

# A SAFE HARBOR IN HARD TIMES

## AN ANCHORAGE MOTEL STORY

*"Simple works, basic humanity works, fun works, normal works. One guest described the motel as 'sort of a cross between Fawlty Towers and Cheers without the booze.' I just love that."*

*-Lynne Ballew*

Homelessness is a problem throughout Alaska, but perhaps more visible in Anchorage than in smaller communities. People become homeless for all sorts of reasons—job loss, family problems, unexpected medical bills which drain their resources, physical or mental disability or addiction, for example. No matter what their problems or the numbers of agencies helping them, people need housing. A place of your own makes all problems more resolvable. When that home, even a temporary one, also supplies assistance and humane and dignified support, individuals and families are in a better position to reassert control over their lives and their health.

Communities can improve public health through attention to the housing needs of their residents. Concentrated effort and creative thinking may be needed to find an approach that will work for your community or neighborhood, whether the need is for more affordable housing, short-term assistance, or a combination of supportive services.

In the following story, Lynne Ballew describes two years of effort to create the Safe Harbor Inn. Lynne Ballew, a single parent and former welfare mother, housing specialist and community activist, moved to Anchorage in 1978 to found Bean's Cafe, a social center and free restaurant for homeless people.

### THE SAFE HARBOR INN: AN OVERNIGHT SUCCESS

*by Lynne Ballew*

#### Background

Up through the 1970s, if you were on the road or between apartments or just down and out, where did you stay? Most likely answer: At an inexpensive motel or a boarding-house. At a Holiday Inn (they were the first in the genre of budget lodging, remember?). At a Motel 6 (because they cost \$6 a night). At a Super 8 (because they cost \$8 a night). Or, even better, at a mom-and-pop stucco-and-log place that smelled of Clorox, whose TV got maybe two channels, whose coffee was appalling, and whose owners were friendly and happy to see you.

What happened to this incredible resource? The chain motels up-scaled. The private motels increased their prices because they could. Zoning policies and gentrification everywhere sharpened the divide between commercial and residential areas, and a significant housing resource for thousands of Americans, the cheap motel and the boarding-house, essentially vanished. The result was thousands of homeless people.

Remembering what a simple, inexpensive, and congenial form of lodging America once had in virtually every community, we decided to bring it back to Anchorage—to reinvent the cheap motel, but to tailor its operation and its target guests to fit contemporary needs.

## Why Anchorage?

On any given day in Anchorage, approximately 1,000 homeless people have no safe, secure, affordable place to stay where they can begin to get back on their feet. Like every other city of its size, Anchorage has faced a longstanding gap in housing resources that can help homeless families and individuals with disabilities make the transition from shelters or the street to permanent housing.

## Galvanizing

We incorporated Anchor Arms, Inc. (AAI) in December 1999 as an Alaska nonprofit corporation and soon received our 501(c)(3) not-for-profit determination from the IRS. We built a board of directors of senior professionals from business, the hospitality industry, law enforcement, and social services (not surprisingly, the average age of board members is well over 50). The board has worked with hundreds of community representatives to raise funds (more than \$1.23 million to date), garner widespread community support, collaborate with local agencies that serve homeless people, negotiate the motel purchase, and refine the motel business plan.

On October 15, 2001, AAI purchased a newly renovated 30-unit motel in east downtown Anchorage (the former Grizzly Inn), and the Safe Harbor Inn opened for business on November 9, 2001.

## Immediate results—it works!

The Safe Harbor Inn was an overnight successfull five days later-and has remained full. Through April 30, 2002, 162 guests have been provided with 6,131 bed nights. Of these guests, one-fourth have been persons with mental disabilities (who have been provided with 1,872 bed nights), nearly three-fourths have been families, one-third have been children under 18, and 10 percent have been persons with physical disabilities. Half of all guests have been minorities, with 30 percent Alaska Natives/American Indians. Ten rooms are set aside for guests with mental disabilities; in addition, agencies have pre-reserved five rooms for homeless families, one for victims of sexual assault, and one for homeless Veterans. Five

of the motel's 30 rooms will soon be handicap accessible.

Of guests who have checked out as of April 30, 2002, 66 percent have moved into permanent housing—a remarkable success rate. Our goal is that as many of our guests as possible will benefit from their lodging at the Safe Harbor Inn, get back on their feet, and move on to permanent housing situations.

Motel rooms are not provided free of charge. The 30-day rate is \$375, and can be paid by the guest, the referring agency, a third party, or a combination of sources. Guests typically have used their stay at the motel to save up for an apartment, get a good reference from motel management, and secure employment and permanent housing. In short, the Safe Harbor Inn is providing them with a critically needed stepping-stone to self-sufficiency—not a handout.

