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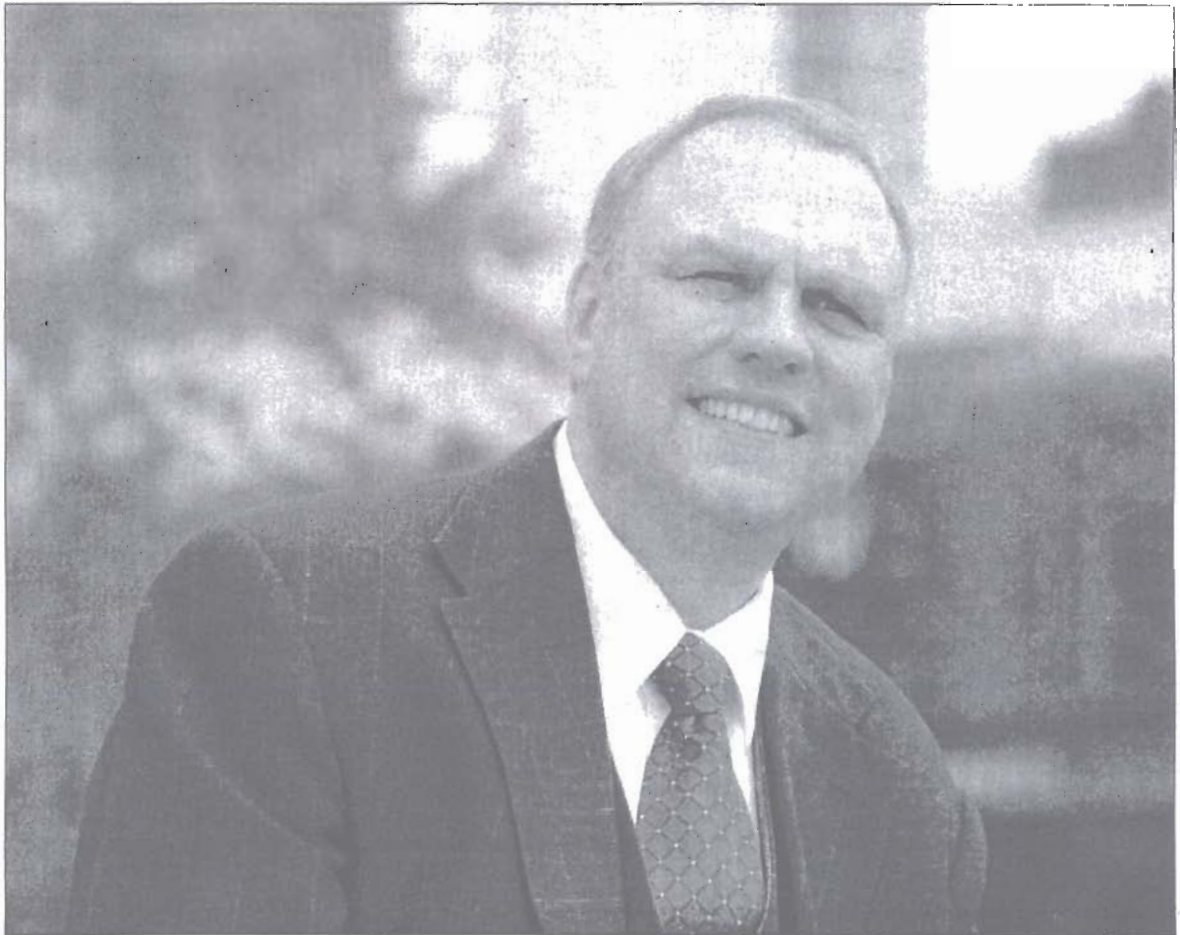


INSIDE:

Business

TALKING WITH JOHN FORAN

'Housing first' helps homeless



Seth Harrison/The Journal News

Katonah resident John Foran is CEO of Praxis Housing Initiatives Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides transitional housing for New York City's homeless people. Praxis is based in Manhattan.

Manhattan nonprofit using new approach to tackle endemic problem

David Schepp
The Journal News

Of all the issues facing Americans that have long begged for a solution, the nation's homeless problem has been perhaps the country's most entrenched and embarrassing.

Not simply limited to a few select locales, cities across the country, regardless of size or climate, have long grappled with what to do about the homeless who wander city streets, huddle in alleys and doorways, and sleep just about anywhere that affords a modicum of protection from the elements.

But now a change in the way in which cities deal with homelessness is leading to better results in helping homeless people stay off the streets and lead more promising lives.

Currently, about 2 million Americans have no place to call home with about 10 percent of them chronically displaced.

In New York City, about 8,000 people fall into the latter category, according to John Foran, the recently appointed chief executive of Praxis Housing Initiatives Inc., one of 18 agencies that help address the needs of the city's homeless population.

Founded in 1995, Praxis operates four residential buildings that provide

John Foran

Title: Chief executive officer of Praxis Housing Initiatives Inc. in Manhattan.

