

New Life Mission sees high success rate by focusing on mental health

By Ken Datzman

MELBOURNE — Homelessness and mental health are closely linked. Research indicates that homelessness can exacerbate existing mental health conditions, while mental illness can increase vulnerability to becoming homeless. It is a complex two-way relationship.

Twenty-three percent of adults experienced a mental illness in the past year, equivalent to nearly 60 million Americans, according to Mental Health America, or MHA, a leading national nonprofit founded in 1909.

Access to mental health care is difficult for many people who are unhoused. And the number of homeless individuals and families continues to grow. In 2024, nearly all populations experienced record levels of homelessness, and families with children had the largest single-year increase.

“Mental health is one of the most discussed topics in America today,” said Amy Lyon, chief executive officer of New Life Mission, a Christian-based 17-year-old private nonprofit that focuses on breaking the cycle of homelessness by providing shelter, support, and life-skills training to women with children.

“A shortage of affordable housing is not the sole cause of homelessness. There are many other contributing factors, with one of the big causes being mental health. When you dig deeper into the root causes of homelessness, mental health is a huge part of that.”

New Life Mission does not receive government funding. Instead, the organization relies on private donations from businesses and individuals. New Life Mission teaches families how to become self-sufficient and live independently without government assistance.

“Most of the mothers who come into our program have traumatic histories. The experience of homelessness, for example, is traumatic for them. They come from all types of life scenarios. They are struggling with anxiety or depression or other mental health issues,” said Lyon.

She says there seems to be a “misnomer in the community that mental health isn’t a problem among the homeless population. It is a problem. That needs to be emphasized.”

A recent study highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive solutions to address both housing instability and mental health needs simultaneously. When mental health conditions are treated early, it can save lives and improve outcomes for individuals. “Two years ago, we decided to increase our mental health services for families by having on-site evaluations for the families when they first come into the New Life Mission program,” said Lyon. “Mental health services are available for every mother, as is counseling for her children.”

By addressing mental health and helping clients work through the issues, the New Life Mission model has been a big success, she added.

“We have a 91 percent success rate for people who graduate from our program,” said Lyon. “That means 91 percent of them do not return to homelessness.”

Families receive up to two years of safe housing at one of New Life Mission’s campuses while they work through the four levels of the program.



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

New Life Mission focuses on breaking the cycle of homelessness by providing shelter, support, and life-skills training to homeless women with children. It has a 91 percent success rate for mothers who complete the program, meaning they do not return to homelessness. New Life Mission will host a fundraiser themed ‘Once Upon a Time’ on April 10–11 at the Hilton Melbourne. It is seeking table hosts and sponsors. From left, the team includes: Amy Lyon, CEO; Miranda Stewart, program director; Kimberly Cappelen, Kids Academy director; Laurie Loucks, business director; and Staci Donovan, director of development. New Life Mission recently hosted a ceremony marking the opening of its New Life Chapel, which was donated by Veterans Church. The facility was fully renovated.

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They have access to case management services, mental health counseling, financial coaching, no-cost child care, educational opportunities, and employment assistance.

“We believe the way we have structured our program — with wraparound services and increasing our mental health services, plus having on-site child care at no cost for the families — has driven our success,” said Lyon.

She continued, “New Life Mission added child care two years ago when we opened the Kids Academy. We are going even deeper with the services we offer to ensure that mothers do not go back to experiencing generational poverty.”

“One of every three children who grow up in poverty will raise their children in poverty. We are breaking that cycle,” said Lyon.

Generational poverty occurs when children who grow up in families with incomes below the poverty line are themselves poor as adults.

Among U.S. children born around 1980 who grew up in households with incomes near or below the poverty line, 34 percent were still living in low-income households when they were in their 30s, according to report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in Washington, D.C.

Children in families with low incomes have “worse health than other children, a disparity that begins before birth and increases as children grow older. There is a strong association between growing up in a single-parent family and experiencing childhood poverty.”

The New Life Mission team, along with Lyon, includes Laurie Loucks, business director; Miranda Stewart, program director; Kimberly Cappelen, Kids Academy director; and Staci Donovan, director of development. These women, and others, have played a role in the success of New Life Mission.

There is an increasing demand for the services New Life Mission provides.

“We are serving 53 percent more individuals than we were at this time last year,” said Donovan. “We are experiencing the pain of inflation like everyone else. It has affected us.”

“In addition to the 53 percent increase, we are serving larger families,” said Lyon. “We have four mothers with four children each, one mother with five children, and one mother with six children. Being able to offer on-site child care at no cost has been huge for these families.”

To help offset its rising costs, New Life Mission will be hosting “Once Upon a Time,” a “community care and share” fundraiser luncheon from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Thursday and Friday, April 10 and 11, at the Hilton Melbourne. The event is presented by Robert Ranew’s State Farm Insurance Agency.

“This year’s theme — Once Upon a Time — was inspired by one of our first donors,” said Donovan. “The idea behind the theme is that fairy tales always have a character and a problem. Although the mothers at New Life Mission do not meet the image of a fairy tale princess, they are women who have to work through a problem to find a solution, which is what they are doing. The Once Upon a Time luncheon celebrates the work and accomplishments of these women. We highlight a graduate of the New Life Mission program every year at this event.”

Donovan said this year’s program graduate to be featured will “share the hard realities of growing up in poverty, raising herself, and overcoming addiction. We invite the public to hear her uplifting life story.”

Despite life challenges, there is always hope. “Every story has the potential to have a happy ever after ending,” said Donovan.

