

# SunSentinel

## A sign of success amid homeless controversies in Fort Lauderdale



[The Chronic Homeless Housing Collaborative joins Broward County and Fort Lauderdale in effort to provide free housing for the homeless](#)

By **Mike Clary**, Sun Sentinel

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When Rondalyn Harden walked into her own apartment for the first time, she carried with her more than a determination to turn her life around after years of drug abuse and emotional set backs.

She also carried twin girls, due to be born in February.

"To know that I have somewhere for the kids to be, to not have to wonder where we will lay our heads at night—you can't put a value on that," said Harden, who has bounced from the couches of friends and relatives to sleeping in her car and at various homeless shelters in recent years. "This is a big burden off my shoulders."

Harden, 35, is one of thousands of people in [Broward County](#) considered chronically homeless, disabled and in imminent danger of dying if they continue to live on the streets. In a widely-used survey of vulnerability, Harden scored near the top.

But Harden caught a break several weeks ago while staying at the Broward Outreach Center, a shelter for the homeless in Pompano Beach. After an interview, she was selected to receive one of 22 rent-free apartments in a low-income building owned by the Fort Lauderdale Housing Authority in the 700 block of Northwest 12th Avenue.

In providing permanent residences for the chronically homeless, Fort Lauderdale is one of 235 U.S. communities taking part in the 100,000 Homes campaign, a national effort to move people from the street to a place of their own. The program is funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Using the motto "Housing first," the campaign reverses the traditional approach that required the homeless to go through addiction counseling and job training before earning a roof over their heads.

The first residents moved in last spring. With Harden now settled into her two-bedroom unit, all are occupied, said Lori Day, manager of Fort Lauderdale's permanent supportive housing project.



James Montgomery and Rondalyn Harden are happy to be housed in a two-bedroom apartment through the Chronic Homeless Housing Collaborative, a federally funded effort in collaboration with Broward county and the city of Fort Lauderdale. (Susan Stocker/Sun Sentinel)

Although residents sign a standard lease, they pay no rent for a one or two-bedroom apartment that comes fully furnished, with kitchen appliances and cookware, a flat screen television and linens for the beds. If the residents find work or receive benefits, they are required to pay 30 percent of their income toward expenses, Day said.

Social workers are also on the property daily, and visit with each client at least once a week, said Day. These case managers work with the clients on the issues that contributed to their homelessness -- mental health, substance abuse, medical issues -- while helping them apply for benefits, deal with past criminal charges, and find a job.

"All in an effort to help them become independent and sustain their new living arrangement," said Day.

The housing program is one of the initiatives cited by mayor Jack Seiler and other city officials as they struggle to combat the whirlwind of negative publicity generated by the city's effort to crack down on the number of homeless men and women in the downtown area. An ordinance that regulates public feeding of the homeless has led to a continuing high-profile battle with 90-year-old activist Arnold Abbott.

Abbott has now been cited three times for violating the law.

Seiler and others argue that regularly providing food for the homeless, without offering social services to deal with underlying problems, creates a cycle of dependency. Housing people, and then addressing problems, is the way to go, many say.

And Fort Lauderdale's program will likely be growing.

Seiler recently announced that the city's housing initiative has been funded for a second year, "giving us an additional \$455,000 to continue to operate and expand this effort to serve even more homeless."

Currently, there are just 22 units for the supportive housing project in Fort Lauderdale. However, according to this year's Point in Time count conducted by the Homeless Continuum of Care, there are more than 2,700 homeless people in Broward.

Until recently, Harden was one. The way she got to the streets, with no money and nowhere to turn, was through a combination of ill health and bad choices, Harden said.

After graduating from South Broward High School, she worked as an aide in an assisted living facility and at a warehouse before getting involved with drugs, she said. She said she also became a victim of domestic abuse, found out she had had sickle cell anemia, and developed a spinal condition that makes it difficult to stand for long periods of time.

She also became a teenage mom. Harden is now the mother of three, including a 19-year-old daughter and another set of twins, aged 6. The twins live with their father in Fort Myers.

In James Montgomery, 30, her fiance and the father of the unborn children, Harden said she has a supportive partner who can help her break "the cycle of life on drugs that was leading us nowhere."

She can see a future, she said, as a loving, sober parent. In 2012 she earned certification as medical assistant from American Institute-School of Health Careers in Lauderdale Lakes.

"When I got to the shelter, I had hit rock bottom," said Harden. "James and I have been through highs and lows together, and I think we are going to make it. I did not expect to be pregnant at 35, but God makes no mistakes."

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