



## Pittsburgh mother finds stability through 500 in 500 program

Toniya Moseley fled a domestic violence situation in Georgia and was living in her van and shelter with son and daughter. The county's housing initiative has been a huge help, she says



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When Toniya Moseley arrived in Pittsburgh well over a year ago, she would drive around in her 2006 Toyota Highlander, waiting for her two children — Symir, 11, and Nevaeh, 6 — to fall asleep.

Ms. Moseley, 34, and her children were living out of her car. The Philadelphia-area native had fled a domestic violence situation in Georgia, and drove to Pittsburgh. She picked Pittsburgh, a bit more than a 4-hour drive from where she grew up, to have “a fresh start.”

She would cruise around, completing DoorDash orders, having her kids watch TV on screens on the back of the front seats until they fell asleep.

“The unknown is scary,” she said inside her apartment in Duquesne recently. “It’s coming to a new city, not knowing if it’s going to work out. It was praying, and it was a lot of faith. It was a lot of leaning on faith.”

The family eventually found shelter at Womanspace East in Uptown — and not long after, an apartment for her and her two children to call home.

That apartment is part of the 500 in 500 program, an Allegheny County initiative led by County Executive Sara Innamorato to place 500 people into affordable housing units along with creating 500 more units, each in the span of 500 days.

The initiative started in early in June 2024, putting the deadline at mid-October 2025. As of mid-August, people have moved into 333 units, with move-ins occurring at another 29, and another 16 available for matching.

One part of the goal already has been reached: 541 people have moved into housing, including Ms. Moseley, Symir and Nevaeh.

## **Finding a home**

In their three-bedroom apartment, nestled on the second floor of a brick building on the 200 block of Grant Avenue, both Symir and Neveah are able to sleep in their own rooms now, instead of a backseat of the Highlander.

They both have access to video games in the living room and their bedrooms. A favorite of theirs is Roblox, one that allows players to create their own universe and play various games with online users.

Ms. Moseley, who works in customer service at Peoples Gas, works a few days a week out of the apartment, in a mini home-office space.

More important than the space itself, Ms. Moseley said it allows her family to return to a routine, something that was difficult while living out of a car or a shelter. They were staying at Womanspace for about two months, but most people take for granted the ability to grab a drink out of the fridge, or to use a bathroom where only your family has access.

“It’s a great feeling, getting back to our norm,” Ms. Moseley said. “And now you can tell [my kids are] more comfortable, they’re more at peace. And me too, there’s nothing like waking up in your own home.”

In the kitchen, Ms. Moseley unwinds from the day by cooking — she used to run a breakfast joint near Fort Stewart in Georgia, and she enjoys experimenting with different recipes.

Ms. Moseley said the Duquesne apartment has provided stability, especially since she was able to get matched up to 500 in 500 with a Section 8 voucher. That means 30% of her income goes toward rent, she said.

She’s deeply appreciative of the people that helped find her a place. That includes Monica Reifman, who has been a social worker for 20 years and worked for the county for roughly nine.

When they met at Womanspace in Uptown, it was clear that Ms. Moseley was “document-ready,” meaning that she had everything she needed to be matched within 500 in 500 — birth certificates, Social Security cards and identification.

Having a folder with all those documents handy was what she needed to get out of the shelter, Ms. Moseley said.

“I always say, ‘Don’t complain about a situation if you’re not going to do anything to change it,’ ” she said. “So I went into the shelter knowing, I’m going to do whatever in my power to get out of this situation, and it’s not going to be my fault that I’m still in this situation.”

She got the job at Peoples shortly after she arrived in Pittsburgh, and knew that there would be logistical challenges, especially with working remotely out of a shelter. But her supervisors worked with her, when those in other jobs might not have, she said.

It’s been a good workplace, one she thinks she could see herself retiring at. She started there at \$19.20 an hour, and now earns \$25.40 an hour after a recent promotion.

## **How 500 in 500 works**

Officials from the county’s Department of Human Services, building owners and property managers, and affordable housing providers all play a

role in the 500 in 500 program.

They and case workers, like Ms. Reifman, are essential in helping families like Ms. Moseley get matched into an apartment.

Apartments for 500 in 500 are throughout the county, from Pittsburgh to the Mon Valley and various other places.

DHS officials provide landlords and property managers with access to caseworkers for each person accepted in the 500 in 500 program. The county has also focused on working with partners to rehab older buildings such as nursing homes or motels, fixing units not yet habitable so that people can move in and prioritization of existing units to those eligible for the program.

When Ms. Innamorato announced 500 in 500 last year, she was flanked by lawmakers, affordable housing developers, social service organizations and others, all committed to getting people out of shelters and off the street.

There was some criticism that the program was diverting units away from seniors in need of housing, or that it would put them in dangerous situations as new tenants moved in. County officials and partners later clarified that senior centers and facilities were not a target for the program, but did say that some homeless seniors were being placed into some of those buildings, run by the county housing authority.

County officials are optimistic about the program's goals, but federal funding cuts — \$3 million as part of a continuing resolution later this year — have created logistical hurdles. And they remain concerned about the state of Section 8 vouchers, which are critical to many in the program.

## **Lessons to share**

Roughly a year and three months into being a 500 in 500 member, Ms. Moseley said she has other plans in the works, such as restarting her breakfast business or taking a business administration course with a real estate concentration online at Liberty University.

Her story is one of many families that have used the program, according to county officials. As of mid-August, 90 families have been housed. As of the end of July, 97% of families have not returned into homelessness, and 98% of individuals have remained in their homes.

She said she wants her story to be a reminder that anybody can fall through the cracks into homelessness. And it's not just people who have had rough upbringings, she added.

Ms. Moseley grew up in a two-parent household in Drexel Hill, Delaware County. She described her childhood as a typical suburban one — she attended Upper Darby High School, one of the largest in the state, ran track and was on the cheerleading team.

“There's no horror story. I'm behind [the domestic violence] situation, but life happens, and you just deal with it,” Ms. Moseley said.

Finding better housing can seem daunting, especially with retrieving the necessary paperwork while living out of a shelter, she said.

But she wants those experiencing homelessness to remember that programs like 500 in 500 and Section 8 — and the people behind them — are there to help.

“I would just say, stick with it, and stay focused,” she said. “Keep your eye on the prize. If you want it badly enough, you can do it.”

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