Education: Bachelor's degree in economics from Fordham University; master's in business administration in both finance and international business from New York University's Graduate School of Business.

Residence: Katonah

Age: 60

Personal: Married, two sons

On the Web

- Praxis Housing Initiatives Inc.: www.praxishousing.org
- New York City Department of Homeless Services: www.nyc.gov/dhs



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transitional housing for 400 of New York City's homeless people. There, Praxis staff work with clients to gain the skills they need to live productively in permanent housing.

The nonprofit organization receives the bulk of its funding from federal, state and city governments, with a small amount from individual donors. Praxis has an annual budget of slight-

ly less than \$10 million and a staff of 100, or one employee for every four clients.

Foran supports a relatively new concept, known as "housing first," that is yielding striking success in reducing the numbers of homeless in many U.S. cities that have tried it.

The idea, as the name suggests, is to first give homeless people a permanent place to live. As they become adjusted and feel more secure, a regimen is gradually imposed to address individual needs, including addiction control, mental-health counseling, physical health problems and vocational counseling.

"The big mistake that many people make when thinking about homelessness is they associate it with 'homelessness,'" says Foran, who lives in Katonah.

"That's not the case. Homelessness really involves people who have become disconnected from community and society and cannot live a functioning life in a normal setting without assistance," he says.

Reducing the rate of chronically homeless is more cost effective than alternatives, such as jail, which costs about \$150 a person a day compared to about \$50 a day in a Praxis facility, Foran says. A stay in the hospital can run 10 times or more than that amount a day.

One of Foran's first initiatives will be to find funding for Praxis to estab-

Please see FORAN, 11C

Helping homeless with 'housing first'

FORAN, from 9C

lish its own permanent supportive-housing program. The organization currently places people in permanent domiciles, "but not our own," Foran says.

About 88 percent of Praxis clients have some form of mental illness, he says. About 93 percent of them use drugs or alcohol, and nearly all are at least "dual-diagnosed," meaning they have multiple forms of disability.

Those disabilities include HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C, bipolar disorder, depression and psychotic episodes, such as schizophrenia, all of which are treatable, he says.

Foran, who first joined Praxis three years ago as chief financial officer, recently took time out to answer a few questions about Praxis, his plans for the organization and his views on homelessness. Here are some excerpts:

Q: Do you agree that "housing first" initiatives are effective in alleviating the nation's homelessness problem?

A: Yes, absolutely. We do that to some extent with the transitional housing. What you really want to do is create an atmosphere of community, and that's what

they've been missing in their life. They have no peer groups in which they can interact in their community and feel at ease. They're very defensive when you first meet them. And once you incorporate them into a community, they open up (and) they become amenable to treatment.

Q: How many staffers do you have?

A: We employ 100 people. Many of our people have been involved in the critical justice system, before becoming employees of Praxis. About 60 percent of our employees are former felons. That's the dual mission of Praxis. What we found is that these people can relate to those people suffering with addictions better probably than any other group. And they have a great deal of sympathy and empathy for our clients.

Q: How do you go about finding your clients?

A: All the homeless people we receive are referred to us by Human Resource Administration of New York City, the Department of Health or the Department of Homeless Services; those are three areas where clients come to first and then get sent to us the same day that they arrive at those agencies.

Q: You talked about your organization's "dual mission" of Praxis. Is that unique to Praxis or are there other organizations in New York City that also try to accomplish the same thing?

A: No, that's unique to Praxis. Although people who have been incarcerated are used as counselors here-and-there at different locations, it's unique to have this large number of people at any one agency. It's something that we are going to try to establish as a national model because it's become so effective.

Q: What piqued your interest in coming to work for Praxis in 2004?

A: Praxis is an organization that really epitomizes the type of issues that I've been interested in all my life. It's one that addresses the most-destitute of all society. Having grown up with role models like John F. Kennedy, Pope John XXIII, Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Teresa, it's hard not to get excited about an opportunity to run an organization where you can make a huge contribution to individuals who otherwise would not have the opportunities that we can afford them.

Q: Is there one thing that you can point to in your style of leader-

ship that you hope will further Praxis' mission?

A: I suppose if there's one thing, it's that I came from a for-profit background that is focused not only on mission, but is also results-driven. That's helped me in the four not-for-profits I've been effective in. In the past, I've done a lot of benchmark setting, measuring, monitoring and managing success in each area always to standards and goals. That's key in a not-for-profit and not always present. What I find is that a medium-sized not-for-profit, such as Praxis, can be far more effective than larger not-for-profits because we have the ability to move fast to address needs that are increasing, such as this mental-health problem. We have the ability to be much more innovative.

Q: Do you have an immediate initiative that you're leading your organization to implement?

A: From a financial standpoint, I'm hoping to get the funds to move into permanent-supportive housing, (which is) our No. 1 new initiative.

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