newbury. If you are interested in joining our activities, or learn more about the issue, please go to <https://bit.ly/3HHVotS> and get in touch at [jmeers@ywcanewburyport.org](mailto:jmeers@ywcanewburyport.org). We meet the third Thursday of every month.