



Photograph courtesy of Upward Bound House

UPWARD BOUND HOUSE

Consider this alarming fact: In the winter of 2008-09, the number of homeless families seeking shelter in Los Angeles County doubled.

Some shelters saw demand from families soar more than a thousand percent. Once the warm weather returned, many families reverted to sleeping in cars or makeshift campgrounds, and those numbers dropped. But the underlying fact remains – nearly 10,000 children are homeless each night.

That reality makes Upward Bound House’s most recent project all the more pressing. Soon the organization, which operates a transitional shelter for homeless families in Santa Monica, will open “Family Shelter”, an emergency housing program.

Unlike its existing shelter, which provides housing for families for up to one year, the new site will limit stays to three months, transitioning residents to other longer-term facilities where they can continue to receive services and support. The intention, according to executive director David Snow, is to reach as many families as possible – as quickly as possible. “There are so many families in need of our services,” Snow said. “Family Shelter is like triage. It’s the first step in getting these families stabilized.”

At Family Place, the transitional shelter operated by Upward Bound House since 1997, more than 1,000 participants – more than half of them children – have graduated from the program and are no longer homeless. Many of the families keep in touch with each other, and nearly all have managed to continue living independently after leaving the shelter. Some program graduates have shared their stories with Upward Bound House, and the center’s literature is full of their triumphs.

“There’s no telling where I’d be if I’d gone somewhere else,” said one such graduate, Victoria, who arrived at Upward Bound House with her children six years ago, fleeing an abusive relationship. She had two weeks to find housing and return to her job or face termination. At Family Place she got back on her feet.

Another graduate, Richard, arrived after a difficult divorce. He was

living with his two sons in his car. With Upward Bound's help, they were soon able to find an apartment. "It's like having family you can trust and depend on," Richard said. "Upward Bound has supported me to accomplish my dreams."

The new shelter, housed in a converted motel in Culver City, will contain 18 units, each with a refrigerator, bathroom and main room large enough to accommodate four twin beds and a table. Like the units at Family Place, the living quarters at Family Shelter will be intentionally modest, and the design will be similarly discreet, resembling a typical mid-level apartment complex.

"It's a place for families to feel safe while they get back on their feet," Snow said. "It's not a place to settle in to as a long-term home."

Still, for many families who have been sleeping in cars or communal shelters, the security of a private room is an enormous relief. "Families are really excited to be here," Snow said. "Compared with most homeless shelters, this is the Taj Mahal!"

The success of Family Place stems in large part from the program's comprehensive approach to addressing client needs and issues. Families have access to medical and mental health services, childcare assistance, substance abuse counseling, job placement and housing assistance, domestic violence services and food. This case management approach is critical to serving families whose various members have specific needs.

In exchange, all residents must comply with a 15-page rule manual which includes a 9 p.m. curfew and a complete ban on alcohol and overnight visitors. Children under 12 may not be left alone anywhere on site. Residents with a history of substance abuse must provide documentation that they have been clean for a year, and are subject to random testing. All units are subject to unannounced searches. Parenting and budget management classes are mandatory. "We focus on intensive stabilization," Snow said.

Families are required to work and to save 75 percent of their income, which they will use to pay a deposit on an apartment when they leave. "The most common problem for families that wind up here is the struggle to come up with a security deposit," said Cherrisse Payne, an Upward Bound House senior case manager. The financial literacy skills they gain at the shelter are critical to their long term well-being.

While parents are working hard to get back on their feet, children are treated to art classes and field trips, most of which are donated by local businesses. On a recent trip to Fraichê, an acclaimed local restaurant,

children toured the kitchen and made panini with the chef, which was then served to them by the wait staff in the dining room. The children ordered ginger ales, feasted on their creations and were treated to dessert.

“The kids were blown away by the experience,” Snow said. Though many had never been to a fancy restaurant, by the end of the visit, one 10-year-old girl declared her intention to become a chef. “The trip was intended – as are all our programs – to provide formerly homeless kids with opportunities to be kids,” Snow said. “And, yes, to share with them a sense of self-value and possibility.”

At Upward Bound House, parents too have an equally powerful, if not life-changing experience. LaChonda, a current resident, summed it up this way: “When I was without, Upward Bound provided. When I was down, Upward Bound lifted me up. When I knew there was no other way, Upward Bound was there to show me the path.”