

# With new nonprofit, Keene Housing puts focus on kids

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Posted: Saturday, June 20, 2015 8:00 am | Updated: 1:04 pm, Sun Jun 21, 2015.

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Josh Meehan wants to put Keene Housing out of business.

The low-income housing organization's executive director has visions of a time when the more than 400 kids who live in Keene Housing properties become adults who no longer need housing assistance.

And it will start with ballet lessons.

"If we're going to be very serious about moving people to economic independence, we'd better start when they're very young," Meehan said Tuesday.

Children growing up in subsidized housing in Keene don't get the same opportunities to play baseball, take dance lessons or go to summer camp that others do, Meehan said.

In the long term, that can mean they end up in the same economic circumstances as their parents, he said.

With a new nonprofit organization — the Keene Housing Kid's Collaborative — Meehan wants to break that cycle.

The new organization, which will be supported by Keene Housing for its first three years, is designed to give Keene Housing's youngest residents access to activities and resources that will get them the connections and confidence they need to succeed in school and life.

Keene Housing has already established scholarship and reduced-tuition programs with several city organizations, including the Keene Family YMCA, Moco Arts, the Keene school district and the city's Department of Parks, Recreation and Cemeteries.

The Kids Collaborative will take over those partnerships, eventually adding new ones with other local organizations, Meehan said.

Jennifer Marsh, a resident of one of the 12 properties Keene Housing operates, dropped her son off at a baseball game last week.

All three of her children have benefited from Keene Housing's assistance for kids activities, she said. Her older son plays baseball. His younger brother has developed a passion for theater in classes at Moco Arts subsidized by Keene Housing. The youngest boy, who is five, went to camp last summer.

Spending time at these activities has kept her boys busy when they're not in school, Marsh said.

"Usually every night is something," she said. "They're out of trouble."

They're also learning new skills doing activities they wouldn't otherwise be able to afford, she said.

Her 14-year-old, the theater buff, told her he's become braver as a result of his classes.

"He can go out on stage and sing a solo," Marsh said. "My knees would be knocking together, but he has the confidence to do that because he has the tools."

The potential for individual benefit is great, Meehan said, but programs like the Kids Collaborative go beyond giving one kid the confidence to sing a solo.

Patrick Dolenc, a professor of economics at Keene State College and a member of the Keene Housing Kids' Collaborative board of directors, said access to extracurricular activities can change the structures that keep families poor generation after generation.

"My sense is that the Kids Collaborative is a very conscious attempt to try and break the cycle of poverty," Dolenc said.

As the gap between rich and poor families widens, children like the ones growing up in Keene Housing are falling farther behind their peers, Dolenc said.

"We all know that kids who grow up in poverty are more likely to end up being parents in houses that are struggling economically," he said. "Increasingly, we're not dealing with a level playing field."

Participation in sports, arts classes and after-school activities can level that playing field, Dolenc said.

"There's just a whole host of reasons that (the kids) are going to start adulthood in a better-off place with more of an advantage," he said.

Moco Arts Executive Director said Reagan Messer said he has heard from the parents of Keene Housing residents who take dance or theater classes at the school that the benefits are clear.

"It's not just learning how to dance, or how to sing or act, the kids are learning life skills that they're going to learn to apply in their lives," Messer said.

Liz Chipman, a former Big Brothers, Big Sisters program director, began as executive director of the Keene Housing Kids Collective two weeks ago.

Chipman said she plans to spend the first weeks in her new post getting to know Keene and deciding which new organizations the collaborative could partner with.

"I feel so very excited about being here and starting this organization," she said, calling Meehan and Keene housing "really forward thinking" for establishing the collaborative.

For its first three years, Keene Housing will support the collaborative with money it has generated through the Moving to Work program, a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development deregulation program that gives 39 public housing authorities nationwide more flexibility to test approaches to affordable housing.

By exempting Moving to Work housing authorities from many of the rules set out by the United States Housing Act of 1937, housing authorities like Keene Housing can reduce their costs and spend their money more efficiently.

Keene's participation in the program since its inception in the early 1990s has given the organization the freedom to experiment with projects like the Kids Collective, Meehan said.

Marsh hopes the Kids Collaborative will mean a better future for her kids, and maybe help them avoid the mistakes she said she made.

"I don't want them to follow my lead and end up in the same place," she said. "They can go on and do something bigger and better."