

NJAMHAA Member, Others in Mercer County Make Great Strides in Reducing Homelessness

"When I started as County Executive, we handed out Section 8 vouchers to put people in hotels. The system was broken. We want to put everyone in a house the day he becomes homeless," said Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes during a recent "Ending Homelessness" press conference at Greater Trenton Behavioral HealthCare (GTBHC). Hughes is one of many supporters of the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness that has made great strides toward their mission. Alliance supporters also include other county officials, state and federal officials and numerous other individuals, including John Monahan, ACSW, LCSW, President & CEO of GTBHC and a member of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies' (NJAMHAA's) Board of Directors.

Mercer County's system clearly has been fixed, based on the following statistics, provided by Marygrace Billek, Director of the Mercer County Department of Human Services:

- * Long-term homelessness of individuals was reduced by 68 percent since 2007 through the Housing First program.
 - o More than 287 individuals, most with mental health or substance use disorders, were served with housing and services to address their mental health disorders, addictions and physical illnesses.
 - o Only seven of these individuals returned to homelessness.
 - o Emergency room and inpatient hospitalization costs decreased by 50 percent.
 - o Overall healthcare costs were reduced by 78 percent.
- * Homelessness of families was reduced by 74 percent since 2007 through the Rapid Rehousing program.
 - o Case management services helped the families increase their incomes by 50 percent and reduce the length of time on public assistance from one year to six months on average.
 - o Lengths of stay in emergency shelters were reduced by 36 percent.
 - o Nearly all of the families - 94 percent - have not returned to homelessness.

While these statistics are certainly compelling, the stories of individuals who are behind the numbers are even more powerful. Tenants of GTBHC's Housing First program shared their personal experiences during the press conference:

- * Donna was homeless for about seven months after losing her job of 14 years. "I couldn't deal with my mental or physical illness. I had to focus on where I would sleep each night, which caused more anxiety and depression. With housing and treatment from Greater Trenton, I can focus more on my health and I reduced my emergency room visits. This place is a blessing," she said.
- * "Greater Trenton showed me you can put your trust in someone to be better than what you are," Aubrey said. "They gave me my sound mind back." Aubrey had been on and off the streets for 10 years. Now, he is one and a half years into his recovery from drug and alcohol addictions.
- * A woman in a soup kitchen helped Reggie get into housing. He has now been off drugs for three years and plans to get married. "Now, I'm living the life I should've been living a long time ago," he said.
- * "Being housed stopped me from being locked up. You all made a successful story out of me," Morgan said.

* "Everyone in the program stuck by me and trusted me even when I didn't know who I was," Gail said. "We got to use all the doors, not just the one to our homes, but also the counseling door and so on."

All of the tenants finished their stories with heartfelt gratitude to specific GTBHC staff that was rightfully followed with applause from everyone in the room, which was packed with service providers and recipients, media representatives, county government staff and other stakeholders.

What made the event even more profound is not just the tremendous impact that the providers have on individuals' lives, but also the fact that achieve such impact with limited resources. "We have housing subsidies for 165 people, who had been chronically homeless, but service dollars for only 84. We received four different funding cutbacks over the past four years despite excellent outcomes. Although other funders increased their funding to help out, we still had a several hundred thousand dollar gap. Staff responded by taking on additional clients rather than returning anyone to homelessness. Because of this generosity by staff, I am calling them our newest funding source," Monahan said.

Press Conference Featured in *NJ Spotlight* and *Trenton Times*

Thirteen of 75 early participants in GTBHC's Housing First program who had the highest healthcare costs "saw their annual hospital inpatient and emergency costs drop from an average of \$24,320 to \$5,269, a 78-percent decline," as reported in [NJ Spotlight](#). "In addition, the number of residents with no hospital costs grew from 20 to 37, or nearly half of all Housing First enrollees. All of the participants had mental or behavioral health issues and most had drug or alcohol problems."

"If you added integrated care into the mix, you could have even bigger savings," Monahan told *NJ Spotlight*. At GTBHC, the staff coordinates physical and behavioral healthcare and works with residents to improve their diet and exercise habits.