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QuikTrip donation to help 225 families stuck in motels move to homes



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A donation from QuikTrip will more than double the number of families getting help moving from extended-stay motels back into apartments or houses, according to officials at the charity running the metro Atlanta program.

Tulsa-based QuikTrip is giving \$1,075,000 over three years to the Motel to Home program run by St. Vincent de Paul of Georgia.

“This is transformative,” said Denise Fisher, board chair of St. Vincent de Paul Georgia. “The need is huge and it’s every month.”

St. Vincent’s program currently has a budget of about \$450,000 a year, the lion’s share of that coming from United Way of Greater Atlanta. That money allows St. Vincent’s to get about 200 families from extended-stay motels into apartments.

The QuikTrip donation puts them on track to help about 425 families this year, Fisher said.

Motels — mainly “extended-stay” lodges that offer weekly stays — often become sanctuaries where working people head when they run into trouble paying for an apartment or house. Some have been evicted, some just fell behind on payments or departed when their landlord raised the rent and some left when their marriage broke up.

Many hope the motel will be just a way-station but find themselves stuck there for months or even years as they look for an affordable new place. That’s hard, especially for families unable to save enough money to cover the costs of a move.

And while for most, a motel is preferable to a life on the streets, the motels can put the families in a bind — relatively safe, but precarious and often financially burdensome.

“My daughter went to her prom from the motel,” said Tracye Neal, who went to a Norcross motel with three children when her post-divorce income wasn’t enough to cover rent in the townhome where she had moved. “But living in a motel, it’s hard to save money.”

She paid the motel \$1,450 every two weeks.

She was among the first 13 families enrolled in the initial Motel to Home program, learning how to budget her finances and eventually getting help with the expense of moving to another townhome where again she pays \$1,450 — but just once a month.

Statistics are hard to come by, but advocates believe there are thousands of families living in extended-stay motels around metro Atlanta. The cheapest — and least desirable — may be \$500 a week, but most are significantly more expensive.

Amenities are few, space can be cramped and a “guest” can be tossed out for being even a little late in paying the bill. But getting back into an apartment depends on having the upfront costs — security deposits, first and last months’ rent, application fees and utility hookups.

The challenge is even tougher in a market like the current one, where apartment rents are high and vacancies few.

Motel to Home can cover the costs of getting someone moved into an apartment, but will do that only if the family has enough income to afford things on their own afterward. Fisher said. “Once you put them in an apartment, you want to know that they can sustain it. You don’t want them to be evicted a month later.”

The program serves mostly Gwinnett and DeKalb, although it has clients in Fulton as well.

While the economy has been strong and wages in most jobs have increased, rents for several years rose a lot faster. Moreover, Atlanta has a severe shortage of housing — it’s 60,000 homes short, according to MarketNsignal, which tracks home sales in the southeast.

While the rental market has loosened slightly, landlords still have the upper hand, knowing they can quickly fill an empty apartment. Moreover, Georgia law favors owners, allowing quick evictions.

So far this year, Motel to Home has seen applications for help rise each month, reaching 353 last month.

Motel to Home can only help a fraction of those who apply, but it offers training in household finance to prepare people for a future move. The QuikTrip money means more caseworkers and more cash for moving people into apartments.

The program is primarily funded with one-year grants. This year’s funding includes \$319,000 from United Way of Greater Atlanta, \$50,000 from the DeKalb Commissioners, \$40,000 from PNC Bank, \$20,000 from the national St. Vincent de Paul Society and \$30,000 from individual donors.

The program gets \$225,000 from QuikTrip now, with the remainder in payments the next two years, said Marial Risner Silvey, housing director for St. Vincent de Paul.

QuikTrip has committed to donations totaling \$2.8 million in metro Atlanta in grants to the Atlanta Police Foundation’s At-Promise Centers and a community program operated by the Atlanta Hawks. Motel to Home is the largest contribution the company is making here this year. “This is huge for us,” said Aisha Jefferson, QuikTrip’s corporate communications manager. “We are trying to move the needle on homelessness.”

Applications for help, Motel to Home program

January: 222

February: 238

March: 322

April: 336

May: 353

Snapshot, Motel to Home

Cost per family: about \$2,500

Current annual budget: about \$450,000

Grant from QuikTrip: \$1,075,000 over three years

Current annual placements: 200 families

Expected placement, with grant: 425 families