

Moving homeless out of I.P. motel

New initiative has drastically cut number of occupants at Long Beach Motor Inn

By **JEFF LIPTON** and **JOSEPH KELLARD**

County officials say they are determined to end the practice of housing the homeless in motels by the end of the year, and recent statistics show that their efforts appear to be succeeding at the Long Beach Motor Inn in Island Park, where the number of such residents has been

rapidly dwindling.

In January, the Nassau County Department of Social Services teamed up with the nonprofit organization Community Housing Innovations (CHI) to launch a new initiative, called Home First. The program is designed to end the department's use of motels as short-term emergency housing by providing homeless families and indi-

viduals at the Long Beach Motor Inn with case managers, who work with them on long-term housing goals. In many cases, the case managers assist them in finding jobs and affordable housing, in the interest of ending the cycle of placing them in homeless shelters.

Since Jan. 1, the number of homeless families living at the 67-room motel on Austin Boulevard has dropped from 17 to six, and the number of homeless individuals is down from 23 to 12, Social Services Commissioner Dr. John E. Imhof

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said last Wednesday.

Social Services and CHI have devised a set of regulations for clients who are referred to the Home First program, including one stating that clients will be rejected from the program and in danger of losing emergency placement if they fail to meet with their case managers.

Imhof said that when he was appointed to lead the agency in March 2006, County Executive Thomas Suozzi put in place a mandate to reduce the numbers of homeless living in motels. By that October, however, Social Services had dramatically increased the number of homeless families it placed in the motel, from three in 2005 to 22, records show.

On Sept. 27, 2006, Town of Hempstead building inspectors issued motel owner Charlie Goldgrub 17 building code violations for providing rooms to families for more than 30 days, which is against town code. In addition, the inn was issued 19 violations for having cooking appliances such as microwaves in sleeping areas, six for having over-occupied rooms and 10 for various other infractions.

The county pays the homeless the going motel rate, roughly \$100 a night, to stay in the motels for what officials hope will be no more than 30 days. But as of next Jan. 1, the county will no longer pay for this type of housing, Imhof said.

“By the end of 2008, Nassau County will put an end to the use of motels for homelessness and will no longer pay people to stay in motels,” said Imhof.

“I think we’re very optimistic,” he added, referring to the Home First program. “We don’t want to see families living out of motel rooms. It’s not good for [their] children and it’s not good for the community. That’s why we’re taking a much more



Herald file photo

THE NASSAU COUNTY DEPARTMENT of Social Services has launched a new initiative, Home First, in which the department will stop sheltering homeless families in motels such as the Long Beach Motor Inn in Island Park by year’s end.

aggressive approach.”

Imhof said that since January, 11 homeless families that were living at the Long Beach Motor Inn have been moved into supervised residences under the Home First program, and county officials said that five others have relocated to permanent housing. “Now we’re focusing on moving the remaining singles from the Long Beach Motor Inn,” Imhof said.

Rita Nolan, director of medical services for the Department of Social Services, explained that homeless people choose the motel where they want to live, which is usually close to where they have lived in the past or near their families. Mary Ellen Zimmerman, the department’s assistant director of temporary assistance, said they must overcome several barriers to get back on their feet, first and foremost the lack of employment. “It’s very difficult for them,” she said. “They want to stay in Nassau County. They have roots here. Their children want to continue to attend schools in the district.”

Imhof added that many Long Islanders are “one paycheck away from homelessness. It’s a difficult situation for them. We’re a safety net for these people.”

There are currently 120 homeless families and 72 single adults who are homeless in Nassau County, Imhof said, adding that 39 of the families are living in motels. They have been housed in motels for about five years, and in the case of the Long Beach Motor Inn, neighbors have vehemently complained about a marked decline in the area’s quality of life since then. They have said that they fear drug-dealing and other crime by the motel’s occupants. Some neighbors of the motel have expressed concerns that it could mimic the Oceanside Motel, which housed homeless families as well as sex offenders and drug users and dealers before it was condemned and demolished in 2005.

“I understand the concerns of the community and [their] wanting the homeless to go away,” said Imhof. “I only hope that the community could be a little patient and

allow us to implement this program.”

Some residents said last week that they remain skeptical about whether the county will stick to its promise of moving all of the homeless occupants out of the motel by year’s end. Others said they were even more frightened by rumors that have circulated in recent weeks that the county was actually planning to do the opposite — secretly scheming to turn the entire motel into a permanent homeless shelter.

“I don’t know how that [rumor] got started, but that was never the intention,” said Imhof, who called those fears unfounded.

Island Park neighbors said they were adopting a wait-and-see attitude about the county’s plans. “Shouldn’t that have been the goal to begin with?” Michael DiBenedetto, who lives behind the motel on Jamaica Avenue, said of the county’s promise to reduce the motel’s homeless occupancy. “I think that’s definitely a good thing for property values. But we’ll see what happens.”

Another resident, Chris Fabris, added, “I’m a little skeptical because we’ve heard this all before. I think everyone should follow through on this.

“There are strong rumors in the community that don’t support the facts that Social Services are committing to,” he added. “We highly doubt that anyone at Social Services is truthful unless the place is closed down and they are not involved anymore. We would like the politicians to do for the Island Park community what they did for the Oceanside community, which is to get rid of the motel.”

Goldgrub could not be reached for comment, and county Legislator Denise Ford (R-Long Beach) did not return a call for comment.

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