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Training program survives

By *PATRICK MEIGHAN* Staff Writer

NASHUA – Connections has not only been saved. It's become an official "clubhouse."

Six months ago, a reduction in state funding jeopardized the meeting place and job training program for homeless men and women. But Connections was saved through a large donation from an anonymous board member, plus money raised through a softball tournament and other donations, according to Harbor Homes Inc., the parent organization.

Connections was founded in 1984 as the Gathering Place, which provided a place for homeless people to socialize during the day before shelters reopened in the evening.

From that Main Street location, it moved to Harbor Homes at 45 High St. and became Connections, which focused on providing job training and living skills and helping members find work.

Many of its members have had to deal with mental illness and other social and personal issues.

"When the Gathering Place opened, there were few opportunities for homeless individuals or 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.

"Those joining also began to include unemployed individuals looking for direction," Goodwin said.

Connections runs on a shoestring, but the program was in jeopardy when the state cut its \$35,000 funding. The program is run largely by member volunteers – for example, Goodwin had been homeless and started coming to Connections as a member before volunteering and ultimately getting the director's job.

As part of its continuing evolution, Connections recently formed an affiliation with the International Center for Clubhouse Development. It is in the process of becoming the first certified clubhouse in New Hampshire.

According to the international center, a clubhouse is a community center for people who have mental illness.

More than a program or social service, a clubhouse helps members gain access to opportunities to rejoin the worlds of friendships, family, employment and education, and to the services and support they may individually need to continue recovery, according to the center.

"In our continuing efforts to improve the quality of our services and to enhance the independence of our members, it became clear that it was time to take the next step," Goodwin said.

"Connections provided many supports and services that our members need. However, it was time for the members to assume more of a management role. Rather than reinvent the wheel, we looked to see if any programs were already in existence that could move us forward," he said.

Connections staff visited the Genesis Club in Worcester, Mass., a certified clubhouse through the international center, to learn about the clubhouse model, Goodwin said.

Several Connections staff and members attended a three-week session in Worcester to learn how to make the transition, Goodwin said.

Connections, which closed for several weeks, is open and operating again, he said.

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