



THINGS THAT WORK

In Chelsea, coalition aims to save lives on verge of unraveling

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Before members of the Chelsea Hub intervened, Nicole Castro was destitute and homeless.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

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Editor's note: This is part of a series exploring initiatives around Boston, the country, and the world that have succeeded or hold great promise, from government to business to culture. For more stories, [click here](#).

Nicole Castro was someone who could have slipped through the cracks. Homeless, destitute, and addicted to heroin and other drugs, she passed most days around a downtown square in Chelsea after losing custody of her nearly 1-year-old son.

But people began to take notice — workers from social service agencies, the police, and health advocacy organizations — who compared notes and realized she was someone who needed to be pulled back from the brink.

Castro, 29, heeded their offers of help two months ago and was quickly connected with a range of resources she needed — detox, food, clothing, a bus pass, and housing assistance.

It may not sound radical, but the act of actually sitting down regularly to share information about individuals that disparate agencies had separately encountered has proven to be effective in Chelsea, the first municipality in the United States to use the model, which was developed in Canada.



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“I had no idea there were so many people who could help me,” said Castro, who is now sober, employed, and living in a recovery home. She recently was allowed to visit her son for the first time since losing custody.

“It was a gift from God,” she added. “They saved my life.”

The Chelsea Hub, as the coalition of agencies is called, meets once a week to share information about people and families they’ve come across in their normal line of work whose lives seem to be unraveling because of multiple serious problems such as drug addiction, mental health issues, homelessness, poverty, and crime.

The group then tries to steer these people away from full-blown emergencies — such as committing a crime, becoming a victim of one, or winding up injured or dead from an overdose. The Hub sends a team, typically within 48 hours, to offer to connect those individuals with services.

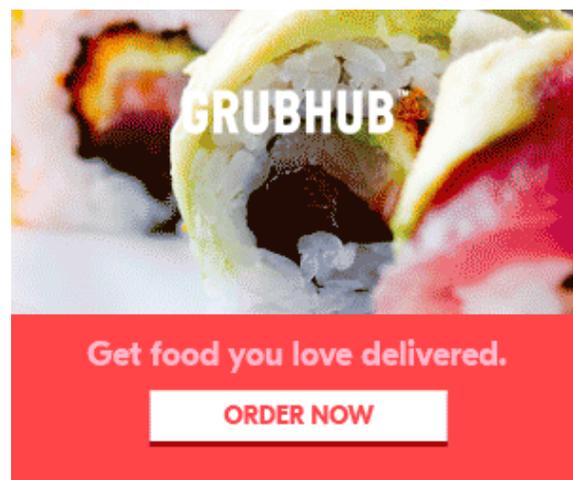
Since originating in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, several years ago, the model has spread to more than 100 other Canadian communities and has been credited with [helping](#) reduce crime, calls for urgent services, emergency room visits, and school absenteeism.

Chelsea adopted the approach two years ago. Springfield followed soon afterward, and officials in both cities praise the approach. Officials in other Massachusetts cities and towns have taken notice and say they are planning to replicate it.

“It’s not, ‘Oh, Chelsea has this idea that might work.’ It’s, ‘Chelsea has something that has worked and has helped improve people’s lives, and it’s a model that’s been working for some time in Canada,’” said Daniel Cortez, coordinator of the Chelsea Hub, who holds the civilian position of community engagement specialist at the Chelsea Police Department.

It’s a common-sense approach, and officials acknowledged it might surprise some that such a framework didn’t already exist.

But they said that in many communities, public agencies and nonprofits — each with their own mission, focus, approach, and limited resources for trying to address society’s ills — tend to work on their own. Partnerships that unite so many different kinds of organizations in such a structured format are rare, officials said.



In the past in Chelsea, individual agencies tended to work in their own “silos,” said Chelsea Police Captain David Batchelor. “We never really had a conversation with each other.”

Without a system in place to connect people with services, those in need regularly wound up getting only some of the assistance they needed, if any at all.

“We would do a great job of waiting until something does happen and then responding,” said Batchelor. “But we had to do a better job at prevention.”

