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Mental Health Awareness Month: Voucher Participants Are Thriving in CHA's Health and Wellness Program

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Thomas King had earned an Associate Degree from Truman College and had transferred to Northeastern Illinois University where he'd been accepted into the Godwin School of Education. Everything was going well for the former restaurant worker who decided to switch gears and pursue a teaching career.

Then the pandemic hit, and everything changed. King, like many others, fell into a depression – the lack of campus access creating a feeling of isolation that exacerbated distractions and made online education challenging.

"It all just unraveled," King said. "The whole thing just threw me off. And I started realizing something was wrong."

King is once again ready to pursue his teaching aspirations after three years of mental health struggles, thanks in part to the Chicago Housing Authority's Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Health and Wellness Program. The program, established in 2022, offers support to individuals and families participating in the HCV program who may be experiencing various life stressors that place them at risk of housing instability or other situations that create difficulties in their daily lives.

While public housing residents have historically had access to mental health support services through the agency's third-party service providers, this program is a first for the agency's HCV participants. It represents a fresh focus for CHA that addresses mental health issues and utilizes trauma-informed counseling that is intentional and strategic specifically for those in the HCV program.

"CHA is evolving as an agency, and, as part of that evolution, we have recognized that we must invest in supportive services in a way that we haven't done before," CHA CEO Tracey Scott said. "By proactively helping residents make their mental health a priority, we are taking the steps necessary to make sure they have a better and brighter present and more options for the future."

Cheryl Burns, CHA's Chief Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Officer, said:

"In my day-to-day experience with participants, I noticed how many of them had needs that CHA was unable to meet," she said. "Hiring a clinical therapist to assist families was a natural outgrowth of the services that we offer. We provide support to families in many ways, but recognizing the stress and trauma that people were experiencing made it important to offer an outlet that made our engagement more productive."

For King, the falling out of a routine led to not sleeping well which led to a depression that caused him to drift away from friends. It is something he is still coping with but feels a sense of support since participating in the Health and Wellness program.

"I'm so glad I found it," he said. "For me it's the reinforcing ideas of mindfulness and allowing me to talk about things that are going on. It's really important to have someone to talk with about things that we're not necessarily comfortable talking about."

The program is available to HCV participants and property owners, offering general resources as well as information on how they can provide support to tenants who may be experiencing challenges. There is no cost and participation is confidential and has no impact on a participant's voucher.

Services are available by phone, through video conference or in person at a designated CHA office during normal business hours and include:

- Case Management
- Care Coordination
- Information on Community-Based Resources
- Individual and Family Therapy
- General Support with Conflict Resolution between Property Owners and participants.

King credits Program Manager Doreen Green, a clinical therapist who helped establish the program in June 2022, with responding fast, giving timely information and providing excellent service that helped them immediately.

"I am very happy that Mr. King reached out to the program," Green said. "I believe Mr. King has shown that it is okay to be human. I commend him for asking for help and taking steps to make changes in his life. I appreciate being able to witness his growth as he continues to not only be alive - but to truly live and thrive."

Now, King is meeting with professors at NEIU to discuss his road to a teaching degree. He is optimistic for the first time in months and looking to learn new things and finish what he started.

"I'm in a better place right now," he said. "I'm looking to get back into a routine, back to being on campus and back to interacting with people."

Clients can self-refer by emailing ClinicalSupport@thecha.org or call 312-935-2634.

All others can email fairhousing@thecha.org