The motel's waiting list continues to grow—60 persons as of this writing. Guests, referring agencies, and stakeholders all agree that the Safe Harbor Inn needs to expand as soon as possible. More than 40 agencies now have memoranda of agreement with Anchorage Arms, Inc. in place or in process to refer clients to the motel. AAI is now beginning another capital campaign to build 25 additional units on the motel property.

## How it works

AAI's mission is to provide comfortable, safe, affordable, well-managed temporary housing for low-income persons and families who are referred by, and clients of, social service, nonprofit, and civic organizations in Alaska. The Safe Harbor Inn is a motel—not a social service agency, not a “program,” not a care facility, not an institution. Our guests are guests—not “clients,” not “residents,” not “tenants,” not “cases.” Our watchwords are privacy, dignity, respect, warmth, and friendship.

Because being safe, warm, clean, well-rested, well-fed, and welcome are integral to getting back on your feet, every fully-furnished, attractive room has a full bath, cable TV, coffeemaker, microwave, refrigerator, and motel

goodies. The office is open 24/7 with free coffee, food, phones, and helpful, jolly staff. Security staff are present 24/7, and house rules are strictly enforced for the benefit of all guests. No alcohol is allowed on the premises and no smoking is allowed inside the buildings. Four staff are veterans; three are formerly homeless; and two are former guests of the motel.

Guests come by referral only (no walk-ins) from local agencies, which provide all treatment and support services. Guests must have incomes below 50 percent of median income (using U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) guidelines), must continue to receive services from their referring agency for the duration of their stay, must be unable to afford another place to stay, and must be likely (in the referring agency's judgment) to be responsible guests. There is no maximum length of stay (this is up to the referring agency). So far, all guests have met HUD's definition of "homeless." Through April 30, 2002, the average length of stay among guests who have checked out was only 33 days.

### **Problems we encountered**

**Seller nightmares.** Our first attempt to purchase a motel—the Anchor Arms Motel (hence our corporate name)—fell through after a year of negotiations when the motel's owners simply walked away from the transaction. Our second attempt also took nearly a year and was no less grueling. We persevered.

**Funding issues.** Our motel model, simple and effective as it was, did not fit the criteria of the two most obvious sources for funding transitional housing—HUD and the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation—because it was commercial rather than residential, was lodging rather than rental housing, and had no maximum length of stay. The Safe Harbor Inn's simplicity and potential, however, proved compelling enough to receive significant funding from the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, the State Department of Health and Social Services, the Rasmusen Foundation, and dozens of private businesses, banks, associations, and individuals. While raising funding from so many sources meant a lot more work, this breadth of support

has served to increase the motel's general popularity and community acceptance—probably far more than a single public funding source would have.

### **Problems we didn't encounter**

**Zoning and NIMBY.** Because we bought a motel and kept it a motel, we had no conditional use, zoning change, or other public processes to go through, which shortened our development time considerably. And because the motel is located in a commercial/industrial area across from Merrill Field, and had suffered from years of questionable ownership and operation when it was the Woods Motel and the Grizzly Inn, we have had no NIMBY ("not in my back yard") problems whatsoever. One of our neighbors - Six States Distributors - even plows our driveway for free. Our plans for landscaping, fencing, and property enhancements will clearly help to improve the neighborhood.

**Building quality.** Fortunately, the motel we purchased already had 25 completely renovated units, two of which are still being used as a temporary office. A separate building with a new office space, guest laundromat, and five more units is now being finished out for handicap access (it was down to studs when we purchased the property). But no major systems had to be replaced, and the main building is fully sprinklered. A giant overall rehabilitation project would have increased our timeline and costs substantially.

**Duplication of other nonprofits' programs.** We very carefully designed our project and services to be responsive to, and not competitive with, the needs of local service provider agencies and their clients. Referring agencies have been thrilled with the resource the motel provides for them and their clients and are impatient only with the length of the waiting list. Nor are we competing with other agencies for municipal or federal housing funds.

