Grants to provide aid for homeless

Former drug addict Larry Harrison sits on his bunk at O'Brien House on the last weekend of his six-month stay at the shelter and treatment center in Baton Rouge.

Former addict recalls help at O'Brien House

Larry Harrison is a self-described former crack addict who has lived drug-free for the past 11 months.

"I'm making it on no power of my own. I just take it one day at a time with the help of the Lord," said Harrison.

Harrison escaped the temptations of his old neighborhood to live six of those 11 months at O'Brien House, a halfway house that provides shelter and treatment for alcoholics and substance abusers.

When Harrison first called O'Brien House and learned the wait would be 30-60 days, he recalls that he was unsure if he had the strength to hold on. "I'm on the edge of giving up, man, I'm not going to make it," he remembers thinking.

"We've had some people wait up to two months," said O'Brien House director Katherine Martin.

Trinity Marine employee Larry Harrison walks past a sign reminding people not to bring in weapons, alcohol and drugs on company property after a day of work at the barge manufacturer in Port Allen.
"People have to be persistent, and there has to be an opening for them to get in."

By the grace of God, Harrison said, eight days after he called, he moved in.

The O'Brian House is one of five Baton Rouge agencies which will share a $1.8 million federal grant to help the homeless and increase transitional housing.

With the funding, O'Brian House will add 24 beds to give people like Harrison the opportunity to turn their lives around. O'Brian House currently has 60 people on its waiting list, Martin said.

Harrison’s journey to O’Brian House started last November.

The 40-year-old New Orleans native was first sent to the Baton Rouge Detox Center, then treated at the Fontainebleau Treatment Center in Mandeville. He was discharged three days before Christmas.

The next 30 days were rough, especially when he would encounter people he knew were still using drugs.

But it was an incident with his son that motivated him to stay clear of drug abusers.

"My son came by calling for his daddy," said Harrison. "I was hiding from him because I was high. I asked myself: What if my son really needed me? I felt really small. Here I am running. What kind of father am I? I'm running and hiding because I didn't want him to see me high."

What Harrison needed was to get away from his neighborhood. His counselor from the Fontainebleau Treatment Center suggested the O'Brian House. On Jan. 22, he moved in.

While at O'Brian House, Harrison was able to find a job as a welder and later as a welder at Trinity Marine in Port Allen.

He graduated from O'Brian House in late July and now lives in an apartment in Baton Rouge. Meanwhile, he continues his struggle to stay drug-free, a battle he credits O'Brian House with helping him fight.

"The O'Brian House put a lot of structure into my life," says Harrison. "People cared and showed nothing but love."

The new building could allow O'Brian House to upgrade treatment at its existing, 36-bed facility to last a year rather than six months, Martin said.

- $326,529 for the Salvation Army, which intends to renovate a hotel at its Airline Highway property to provide transitional housing to 30 people who are trying to work their way out of homelessness. Programs director Reynold Carlson said the Salvation Army now provides transitional housing to eight men who are enrolled in its own drug and alcohol rehabilitation program.

The new facility would be open to referrals from other agencies as well. Carlson said the capacity of the army's emergency shelter would grow as a result of the renovation. The shelter now holds 16 men and its capacity would increase to 25.

- $157,000 for St. Anthony's Home, which plans to provide housing and living assistance to 10 or 12 additional patients diagnosed with AIDS. Site manager Chuck Johnson said St. Anthony's Home currently provides housing to seven AIDS patients. Studies are being done to determine if the existing facilities should be offered to specific groups — such as families coping with AIDS or people who are just beginning to exhibit symptoms of the disease — once the new homes are ready.

- $141,533 to Friends of Families, which will provide education and job training programs to people living in transitional housing.

While not all of the programs deal with people who currently are homeless, they all serve people who might find themselves on the streets without assistance, officials said.

Surveys have indicated that 40-60 percent of the homeless are chemically dependent and about one-quarter of the homeless may have mental illnesses, said Keyth Devillier, the emergency shelter grants program manager for the state.

Christine Rhor, temporary chairwoman for the Capital Area Alliance for the Homeless, said the grant applications sprang from a coordinated effort by numerous agencies to address the long- and short-term needs of the parish's homeless. She said it was the first time that has been done.

"The more hands you have on deck ... the more hearts you have together, I think you can do a better job," Rhorer said.

She said there is a continuing need for more overnight emergency shelters for the homeless.

St. Vincent de Paul officials are moving in that area.

The society's executive director, Michael Acaldlo, said $875,000 already has been raised for such shelter.

The facility, which will be located by the St. Vincent de Paul Dining Room, would provide emergency beds for 30 men and a day shelter for homeless men, women and children, said Acaldlo. He said the day shelter will offer child-care services, nutritional assistance and referral services.

The society has submitted a request for HUD funds to buy furnishings and assist in operating the new facility, but those funds are part of a separate program from the five already approved.

Al Gensler, the city-parish urban development director, said the society has "a pretty good shot" at getting those funds, which should be allocated within two months.

Acaldo said the society has enough money to construct the facility without the grant and should break ground in November or December.