

Homelessness is as much an indicator, as it is a barrier. It's an indicator that conditions in the life of an individual or family may be spinning out of control. Domestic abuse, untreated physical or mental illness, criminal involvement, addiction to drugs or alcohol, and other stressors precipitate crises that can lead to homelessness.

The cycle perpetuates itself, as not having a home is often an insurmountable barrier to stability. DHS contracts with providers that work with homeless individuals and their families to reduce the likelihood of crises by helping them identify and resolve their underlying issues.

Overcoming homelessness and achieving stability takes determination and commitment from individuals and providers, as well as from the larger communities. But, you will see from the stories included here, it is possible and worth the effort.

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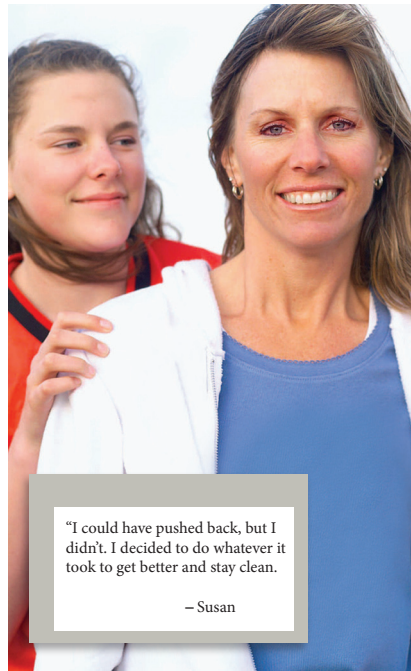
Susan

Experimentation with drugs, beginning at 13, taught Susan many ways to dull life. At 26, during the second trimester with her first child, Susan injured her back and was prescribed narcotics to ease the pain. Soon the “pill popping” was less about pain and more about addiction.

She “did things she never thought she would do in her life, just to get the drugs she needed to feel normal.” As years passed, normal became less and less attainable. The potency and dosage increased, and eventually, heroin replaced pills. Alcohol, anti-depressants, and crack cocaine formulated a dangerous cocktail of destruction that drove the downward spiral that defined her life. With a protection from abuse order – filed by her husband – that kept her from seeing her children, Susan found herself standing outside her mother’s senior high rise at 1:30 a.m., having hit rock bottom after 20 years.

“Being kicked out of my home seemed the worst possible thing to me, but it turns out, it may have been the best,” Susan recalled philosophically. “It had to happen for me to get [help]. When I got [to the DHS-funded treatment center], they gave me a bed and fed me. My ‘big sister,’ 18 years younger than me, had all kinds of clothes waiting for me on my bed. I said, ‘You don’t even know me.’ She said, ‘That’s ok. It’s how we do things here.’”

Susan spent six months living at the treatment center and working with a therapist, who used a simple, but profound mantra – I will not work



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– Susan

harder than you for your recovery – to remind her that this may be her last chance to be normal without drugs.

Having completed the center’s treatment program, still needing support to stay clean and facing the prospect of homelessness, Susan joined another program that offers rental assistance to participating addicts in recovery. However, she had to find an apartment willing to take a risk on her.

“Most people were rude when I said I was in recovery,” Susan said. “But I found this really nice place with wall-to-wall carpeting and a

stove, and I decided to be really honest. I said, ‘I am a recovering drug addict. My credit is [awful] but the rent check will come directly from the program. I have a 13-year-old daughter... who will visit. I need someone to give me a chance.’” They did.

Susan decided to give herself a chance, too. “I realized the assignments they gave me were to help me,” Susan said. “I could have pushed back, but I didn’t. I decided to do whatever it took to get better and stay clean. I participated in [group therapy], committed to a home group and worked with my sponsor and my therapist. I still do. Even though I’m not there anymore, I still see my therapist, and I’m giving back.”

