STRATHAM - Scott Blaine never thought he'd end up homeless.

"Homelessness is the thing that happens to other people. It's a shame, but a lot of people have that predisposed notion about homelessness. They think you must have done something wrong," Blaine said at the Seacoast Family Promise family homeless shelter. "We've all made wrong choices. ... But it just takes one bad day or a group of bad choices."

Blaine is one of about 15 people - made up of families with children younger than 18 - staying at the facility during the day, which is run out of a small office/day center at the Stratham Community Church. At night, the families are transported to a group of 10 rotating area churches that host the families for a week at a time in makeshift bedrooms. They eat dinner at the churches, sleep there and then head back to the center in the morning.

Pati Frew-Waters, executive director of the nonprofit Seacoast Family Promise, said she has worked there for six to seven years and the program has been "full every single day except for two weeks." She said the stagnant economy and staggering cost of rental properties on the Seacoast means the need for such facilities is only growing.
People come for a variety of reasons: a job loss, unexpected expenses, a fire and illness. "We have families come where one member has survived cancer, but they didn't survive the financial toll it took," she said.

There's a growing number of people in the state who are just getting by, where one financial hit can put them on the streets, Frew-Waters said.

"There is great wealth in this state, but there's probably a quarter or a third of the people in the state who live paycheck from paycheck," she said.

Two of the greatest needs of homeless families trying to get back into their own homes is raising the roughly $3,000 it takes to move into an average Seacoast apartment and having safe, reliable transportation.

"All of families our job searching, but how do you get a job if you can't get to the job interview," Frew-Waters said.

She said they have a car for one of the families at the shelter, but it needs $1,000 in repair work. Frew-Waters hopes that instead of giving older, reliable cars to a national nonprofit, Seacoast residents will consider donating them to Seacoast Family Promise.

"If they would consider donating their safe cars to us for the tax write-off, it would really give a homeless family the gift of transportation," she said.

She's also hoping either a mechanic or owner of a parts store will donate their services to the shelter. The shelter can be reached at 658-8448.

The cost of living

Marcy Croto, a resident of the family shelter, said high rents and the cost of keeping a car on the road puts families who work low-wage jobs in a precarious situation. "It's outrageous," Croto said. "Even when we were both working full time we still couldn't afford rent and our bills and keeping vehicles registered and running. And with the cost of living the way it is, minimum wage doesn't even come close to helping you make enough to afford anything."

Blaine said when struggling families need to make significant car repairs, they often must choose between the repairs or buying another junker. "When you're in that low-income group, if there's anything that goes past that budget when
you're already skimming by, you're in trouble," he said. "We're trying to get back on our feet and we have interviews, we have to go to Town Hall, get this paperwork, get that paperwork, re-establishing yourself from the ground up is tough."

Plus, many people have to work multiple jobs to pay their bills and stay in their homes, Croto said. "The way the jobs are, even if it's a good rate of pay, they don't give you enough hours," Croto said. "If you get enough hours, you're making minimum wage and that's not enough to pay for anything."

The invisible homeless

Frew-Waters said most people don't realize how many homeless families there are in the state because they are "so invisible."

"People not in their situation don't understand how much they're like each and every one of us," she said. "They sit next to your children in school, they stand next to you in the grocery store, but you don't know it. Just because someone is showered and has clean clothes doesn't mean they have a home to go to."

The amount of homeless children is a constant and growing problem in the state, according to Frew-Waters, who said the average age of a homeless person in New Hampshire is 9. "I have them from four months to 15 years old right now," she said.

Asked how kids handle being in a family homeless shelter, she said, "I would say the kids love it, the younger kids, it's a very loving atmosphere. I think it's much more difficult for the older kids and the teens to be living in a homeless shelter." Asked if they can invite their friends over in the summer to visit, she said, "They can, but they don't because they're ashamed."

She said she constantly gets calls from families wanting to stay with her, but she has to turn most away. "If across the state we opened 10 new homeless facilities they would probably be full in a week," she said. "It's amazing the amount of homeless there are. If I wasn't in this line of work, I never would have believed it."

A cramped center
During a recent visit, several parents sat with their children at a table while a reporter spoke with three program participants on a nearby couch. A child was taking a nap in a supply closet and Frew-Waters worked in her office, frequently sticking her head out to talk to parents or children. Someone else worked on a computer in the cramped center.

Blaine said when he heard about the shelter, he initially worried about "the kind of people you're going to meet."

"No one here is anyone less than beautiful people. We have become our own little family so fast," he said.

Croto agreed, saying they all watch out for each other and each other's kids. "We're a big giant family," she said.

Program participant Justin Frazier talked about the atmosphere at night when the families are transported to the host churches. "The thing I love is when it comes supper time ... everybody sits down at a big, long table and has a meal," Frazier said. "We chat, laugh and joke. It's special."

Asked where they'd be without Seacoast Family Promise, Croto said, "We'd be living in our vehicles in the woods, waiting for the game warden to come kick us out. We actually spent two weeks sleeping in the back of my truck before we came here."

She and Frazier got placed in the program through their daughter's school.

"They told us about this program and helped us get into it," Frazier said. "That was very helpful, too. They didn't have to do that for us, but they did it so we could be a family."

At night, each family has their own room. "We have inflatable beds and all our stuff," Blaine said. "Again, with a shelter you worry about what little you do have being snatched, but it's not a problem here."

Croto agreed. "We all trust each other. We're all here to help each other," she said. "We're all in the same boat."
All three of the program participants said that while the program typically lasts six months, Seacoast Family Promise makes sure everyone is ready before they leave the program and go out on their own.

"There's certain things you have to have before you go," Blaine said. "But there's no one pushing you out the door."

Frew-Waters said they help families find jobs and affordable apartments, which is often extremely difficult, pay back utility bills and have money in the bank when they leave. "You have to learn to make appropriate decisions and pay your bills and set your priorities," she said. "It's a family effort and while they're here, the family sets attainable goals."

Croto said people in the program all work toward the same goal: to be able to live on their own. "Our goals are to find secure jobs, save some money and get stable reliable vehicles," she said. "We're all just trying to achieve that for ourselves and our family and get back on our feet."

At a glance

Seacoast Family Promise family homeless shelter

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