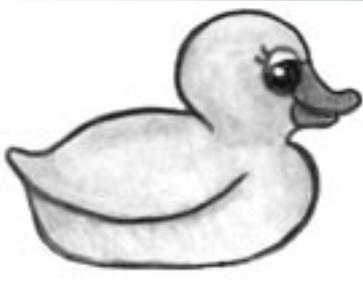
**Operating problems.** Surprisingly, we have had very few behavior problems with guests in our first six months of operation. Of the 11 terminations to date, most were for smoking in the rooms. We attribute our peaceful atmosphere

### **Safe Harbor Residents Say:**

*"I don't know of another place that can come close to what the people have done for me and the rest of the people here."*

*"When you hit rock bottom, and you find a place like this, it gives you a sense of direction back to normal living."*

*"All our needs were met and it was a great place to be during our transition into regular housing, and back into life, so to speak."*



*Emma Mattson-Semonis and her class at Anchorage's Wendler Middle School were honored for gathering an enormous quantity of toiletries, gifts and holiday decorations for the guests of the Safe Harbor Inn.  
2001-Spirit of Youth*

to our extremely friendly and helpful staff, to appropriate referrals and support from our referring agencies, to the fact that all guests agree to the house rules before they come, to the comfort and amenities of our rooms, to our 24/7 security, and to the scarcity of other lodging resources. Our models for guest services are the Marriott and Sheraton—and guests have responded in kind, with helpfulness and respect for the staff and for each other. Our culture and our customer service standards are firmly in place and will be strictly maintained.

**Physical atmosphere.** Much of the Safe Harbor Inn's success is due to its attractiveness—log siding and green shingles on the exterior and new rooms with all the amenities. Guests routinely gasp when they are shown to their rooms. They don't expect lovely new furniture, huge windows, a 25" cable TV with remote, coffeemaker, hair dryer, refrigerator, microwave, full bathroom with a new rubber ducky on the tub, fresh supplies of coffee, tea, shampoo, soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes, tablets and pens in the desk, or the chocolates on the pillows. Beautiful surroundings are vital to everyone's well-being and recovery. Our guests deserve no less.

### **Outlook for the future—expansion and replication**

Building 25 more units will not only help us continue to meet our housing goals by serving more guests but will enable us to meet our financial goal of self-sufficiency. It is our goal to cover all operating expenses (between \$250,000 and \$300,000 per year) with revenues from room and laundry charges and a small component of private donations. With the addition of one more security staff, the motel staff now on board will be sufficient to manage the additional units.

Our experience to date tells us that the new building should include several larger units for bigger families, more handicap units, and a good-sized common area with computers and workspace for guests. We believe we can raise most of the estimated \$1,875,000 total development costs (\$75,000 per unit) from Alaska sources for a new building. Our task is easier because of the overwhelming public support for the Safe Harbor Inn, our ability to document the need for the new building, and the relative ease of constructing a new facility with few site improvements on clean land that we already own.

We do not know of any similar organizations or of other nonprofit motels like the Safe Harbor Inn. We do know, however, that there are modest motels for sale, homeless people, service agencies, and community resources throughout the U.S. We believe that the Safe Harbor Inn model is ideal for replication in other communities nationwide, and such replication is one of the five major goals of our strategic plan.

We are now getting inquiries from other communities about the motel and are providing them with technical assistance. Beginning in fall 2002, we will develop a comprehensive how-to manual and a Website that can assist other communities in developing their own Safe Harbor Inns.

## SAFE HARBOR INN PARTNER AGENCIES (AS OF APRIL 30, 2002)

The following agencies have signed Memoranda of Agreement with Anchor Arms, Inc. to refer their clients to the Safe Harbor Inn:

Veterans Administration/VA Social Services	Salvation Army - McKinnell Shelter
Abused Women's Aid in Crisis (AWAIC)	Southcentral Foundation
Cook Inlet Tribal Council Transitional Services	American Cancer Society
Department	Anchorage Housing Initiatives, Inc.
Bean's Café	UAA Adult Learning Center
Brother Francis Shelter	Fort Richardson Post Chaplain's Office
Office of Public Advocacy - Public Guardian	Municipality of Anchorage Workforce
RuralCap - Homeward Bound	Development
Lutheran Social Services	Cook Inlet Tribal Council Family Services
Alaska's People, Inc.	Department
Catholic Social Services	NineStar Enterprises, Inc.
Anchorage Neighborhood Health Center	Anchorage Mental Health Court (in process)
Alaskan AIDS Assistance Association (Four A's)	Stone Soup Group (in process)
Providence Alaska Medical Center	LifeQuest (in process)
Salvation Army Clitheroe Center	Alternatives Mental Health Center (in process)
Mary Magdalene Home Alaska	Division of Family and Youth Services (in
Anchorage Center for Families	process)
Standing Together Against Rape (STAR)	Mabel T. Caverly Senior Center (in process)
Access Alaska	Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (in
Southcentral Counseling Center (accounts for	process)
28% of referrals to date)	Alaska Native Medical Center (in process)
Alaska Psychiatric Institute	Anchorage Probation and Parole (in process)
Recovery Connection	Division of Adult Public Assistance (in process)

## WHAT NUMBERS CAN TELL US

Estimating the number of homeless people in any community is difficult. Some people may not be willing to tell anyone that they are homeless. It may be possible to count the clients in shelters and food kitchens, but many others may live in cars, rural campsites, parks, abandoned buildings, or other locations. People moving from house to house staying with relatives or friends may be considered to be homeless as well, but are unlikely to appear in any count. Other homeless people, who receive services from several different agencies, could be counted several times over.

