

## Main Street Housing: Good work on the down-low for 25 years across Maryland



Ken Wireman, executive director of Main Street Housing, with two of the nonprofit's tenants in Baltimore, Shakea Conyers, left, and Suzanne Hecker. staff BY DAN RODRICKS

I need a timeout to recognize a Maryland nonprofit that apparently has more important things to do than alert the media to its good works.

Though it has been operating for 25 years, now with locations in Baltimore and 10 counties, I'd never heard of it, until recently. And, evidently, I'm not alone: The organization's website does not include an "In The News" page, with links to media coverage of its mission, as is common among nonprofits.

There's nothing wrong with charitable organizations letting us know about what they do. In fact, more of them should. They fill gaps in the nation's social safety net. Given well-founded apprehensions about the future federal role in providing for our most vulnerable citizens — with two erratic billionaires about to be in charge of cutting government — we're going to need the nonprofits more than ever.

Part of the reason Main Street Housing (MSH) has been on the down-low is this: It works quietly to buy and rent homes to people who've experienced mental health disabilities, to integrate them into neighborhoods across Maryland without a lot of fuss — and without displaying signage on any of its properties.

With funding from the state and other sources, MSH has been able to purchase houses from western Maryland to the Eastern Shore that, at capacity, can accommodate up to 114 tenants. I visited the one in northeast Baltimore where Suzanne Hecker and Shakea Conyers have lived for a decade. They each have their own space, upstairs and downstairs, in a modest but roomy brick cape on a residential street near a mainline road. They share a kitchen and a living room. Hecker has room to work on her watercolor paintings — she has a master's degree in fine art from the University of Delaware — while Conyers studies for her undergraduate degree from Towson University and takes buses to a part-time job in Baltimore County.

Ten years ago, they both needed stable housing and found MSH. Along with a third tenant, a man who did not want to be identified in this column, they each pay \$365 a month in rent. That's part of the MSH model, making each tenant contribute to the cost of the housing.

Main Street Housing's official mission is to "create life changing housing opportunities and empower people living with mental health disabilities to have a place to call home."

I would add this: "To treat people like peers, like fellow human beings. And give them a place to call home. A place to call home makes all the difference."

That's the view of Ken Wireman, a graduate of the University of Maryland School of Social Work who became MSH founding director in 1999. He's still in charge, a jovial gent with white Einstein-ish hair and moustache. He's a native of Hagerstown, in Washington County, where MSH purchased its first house.

"There was a committee, which I was on, looking at affordable housing and what we could do about it," he says. "We made a decision to work at actually getting some properties and providing housing in a way that is proactively consumer-based — housing the way people with psychiatric disabilities would want."

Wireman has a checklist of criteria for a property that fits the needs of MSH tenants. They need to feel comfortable, he says, so he avoids buying houses in "stuffy" neighborhoods as well as houses near "seedy establishments" in marginal ones. Tenants need to be able to walk to a bus stop; they need to live within a reasonable distance of shopping and therapeutic services.

I pushed Wireman to better understand the MSH model. His organization's website includes this statement: "Historically, housing opportunities for people with psychiatric disabilities have been tied to their participation in mental health services. This creates a paradox: achieving more independence and psychiatric wellness can place a person's housing in jeopardy."

Here's what that means:

In the decades after deinstitutionalization, government programs tied housing to mental health services. There was a problem with that.

"We found," said Wireman, "that getting well and doing better can cause a denial of housing. I talked with one person in Harford County [whose] mental health improved to the point where he no longer qualified for the treatment services and he lost the housing that is connected to these services."

That doesn't happen at MSH. "Once a person is in, as long as they follow the lease, they can stay as long as they want," says Wireman. "Many times, when tenants are in place for a long time, they do get much better. ... If they would have to leave, their mental health may very well be compromised."

MSH believes its tenants have a right to privacy and a right to live independently, without constant supervision. Tom Carter, MSH's regional property manager, makes visits about once a month, but that's about it.

"A person living at MSH chooses the [mental health] services they wish to have separately from our housing," says Wireman. "We don't have any mandatory services attached to our housing. This has been very successful as our tenants took on the real-life role of tenant. They kept up with the services they needed to maintain their housing as a tenant, with rights and responsibilities."

And both Susanne Hecker and Shakea Conyers can tell you what their responsibilities are.

"Pay your rent on time," says Hecker.

"Keep your room clean and organized," says Conyers.