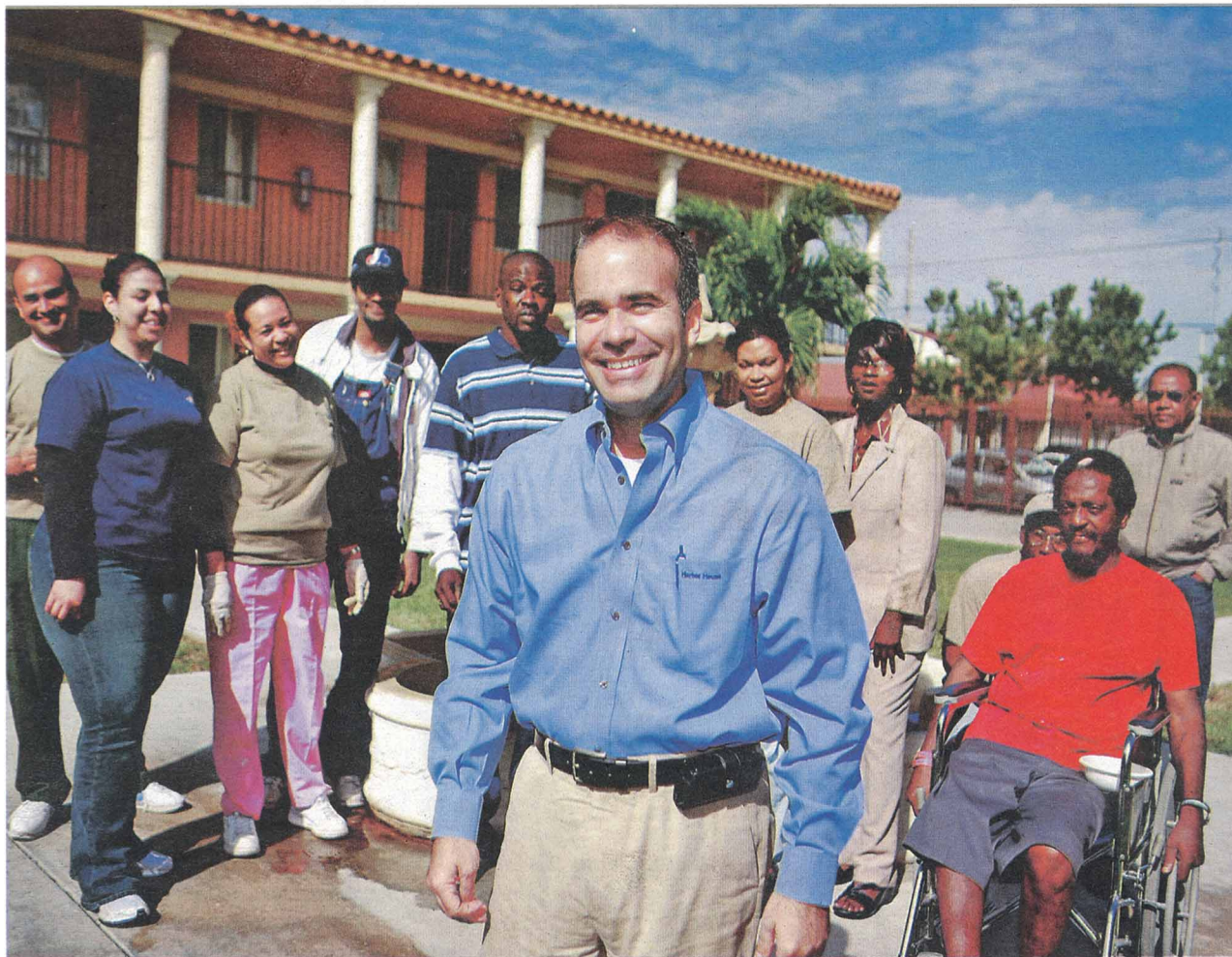


NEIGHBORS

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HOUSING AUTHORITY

Pedro Martinez, executive director of Harbor House, is surrounded by residents and staff members at an **Overtown** building. The organization shelters the homeless while it rehabilitates decrepit buildings and then operates them as new facilities. **PAGE 4**

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OVERTOWN

Critical-need housing a life-saver

■ A nonprofit that offers housing to people who are homeless or have substance abuse or mental health problems is looking to expand its services in the neighborhood.

BY TANIA VALDEMORO
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The streets of Miami have been Mark Rowell's home for most of his life. It is where he usually drank himself into a stupor, got high on drugs and saw the stars before slept at night.

Now, thanks to Harbor House, he shares a one-bedroom apartment with a roommate named Mr. Reese. And he sleeps on a twin bed with white sheets. The organization provides housing for people making less than \$7,000 a year. Those like Rowell, who get a monthly Social Security disability check, pay rent for the lodgings.

Harbor House is where Rowell also began to deal with his schizophrenia with the help of M. Dewitt King, his case manager.

"I go to psychotherapy five days a week now. It teaches me how to communicate and interact with people. I've been more stable now than I have been ever before in my life," Rowell said.

