

Homeless No More:

A Continuum of Care for Families in Need

By Marilyn Thomas



Families who are homeless are a particularly vulnerable population, but Homeless No More, a local organization in Columbia, is partnering with the community to solve this serious issue. Backed by data and proven best practices, this nonprofit offers its participants a “continuum of care,” which includes emergency services, life skills training, and transitional accommodations with the ultimate goal of helping its residents to achieve self-sufficiency in permanent, affordable housing.

The basic definition of homelessness, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), is an “individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” HUD data from 2020 indicates that approximately 4,287 South Carolinians had experienced homelessness on any given day; of that total, 279 were family households. Furthermore, in the 2017-2018 school year, the U.S. Department of Education approximated that about 12,426 South Carolina public school students had experienced homelessness during that time frame.

“Formerly known as Trinity Housing





Corporation, Homeless No More (HNM) was created in 1989, in response to the rising number of homeless families in the Midlands of central South Carolina,” says Lindsey Pitts, the administrative coordinator of HNM. “The organization built its reputation for serving homeless families through its transitional housing program, St. Lawrence Place.” In 2005, Lila Anna Sauls joined the staff as a part-time employee of St. Lawrence Place in response to a friend’s request for help. “I set foot on that campus, and I will never forget,” recalls Ms. Sauls. “It was around Easter, and they were unloading bicycles that someone had donated. I watched the kids and their reactions to the bicycles, and I thought, I’m never leaving this place.”

With an extensive background in the nonprofit sector, Ms. Sauls accepted the role of chief executive officer of HNM two years later. “We became what you call a ‘best practice’ at St. Lawrence Place,” she says. “We were working with families; we had done a million-dollar rehab of the property, and we were presenting at conferences nationally.” Although St. Lawrence Place was proven successful in its mission, in 2016, Ms. Sauls and the organization’s board of directors realized that “something was missing” and envisioned a more comprehensive approach. In response to this, a study was commissioned with the University of South Carolina to identify effective methods for addressing homelessness.

The “data-driven” findings from that research indicated that families needed programs related to the underlying contributors of homelessness as well as more affordable, permanent housing options once stabilization is achieved, to achieve and sustain positive outcomes.

As a next step, the board recommend-

ed finding a model program to emulate. “I spent time researching and making phone calls and identified HomeFront [in Lawrenceville, New Jersey] as what we need to be,” says Ms. Sauls. “We cross-trained, my board members visited and asked tough budget questions, and Homeless No More was born.” This innovative program was “a continuum for homeless families,” she explains. “What that means is it’s step-by-step, depending on where you are in your journey of homelessness, and we have a program that will walk with you.”

In addition to the existing St. Lawrence Place program, which accommodates 26 families, they then acquired

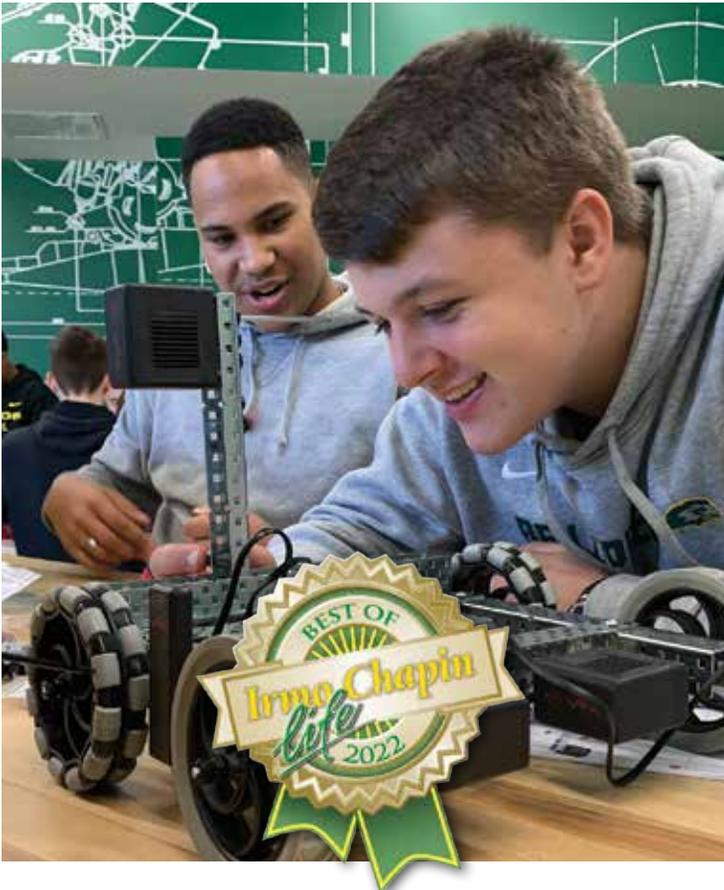
the Family Shelter to provide emergency housing for up to 30 days for as many as 17 families at a time. They also initiated Live Oak Place, an approach that directs families to affordable housing options. To that end, HNM secured a number of residences throughout the region within existing neighborhoods; they also constructed a brand-new, 15-unit apartment community known as Myrtle Grove. Those who move into the Live Oak Place homes have completed the programs of Family Shelter and St. Lawrence Place and are able to work and live independently there with their families.

