

Supportive housing a gift that can last a lifetime



The holidays are often the time of year we not only reflect on the blessings we receive, but work to help those who may be less fortunate. From donating toys, coats or canned

goods, to delivering or serving holiday meals, we want to make sure less fortunate individuals and families enjoy blessings and dignity during the holiday season.

But among those to whom we might be generous this time of year, individuals who are homeless face a unique set of barriers and challenges that can sometimes preclude them from benefitting from acts of charity – or from programs designed to help low-income and indigent families throughout the year.

Last month, I spoke at the Georgia Supportive Housing Association (GSHA) annual conference in Atlanta about the importance of permanent supportive housing in facilitating recovery for individuals with mental illness, addictive disease or disabilities. GSHA is a network of non-profit housing developers, service providers, statewide agencies and corporations that work to strengthen housing resources in Georgia for at-risk populations.

As a provider of supportive housing services, Highland Rivers Health – like GSHA – supports a housing first philosophy. The National Alliance to End Homelessness defines housing first as an approach that prioritizes providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness, to provide a foundation from which they can pursue personal goals and improve their quality of life.

This approach is guided by the belief that people need basic necessities like food and a place to live before attending to other needs such as getting a job, budgeting, or receiving treatment for mental health or substance use issues. This is also true – and critical – for children, who miss fewer days of school and are more likely to be successful academically when they have a home.

Housing first also does not require recipients to begin mental health or substance use treatment or other services as a condition of receiving housing – though many do, and are more successful because they are better able to focus on recovery. For those reasons, housing first has proven to be effective on many levels.

According to a 2015 study by the National Institutes of Health, people receiving housing first services achieved superior housing outcomes and showed more rapid improvements in community functioning and quality of life – the goals of mental health and substance use treatment services.

Likewise, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reports that housing first is an effective intervention for ending and preventing homelessness for individuals with severe mental illness and co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders.

In addition, by making it easier for individuals to receive consistent mental health treatment, [supportive housing reduces the likelihood of individuals seeking mental health services in the emergency room or requiring psychiatric hospitalization – resulting in significant cost savings.](#)

Because mental illness and substance use disorders are much more prevalent among homeless populations than the general population, permanent supportive housing can be the catalyst for a chain reaction of positive events.

Providing a home for someone with mental illness or a substance disorder not only removes him or her from the streets (reducing their risk of assault, ongoing substance use, TB, HIV and death) but helps them take steps needed to live in recovery. As I've written many times before, individuals in recovery are often able to seek additional education or skills training, find employment, become better parents and contribute to the community.

Most important, these benefits – stable housing, recovery and dignity – go well beyond the holidays, lasting for years or even a lifetime. And there is perhaps no gift, no act of charity or kindness, more meaningful to people and their communities than productive, thriving individuals and families.

To learn more about Highland Rivers' supportive housing services, visit <http://highlandrivershealth.com/residential-recovery-services>.

Melanie Dallas is a licensed professional counselor and CEO of Highland Rivers Health, which provides treatment and recovery services for individuals with mental illness, substance use disorders, and intellectual and developmental disabilities in a 12-county region of northwest Georgia that includes Bartow, Cherokee, Floyd, Fannin, Gilmer, Gordon, Haralson, Murray, Paulding, Pickens, Polk and Whitfield counties.