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FAMILY PROMISE OF GREATER HELENA PILOTING PROGRAM TO PREVENT HOMELESSNESS

HELENA, MT—When Helena’s homeless population doubled from January 2020 to January 2021, Family Promise Executive Director Renee Bauer wanted to try a new approach. The organization—which helps homeless families and children through temporary shelter, food, and essential services—initiated a Homelessness Prevention and Diversion program. The goal is to stabilize at-risk families before they become homeless, thus stemming the surge at the outset.

The result? “Family Promise has helped 30 families since May and we are working with seven others now, on everything from mediation to finances and budgeting,” Bauer says. “We look at each individual family’s situation and tailor a solution to help them overcome their individual challenges. This includes landlord mediation, financial literacy, childcare, employment training, and help accessing rental assistance.”

The nonprofit hired an assistant advocate in May to assist with case work and relations with partner agencies, all of whom play a different role. “Good Samaritan, the Y, Friendship Home, and God’s Love all have different visions, but we are focused on one main issue,” Bauer adds.

Even with several nonprofits working with each other and the city to address homelessness, Helena lacks sufficient transitional housing, according to Bauer. “Public housing is full. Some families have been evicted, and some have been priced out of the housing market altogether, even with full-time jobs. Others are coming out of domestic violence situations. We simply don’t have enough space.”

And, Bauer continues, “COVID made the world completely different,” citing “the skyrocketing cost of housing in Montana and an unusual job market” as catalysts behind the increase in homeless families.

Family Promise is currently housing four families at area churches and its Day Center, has 35 families on a Helena housing list, and another nine families living in cars on a waiting list. “It’s hard to get accurate numbers,” Bauer says, “because the shelters are all at capacity and we don’t know exactly how many more are out there beyond this capacity.”

Family Promise expects to serve 60 families in 2021 through the pilot program, keeping at-risk families in permanent housing rather than transitioning them through shelters. The organization will provide ongoing support to ensure families have the skills and tools to succeed in independent living.

The new prevention program is funded by the Gianforte Family Foundation, the national Family Promise organization, and individual donors. Catherine Koenen, executive director of the Gianforte Family Foundation, says, “Our goal is to see all Montana children and families flourish. Adequate housing is a vital component toward this vision, and we’re thankful for Family Promise and their efforts to help families with children maintain stability during tough times.”

Family Promise welcomes community volunteers, donors, and supporters. For more information or to donate, call 406-465-9467 or visit <https://www.familypromisehelena.org>.