

Front Steps Operates New ARCH and Much More

By Stacey Frank

For those who find themselves homeless seemingly simple things such as showering, eating, sleeping, and access to various basic resources become major challenges. For those who face these challenges, and hope to one day overcome them, services need to be provided. Front Steps (formerly known as the Capitol Area Homeless Alliance) has taken a leading role in providing these services to Austin's homeless. This nonprofit organization is based on the belief that all people deserve dignity of a safe place to call home and seeks to end homelessness by providing shelter, affordable housing and community education (Front Steps Website). Carol Swicker, Program Director, invited me into her office to discuss their programs highlighted by the recent grand opening of the new Austin Resource Center for the Homeless.

Front Steps largest program is the new Austin Resource Center for the Homeless (ARCH), which is located at 7th and Neches Street. This center is a multi-purpose facility designed to meet the needs of many segments of the homeless population. Within this program, there is a day resource center, a health clinic, an overnight shelter for single adult men, and a day sleeping program. Helen Varty, Program Director, and Swicker are two of the many people from Front Steps that operates the ARCH, but there are many other homeless service organizations that are going to be located on-site as well.

On Wednesday, April 28, the City of Austin sponsored the grand opening celebration of the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless. People from all over finally came to look at this new and important asset to the city of Austin. Inside this two-story facility there is a check-in desk, a gathering room, laundry facilities, lockers, a computer training room, bathrooms, and office spaces for the agencies. The program began around 10:15 that morning. David Lurie, the Director of Austin-Travis County Health and Human Services Department, welcomed everyone to the grand opening celebration and spoke about how Austin really needed a facility like the ARCH. Other speakers included Austin City Manager Toby Hammett Futrell, Austin Mayor Will Wynn, former mayors Kirk Watson and Gustavo L. Garcia, various members of the Austin City Council Members, Front Steps Board of Directors member Rose Lancaster, and former ARCH client William Westpoint. After the speakers completed their speeches, the ceremonial ribbon was cut, and the tours of the new ARCH facility began.



Although the ARCH is the most visible program Front Steps currently provides, Swicker also discussed some of the many others. One of those is a program called *Hands Up to Housing*, which provides loans to homeless working people to pay the move-in costs for permanent housing. Front Steps supplies up to \$400 in forgivable loans. While working with the organization through this program, not only is one helped financially, but the homeless are also given the opportunity to seek support services through the staff at Front Steps.

Another program that Swicker spoke about was the *Emergency Motel Voucher*. This program offers a three-day respite in local motels for homeless families with a sick child, or homeless individuals released from the hospital with no place to stay. Swicker mentioned that this program has helped a large number of families that face these types of problems and issues, but hopes to be able to do more in the future.

Client Discretionary Funds is a program that helps the homeless prepare for any event, such as job interviews. Front Steps helps them acquire identification cards, birth certificates, and other such items. Currently they have a clothing closet where anyone that needs clothes can go in, search through, and find an outfit to wear for whatever the event may be. Tangible items are not the only way that Front Steps is able to help. They have job readiness workshops also. According to the Front Steps Annual Report for 2003, 185 grants were provided, with an average grant amount of \$28.

Permanent housing is difficult for the housing to find without the help of a service organization. Recently, Front Steps, in partnership with Foundation Communities, renovated a former nursing home into a place that is now called *Garden Terrace*. Throughout *Garden Terrace*, there are single-occupancy rooms in which single adults with low-income can permanently stay. As well as the room, supportive services are also

offered. When walking into the building, there is a very nice lobby that leads out to a beautiful backyard with hammocks and trees all around. Front Steps also has a room with games such as ping-pong, and, of course, there is a small area with vending machines.

At this point in time, Front Steps has a few, simple needs from the public. Swicker stated that donations of basic hygiene items, jeans sizes 30-36, and volunteers for the new ARCH to help operate the kitchen and computer lab would be greatly appreciated. If you are able to give any of these items or more, please contact Carol Swicker at cswicker@frontsteps.org.