



Mary Kay Sweeney, executive director of Homeward Bound of Marin, left, and Dominican Sr. Carla Kovak, prioress general of the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael, stand in front of Lourdes Convent, which has a private entrance to the Yellow Hallway on the right side of the convent porch. (Courtesy of the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael)



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(GSR/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

**Editor's note:** More than 1.6 billion people worldwide live in substandard housing. Of those, at least 150 million have no home at all. In this special series, [A Place to Call Home](#), Global Sisters Report is focusing on women religious helping people who are homeless or lack adequate shelter. Over the next several months, we will examine how homelessness and a lack of affordable housing affect teens and young adults, families, migrants, the elderly and those displaced by natural disasters and climate change in stories from Kenya, India, Vietnam, Ireland, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, the United States and elsewhere.

A mother who lived with domestic violence for several years found peace and "quietness for our souls" when she and her two young daughters moved into the Yellow Hallway, a private residence created by the [Dominican Sisters of San Rafael](#) in a portion of their Our Lady of Lourdes convent in San Rafael.

She and her daughters were welcomed on Nov. 10, 2017, as their first residents, the culmination of a two-year effort by the sisters and their project collaborator, [Homeward Bound of Marin](#), to secure the city's permission to alter the convent's use permit and ready the space.

A second single mother and her daughter joined the young family that day in the five-bedroom corridor, a yellow-painted wing of Lourdes' skilled nursing facility for aging sisters across the street from the community's administrative offices on the campus of Dominican University of California.

Both of the young mothers and their children lived there for more than a year. Two other single mothers and their sons are the new residents.

The conversion of the unused convent space initially was [fraught with legal difficulties](#) when Christopher Dolan, a California personal injury attorney whose home is adjacent to Lourdes, opposed the project when it went before the San Rafael Planning Commission, despite the sisters' outreach efforts to the neighbors. Dolan and other neighbors said added traffic, unsavory visitors and noise would disrupt the tranquility of their neighborhood.



The Dominican College infirmary, which would later be split into two parts, one of which became Lourdes Convent, in an undated photo (Courtesy of the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael)

Dolan, a Georgetown University law school graduate whose children attended a preschool run by the sisters, filed appeals with the commission and the city of San Rafael, stating the convent conversion violated the city's zoning laws. His appeals were rejected, and the sisters were granted a two-year temporary use permit on May 15, 2017. The occupancy permit was given on Oct. 26, 2017, and the two families moved in two weeks later. On Dec. 16, 2019, the city council voted unanimously to extend the permit in perpetuity.

Dolan at the December council meeting acknowledged that his concerns proved "unfounded."

"At that time, they were important to me. But they've not manifested themselves," Dolan [told the Marin Independent Journal](#).

Offering hospitality within their convents is not new to these Dominican Sisters. During the 1980s, when Central Americans were fleeing to the United States to escape civil war violence, they shared a portion of their motherhouse convent with a family from El Salvador.

That kind of security is what the Yellow Hallway has become for the women they now house.

"The Yellow Hallway gave my daughters and me an opportunity to live in a safe place," Roxana, the sisters' first resident, wrote in an email to GSR. (She asked that only her first name be used.)

"We felt secure and, for the very first time in years, I was able to have restful nights without worries, knowing the Dominican Sisters were close by and that the Dominican University has a security guard."



A group of San Rafael Dominicans and friends gather in August 2017 in the Yellow Hallway before painting five bedrooms in a portion of the Lourdes convent in San Rafael, California for two women and their children who were homeless. (Courtesy of the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael)



From left: Dominican Srs. Abby Newton, Katherine Hamilton and Lorraine Amadeo take a break from painting one of five bedrooms in the Yellow Hallway to ready them in August 2017. (Courtesy of the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael)

The current effort grew out of a community discussion on how to respond to Pope Francis' call for mercy. Sr. Patricia Simpson, administrator at the Lourdes convent from January 2010 through August 2019, had an "unexpected, surprising idea" to redirect the Yellow Hallway into housing for a family in need. Only one sister was living in that corridor at the time, and there was room for her in another wing of the building.

Initially, Simpson hoped to offer hospitality to refugees fleeing Syria or another war-torn country, but she soon realized that the community was "not in a place to take on the full commitment of refugee sponsorship."

Instead, she and a small committee of other sisters "moved on to the next right answer": offering a home to two unhoused women and their children. They presented a proposal to Mary Kay Sweeney, executive director of Homeward Bound, the primary provider of shelters and services for homeless families and individuals in Marin County, of which San Rafael is the county seat.

