



ENTRYWAY HELPS FILL JOBS, LIFT LIVES

BY TRISH HARRIS

Jessica Corton (above, center) celebrates with several Entryway participants at the Entryway to Excellence event in December 2023.

Recruiting long-term motivated employees to fill positions in maintenance, groundskeeping, leasing, and more has long been one of the multifamily industry's top challenges. In fact, the National Apartment Association's Property Management Industry Pulse conducted by AppFolio has consistently found the category of staffing and recruitment among the top three challenges for multifamily professionals who responded.

It's a challenge Chris Finlay, founder and owner of Middleburg Communities in North Carolina and Tennessee, knew all too well. As he was pondering the multifamily industry's need for dependable employees, Finlay began to think about all the wasted talent in the ever-increasing number of people experiencing homelessness. He considered how many people on the streets are there not because of laziness or an unwillingness to work; instead, they are unhoused because of a life-altering event resulting in no clear pathway toward self-sufficiency. The reality is that many

Americans teeter on the brink of homelessness, only one paycheck away from living in their car or going to a shelter, and one in four have no savings to cover an emergency or unexpected expense.

This realization led to the seed of an idea. Why not tap into and partner with social service agencies for referrals from the homeless population? Why not provide training that would prepare those folks to not only fill but thrive in the positions most needed in the multifamily industry? Finlay answered his own questions with another: Why not?

► What Is Situational Homelessness?

Situational homelessness is the state of being forced to live without stable housing due to a life-altering event, such as job loss, domestic violence, medical emergency, or natural disaster. Sometimes referred to as transitional homelessness, this generally means that an individual's situation without a home is temporary and can be resolved by addressing a specific life challenge. These people — many of whom are responsible for dependents — come from a variety of backgrounds. Situationally homeless people may be survivors of domestic and other types of violence; they may include veterans, college graduates, previous homeowners, and even experienced professionals. In 2021, the National Alliance to End Homelessness found that 81% of Americans who experience homelessness are situationally homeless. Many of them are youths or young adults.

Between 2022 and 2023, the number of people in the United States unhoused on a single night increased by 12%, from 582,462 to 653,100.

So, Finlay established a process and program under the name of Shelters to Shutters and piloted the idea in his own Middleburg Communities. How did it go? Well, suffice it to say that it worked. And, in 2023, the seed that Finlay had planted nine years earlier was rebranded as Entryway and positioned to expand its footprint across the country, enhance services, and increase partnerships. The goal is not only to supply the multifamily industry with loyal and effective talent, but also to positively impact the situational homeless population.

Entryway identifies individuals who have been in the workforce before, have marketable skills, and are ready to return to economic self-sufficiency. Although the program participants have experienced hardship, they hope for a better life. They need a pathway (an entryway) to making that hope a reality. They simply need the opportunity to prove themselves. Considering the statistics and the percentage of people who are situationally homeless, the potential number of Entryway candidates throughout the country is staggering.

Upon acceptance into Entryway and completion of training, participants have an opportunity for employment at a multifamily property with an industry partner. They live where they work, and their housing is discounted for a minimum of one year. This creates a “win-win-win” proposition that not only helps to both alleviate the sparsity of industry talent and provide support, security, and stability for Entryway participants, but also strengthens the community at large.



**JESSICA
CORTON**

According to Entryway's Central Florida Executive Director Jessica Corton, the organization's model is all about partnering. “I am out there every day doing everything I can to make connections, create community partnerships, and build awareness of the benefits of working together,” Corton said.

Entryway partners with social service agencies (referring partners), multifamily housing properties (industry partners), training



Erica Wise relocated to the Orlando area from North Florida and hoped to continue to work in multifamily. She did not have industry connections to enable her to secure a position on her own, and she and her three small children wound up living in a hotel. With help from Entryway, Wise received two job offers and ultimately found herself at the “Entryway” to her new home.

entities (training partners), and supportive individuals and donors (volunteer partners). In addition, National Partners, such as CORT, and Local Partners provide products and services, as needed.

Demonstrated Success

Not only are the various partnerships proving invaluable, but the people recruited by Entryway are conscientious, dedicated, and motivated, Corton said. “Our retention rate is top-notch because our participants are so determined to succeed,” she explained. That determination is demonstrated by the many success stories Entryway affiliates from all around the country have reported.



Michael Montroy and Jessica Townsend receive the keys to their new home after a period of homelessness following Montroy's severe heart attack in early 2023. They had been living in hotels and their car when they found Entryway and were matched with industry partner Riverstone Communities. Riverstone hired Montroy as a maintenance technician and Townsend as a leasing agent.



Referred by the Rescue Outreach Mission shelter in Central Florida, Steven, who loves working with his hands, went through Entryway's online maintenance technician training and had the opportunity to apply and interview for a full-time, tech-2 position located on the property of an industry partner. After meeting Steven and recognizing his skills and potential, the hiring manager not only hired him on the spot, but also elevated the position to the tech-3 level. Steven sees this as a long-term situation. "Having my own place has allowed my son to come home instead of facing homelessness as well," he said. "Entryway gives people the opportunity to start their life over again. It offers the opportunity to be self-sustainable. And what sold me on the idea was the opportunity of housing right where you're working."

Stories like Steven's are told on Entryway's website (www.entrywaytalent.org) and include real-life

examples of previously homeless people having earned such positions as property monitor, resident service coordinator, groundskeeper, leasing agent, and even assistant property manager. Clearly evident in the success stories and photos is the confidence participants display in themselves and the positive attitudes they have about the future of their new and improved lives.

A Walk in Their Shoes

Corton has a special understanding of homelessness and helplessness. "When I was in my 20s, I became dependent upon physician-prescribed opioids. After losing my father to suicide, I lived the hopeless life of a homeless addict. An example of what situational homelessness looks like, I actually lived off and on the streets for years," Corton said.

When Corton — a single mom — confronted the very real possibility of forever losing her children,

▶ A Life-Changing Solution

- Entryway is a national 501(c)3 organization that transitions individuals and families at risk of or experiencing homelessness to economic self-sufficiency by providing career training, full-time employment, and housing opportunities in partnership with the real estate industry and community social service agencies.
- In 2017, Entryway became the National Multifamily Housing Council's designated charity. As a result, recruitment of industry and nonprofit partners increased threefold.

she sought help. In 2017, she checked herself into treatment and started a 12-step recovery program. “From there I went to transitional housing, followed by renting a room from a friend,” she explained. “After that, I was referred to a Department of Children and Families (DCF) program, where I received assistance that helped me regain economic stability,” Corton said. “I have been clean for the past seven years, and four years ago, today, I was able to buy my own home.”

After speaking with Corton for a few short moments, one can readily discern her heartfelt connection to program participants and her deep dedication to the role she plays at the helm of Entryway Central Florida. It is inspirational to see how she has used her experiences to help others overcome barriers posed by homelessness.

Today, Corton’s attitude is one of gratitude and commitment. She is adamant about helping those who are on that same desperate downward path she once followed: “I needed to be involved with Entryway because I’ve dedicated my life to helping others receive the second chance I got for my own life.” **MF**

Entryway seeks partnerships and involvement at all levels. To learn how you or your property might partner with Entryway, you can connect with Jessica Corton through email at jcorton@entrywaytalent.org.



Participant Steven Derby at work.

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