

endeavors

Spring 2008

Research and Creative Activity • The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
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We've all heard about the latest,
greatest, whiz-bang discoveries:

The universe is accelerating.

Stem cells may save us.

T. Rex was related to chickens.

Our planet is getting warmer.

Fine and dandy.

There's just one thing bugging us:

What **Don't**
We Know?

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THE UNIVERSITY
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at CHAPEL HILL

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Having no home is costly, too

Many homeless people go through a series of revolving doors as they navigate some combination of hospitals, shelters, jails, prisons, and the streets. They can't afford housing or are denied it because of their backgrounds. The cycle continues, and the costs to homeless people and communities accumulate.

Researchers in the School of Social Work have found that giving homeless people small apartments and charging rent based on income resulted in cost savings for the community. The researchers interviewed twenty-one residents of Lennox Chase, the first apartment complex built in Wake County to provide permanent, supportive housing for homeless people.

A third of residents the researchers interviewed had been in residential drug- or alcohol-treatment centers. Resident William Dickens has lived at Lennox Chase since November of 2003. "When I when was on drugs and alcohol, I was spending no quality time with my daughter like a father should be," he remembers. He made promises to his family he couldn't keep, and after getting clean at The Healing Place recovery center in Raleigh, one of his first goals was to rebuild his family ties.

Dickens remembers being on shaky ground then, trying to find a job, manage his money, and find a place to stay. A friend from The Healing Place told him about newly built Lennox Chase, which has a social worker and three dozen 500-square-foot studio apartments.

The total cost of services for residents in the two years before entry into Lennox

Chase was \$377,142. In the two years after, it was \$265,785. The cost for incarceration went from \$3,500 to zero. Inpatient substance abuse treatment—\$128,000 to zero.

Not all costs fell. Medical treatment costs went from about \$111,000 to \$202,000. Two people with long-term health concerns, which included chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder and asthma, accounted for most of the increase.

"These initial findings are very hopeful," says Dean Duncan, who led the study and is leading similar studies of developments in Asheville, Greensboro, and Durham. "I think that the next report we generate will show that it's much more cost-effective to move directly off the street into supportive housing."

Duncan says the chronically homeless population ranges from individuals who sleep on the streets to families whose parents

are working but can't afford housing, to multiple families or individuals staying in overcrowded homes. The N.C. Interagency Council for Coordinating Homeless Programs estimates that on the night of January 24, 2007 in North Carolina, nearly 11,000 people were without homes. In 2005 the state's Department of Health and Human Services drafted a ten-year plan to end homelessness, and Orange County is one of many communities drafting its own version. The plans include the goal of introducing more permanent supportive housing.

It's often difficult to identify service needs for homeless who are not in permanent housing, says Adam Walsh, a School of Social Work graduate student who coauthored the report. Even Lennox Chase residents, Walsh found, didn't know certain services were available. "Once they were in a stable place like Lennox Chase, they could talk about what they needed and coordinate services. That was really important," he says.

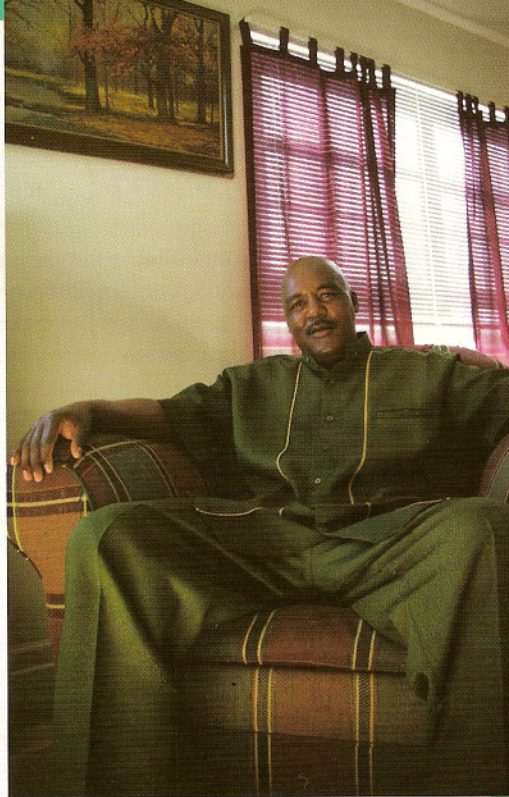
Some benefits cannot be measured in dollars. "I think there was a transformative effect of getting your own place and of being able to open the door and shut the door," Walsh says. The residents regularly check up on one another and greet new residents, he says.

Dickens, who has been clean since 2002 and now works at Fords Produce in Raleigh, says it's difficult to express his gratitude for having the housing and stability to get on his feet and rebuild his relationship with his daughter. He remembers her first overnight visit to his apartment. "I got up in the middle of the night and sat in one of my chairs to watch her sleep," he says. "It brought tears to my eyes. There's nothing like that feeling."

—Kelly Chi

Dean Duncan is a research associate professor and Adam Walsh is a fourth-year doctoral student in the School of Social Work. They received funding from the North Carolina Interagency Council for Coordinating Homeless Programs.

Jason Smith



William Dickens in his apartment at Lennox Chase.