STRATHAM - "Everybody comes here for different reasons," says Seacoast Family Promise director Pati Frew-Waters. "A woman who owned her own business for 20 years got breast cancer, lost everything and ended up here ... a lot of times when you lose your job, you'll just think something else is coming and you can spend your savings, but sometimes that's not the case."

Seacoast Family Promise, a non-profit dedicated to help families with children experiencing temporary homelessness get back on their feet, has outgrown its current location at the Stratham Community Church, according to its directors. After deciding on a location on Hampton Road in Exeter for their new facility, SFP directors found themselves facing stiff opposition from neighboring residents, numerous hours before the Zoning Board of Adjustment, and now a legal challenge to the ZBA's last decision allowing them to relocate to Hampton Road.

This led SFP directors to invite the News-Letter, as well as the general public and objecting abutters to visit their current location for a first-hand look at what goes on.

Frew-Waters showed the News-Letter around the inarguably cramped facility, where two tables are used for crafts, intake meetings, case management meetings, paperwork, laundry and eating, and a closet had to be reconfigured into a shower. In order to better serve their guests, a new, more expansive
facility is needed, according to Frew-Waters, but the road to calling 27 Hampton Road home has been a long one, with Family Promise's approval now being appealed by abutters in Rockingham Superior Court.

Neighbors have cited security concerns and a deleterious effect on property values as reasons why they oppose the 27 Hampton Road location for the facility, and according to Frew-Waters, one of her aims in inviting the media to tour the current facility was to combat some of the misconceptions she believes people have about the center and SFP's clientele.

Frew-Waters added that SFP's guests are "our neighbors, everyday people." We grew up with them. Their kids sit next to our kids in school," she said. "86 percent of our families were stable, in good housing for as long as ten years...; the working poor fall through the cracks and don't traditionally get services of any kind."

A current SFP guest named Jen, who requested that her last name not be used, recently left a "domestic situation" with her 16-month-old son, and is currently unemployed. During the News-Letter's visit she was working in the facility's garden and shared some of her experience at SFP.

"About six weeks ago I pretty much had nowhere to go," she said. "I made a phone call and now here I am. It's a great network of information for where to look for jobs...; I just had a job interview today."

"I didn't even know they (SFP) were here - I might have called sooner if I knew. Without SFP we'd probably be in my car or putting out a family member," she added.

Jen said that it had been her birthday the week before and she was surprised by a beautifully decorated chocolate cake from the volunteers.

SFP partners with area churches to house its guests at night (there are no overnight guests permitted at the facility itself), as well as 900 Seacoast area volunteers, including former guests. Frew-Waters said that she wished some of the objecting abutters would take SFP up on their invitation to visit the facility and meet some of their guests.
"For me this is the big thing: you guys stepped out of the box and came to see the facility," she said. "I have sent out a notice to all the abutters, but no one responded. Anybody could come in here right now. In fact we just had four former guests come in to visit the other day to say thank you and that they're doing well."

"Being homeless is a 24/7 job, trying to get out of it ...; by the grace of God do you, I and everybody have what we have," Frew-Waters added.