

NEWS/BREAKING NEWS

Hillsborough County, local agencies forced to step in and find housing for residents with mental health issues

Community effort finds homes for about 30 residents of Friendship Palms but handful of others still waiting as deadline to move out expires.

Tampa Bay Times, August 2, 2019 Christopher O'Donnell and Divya Kumar,
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TAMPA — James Williams is terrified at the thought of moving into a homeless shelter and the temptations that might await there.

Four years ago, he moved into Friendship Palms, a supportive housing complex for people with mental health issues, and became sober. He regularly attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings down the street and swore off drinking and drugs.

Williams is among 35 residents of Friendship Palms who were told in June their leases would be terminated in less than two months because their non-profit landlord, Project Return, had sold their apartment complex on Waters Avenue.

Most moved out over the past 10 days through a rescue effort led by Hillsborough County, the Tampa Hillsborough Homeless Initiative and other local non-profit groups. They stepped in after a Tampa Bay Times story highlighted the plight of the residents who live with conditions including bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia and other illnesses.

Williams and a handful of others, however, were still without a new home even as the deadline to move out passed, leaving them stressed and fretting over their future.

"I thought I was past all that. I thought I was getting stable," Williams said. "I got my sobriety risking on this."

Project Return officials said this week that any remaining residents will get a week's extension to find a new home. But the group has come under criticism for not doing more to help tenants, many of whom do not have their own transportation and cannot afford security deposits and first and last month's rent for a new apartment.

"They weren't as proactive I hoped they would have been," said Antoinette Hayes-Triplett, CEO of the Tampa-Hillsborough Homeless Initiative, who along with Hillsborough County officials met with Project Return leaders last week and pressured them to do more.

Project Return then agreed to provide a \$500 one-time assistance payment to residents and to waive any other costs, including apartment cleaning and utility bills. Those that remain for additional days will not be charged rent.

The non-profit decided to sell the complex after it learned in February it would not get an annual federal grant worth about \$156,000 that paid for mental health services, operations and administrative expenses. It has a buyer for the 1.38 acre site, which was listed for sale at \$2 million.

But the group waited until June 6 to notify tenants that they must move out and had no coordinated plan to help residents find a new place.

"It doesn't appear that the services that should have been offered to people to find places was really happening very efficiently or effectively," said Linda McKinnon, CEO of Central Florida Behavioral Health Network, which provided funding for mental health services at Project Return. McKinnon's group was informed in March about the grant but was told the transition was going smoothly, she said.

Daniel Drake, an attorney representing Project Return, said the group reached out to other local groups — including the Homeless Initiative — seeking help but got little response.

"We did not know how long it would take to sell the property, and we have been actively working to help the tenants find other housing," he said in an email. "Our difficulties stemmed from the unexpectedly short timeline for the sale of the property as well as the fact that the sudden need overwhelmed our relatively small staff."



Cynthia McTier 59, says she has depression, anxiety and seizures. She is one of 35 residents moving out of Friendship Palms, a Tampa apartment complex for people with mental health issues. Local agencies including Hillsborough County are still trying to find homes for a handful of tenants even as a deadline for them to move out has expired. Their non-profit landlord, Project Return, sold the complex after losing a federal grant it says it needed to run it Project Return has agreed to give remaining residents a weeks' extension. [OCTAVIO JONES | Times]

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Since last week, staffers from the Homeless Initiative and the county's Homeless Services and Affordable Housing departments have visited residents to figure out how best to help them.

"Each case is so different because they're so vulnerable" said Felicia Crosby-Rucker, director of Homeless Services.

Some have been reunited with families or found new subsidized housing. Others have been placed in shelters as a temporary step. Boxes for packing possessions and help paying application fees and security deposits was provided. The county also hired a moving firm.

Other agencies that pitched in included the Central Florida Behavioral Health Network, the City of Tampa and the Tampa Housing Authority, which provided housing vouchers for about 10 eligible residents.

Katherine Hanson, staff attorney with Disability Rights Florida, said the crisis could have been averted had Project Return reached out sooner.

"This needed to have happened a long time ago," she said.

Carmen George, who lived at the complex for the last eight months, is one of those still waiting for a new home. That's despite applying for more than 30 apartments.

Like Williams, she has been rejected by some apartment complexes because she doesn't earn enough to meet their minimum income requirement. Hope has come from seeing other residents move to new homes but it's hard to stop the tears when she talks about her situation.

"I'm putting my faith and trust in God," she said. "It just seems like there's no hope. You wonder 'why not me, God?' I'm not asking for a million dollars or a car."

Another worry is how she will receive her next shipment of medication when she doesn't yet know where she will be living.

A case manager at Project Return helped Cynthia McTier find an apartment across town with a roommate and her service dog, Princess.

The daughter of a military veteran, McTier was born at MacDill Air Force Base. She attended Tampa Bay Technical High School and, later, raised a son. Having her own place at Friendship Palms meant she didn't feel like a burden to him. She suffers from anxiety, depression, PTSD and a seizure disorder.

Most of her belongings were packed in boxes by Thursday and she carefully wrapped her mother's china and knickknacks in paper before putting them in the last of the big boxes the county had brought over.

"That's all I have left," she said.



Laura Miller, 55, is one of 35 residents forced to move out of Friendship Palms after Project Return, their non-profit group landlord, sold the apartment complex. Miller is diabetic and battles chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. She is scheduled to move to a shelter as a temporary measure. In the wake of a Times story on their plight, Hillsborough County and other local agencies have stepped in to find homes for Miller and others at risk of becoming homeless and pressured the non-profit to do more. It has now agreed to provide a \$500 one-time moving fee and to give remaining residents a weeks' extension. [OCTAVIO JONES | Times]