



**House of Hope, Inc.** is pleased to announce the opening of their newest workforce development effort serving homeless families in Lowell, MA.

The program called the **Hope Chest** consists of a small retail operation selling affordable and gently used items of children's clothing to our neighbors in Lowell. The goals of the program are three-fold:

The Hope Chest Program will provide a supportive work environment that ignites the desire within each woman to successfully support her family and to make a difference in her community. The Hope Chest Internships transform the Interns' experience of and relationship to work; Interns discover that work is positive, work allows them to give back to society, and that work is valuable.

The Hope Chest will also support families struggling with the high cost of children's clothing by providing affordable gently used clothing to former House of Hope families, the Acre neighborhood and the community at large.

The Hope Chest will also serve as a vehicle of care for those in the community who wish to donate seasonal, gently used clothing to those in need. These donations will help homeless women learn valuable employment skills, provide appropriate clothing for primarily poorer children and support mother earth by reducing waste.

### **The Rationale**

HOH has been operating a successful on-site internship program for many years and we recently expanded this workforce program to include supporting employment for our current residents outside of shelter. This expansion stumbled a bit as most of our interns could not sustain a transition to independent employment. However, the most successful place of employment was a small second hand / consignment store in Dracut, MA. House of Hope residents, who are primarily very young mothers, reported in words and actions that they liked this placement and we saw the impact in their lives as they experienced the pride and satisfaction of gainful employment. Young women who complained about walking a few blocks to keep medical appointments were walking 1.5 miles to get to this job because it was faster than waiting for the bus. This experience was the stimulus HOH staff needed to look more closely.

What we found was:

- Almost 50% of our parents had neither a high school diploma or GED
- About 50% of the parents had neither a learners permit or driving license
- Over 40% of our parents lacked access to affordable child care
- Few of the young mother's report any employment that lasted six months or more

These realities translate to significant barriers in accessing, maintaining and growing in a job or deciding on a profession. Add the stress of living in shelter, often in an unknown community, to this equation and it makes sense that learning both the soft and hard skills of any job would be daunting.

House of Hope decided to build upon the success of the Dracut consignment / second hand store by creating our own local store. We identified a store front space of about 400 sq. feet at 387 Market Street which is owned by a local nonprofit. We reallocated existing resources as we embrace this new mission-focused program. By the end of March we will be operating the Hope Chest 3 days a week, employing at least 3 interns, providing a respectful shopping environment for poor families and leveraging our engagement with the interns to ensure their ongoing participation in accessing needed services like education, counseling, health care and driving lessons.

### **The Future**

House of Hope cannot afford to operate this program and store beyond 24 hours per week but we intend to expand the hours of operation by soliciting grants and support. The good news is that by next winter we will be able to intervene and support the increasing numbers of women and children who we too often observe walking around town under dressed and ill prepared for the winter weather. Also by next winter we will have gained the business experience required and hopefully the financial support necessary to operate this important little store 5 days a week, including Saturdays.

House of Hope recognizes that the Hope Chest can and should be expanded to serve the three primary objectives of: supportive work environment (workforce development) for homeless mothers, clothing affordability for poor families and encouraging community wide avenues of support that fully embraces waste reduction and green material re-use.

