FAREWELL INTERVIEW WITH SHARON ALFORD

This month we bid a fond farewell to Sharon Alford. Sharon joined BFHP in 2007, and in her more than 12 years with us, she has played an instrumental role in developing BFHP’s Community Meal and Veteran’s Transitional Housing programs, as well as in the implementation and fine-tuning of many of the tools we use to serve our clients, including: HMIS (the digital Homeless Management Information System), the City of Berkeley Shelter Reservation hotline, and the city’s Coordinate Entry System for homeless services.

For Sharon, it has always been a priority to create safe and inviting spaces for our most vulnerable community members, to treat them with respect, and to foster that value in her staff. We are grateful for Sharon’s many years of service, her straight-talking, her passion for her job, and her commitment to working with high-risk and underserved populations. “What I love most about my work,” she says, “is that we are changing lives.”

We interviewed Sharon at the beginning of August.

Have you seen the issue of homelessness change since you started at BFHP?

Certainly it has increased in numbers, and the face of homelessness has changed. There are many middle class or long-term housed individuals who are now homeless due to the rising housing costs.

What are the biggest challenges in the fight against homelessness?

Affordability – there are few units near Berkeley that are affordable to our clients on a fixed income. Without rent control that is the biggest challenge, the lack of inventory. There is funding provided, but we also want to make sure that a client is able to sustain that unit if the financial subsidies they receive decrease. Some subsidies decrease because the goal is to lead the client toward independent living.

The results of the latest Point-in-Time count show an almost 43% increase in homelessness in Alameda County over the last two years, but only a 13% increase in Berkeley. Why do you think that is?

We have very strong partnerships connected to the Hub. I believe those partnerships working hand in hand contributed, because each partner has a specialty, and so there is not one agency trying to do everything. There are agencies that are connected to each other and together they provide coordinated wraparound services to the client. The Coordinated Entry System provides the funds to house clients and the case management to keep them housed while they’re working.
On August 2nd we broke ground on our new project in Rio Vista! We are partnering with Habitat for Humanity in Solano County on a new permanent home with support services for six veterans exiting homelessness.

We’re excited to watch the progress of construction by Habitat for Humanity, with volunteer help. When the home is completed, we will be moving in formerly homeless veterans and providing them with case management and support services to make their transition out of homelessness as easy as possible. Once moved in, the veterans will be able to live there as long as they wish.

Thank you to the group of volunteers from Project Peace East Bay who came out to do some gardening at our Russell Street Residence (RSR)! They planted peppers, eggplants, and strawberries to go with the cabbage, herbs, and tomatoes that were already there.

RSR is our permanent supportive housing facility for formerly homeless individuals with serious mental illness. The residents help tend the garden and our staff incorporates the fresh fruits and vegetables into the home cooked meals we provide.

More photos on bfhp.org

Thank you so much to Concord Chevrolet for this generous donation! Strong community partnerships like this help us to assist hundreds of veterans and their families each year recover from homelessness and retake their place in our community.
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through their challenges and being connected to partner services. These services often include mental health and medical, because we know there is a direct correlation to physical fitness as well as mental health fitness in order to stay housed.

Also, I think it is a direct correlation to Coordinated Entry Services and the changing focus on Housing First. Housing First is when you place the individual in housing and then you work on the challenges that they face that had kept them in homelessness, so using that approach will tend to decrease the number of newly homeless individuals.

What do you want people to know about the homeless?

That they want to be seen and valued as human beings. At BFHP we believe everyone has a right to have a home, food, and medical care. Homeless people are no exception.

What is the most rewarding thing about working with the homeless population?

The possibility of it all, that’s what drives me. When you work with a homeless individual you are supporting them with wraparound services and navigating them toward permanent housing. It’s the possibility of the end result, that’s what drives me and keeps me going. The fact that after all these years that I’ve been working here we still have clients who call us after being housed for 12 or 13 years. Because we built that trust relationship, they are clear that if they call us they’re going to get an answer and we’re going to work with them to find a solution to whatever their immediate challenge is. We build lifelong relationships with clients who want that. They know that we’re here and we’re available.

What are you most proud of when you look back over your work here?

I’m proud to have been part of the design and implementation of many of the tools and programs we use to serve our clients, especially the City of Berkeley Coordinated Entry System introduced in 2016. I’m happy to have had a seat at the table with the BFHP leadership team as we grew and expanded the agency.

Also, training our staff in customer service was one of my greatest rewards here. To see the difference in how staff greeted and treated our clients as they entered our doors, made me proud.

THE HOPE CENTER: IN THE HEART OF BERKELEY

Plans for the construction of the new Hope Center are moving forward rapidly. Development of the site at 2012 Berkeley Way is a partnership between Berkeley Food & Housing Project and BRIDGE Housing that will bring much needed affordable housing to downtown Berkeley, along with services and short term housing for homeless men and women. In addition to a commitment of $20M from the City of Berkeley, we have received $20M from Alameda County A-1 bond funds, $13M from the Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities Program (AHSC), and an additional $7M from the Supportive Housing Multifamily Housing Program (SHMHP) and No Place Like Home funds (NPLH).

Grant awards from these sources of funds are highly competitive but because of the innovative nature of the entire development, we are finding that our applications receive very high scores and are coming in as planned. We still have some private fundraising to complete for the ground floor dining area and kitchen.

With an expected groundbreaking in April 2020, the project is due to be completed by 2022.
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