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# Agency places homeless in vacant apartments

**TODD COHEN**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Demand for affordable housing in Charlotte exceeds the supply by 17,000 units. Yet there's a largely untapped resource — half the city's 6,000 vacant units are at least 15 years old and could house needy families.

Moving families from homeless shelters into those apartments is the mission of a collaborative nonprofit initiative launched last spring.

The Workforce Initiative for Supportive Housing is a partnership of Crisis Assistance Ministry, Lutheran Family Services, A Way Home, 10 congregations and a half-dozen agencies.

The partnership functions as a one-stop broker of housing and support services for working families, particularly those with children.

Lutheran Family Services screens families referred from homeless shelters, and Crisis Assistance Ministry then works with owners of vacant housing to find homes.

Each family also receives support from one of two social workers at Lutheran Family Services and from volunteer teams coordinated by WISH, plus a moderate rental subsidy.

"We have a major problem in our shelters where a high percentage of our population are people that are working and simply can't get out," says

Darren Ash. He's a veteran of the multi-family housing industry and joined WISH in April as its first executive director.

"Once they're homeless, they're stuck," he says. "Their credit is shot. They can probably afford half the going rent rate in the city."

Ash says landlords see participating families as "a much better tenant because they have all the support services."

He developed strong relationships with landlords as a founder of Apartment Realty Advisors, a firm that brokers sales of apartment communities. Ash saw WISH as a bridge between "working-poor families and good-hearted landlords with vacant apartments."

Since September, WISH has placed 15 families, including 30 children, in affordable housing. Families might need to stay two to five years before reaching financial independence.

Lutheran Family Services' social



photo LISA HOWELL

**This family found a home through the Workforce Initiative for Supportive Housing, a Charlotte organization that places working families in vacant apartments. WISH also organized this birthday party at a fire station for the couple's middle child.**

workers provide training in areas such as finances and budgeting, and also connect them with agencies that provide food and health care.

Crisis Assistance Ministry covers part of the tenants' rent and guarantees security and utility payments.

And "hope teams" drawn from a pool of 150 volunteers from participating congregations report to the social workers and provide families with a broad range of support.

The teams help families furnish their apartments with donated furniture they can select at a warehouse WISH shares with Family Promise. Volunteers also serve as babysitters, tutors and advocates for families.

The collaboration is modeled on a similar effort for evacuees from Hurricane Katrina who relocated to Charlotte from the Gulf Coast.

Lisa Howell, who serves as faith-community volunteer coordinator for WISH, played that same role in the effort to serve Katrina evacuees.

WISH puts the annual cost of support at \$7,500 per family. It has raised \$1 million, including \$500,000 from corporations, \$300,000 from faith organizations and individuals, and \$200,000 from the city of Charlotte.

WISH aims to raise \$3.7 million over five years for the first phase of its work, including placing a total of 100 families in affordable housing by spring 2009.

To meet its long-term goal of serving several thousand families, Ash says WISH will show its initial efforts are producing results. The organization can measure, for example, the academic performance of children in the program against those in homeless shelters.

Todd Cohen is editor and publisher of the *Philanthropy Journal* at [www.philanthropyjournal.org](http://www.philanthropyjournal.org). He can be reached at (919) 573-4642.