

the way home

A Message from Margaret Middleton, CEO

THE COVID-19 CRISIS CONTINUES TO TOUCH EVERY ASPECT OF HOW WE LIVE, WORK AND PLAY. It forces us to build anew all of our routines, our interactions, and our workplaces. There have been so many hardships and so many losses, it's difficult to comprehend the scope of the suffering. No one in our community has been more vulnerable to this virus than those without the ability to stay home and stay safe because they have no home. But, a silver lining of this crisis is that so many of us are appreciating our interdependence as humans, and that allowing homelessness to continue in our communities is not acceptable. Before the pandemic, ending homelessness was a moral imperative; now it is a public health imperative as well. I am so grateful to be given the opportunity to roll up my sleeves and work with such talented and committed partners towards such a worthwhile goal.

Columbus House has been a pillar of my life for over a decade. I joined the Board of Directors in 2009 during the uncertainty of the housing crisis. I marveled at our tremendous growth of staff, programs and geographic reach over the following decade. Columbus House, and my work as a lawyer representing homeless Veterans, turned me into a die-hard Housing First advocate. No one can live a life of fulfillment and purpose without a safe and affordable place to live. I look forward to continuing our work of ending homelessness and thank you all for your continuing partnership. ■



Photo: Carolyn Richardson

Pandemic Facilitates Unprecedented Housing Success

WE SAT IN THE MEETING AND STARED AT THE SPREADSHEET before us and it told a story of death that was hard to comprehend. At Columbus House we had the benefit of having a data expert on staff, and as COVID-19 began to spread into Connecticut we had early insight to the harm it could do if it got into our shelters. Columbus House leadership had hard numbers to look at and it was clear that we needed to act quickly and decisively – we knew we were in a life and death race. In early March we

had over 160 individuals in our New Haven shelters. The Warming Centers in Hamden and Middletown were serving between 25-40 clients per night. Our clients are some of the most vulnerable people in society when it comes to health issues and they were residing in spaces that would not allow for social distancing.

We knew that each person housed increased their safety and reduced the number of people that could be infected. At this early stage we didn't have the

resources to place everyone into hotels. So we were determined to house as many people as quickly as possible.

Every way Columbus House operated changed due to the pandemic – systems and processes were reimaged and new methods were established. The Permanent Supportive Housing department (PSH) developed a new rapid-exit model by re-organizing and creating three teams to serve our clients efficiently and safely: one to conduct phone intakes; a second to show

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A meeting area is repurposed to store basic household necessities for those moving out of homelessness and into their own apartment during the pandemic. A Case Manager inventories Welcome Kits that she has just brought in from the rain. With unprecedented numbers of people moving into homes, these Kits – purchased with funds you provide – are needed now more than ever.

apartments and sign leases; and a third to obtain and deliver the necessary supplies for someone moving into a permanent home.

First the PSH team asked for a list of everyone known to the homeless system with an income of \$700 or more per month. Then they called every landlord they had ever worked with for available units and ensured housing inspections were conducted on each unit before any client went to see it. They obtained all required documentation for federal subsidy including Rent Reasonableness forms, proof of ownership, W-9s and FEMA flood maps. 15 units of housing were ready and approved for clients – before we received our first referral. Once we got a referral, a client went to see the unit and if they liked it, they immediately signed the lease. Before the pandemic, this process would normally take two weeks or more – PSH staff literally reduced it to one day. And then we started housing people. Some days we housed up to five people, an unheard of accomplishment. On our most successful day (April 1), we housed 12 people. From March 15-July 28 we placed 149 individuals into permanent homes. PSH includes a small but dedicated team who work on Rapid Re-Housing – this team was responsible for 123 of the 149 people housed.

Securing housing for those experiencing homelessness is a complicated process and during a pandemic it is even more so. With the streamlining of efforts, PSH as well as Residential and Outreach & Engagement (O&E) staff literally saved lives – and continues to save lives – by providing vital services during unprecedented times.