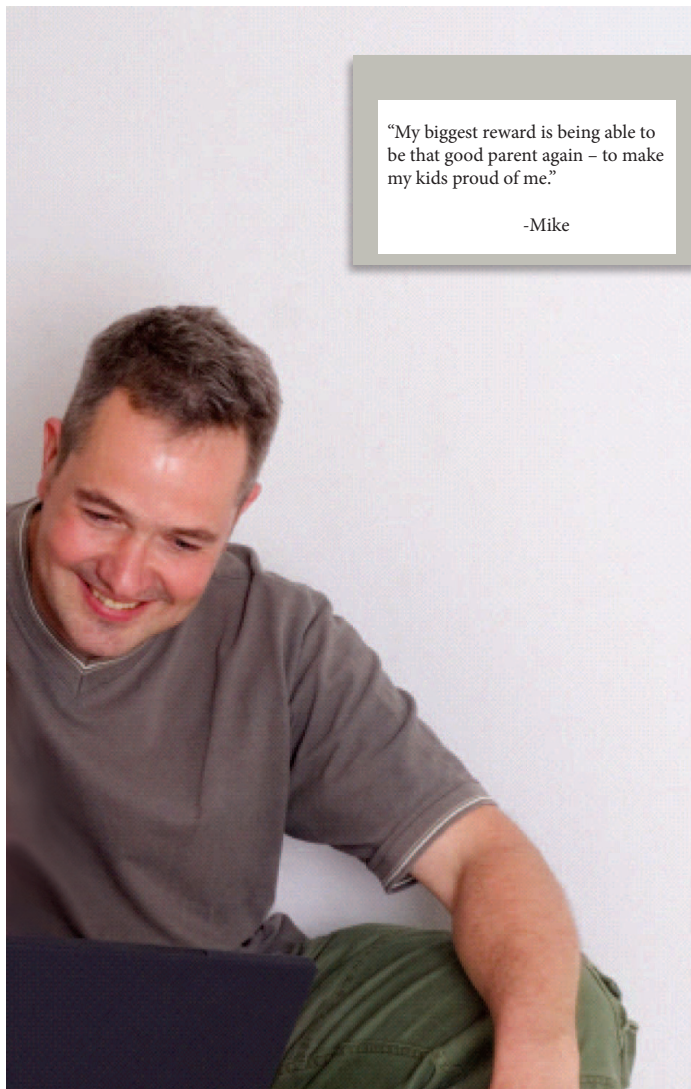
The process is working. Clean and sober, Susan is slowly but surely rebuilding her relationships with her children and former husband. “I thought I’d end up dead in some building or street somewhere,” she said. “Now I wake up every morning and say, ‘I am worth the battle today.’”

At 50, Mike appreciates his life. That hasn't always been true. It hadn't always been this manageable.

"I was an All-American basketball star in Sto-Rox," Mike said, remembering his youth. "I was going places. Graduated, spent a short time in the military. Then I got into drinking and smoking marijuana."

Recreational habits soon became monopolizing addictions. Jobs turned over fast as drug use overlapped work. "I burned so many bridges back then. People gave me good jobs. I could never hold one down."

Mike checked into a rehab program on the Northside, but recidivated several times before finally moving to Kittanning to live in a halfway house. Determined to stay clean, he found a job as a salesman and earned a reputation as a dedicated worker. When the business closed, his former employers helped him open his own business, proudly referring their longtime customers and suppliers his way.



"My biggest reward is being able to be that good parent again – to make my kids proud of me."

-Mike

"My son was back in my life," Mike recalled. "I was living the dream, and I was clean and sober. But, the disease is cunning, baffling and powerful."

When Mike strained a muscle at work and asked a doctor to give him pain pills, on some level he understood the risks. Two pills are all it took to precipitate another downward slide.

Everything in Mike's life – family and career – was sacrificed. He cashed bad checks to buy drugs, broke promises to his family, and let his once prosperous business fold before finally finding himself cornered, quite literally, on a bridge surrounded by police and prepared to jump.

One of the officers told Mike, "There's something about you that tells me you're in the wrong place."

The judge in Mike's case granted him permission to live at an alternative treatment facility, but with the expectation of producing results.

"I used those two years ... to prove I was serious about my recovery," Mike said. "I took part in meetings, got a sponsor. I got a job. I established such a positive routine that I didn't need to go back to the old ways. I wanted to step out of there and step back into living, but leaving meant I'd be homeless again."

With the help of a DHS-funded veterans' program, Mike was given work boots, bus tickets, suitable clothes for living and interviewing, a peer support team, and help finding and paying for an apartment.

Having made restitution for his debts, he still faced the consequences of his criminal charges. The judge, impressed with all he had accomplished, sentenced Mike to time served and probation.

"I haven't taken one day of freedom for granted," Mike insisted. "My biggest reward is being able to be that good parent again – to make my kids proud of me." Mike was selected as the 2009 Employee of the Year by his employer.

Mike is committed to giving back to the programs he calls the stable foundation for his recovery by volunteering and counseling others coming in to the program.

"All the fast living is behind me," Mike said. "I know just where I could be ... dead or in jail for a long time."

To learn more about how DHS and its contracted providers are addressing homelessness in Allegheny County, visit the DHS web site at www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/hh.aspx.