

Framingham: SMOC's go-to person on sobriety retires



Mary Shanahan, here at her desk, is retiring Tuesday after 20 years with the South Middlesex Opportunity Center. Her grandchildren are on her screensaver. Daily News Staff Photo/Art Illman

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FRAMINGHAM – Sober herself for 22 years, Mary Shanahan relates to the struggles of her clients at South Middlesex Opportunity Council.

As a program manager at SMOC in charge of supported housing, Shanahan, 67, has used her personal experience with drug and alcohol addiction to help others turn their lives around.

“This has been a passion of mine for the past 20 years because I’m also in recovery,” she said Monday. “I’ve just loved doing this.”

Shanahan, who retires today, helped establish the Common Ground Resource Center and has led a relapse prevention group. As program manager, she oversees supported housing in Framingham, Marlborough and Hudson.

“Most of the people in my houses are trying to stay sober,” she said. “They’re in recovery, they’ve gone through detoxes and 30-day or six-month programs. It’s kind of like a safe place to be because they’re with other people who are trying to stay sober.”

SMOC’s Executive Director, Jim Cuddy, said Shanahan has been the “backbone of our whole sober housing network in MetroWest.”

“When she came here we had some sober housing but it greatly expanded during her time here,” Cuddy said. “She really played kind of a leadership role.”

And the field evolved in challenging ways over that time, Cuddy said. The agency shifted from a no-tolerance, Alcoholics Anonymous-based approach to working to help clients who relapse.

“Some of those changes haven’t been particularly easy,” Cuddy said. In the past, “if you violated a sobriety rule you were bounced from a program.”

He said Shanahan handled the transition with grace and mentored other staff members.

Through her work, Shanahan, who lives in Natick, said she’s seen sad cases of addiction.

“It’s a disease and not everybody makes it, but I’ve seen a lot of miracles,” she said.

Some of her clients have gone through the housing program, found a job, moved on to their own apartment, got married and had kids.

“A lot of them who have gone through the program have gotten back with their families,” Shanahan said.

The resource center she helped establish, now at 7 Bishop St., helps clients become self-sufficient.

“When we worked together we really saw success and improvement in the people that we worked with because we could give them so many services all at once,” Shanahan said.

Cuddy said Shanahan has been a go-to person at SMOC, the link between the agency and the AA community in terms of helping people get from one place to another. He said SMOC is sad to see her go.

“Mary’s a special person and she never lost her belief in helping people get and remain sober, and never lost her faith that that mysterious process, that you work on it every day, that you never really give up hope,” Cuddy said.

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