Columbus House – staff and supporters – always gives their best to protect and help the clients we serve – but never before had they been asked to do so in such dangerous conditions. When the call

Our volunteers and donors came to the rescue in momentous ways – providing masks, hand sanitizer and numerous items for newly housed individuals, as well as financial gifts to keep us operating...any success that PSH was able to accomplish is on the backs and the wings of the other departments, volunteers, donors and community members.

went out for all hands on deck, everyone responded. Shelter staff showed up day in and day out, often without sufficient PPE at first. O&E spread the word on how people could stay safe and where to go if they needed help. PSH redesigned itself to become a housing assembly line. Administrative staff added to their duties to assist where needed, whether in the kitchen preparing or serving food or working on finding PPE. Our volunteers and donors came to the rescue in momentous ways – providing masks,

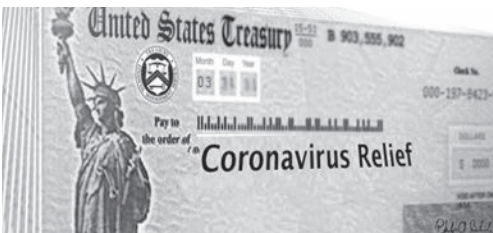
Our dedicated friends and supporters at Medtronic, New Haven, couldn't join us in person for their yearly volunteer event (which often includes 80-90 volunteers) but they still came through for us! Kathy, Christine, and Christine's children delivered the results of their Welcome Kit drive for items our clients need most during the pandemic as they move into their own homes!

hand sanitizer and numerous items for newly housed individuals, as well as financial gifts to keep us operating. To see an entire community – and Columbus House is a community – respond so quickly, so selflessly, and so efficiently was awe inspiring.

So I was asked to write about our housing efforts – as they have been extraordinary. But to simply write the facts and figures of housing ignores the larger picture and does not give credence to the situation under which these feats were accomplished. I mean to say that any success that PSH was able to accomplish is on the backs and the wings of the other departments, volunteers, donors and community members.

Housing is healthcare, and that has never been more apparent than during this pandemic. Our shelters did not see mass hospitalizations or multiple deaths because of the courage, dedication and hard work of the staff at Columbus House and all of our partners. We are a beacon of light during these very dark times – and we will continue to shine until everyone has a home of their own! ■

Written by Cathleen Meaden who is the Director of Permanent Supportive Housing at Columbus House, overseeing our single and scattered supportive housing sites, Rapid Re-Housing and Income and Employment programs.



If you received a stimulus check and you and your family are okay financially, please consider donating a portion to Columbus House so we can continue our life-saving work of getting people off of the streets, out of the shelters and into their own homes.

You can make a safe, secure on-line contribution at www.columbushouse.org or by calling our development office at 203-410-4400 x131. Thank you.

Amanda's Story

HOMELESS DURING THE PANDEMIC: FROM HOTEL TO HOME

AMANDA HAD BEEN STAYING AT COLUMBUS HOUSE'S NEW HAVEN EMERGENCY SHELTER when Governor Lamont declared a public health emergency in response to COVID-19. "Stay safe, stay home" was the recommendation. But Amanda had no home. And six-foot social distancing was impossible while living in a congregate shelter, sharing communal spaces with over 80 people each day, and sleeping in a room with up to 16 women each night.

Already stressed about her living situation, she had added anxiety about the full-time job she just landed. It was a wonderful development in her life, but as an essential worker she had to get to her new job by taking the bus twice a day – causing additional concern for her safety and others at the shelter. "I've been unemployed for the past four years since I've been homeless...it feels great to actually have a job."

Columbus House was working to keep everyone safe at the shelter. Guests were staying inside all day and all volunteer activity was suspended. By April 3, with the help of multiple local and state government agencies, partners, and our wonderful supporters, Columbus House was able to move all guests staying at the New Haven Shelter, including Amanda, safely to a local hotel. With only two guests to a room, social distancing was achieved. "The hotel was beautiful," says Amanda. She was comfortable, still able to get to work, and had a good roommate.

After two and a half weeks at the hotel, Amanda's Case Manager, Katy, connected her to a Columbus House housing specialist who got Amanda into the Rapid Exit program. (See accompanying article by Cathleen Meaden for more on this innovative model.) People who are literally homeless but have income and are ready to live independently are eligible. Columbus House staff helps find and secure affordable apartments, mediates with landlords, and assists in



Amanda stands on the porch of her new apartment while Katy, her Columbus House Case Manager, takes their photo.

