

Once homeless, new Fresno tenants adjust to new stability

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Domestic violence drove LaSonya Rucker to the streets of Fresno, and for four years, she spent a lot of her time afraid.

Rucker feared the sound of gunshots, reports of homeless women being raped or even the threat of being hit by passing cars. She managed to find shelter at the Poverello House in downtown Fresno, but dreaded missing curfew and the chance to get a cot, since that meant spending the night unprotected, somewhere in the city.

No longer.

Now she lives in a small apartment in downtown Fresno, where she's hung posters of angels and Jesus Christ.

Last week, dressed in a bright aqua-colored blouse and pants that complemented her bright smile, she talked about her journey from the streets to security, made possible largely by the Fresno Housing Authority and Fresno First Steps Home.

Rucker is one of 110 homeless people who've been helped off the streets by the authority since last year's high-profile razings of three downtown homeless encampments. She moved into her apartment in July.

"It feels good to have your own house where you can have structure and you don't have to be scared and can just stay safe, and it's up to you to open your door if you want to," Rucker said. "You can have good people in your circle and have a good support group."

Rucker puts a face to the data discussed at a homelessness workshop at a City Council meeting Feb. 13. The workshop served as a six-month report card on the encampment razings. City officials said about 250 people were displaced — but acknowledged that it's hard to pin down the fate of homeless who weren't helped into housing.

Fresno First Steps Home bankrolls the housing efforts through community donations, paying for rent or other temporary assistance, such as a deposit on an apartment. Once housed, they are asked to put 30% of their income toward rent.

So far, 76 formerly homeless people remain under the supervision of the Fresno Housing Authority — which contracts case workers to check in on those who've gotten housing — and 34 have transitioned into other housing programs, said Doreen Eley, assistant housing manager for the authority.

Rucker said she cherishes her apartment every day. "I say, 'Thank you, God, for my blessings,' because this is a blessing."

The apartment was the hand-up she needed, Rucker said. She now attends self-help groups and is getting treatment for medical issues that kept her from getting a job. Rucker has three children who have been staying with her godsister in Madera.

"We don't just give a key and say, 'See you later, best luck to you,' " said Tiffany Cantu, a housing authority supervisor who creates and manages programs for the homeless. "We wrap services around our clients."

Cantu has been with the housing authority for 30 years. She likes to keep tabs on the homeless she's helped, even years later.

She said Rucker is "always very up, very caring, very concerned about other people." Since moving into her apartment, Rucker likes to cook for and feed homeless people near a bus stop downtown.

"It makes me feel so good when they are just so happy to get that sandwich or something," Rucker said. "I don't have no money to give them, but I'll feed them."

Also endearing: Rucker greets good news with celebratory high-fives, followed by an enthusiastic "hey," Cantu said. "She makes me laugh."

"She can make you walk away kind of with a bounce in your step."

Rucker is thinking of becoming a care provider. She started attending Fresno City College while homeless — her classes funded through government aid.

Rucker wants homeless people to keep this in mind: "Sometimes you've got to crawl before you can walk, and keep your head up and pray and take it one day at a time."

Cary Catalano, fundraising coordinator for Fresno First Steps Home, is hopeful that residents, businesses and organizations will keep donating to the city-sponsored nonprofit so more people like Rucker can be helped.

Since 2011, the nonprofit has raised almost \$1 million to help homeless people get off the street, he said.

Eley said the housing authority is still focused on helping those who were housed between last summer and early this year, but another campaign to house more homeless is possible. Former

outreach targeted the homeless considered the most vulnerable, such as pregnant women, children, disabled, the mentally ill and veterans.

During the city's previous encampment sweeps in 2009 and 2011, more than 100 other homeless were helped into housing, officials said.

"I've seen some really, really sad things out there," Cantu said. One of the worst: "An elderly, frail, sick, obviously disabled woman sleeping on a piece of cardboard on the sidewalk in the rain."

When Cantu hears people say that the homeless are just drunks or drug addicts who aren't worth helping, she likes to counter with this question:

"If you were homeless and you were out there, what would you do? Until you walk in someone else's shoes, you can't really say what you would do. So just to stand from afar and say, 'Drunks, drug addicts, prostitutes, they want to be out there' — people can't generalize like that."

There are many misconceptions, Cantu said.

"Sometimes people are out there because they are mentally ill," she said, "and sometimes I think being out there made them mentally ill."

How to help

Donations can be made to Fresno First Steps Home online at fresnofirststepshome.org, or checks can be made payable to Fresno First Steps Home and mailed to Mayor's Office, City of Fresno, 2600 Fresno St., Fresno CA 93721.

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