

For displaced family, no place like 'cozy' home for the holidays

By Ira Kantor | Friday, December 25, 2009 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | [Local Coverage](#)

After spending more than four months living in a motel shelter, one little family has come home for Christmas.

Thanks to the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership, Letha Jackson has settled with her two kids, 2 and 12, into a new apartment on Tremlett Street in Dorchester.

"We just put up the Christmas tree last week, so I'm just trying to get some gifts under that," said Jackson, a 26-year-old telemarketer. "But we're happy we got a place."

The family had been displaced earlier this year when Jackson's mother, Myrtle, lost her Dorchester home to foreclosure after her interest rate soared sky-high.

Jackson waited for days at the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance until she and her kids were placed in a single room at the Cambridge Gateway Inn, where they lived for four months.

"It was kind of torturous living in that hotel," Jackson said. "I couldn't cook for my kids. That was the main thing that stressed me out."

Then, Jackson said, a "miracle" occurred: As part of a federal government-funded pilot program, MBHP officials selected her for placement into new housing, thanks in large part to her solid work history. Out of 76 homeless families at Gateway, her family was one of only 25 assessed as being best suited to handle paying rent.

More than 1,000 Massachusetts families live in 15 motel shelters throughout the state, staff members said, and the economic crisis means "hotel families" must be screened for rehousing programs.

"The need far exceeds the resources that are available, and that's the reason we have to target specific families," said Chris Norris, executive director of MBHP, the Bay State's largest regional provider of rental housing voucher assistance. "Our goal would be to move everyone home."

Staffers hope to empty motels of all sheltered families within two years.

"We don't want to set anybody up to fail because we know it's going to be difficult for the families being placed," said Maura Pensak, director of client services. "The state is making sure that there is somebody working in every motel across the state."

Jackson and her children moved into their new home earlier this month.

"It's awesome," she said. "It's nice and cozy. We can cook."

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