Sweeney was enthusiastic about collaborating. The sisters are active partners with Homeward Bound and were a major financial contributor to the agency's [Oma Village](#), a supportive housing program of 14 small rental homes in nearby Novato.

In the partnership, the sisters provide and maintain the space for two families, and Homeward Bound selects the residents from among the women living in their family shelter. Homeward Bound continues to provide the women with counseling and case management support for up to a two-year stay at the convent. The sisters asked that the children be 8 years of age or younger.

Once the initial city approval was given, the sisters and Homeward Bound worked quickly to modify the space by converting two bedrooms into a kitchen/dining area, designating another room as a playroom, and installing two private entrances. Homeward Bound, the sisters, and donors provided all the furnishings.

One Saturday in August 2017, a group of sisters, all wearing freshly purchased yellow T-shirts, painted each of the five bedrooms. It gave them a concrete way to show their support, Simpson said.

As part of the agreement with Homeward Bound, the women pay \$450 in rent to the agency each month while the sisters maintain the property and cover utility costs. Both of the first two mothers to live in the Yellow Hallway were employed during their stay there; their daughters attended school and after-school care.

Each of the first two families has since moved from the Yellow Hallway. Roxana gained enough financial security to rent a Homeward Bound home, where she and her girls took up residence in January 2019. The other mother, struggling with debt, moved back to Homeward Bound's family shelter after her two-year stay. For a short time, a single mother and her infant daughter found welcome in the Yellow Hallway until they were able to move to a supportive housing program. Two single mothers with sons live there now.

"All these women are doing everything they can to survive," said Sweeney, who has headed up Homeward Bound for the past 20 years. "It is wonderful to offer them an opportunity with the sisters, who are so calm and mission-driven."

Sweeney said the project "laid the foundation" for a second Homeward Bound residence in the unoccupied convent of St. Patrick Parish in neighboring Larkspur. After gaining approval from the San Francisco Archdiocese, Homeward Bound [reached an agreement](#) with the parish in 2018 to lease the 12-bedroom convent for 35 years. It had been vacant for several years after the Adrian Dominican Sisters left the parish school and a social service program for women with drug and alcohol addictions moved out.



The convent of the Adrian Dominican Sisters when they taught at St. Patrick School in Larkspur, California, is now home to 12 formerly unhoused seniors who are clients of Homeward Bound of Marin, California. Homeward Bound leases the property from St. Patrick Parish. (Monica Clark)

In December 2018, 12 unhoused seniors, some of them chronically homeless, moved into the convent, now called King Street Senior Housing. Homeward Bound raised \$1.3 million to repair and renovate the space. There was no opposition from neighbors once they had assurance the residents would be senior adults who would not be parking cars in their already crowded downtown neighborhood. The Larkspur City Council gave full approval.

Sweeney said the two convent conversions are positive examples of what dioceses and religious communities might do with unused space, including rectories where, in some cases, one priest lives in a building with several suites.

Sr. Joan Hanna, community liaison to the women in the Yellow Hallway, said it has been a privilege to collaborate with Homeward Bound.

"To walk with these women as they intensely move forward has awakened my understanding of how difficult their lives have been," she said. "We don't know their stories, but we realize they have struggled, been traumatized, and at times are very fragile."

Roxana said the Yellow Hallway provided a "safe haven when we needed it most."



Dominican Srs. Joan Hanna, left, and Emmanuel Cardinale, community liaisons with the women living in the Yellow Hallway, stand in front of the portion of Lourdes Convent that became a residence for two women and their children who were homeless. (Courtesy of the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael)

The calm has been so pervasive that when asked about any difficulties the sisters have encountered since they started hosting families, Hanna smiled, trying to remember any incidents of note. She recalled the night when the women, awakened by a blaring carbon dioxide alarm, called the fire department because they were frightened and didn't know what to do. A new battery offered a quick fix.

A potential "crisis" was averted when the maintenance crew installed a child safety lock after a toddler learned to open the front door and walked outside.

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Simpson said the most serious problem was a leaking pipe that damaged a portion of the hallway's floor and walls. The repair took two weeks. The sisters placed one family in a residential hotel, and the other family shared a relative's small one-bedroom apartment until both families could return to their Yellow Hallway home.

Now that the winter rains have ended, the sisters expect to once again hear children's voices in the garden shared by the families and the Lourdes community.

The sisters living in the Lourdes convent "have come to trust the integrity of the program with Homeward Bound," said Sr. Carla Kovack, prioress general of the community of 60 professed sisters, 34 of whom live in San Rafael. Homeward Bound has created a "culture of respect, hope and empowerment in which our collective creativity finds a positive direction forward."

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This story appears in the **A Place to Call Home** feature series. [View the full series](#).