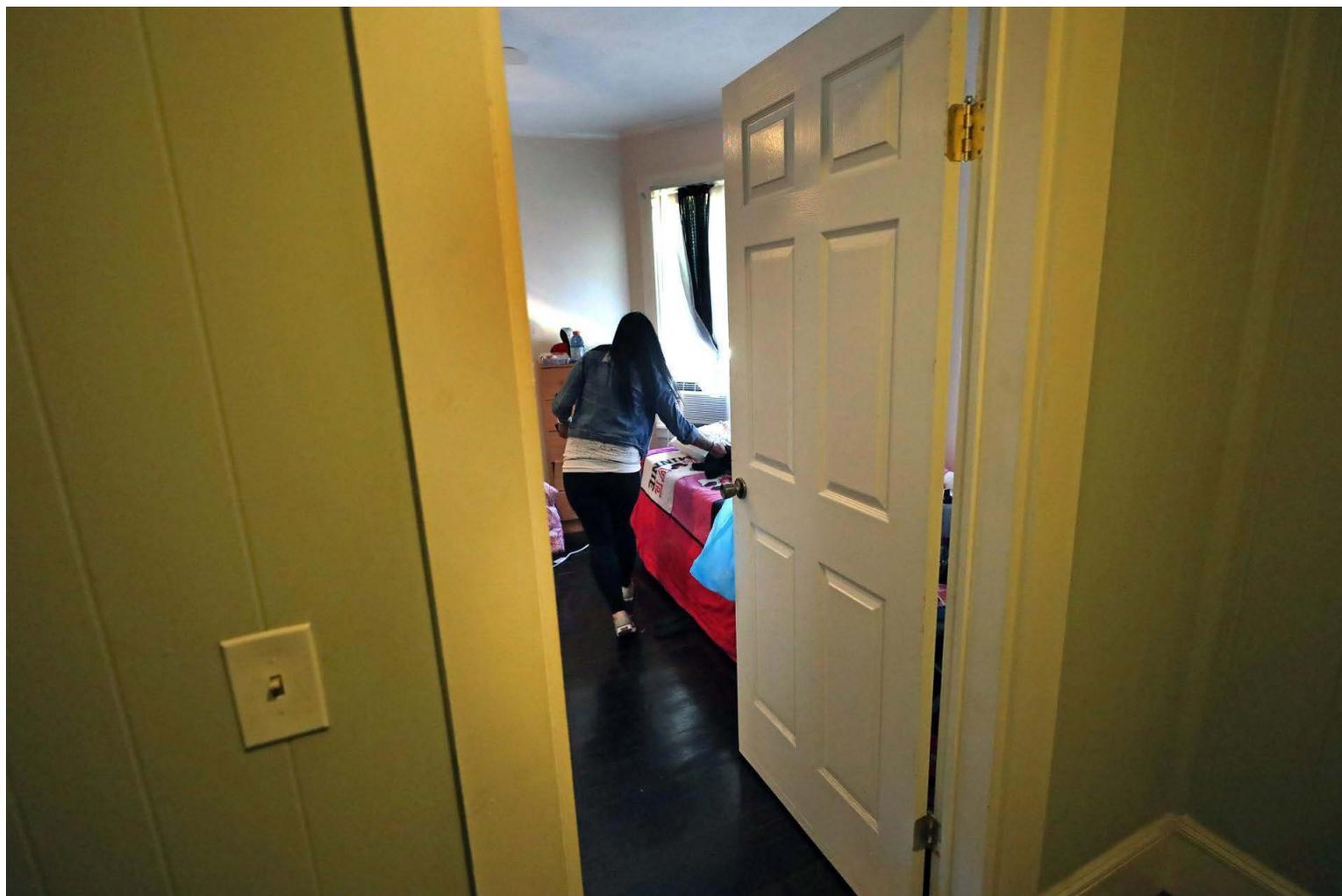
The Chelsea Hub was formed in the spring of 2015 and now includes about 20 organizations. The police, public school system, and housing authority are members. State agencies involved include the probation, parole, and child welfare departments. Health care centers, including ones specializing in mental health, are also members, as well as nonprofits targeting drug addiction, HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, poverty, homelessness, affordable housing, gangs, and incarceration. Religious leaders also play a role, as well as groups focused on helping children, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

Many referrals come from police. But police are often not among the agencies sent to intervene.

“

‘I had no idea there were so many people who could help me.’

Nicole Castro, a beneficiary of the Chelsea Hub



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With help from the Chelsea Hub, Castro has moved into a new home in Revere.

“At first, when we show up with a bunch of community partners . . . there’s a little hesitancy,” said Jason Owens, Hub community liaison for Roca Inc., a nonprofit that aims to help young people involved with gangs or otherwise at risk.

“But that usually goes away once they hear what we have to offer and why we’re here,” Owens said. “No one’s in trouble. We’re just here to help.”

Not everyone is ready to accept it. And there have been cases where people accepted and received help but relapsed.

“This is not going to solve everything,” Batchelor said.

Because the model relies on having officials from various agencies share personal, sensitive details about residents’ lives, it also [has raised privacy concerns](#). Officials say they strictly follow [policies](#) to

protect privacy by only sharing identifying information on a need-to-know basis.

“At some point you’re obligated to share information,” Cortez said. “There’s too many cases where something serious happens where people say, ‘Man, I knew something was going on and I could have stepped in.’”

Chelsea officials, following [the lead](#) of several communities in Canada, are working to compile data about the Hub’s impact.

“The difference, the improvements, are visible” in Chelsea, said Carmen Gomez, chief probation officer at Chelsea District Court, another Hub partner.

Springfield Police Sergeant Brian Elliott said officials there embarked on a Hub model at about the same time Chelsea did, and they are impressed.

“We can get them connected now in ways that before we couldn’t or haven’t,” Elliott said. “Maybe I can’t help, but now I can connect you to someone who I know can help you. One person can’t lift a car off a person, but 10 people can.”

Other US communities that have adopted the Hub model include the Pennsylvania communities of [Lewistown](#) and [Norristown](#).

Revere officials said they plan to soon start a Hub of their own. Officials from MassHousing, the state’s affordable housing bank, said they plan to start one in Boston, in an area stretching from the South End to Jamaica Plain and Dorchester. Other local communities are also considering it.

Revere Mayor Brian Arrigo said he hopes the Hub will help officials there combat the opioid crisis.

“We have to be creative in how we attack the epidemic,” he said, “and the Hub model is another step toward that.”

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