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Metro

Pine Street Inn, hopeFound merging to serve homeless

Focus to be on long-term housing

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 30, 2012

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Two nonprofit agencies with a combined 70 years experience aiding Boston's homeless will soon merge, uniting their similar, but complementary services, in an effort to simplify the process for finding their clients permanent housing.

South End-based Pine Street Inn and hopeFound will announce the move this afternoon following a deal signed last week by each agency's board after a year of discussions between the two administrations, officials said.

Leaders of the two organizations, which are expected to legally merge under the name Pine Street Inn in March, say the move will, at least in the short term, lead to few, if any, cuts for the 480 people they employ.

There is expected to be minimal cost savings. There are no plans to create new services, programs, or to add to the 800 shelter beds across both agencies, nonprofit executives said. There is also no immediate plan to expand the total number of people the two agencies assist.

Instead, the agencies' leaders say the goal of the merger is to get more of the 1,700-plus men and women they serve daily into permanent housing, and to make the process of getting into a home easier.

"The more access to housing we can provide, the better," said Mary Nee, who will step down from her position as hopeFound's executive director to serve as a consultant during the transition. "We see people who are in the most vulnerable of situations . . . and, in that state, you don't want to have to navigate a lot of different agencies to get the help and services you need."

In the summer of 2010, Nee said hopeFound was facing a dead end.

The results of a three-year strategic planning process showed the nonprofit, which generates around \$10 million annually, was financially sound and was getting more of its guests into permanent housing.

But, the analysis said that under its current structure, the agency had little room to expand on its goal of getting more of the estimated 7,500 homeless in Boston into homes. The best long-term course to carry its mission would be a merger.

Nee called Lyndia Downie, the head of Pine Street Inn. They met for breakfast and the idea was well received.

The organizations, two of the largest homeless service agencies in Boston, share mutual goals and similar missions, serve the same population, and have few overlapping programs or services, according to the two leaders.

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'Homeless men and women will have better access to the services they need to get off the street.'

Thomas M. Menino Mayor of Boston

Each agency has its own strength. For instance, while Pine Street Inn specializes in job training, it has no job placement program. At hopeFound, there is job placement, but no job training. In fact, Downie said nearly 70 percent of those who go through hopeFound's job placement program are referred by Pine Street Inn staff.

The combined organization will offer a range of other services, including permanent housing, emergency shelter, street outreach, and substance abuse treatment.

"I think everybody understands strategically it makes sense," said Downie, who will serve as president and executive director of the merged entity.

But, in order to determine whether the logistics of merging such large organizations would pan out, officials said they needed the past year and more than \$50,000 from the Catalyst Fund, a five-year fund launched in 2010 to support "promising voluntary collaborative ventures and mergers among nonprofit organizations."

In a statement, Mayor Thomas M. Menino applauded the merger.

"Now homeless men and women in Boston will have better access to the services they need to get off the streets, out of shelter, and into permanent housing, bringing us one step closer to ending homelessness here in Boston," he said.

During the merger discussions, agency leaders said there was "careful consideration," negotiations, number-crunching, research, and calls to similar nonprofits that had merged and to others that had considered merging, but ultimately decided not to.

"It's hard. It's tough to pull off. Certainly, it's something a lot of agencies are looking at," said Downie. But, "not as many do it as you'd think."

"We're hoping we can really serve as a model for other organizations that want to accomplish this," added Nee.

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