This fundraiser generates from 25 to 30 percent of New

Life Mission’s annual operating budget, which allows the organization to serve more homeless women and their children.

“We are seeking table hosts for the luncheon. Our goal is to have 80 table hosts,” said Donovan. For more information, email CCS@NewLife-Mission.org, or call Donovan at (321) 480-9100, extension 110. Table hosts invite their friends to the event.

Sponsorships are also offered. The levels are: \$600, \$1,200, \$2,500, \$5,000, \$6,000, \$10,000, and \$15,000. There are various amenities at each level of support, including promotional opportunities for businesses.

To learn more about being a table host or sponsor, visit www.NewLife-Mission.org.

Typically, this event attracts more than 800 area professionals over the two days. There is no cost to attend Once Upon a Time and the lunch is free.

“This is an important fundraiser for our organization. At the event, we ask attendees to donate to New Life Mission,” said Donovan.

“We are a 100 percent community-funded entity,” said Lyon. “We receive no government funds. We need the community’s support to continue our mission.”

New Life Mission serves 85 individuals — mothers and their children. “We work with almost 60 children,” said Lyon. “From a mental health perspective, we do evaluations for the children and provide them with counseling. This support helps mothers with parenting.”

The children at New Life Mission are screened for behavioral problems.

“We partner with Florida Tech’s Scott Center for Autism Treatment,” said Lyon. “They provide evaluations of children at New Life Mission at no cost. We greatly appreciate what the Scott Center does for us. By getting an evaluation, and if the child is diagnosed with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), he or she can receive services. Some people with ASD are not diagnosed until they are adolescents or adults. This delay means they might not get the help they need. It’s challenging to obtain ASD services because there are not enough behavioral therapists in the area.”

Community-based mental health services play an important role in preventing homelessness. The U.S. is experiencing a “mental health crisis with increased levels of unmet behavioral needs among people of all ages,” according to the federal government’s National Center for Healthcare Workforce Analysis.

Substantial shortages of addiction counselors, marriage and family therapists, mental health counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists are projected now through 2036.

As of December 2023, more than half of the U.S. population (169 million people) live in a “mental health professional shortage area.”

With the tagline of “Transforming Homeless Families in Brevard County,” New Life Mission addresses issues that cause homelessness, including financial literacy education. New Life Mission offers “financial coaching.”

“Financial literacy is another component that is tied to homelessness and generational poverty,” said Lyon. “Financial and educational experts say that one way to break the cycle of generational poverty is through education.”

Financial strains like debt or unemployment are significant risk factors for becoming homeless, and even help to explain the increased risk of homelessness associated with mental illness, reports a study in the journal “Medical Care.”

The findings suggest that adding financial well-being as a focus of homelessness prevention efforts “seems promising,” both at the individual and community level, according to research.

The study was led by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ National Center on Homelessness and the Department of Psychiatry and Behavior Sciences at Duke University School of Medicine.

Using data on nearly 35,000 participants in the “nationally representative longitudinal survey,” researchers analyzed financial strain as a predictor of homelessness, on its own and in combination with mental illness.

All types of financial strain — financial crisis and debt, lower income, and unemployment — were associated with an increased risk of future homelessness. As expected, “severe mental illness,” was directly related to an increased risk of homelessness.

New Life Mission was founded by Stacia Glavas. She began her career on Capitol Hill as a legislative aide handling international trade policy, agriculture, and women’s issues, before becoming a franchisee businessowner.

Glavas was the CEO of New Life Mission for 15 years. She retired in 2022. The organization was formally known as Brevard Rescue Mission. Lyon was program director under Glavas before being promoted to succeed Glavas.

Lyon has continued the organization’s work to break the generational cycle of homelessness.

“We create an individualized case plan for each family that is specific to their needs,” said Lyon. “Mothers take part in a weekly Bible study and participate in life-skills classes such as budgeting, grocery shopping, cooking, and parenting. Accountability is key.”

The organization’s first campus, “Casa Carol,” opened in 2009 with three retrofitted apartments. Since then, nine apartments have been renovated and house New Life Mission clients.

New Life Mission was able to purchase the Casa Carol campus in 2012, after a successful capital campaign. The mortgage was paid off in the summer of 2014.

In 2018, New Life Mission purchased a five-unit apartment complex debt-free. The new campus, “Joy’s Place,” is two blocks from Casa Carol. The campus was named after local businessman Fred Sutton’s oldest daughter.

The following year, New Life Mission expanded again with the purchase of the Life Transformation Center, now called The Cottages, located just south of the intersection of U.S. 1 and Eau Gallie Boulevard.

With eight existing single-family homes and five commercial buildings facing U.S. 1, New Life Mission expanded its program to serve not only eight additional families, but also open its services to non-resident families, with the goal to help prevent them from becoming homeless.

In 2021, New Life Mission purchased a 25-acre campus that for three decades was operated by the Children’s Home Society and previously served as the Hacienda Girls Ranch.

The property was a haven for children in state custody. The Children’s Home Society closed the campus and put the property up for sale. It’s now the New Life Village campus.

New Life Mission expanded its social enterprise, the Transformed Shop, to an existing warehouse space on the New Life Village campus. Started at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Transformed Shop is a sewing center where the mothers in the program work with staff and volunteers to learn cutting and sewing skills using upcycled denim and fabric.

They create products such as drink coasters, placemats, tote bags and jewelry items that are sold at events and at transformedshop.com. The profits support

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