The U. S. Census Bureau attempted to count people living in shelters, campgrounds, and on the street in the 2000 census. Because of the many problems involved in counting the homeless, however, the Census Bureau does not release any figures on the homeless population.

The Alaska Housing Finance Corporation carries out the Homeless Service Providers Survey twice a year to gather a "point-in-time" estimate of people receiving services from agencies that serve the homeless. In July 2001, 118 agencies were contacted, and 62 (52%) responded. Their findings are not a census of Alaska's homeless population. In the July 2001 count, almost 1,500 persons were identified as homeless. The largest numbers were reported in Anchorage (889), Fairbanks (112), and Juneau (294).

**Alaska Family Hospice:  
Home for Rural Alaskans  
Visiting Anchorage for  
Healthcare Services**

*Since 1997, the Alaska Family Hospice has provided affordable housing for rural Alaskans visiting Anchorage for health care services and training. The apartments have given temporary housing to over 22,000 individuals and families, including community health aides in training and families of patients at the Alaska Native Medical Center, in an alcohol free environment and in a safe neighborhood. Each apartment has a kitchen; grocery list pickup and delivery is available. A shuttle bus service connects the apartments with the airport and major medical centers. Extended stay health care clients are provided with temporary employment opportunities. Yup'ik speakers are on staff. Four Alaska Native women are the current owners of the apartments. Their ownership was arranged through a Welfare-to-Work owner-management training program and small business grant.*

Overcrowding may be less noticeable than homelessness, but overcrowding is a frequent problem where affordable housing is limited. Doubling up of families and sleeping in shifts in crowded apartments can contribute to poor health because of stress or poor sanitation. Schoolteachers, public health nurses and community health aides may be the first to see evidence of such problems. Counts may not be available, but “key informants” involved in community housing, health, mental health services, and school systems may have considerable information about the situation, if they pool what they know.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

### How important is housing to health?

Having a home is basic to health. Homeless people are less able to practice basic sanitation and food safety, less likely to have access to telephone for seeking employment and support services, and less able to prevent injury and violence. They are more likely to become ill. When they become ill, their health needs are less likely to be attended to. They are less likely to have prenatal care, and their children are less likely to have such preventive health care as immunizations. Affordable housing helps solve homelessness. Affordable housing promotes personal and public health.

The people who find housing at Safe Harbor Motel are diverse, but they share one characteristic—they lack housing. Some may be victims of domestic violence, for example, while others may have had financial reversals. What they share is trouble finding housing they can afford. Safe Harbor gives them a temporary affordable home, while they work out long-term solutions. Safe Harbor is not about treatment for diseases or conditions. It is, therefore, more difficult to link it with chapters in *Healthy Alaskans 2010, Volume I*. Instead, we have listed “Health Promotion” as the concept to which it is related. Safe and affordable housing supports public health.

### How is your community solving temporary shelter needs?

Alaska has many resources to deal with temporary and permanent housing needs: the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, regional Tribal Housing Authorities, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Alaska Homeless Coalition, and many groups interested in housing for special populations in need of housing assistance, for example, seniors and people with developmental disabilities.

These resources can help you identify housing needs in your community. If a community has a significant homeless population, or people moving into and out of the community because they can't find affordable housing, or not moving back after time in institutions because affordable housing isn't available, or if there's too much overcrowding because people can't afford homes of their own, housing programs may help you to solve these problems. The Safe Harbor Inn solves these problems by combining functions that are separate in some communities: domestic violence shelters, veterans' housing, and transitional housing for people with special needs.

## TO FIND OUT MORE

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(907) 330-8447  
[www.ahfc.state.ak.us/](http://www.ahfc.state.ak.us/)

Alaska Coalition on Housing and Homelessness  
(907) 277-1731  
[www.akcoalition.com](http://www.akcoalition.com)

Anchorage Safe City Program  
The LINK Project  
(907) 343-4876  
[www.muni.org/health2/link.cfm](http://www.muni.org/health2/link.cfm)

## REFERENCE CHAPTERS IN HEALTHY ALASKANS 2010, VOLUME I

Chapter 5. Mental Health  
Chapter 6. Education and Community-Based Programs  
Chapter 9. Violence and Abuse Prevention  
Chapter 15. Access to Quality Health Care  
Chapter 26. Public Health Infrastructure

## NOTES