

## Beverly shelter to market homeless for hire

**By Paul Leighton**

Staff writer

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BEVERLY — River House has always offered a place to sleep and a bite to eat. Now the emergency shelter wants to provide something else to the homeless people who arrive at its door — a job.

Shelter officials hope to start hiring out their homeless guests to do yard work, cleaning and minor repairs in an effort to return the men to the work force.

The idea came from Jack Levin, a 52-year-old student at Salem State College who is interning at the shelter as part of his master's degree program in social work.

"We're hoping this will catch fire with the community and hopefully transform some of the ways people think about homelessness and homeless men and how they fit back into society," Levin said.

Like many shelters, River House tries to help people find work. But shelter officials say homeless people have a difficult time landing jobs for a variety of reasons.

In many cases, drug and alcohol addiction or mental illness have left them with criminal records, gaps in their employment history, credit problems and a lack of transportation, all potential barriers to finding a job.

By providing employment through its own business, the shelter could get homeless people back into the working world and give them a chance to develop a track record that could lead to a more permanent job.

"We feel like we need to take some relatively novel action to help these men who are motivated to work," River House director Kate Benashski said. "They'll be able to take a side door in instead of hitting the closed door."

The shelter workers would be required to undergo a criminal background check, Benashski said.

Levin said the service would be modeled on programs run by Project Place, a Boston shelter that operates a cleaning business, a catering service and a vending machine business using shelter guests as the employees.

Project Place executive director Suzanne Kenney said the three businesses employed 71 people last year. They are paid minimum wage and stay on the job for six months.

After working an eight-hour day, the employees return to Project Place to attend workshops on literacy, life skills and career development.

"It's been wonderful," Kenney said. "They start believing they can be independent. They gain confidence, they gain skills. The jobs are six months in length, and having that level of stability makes them more marketable when they go to get mainstream employment."

Kenney said the businesses have developed a reputation for good work, which allows them to compete with other businesses offering the same services.

River House has been averaging 28 to 30 people per night this winter, just about capacity, Benashski said. The poor economy had led to an increase in those numbers.

"People have lost their jobs and are unable to pay their rent," she said. "It's pretty frightening."

River House has scheduled a pancake breakfast for Feb. 7 at the Second Congregational Church to raise money for the new employment program. The shelter needs to pay for insurance, transportation and supplies, Benashski said.

Levin acknowledged that some people might be reluctant to hire homeless people. He's hoping the program will help change the image of shelter guests as "this outcast community living on the outskirts of the community."

"We're asking people to give these guys a chance," he said.

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If You Go

What: Pancake Breakfast for River House homeless shelter

When: Saturday, Feb. 7, 8 to 11 a.m. (Snow date: Feb. 28)

Where: Second Congregational Church, 35 Conant St., Beverly

Information: Call River House at 978-921-1304

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### Photos



Jack Levin speaks with a resident at the River House in Beverly on Saturday morning. Levin is a 52-year-old student at Salem State College who is working as an intern at River House as part of his master's degree program in social work. He is trying to start a program that would allow residents and businesses to hire homeless people to do such jobs as yard work and minor repairs. Staff Photographer