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## Program for homeless could be cut

By *PATRICK MEIGHAN* Staff Writer

NASHUA – More than a gathering place, Connections offers homeless men and women counseling for substance abuse and other problems, a program for earning a GED, and computers, telephones, a resume-building program and other resources to help them find a job.

But its role in the community is even more basic than that, explained Ray Villeneuve, a former homeless veteran who still uses its resources and social networking.

“At the shelters, they’re asking you to leave at 7 o’clock (in the morning). Without Connections, where would you go?” Villeneuve said.

Without Connections, homeless people who would left to hang out on the streets, and there could be a resulting increase in crime, he said.

“It’s a buzzing place,” where anybody can drop in, get a cup of coffee, make a peanut butter sandwich and find a welcoming atmosphere, he said.

“There should be more of this type of thing. It provides hope,” Villeneuve said.

But Connections is in danger of closing July 1, according to officials from Harbor Homes Inc., which runs the program. The \$35,000 that helps fund the program has been cut from the state budget.

Connections, founded in 1984 as The Gathering Place, currently operates in a section of the agency’s 45 High St. headquarters. Over the years, it has helped countless local people dealing with homelessness and mental illness overcome social and personal issues, Harbor Homes officials say.

“It keeps evolving and getting better and better,” said Cynthia Andreola, community relations manager for Harbor Homes.

“When the Gathering Place opened, there were few opportunities for folks living with mental illness to socialize,” said Nathan Goodwin, Connections program manager.

“Over the years it became clear that individuals throughout the community were also looking for an opportunity to improve their lives in addition to a safe place to socialize,” he said.

In 2006, Connections began to focus on educational programs and vocational and life skills, he said.

Connections serves lunches to about 70 people each day and probably sees about 100 people a day, Goodwin said. Connections currently has 580 members including 263 homeless

individuals, according to Harbor Homes officials.

"I was a member of Connections before I was an employee of Harbor Homes," Goodwin said.

The program gave Goodwin, who was then homeless, access to resources he didn't know existed.

"I didn't know about the soup kitchen, Pastoral Care – this was all new to me," Goodwin said.

Connections became "one-stop shopping" to learn about resources provided by a host of agencies, he said.

"There's no place else for someone to go and have access to what they have access to here," Goodwin said.

Among the resources that Connections provides its members are use of four computers and telephones for searching for work and programs in group settings to help deal with anger management, substance abuse and other issues.

"It's a great place to re-establish where you are in life. It gives you hope," said Shawn Sheehan, a current member.

"Getting involved in the groups absolutely is the best," Sheehan said.

Today, more people are becoming homeless not because of substance abuse or alcoholism but because of the loss of a job or other situations, Sheehan said. He said that was his case – he became homeless following a divorce, he said.

Members like Sheehan worry that without the program they may be forced to wander the streets. They are also concerned that the support they receive in terms of social and peer support would diminish, leading those in recovery at risk of slipping in terms of their mental health and substance abuse issues.

Staff and board members of Harbor Homes are looking for alternate ways to keep the doors open at Connections. With more than 400 homeless people in Greater Nashua, it is critical to provide opportunities for individuals to move forward, they say.

While \$35,000 may not seem like much money considering the size of the state budget, it's tough in this economy to raise those funds, Andreola said.

"What we really need is a small miracle or generous supporters," Goodwin said.

Patrick Meighan can be reached at 594-6518 or [pmeighan@nashuatelegraph.com](mailto:pmeighan@nashuatelegraph.com).

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