

Grant Program Helps Formerly Homeless Framingham Man Get an Apartment

A new grant program helps homeless young adults - or those at risk of becoming homeless - with the finances needed to rent an a place to live

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Francesco, 22, talks about his new apartment with a Tempo Young Adult Resource Center staff member in Framingham on Feb. 15, 2019. [Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Ruby Wallau]

FRAMINGHAM – Francesco’s life has become kind of boring since he got the keys to his new apartment in Ashland.

“It’s quiet,” the 22-year-old said. “It’s very quiet and less eventful, which is a good thing.”

Francesco, who asked that his last name not be used, was homeless for the last five years, sleeping in parking garages, stairwells, and local shelters. Often, he was rousted

in the middle of the night by a police officer standing over him with a flashlight, asking him what he was doing and telling him to leave.

He left his family's home at 17, after his father's unexpected death from cancer. The death, he said, was a "catalyst" to unraveling an already dysfunctional home.

A graduate of Keefe Regional Technical High School, Francesco found the new apartment on his own. But a state-funded grant program provided some of the money to make renting the place possible.

The South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC) applied for the grant, while Framingham's Wayside Youth and Family Support Network is a subcontractor and accountable to SMOC for the use of the money provided.



Francesco, 22, washes his dishes after making breakfast at the Tempo Young Adult Resource Center in Framingham on Feb. 15, 2019. [Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Ruby Wallau]

The grant allows Framingham's Wayside Youth and Family Support Network, a nonprofit that helps young adults who do not have strong family and community bonds, are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless, get their first apartment. The nonprofit pays the first and last month's rent as well as the security deposit. Francesco is able to pay the \$1,250 rent per month on his own by working overnight at a Framingham gas station.

So far, the grant has allowed Wayside and SMOC to help about 40 young adults struggling with homelessness secure an apartment.

Leslie Lee, the Program Director for SMOC, said the grant is designed to help eliminate the burden of housing deposits.

"Some people might be able to pay monthly rent because they can budget enough, but to get into an apartment a lot of places ask for first, last, and security," said Lee. "That's a big expense up front. Being able to help with that, it's much easier for them."

Once these young adults move into their first apartment, the biggest challenge is usually "affordable housing," said Lee.

"It's very expensive in the MetroWest area. The key thing is making sure they can keep the job. If there's any break in income, that's when trouble comes," said Lee.

It's a difficulty Francesco has run into, saying he "scrapes by the skin of (his) teeth" to make ends meet.

"It's not over. I'm inheriting a whole other 'problem child' that I have to keep up with," Francesco said.

As the young people in the program settle into a more normal life, aides provide support to prevent them from falling back into homelessness. Wayside checks in weekly and helps the young person create and stick to a budget. The nonprofit also has money set aside in case of an emergency.

"We don't want the young adults to not be able to afford rent or be at risk of homelessness again," said Ortiz, the director of the Tempo Young Adult Resource Center, another Wayside initiative that helps young adults with employment, schooling, and life skills.

The grant funding is part of Gov. Charlie Baker's new plan to tackle youth homelessness in the state, unveiled at a January press conference at Framingham State University. He announced \$3 million in funding to ten community partners in Massachusetts to support young people who are homeless or at-risk. South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC), among other local groups, received \$272,340 of that funding.

Watching the youths finally sign a lease or receive the keys to their first place is overwhelming, said Ortiz.

"It's been awesome to see these young people come in and say, 'Oh, I never thought I'd need a trash barrel,'" said Ortiz. "It's a really nice moment."

Right now, Francesco is focusing on moving forward: finding a better job and building up his savings.

"I need to take the next step," he said.

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