

# Study: Charlotte's apartments for homeless save money

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The idea of building apartments to house Charlotte's most troubled homeless men and women – including those with addictions and mental disabilities – was controversial, if not ridiculed, when first proposed by the Urban Ministry Center in 2009.

But a first-year impact report scheduled to be released Monday by UNC Charlotte shows the homeless apartment complex known as Moore Place has succeeded in fulfilling its many promises to the community, particularly in saving tax dollars.

The study, conducted by the university's Department of Social Work, found Moore Place saved \$1.8 million in its first year by drastically reducing the amount of time its tenants spent in emergency rooms (447 fewer visits) and admitted to hospitals (372 fewer days).

Statistics show tenants also stayed out of trouble more, with a 78 percent drop in arrests and 84 percent fewer days spent in jail.

The report is being released at a time when the city of Charlotte, Mecklenburg County and the Charlotte Housing Authority are offering incentives to encourage more permanent supportive housing projects for the chronically homeless.

Charlotte's Neighborhood & Business Services department is pledging up to \$1 million for development, and the county's Community Support Services Department will provide up to \$800,000 in supportive services.

Stacy Lowry, director of Community Support Services, says 10 proposals were submitted for review by the Feb. 28 deadline, suggesting Moore Place is just the start. The proposals are being reviewed, and results will be released by May.

Meanwhile, Moore Place is expanding from 85 to 120 units. The Charlotte City Council unanimously decided in November to help by contributing \$1 million from the Housing Trust Fund. Urban Ministry officials say they have so far raised \$3.5 million of the \$4 million expansion cost.

Caroline Chambre, director of HousingWorks for Urban Ministry, said the UNCC report is proof that permanent supportive housing is worth the investment. Moore Place cost \$6 million using a combination of government grants and private donations. That included the cost of the land in the Druid Hills community.

"You can't argue with the statistics," said Chambre. "This approach was controversial at one time because of the stereotype of who the homeless are, and we had to change that stereotype."

It's estimated there are more than 200 chronically homeless people in the county who qualify for the type of housing offered by Moore Place.

Moore Place operates on a premise that it's cheaper and more compassionate for the community to permanently house the chronically homeless, who are often mentally or physically disabled and vulnerable to dying on the streets. Many are addicted, too, but the Moore Place approach is to admit them anyway, and encourage drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

Only 15 tenants have been asked to leave since the program opened for transgressions that included acts of violence toward fellow tenants.

Four people taken in by the project have died since it opened in 2012, including Charlotte's most famous homeless man: William Larry Major, better known as "Chilly Willy." He was struck by a car in 2012 after living nearly eight months at Moore Place.

"There were a lot of people that thought we'd be having to constantly give him a key to his apartment, because he'd be losing it," Chambre said. "But he wore that key like a badge of honor.

It costs about \$14,000 yearly per person to house the tenants of Moore Place, who are required to contribute 30 percent of their income toward rent. That income typically comes from disability or veterans benefits.

The rest of the operating money is provided by the Charlotte Housing Authority through rental assistance vouchers, as well as small grants and donations from individuals and churches.

Among the current tenants of Moore Place is Michael Byrd, 55, a native of New Jersey who moved to Charlotte in the mid-1970s for a job and has been homeless off and on since the 80s.

In the year before he moved into Moore Place, Byrd visited local emergency rooms 24 times for a variety of ailments, racking up \$268,000 in medical bills. That fell to five emergency room visits during the year after he moved in, which cost about \$9,600.

"When I was on the streets, my worst night was trying to sleep bundled up in an abandoned car when it was below freezing. It scared me," recalled Byrd, who is disabled. "I've dumpster-dived behind a restaurant for food, too. It was not a good way to live."

Moore Place has changed Byrd's life to such a point that he is now dreaming of going fishing again, like he did as a boy.

UNCC assistant professor Lori Thomas, who directed the study of Moore Place, says one of the unexpected findings is that tenants there skew older than similar housing projects in other cities. Most are over 50; the oldest is 66.

Equally telling is the fact that half of them tested positive for post-traumatic stress disorder, which she guesses is connected to trauma or extreme acts of violence they were exposed to on the streets.

Thomas says the study will eventually include data on Moore Place's second year of operation to show whether the numbers hold up. She is confident they will, given the success of similar programs around the country.

"For the longest time, we as a nation tried to manage homelessness instead of trying to end it," said Thomas. "We as a community have got to focus on how to get them off the streets, rather than housing them in shelters. Permanent supportive housing works and saves money."