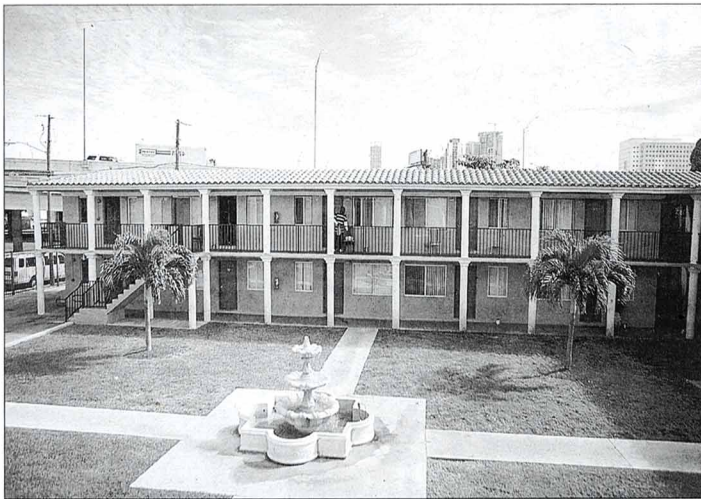
A refuge for those who lack homes, jobs or for people who have finally decided to get clean once and for all, Harbor House stands out from other agencies that also offer medical and social services to people in need.

It has to do with their philosophy about housing.

When they began operating in 2003, Harbor House intended to work with Danc Investments to develop Section 8 housing. Then, they switched course.

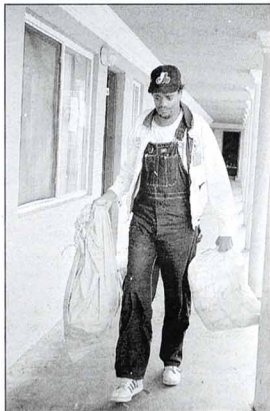
"We found out there's a great need to house people. So we said, 'Let's go ahead and take in people [being evicted] and see if we can help them,'" recalled Pedro Martinez, executive director of Harbor House.

Since then, the organization shelters the homeless while it rehabilitates decrepit buildings in Overtown and then operates them as new facilities. Harbor House, which already operates two apart-



PHOTOS BY BARBARA P. FERNANDEZ/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

OASIS: Harbor House, located in Overtown, provides housing for people making less than \$7,000 a year. The complexes are clean and safe, which has forced adjacent apartment units to clean up their acts.



WASH DAY: Mark Rowell, 45, suffers from schizophrenia and has lived in Harbor House for a year. The agency requires residents to keep the furnished units clean, and conducts routine inspections.

ment buildings, is preparing to open a third one to house 20 people sometime this year.

"We manage the properties and offer housing to people and at the same time give property owners peace of mind. The owners get a rent check from one client and we keep their place clean, crime-free and drug-free," Martinez said.

To date, it houses 90 people, who pay rent on a sliding

scale based on need and resources available from other providers. Martinez said the rents they pay average about \$200 to \$250 a month. All tenants are referred to the agency by other organizations.

Ramiro Areces, who leases a 34-unit apartment at 420 NW 10th St. to Harbor House, said the organization has forced adjacent property owners to clean up their act.

"They won't tolerate drug

dealing or dirty surroundings. That's a great service to the community," he said.

Harbor House's recent entry into the "supportive housing" industry has not been easy. Aside from working with people that have a history of mental health and substance abuse problems, more established organizations like Carrefour get grants and more referrals from social service agencies. Meanwhile, the orga-

nization, which was founded in 2003, operates on a \$500,000 budget with 15 employees. It receives no funding from local, state or federal governments, Martinez said.

According to Maria Ruiz, division director of Miami Beach's Office of Community Services, Harbor House is a godsend.

"They always have five beds set aside for emergency cases and if they don't have room, they let you know right away," she said. "Independence is the No. 1 thing our clients are looking for. Everyone needs something different. The support they get is individualized," Ruiz said.

Tenants also learn how to be responsible when they live at Harbor House. They must keep their apartments — with plush sofas, televisions and fully equipped kitchens — clean every week because there are inspections. There is also nightly curfew that people must respect.

If they break too many rules, they may be asked to pack up. On average, five or six people leave Harbor House for various reasons every month, Martinez said.

For those like Ramesh Kalliecharan, who have been evicted from their homes because of escalating rents, Harbor House should be a model for the future.

"I have never lived on the streets. The staff was willing to work with me whether or not I had money. I appreciate that," he said.

Kalliecharan could not afford the \$1,000 monthly rent on his apartment west of Brickell Avenue. He now uses his \$603 monthly Social Security disability benefits to pay for rent and food. Harbor House helps cover the cost of medicines he takes to alleviate his heart problem.

According to a 2003 Miami-Dade County study, the area will need 294,200 new housing units by 2025 with 42 percent of them for very-low and low-income people.

Kalliecharan wonders how that demand would be met.

"When landlords remodel their buildings and raise the rents, more people will end up coming to a place like this," he said.