After the intake process, which is usually initiated by phone, new participants receive food and housing, are assigned to case managers, and receive life-skills training. “We’ve never just been about the roof,” explains Ms. Sauls. “We’re very much about those wrap-around services.” These sessions cover “soft skills” such as budgeting, communicating effectively, résumé writing, managing stress, obtaining health care, etc. “During life-skill classes, we also provide childcare,” she adds, “so there’s never a reason for a family to not be able to participate in a program fully.” According to Ms. Sauls, if a resident has a specific need that can-

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not be addressed directly with HNM’s inhouse resources, they will outsource that case to an appropriate service provider. For example, they may contact Sistercare about domestic violence situations or Mental Illness Recovery Center, Inc., for its assistance.

Moreover, HNM is unique in that “We’re the only shelter system that takes fathers or boys over 12,” explains Ms. Sauls. “The guiding rule is that there has to be one child in custody, and a child is defined as 18 and under, but our mission, our goal, is to keep that entire family together.” Because she has five boys of her own who have grown up on the campus of HNM, “Everything I do,



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when I come into work, I want to protect the most vulnerable,” says Ms. Sauls. “I want to teach their parents how to be able to do it once they are away from us. The whole thought behind any of our programs is that we give the parents what they need to be independent. I love it when they come back, and they have jobs, and they have these incredible lives – that’s our goal!”

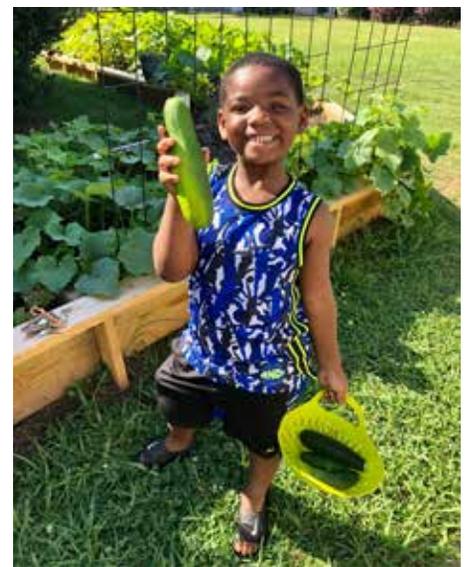
“Carrie” and her young daughter “Ashlyn” have been residents of St. Lawrence Place. [These are not their real names, but Carrie’s story is used with her permission.] Before entering the program, finding affordable childcare, while in a job with limited hours, had become a challenge for Carrie, which affected their ability to live independently. “When I first got here, I felt scared, desperate, and alone. It was like I couldn’t do enough to support Ashlyn or myself,” Carrie recalls. “I didn’t think I could find a place like St. Lawrence Place that could help me do the things I needed to make things better for my daughter.”

At HNM, Carrie was assigned to a staff case manager and a job coach, Sommers Sims, who assisted her in developing stronger occupational skills and helped her enroll in a childcare program designed to give parents the flexibility to work more hours. “When we get new clients, we connect the resources with the person who needs them,” Ms. Sims says. Carrie’s experience at HNM has been described as “transformational.” In addition to spending quality time with her daughter, her self-confidence has grown, and she is able to work more and has been seeking other job opportunities with better hours and wages.

Another key component of HNM’s success is its Community Bridge program, which involves the coordination of local organizations who voluntarily meet in a group called The RoundTable. Together, they endeavor to discuss and successfully resolve issues that may negatively affect the homeless population. Past concerns they have addressed include barriers to obtaining childcare and using the public transportation system in Columbia.

The local community can assist HNM in other ways, and Ms. Sauls summarizes this as “time, talent, and treasure.” For time and talent, volunteer groups, individuals, and businesses are welcome to help with property maintenance. Also, educators and other professionals can tutor the children or teach life-skill classes. As for treasure, monetary donations are always helpful. Additionally, the HNM website posts specific needs that the shelter uses every day as well as seasonably (e.g., snacks, school supplies, comforters, towels, toiletries, dishes, etc.).

This nonprofit also hosts special activities in which the public is encouraged to participate. The Hope for Homes fundraiser in November sells luminaries with which supporters can light up their front yards to bring awareness to the organization and homelessness. Other events include a Race for the Place 5K in February, an Angel’s Tea luncheon and silent auction in the spring, and an annual Rent Party in September. To find out more information about volunteering or upcoming events or to seek assistance with housing, the HNM staff can be reached by calling 803.602.6379 or by visiting their website at www.homelessnomore.org. ■



“We have lots of incredible stories,” says Ms. Sauls. “But all the decisions we make are based on that data because it’s all based on our success. We track everything, we have a database, and everything we do is quantitative.” For example, notable statistics from HNM’s 2021 fiscal year include:

- Four hundred and thirty-nine homeless and at-risk individuals were served.
- Ninety-five percent of families who participated in the St. Lawrence Place transitional housing program moved into permanent housing after completing the program.
- One hundred and thirty-one children and youth were served through the afterschool, day camp, and other programs offered at St. Lawrence Place.
- Ninety-eight percent of HNM’s school children were promoted to the next grade level and 90% maintained or increased their reading levels.

