

GLOBE EDITORIAL

Reality amid the boutiques

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THE SWANK precincts of lower Newbury Street might seem an odd location for a homeless shelter. But the Women's Lunch Place is no ordinary accommodation. For 25 years it has been a safe daytime refuge for women who need a meal, a shower, medical attention, or legal advice - or even just an answering machine for prospective employers to call.

Unlike most traditional homeless agencies, the Women's Lunch Place is dependent on the government for just 1 percent of its \$1.8 million budget. Shelter directors say that frees them from bureaucratic paperwork and other requirements, which in turn works to protect the women's privacy and dignity. "We don't put you through an intake process," says executive director Sharon Reilly. "You can be anonymous. It's barrier-free."

The smallest details distinguish the lunch place from the typical shelter. There is no guard at the door, indeed not even a sign on the building, so women can come and go without feeling observed - and judged - by people on the street. All the meals, including breakfast and lunch, are nutritionally balanced and noninstitutional, and vegetarian options are available. The women can take showers of up to 30 minutes, unlike the 5-minute limit in some other facilities. And of course, this is a day shelter; it closes at 2 p.m.

In many ways the Women's Lunch Place provides a prism through which to view the history of homelessness and poverty in America. Over 25 years staffers have seen an increase in the number of clients who have some college education (now more than half do) and even steady jobs but are still without a home. The vast majority of the women are victims of domestic violence or sexual assault. Welfare reform, which brought time limits to public assistance for poor mothers, has resulted in financial hardship for many. Medicaid cuts to preventive and restorative dental coverage have pushed dental care to the top of the list of client requests. The shelter operates a drop-in medical clinic five mornings a week but needs volunteer dentists.

And that's just the top of the wish list. During the last week of August the lunch place broke a one-day record by serving 150 meals. There are demands for more computer training and longer hours. This fall Reilly is launching a capital campaign to expand the cramped facilities. On Thursday, staff and volunteers will be hosting an open house from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., featuring a show of artwork some of the women have created.

"The act of telling this amazing story is an exercise in healing," says Reilly. But so many stories are of successful women just one illness or trauma away from the streets.

The shelter is located in the basement of the Church of the Covenant at 67 Newbury St. More women should drop by. The shoppers with their designer bags walking above don't know how close they are.■