

# Beacon Interfaith Is Light In The Night For Homeless

By **Debbie Townsend**

Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative's slogan is simple: We believe in home.

Its dozens of congregations across Carver, Hennepin, Ramsey and Scott counties devote hours and dollars to making that happen. One of its strongest areas of support is in Edina, where Beacon opened 66 West, a building of 39 studio apartments where young adults who have experienced homelessness have a home with full support services.

"The success stories that are coming out of it are already transformational," said Lauren Morse-Wendt, Mission & Ministry Developer for Edina Community Lutheran Church (ECLC), which is part of Beacon and devoted about six years to making 66 West happen.

Young adults are often the most under-served among the homeless, and until 66 West, there was nowhere in the suburban metro to give them a home.

"If a teen became homeless, they would have to navigate downtown Minneapolis just to find a place to sleep at night," Morse-Wendt said.

Now the young adults live in furnished apartments with full-time staff at 66 West to provide intensive and comprehensive support. That includes helping them graduate high school or get a GED, find a job, learn about household finances, how to shop for groceries and how to have positive relationships.

66 West is full; vacancies are quickly filled through Hennepin County's coordinated Entry process for the homeless.

"Young people usually stay 12 to 18 months. We actually want them to stay awhile because we want to help them develop those other skills: education, helping navigate the world," said Lee Blons, Executive Director of Beacon. "Most have experienced some level of trauma. Having a trusted adult can help them think about what it means to become an adult themselves."

Edina residents, the business community and the City of Edina have supported the project along the way.

"It's really been a very supportive community for many years," Blons said.

The City's Human Services Task Force, made up of six Edina residents, awarded Beacon more than \$13,000 for both 2018 and 2019 to help with ongoing support at 66 West.

"They were really interested in groups that were doing boots on the ground, reaching out to people," said Jessica Wilson, the City's staff liaison to the task force.

"We have considered Edina a strong and positive supporter from the beginning," Morse-Wendt said. "We are grateful for the financial support of the City of Edina."

Beacon has created other affordable housing across the metro to help people. In addition, some Edina congregations were among the founding members of Families Moving Forward, a program where churches, synagogues and mosques house homeless families on a rotating basis, providing them with meals, space to safely relax and a place to sleep. In the daytime, they are transported to a program center in Minneapolis to help



**A 66 West resident sautes the onions and celery for turkey meatloaf during a cooking class taught by Edina Community Lutheran Church volunteers.**

them with employment, permanent housing and other social services.

“Because of the lack of affordable housing, it can take weeks to find placement,” Blons said. That means some families end up moving congregation to congregation while they wait. It takes the cooperation of dozens of congregations across many faiths to make Families Moving Forward work, but that’s what Beacon is all about.

“It’s really about people putting their faith in action to make things happen,” Blons said.

ECLC members haven’t stopped their work once 66 West opened. They still find ways to help the youth there, such as teaching cooking classes.

“They gave us a list of 10 meals and asked if we could show them how to cook those,” Morse-Wendt said. Residents now know how to make some of their favorites, including macaroni and cheese and meatloaf.

Despite all the successes of Beacon and its member congregations, plenty is left to tackle.

“So many people are at risk. Over 100,000 households pay more than 50 percent of their income for rent in the Twin Cities,” Blons said. “One crisis can send you into homelessness.”

Beacon welcomes more congregations to join its work to ensure all people have a home, including pitching in with the Families Moving Forward program. Donations are needed to help with the ongoing cost of 66 West – it takes about \$500,000 a year to run – and the other programs to help people find stable housing and support.

Both Blons and Morse-Wendt credit Edina’s leaders for recognizing the affordable housing problem and taking action, including a new policy that requires developers to devote part of their projects to affordable housing or pay into a City fund devoted to building such housing.

“The City of Edina has passed an incredible affordable housing policy, which encourages the City to build more affordable housing, and I can’t wait to see what the community encourages to build next,” Morse-Wendt said.

To learn more about Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative or to donate, visit [BeaconInterfaith.org](http://BeaconInterfaith.org) or call 651-789-6260.