"Katy, my Case Manager, was awesome! She made sure I would be sharing a roof with someone I would get along with. I love her, she did her job so well and she helped me so much, she's amazing!"
– Amanda

attaining security deposits and one or two months of rent.

Amanda's housing specialist, Paulette, worked with Katy and Amanda to ensure her plan would be successful. Paulette says, "It's always a challenge finding something the client can afford and is comfortable with. The key is persistence! When the client is willing and engaged in the process it's just a matter of looking until you find something that fits."

Paulette found a nice apartment online that would be affordable for Amanda – if she had a roommate. Amanda was willing. Paulette spoke to the new landlord about Columbus House's work, informing him that we often assist clients throughout their lifetimes, and listened to his criteria for tenants – which Amanda and her soon to be roommate both fit. "A lot of clients can only afford a room share situation so we do our best to put

people together that we think can live in peace. There are no guarantees, but we get to know the clients and what they are looking for and that leads to success. In this case both clients wanted to live with someone who worked."

"Katy, my Case Manager, was awesome! She made sure I would be sharing a roof with someone I would get along with. I love her, she did her job so well and she helped me so much, she's amazing!" says Amanda.

Amanda and her new roommate, another Columbus House client, were able to move out of the hotel and into their new apartment just weeks after the pandemic struck. They had almost no belongings but received full Welcome Kits – cleaning supplies, toiletries, bath towels, kitchen staples, and more to get them started – thanks to Columbus House supporters.

Amanda is 30 years old. She's been homeless on and off since she was just 11. She couch-surfed, lived on the streets, and stayed in abandoned buildings and encampments. She never "had her family in her corner" and found the foster care and shelter system in New York, where she was born, ineffective at getting her the help she needed. In 2017, a good friend from New Haven convinced her to move to Connecticut to try and start over. She lived with the friend for a while but couldn't stay long-term and returned to the streets. She finally called 2-1-1, a point of entry system for anyone in a housing crisis in Connecticut, for help. She made an appointment and was placed at Columbus House where, she says, "The staff is so polite and very helpful. They work hard for their clients."

Amanda made a major turnaround thanks to her determination and the collaborative efforts of our staff, partners, and supporters. She's very excited about her future. "I had a very complicated life. I was really scared to move to Connecticut, but thanks to Columbus House, my life has been so much better since I've been here." ■

SAVE THE DATE!

December 1, 2020 GIVING TUESDAY

Join the global effort in making a positive impact for non-profits by making an online gift to Columbus House on this special charitable giving day.

2020 ANNUAL MEETING

Like everything else this year, Columbus House's Annual Meeting will look very different. Stay tuned for more info!

For the most up-to-date information, visit www.columbushouse.org/events

LOOKING TO VOLUNTEER?

There are still plenty of ways to help during the pandemic! Visit www.columbushouse.org/volunteer to learn more.



Drop-In Center Moves to Columbus House

During the first week of May, the City of New Haven opened a Drop-In Center at Blake Field to reach those living outside during COVID-19. Columbus House's Outreach & Engagement (O&E) team was present three times per week to help get our vulnerable neighbors the basic items they so desperately needed during the pandemic. The Drop-In is now continuing as a program of Columbus House and is located behind our Annex building at 592 Ella T. Grasso Blvd. Open five days per week, 12:30-4:00 PM, guests have access to case management, toiletries, clothing, food, and showers (M-Th). Medical and mental health services through partnerships with the City of New Haven, Cornell Scott Hill Health Center, The Connection, Connecticut Mental Health Center, Liberty Community Services, Marrakech, Inc., and United Way of Greater New Haven are also available.






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Fourth Home in HOMELESS:HOUSED



OUR PARTNERSHIP WITH THE YALE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE JIM VLOCK BUILDING PROJECT is in its fourth of five years and, despite the pandemic, we're proud to announce that construction is underway. This year's student designed building consists of two one-bedroom units for single adults. The home is being built on a formerly vacant lot in a low-income neighborhood in New Haven.

Learn more at: www.columbushouse.org/homelesshoused

INSIDE:

**Meet Our New CEO | Unprecedented Housing Success
Amanda's Story | and more!**