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Vero Beach Magazine®

APRIL 2023

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Bright & Airy





The Hope for Families Center is one of two facilities in Indian River County that can provide temporary housing to parents and their children.

Close to Home

HELPING HOMELESS CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IS COMPLICATED, UNTIL IT'S NOT

The waiting list to get into the Hope for Families Center is a mile long, or so it must seem to each of the homeless parents seeking the safe shelter the center provides. The charitable organization is one of just two facilities in Indian River County that provide homeless families with temporary shelter and supportive services in what must be one of the worst

possible scenarios for a mother or father to face.

The Hope for Families Center and the Samaritan Center both have long histories of helping some of our community's most vulnerable residents. In these times, however, the limited family shelter capacity is not enough to meet the growing demand in our county.

Each year, as part of a process to secure federal funding from the Depart-

ment of Housing and Urban Development to meet local needs, the Treasure Coast Homeless Services Council and dozens of human services organizations participate in a national exercise called the Point in Time Homeless Count (PIT). The result is a snapshot of the number of sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons on a single night in January. On January 31, 2022, the total number of



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING



A mission of Childcare Resources of Indian River County is to provide affordable and quality childcare for families.

homeless individuals who were counted in Indian River County numbered 290, with 225 adults and 65 children. In addition, another 244 households were sharing housing that was not their own, otherwise known as “couch surfing.”

I checked in with Rayme Nuckles, TCHSC’s new executive director, on the eve of the 2023 PIT to get a sense of what this year might have in store. Based on our conversation and other economic conditions such as low wages and higher housing costs, the homeless crisis in our community appears to

be getting worse, especially for families with children.

On a recent visit to the Hope for Families Center, executive director Marty Mercado led a tour of the family shelter in conjunction with a funding request. (Together with our clients, the Community Foundation has awarded more than \$750,000 in support of the center’s proven programs and manages the organization’s permanent endowment.) Mercado asked my colleagues and me to keep our voices low, as the newest resident was getting some desperately needed sleep after spending



A high-quality learning experience for children is important to Childcare Resources.



The Hope for Families Center's facility includes a room for homework and studying.

the previous two nights in her car along with her three school-age children.

"It was so hot and humid, she had to keep the windows cracked," Mercado recounted. "She was up all night swatting mosquitoes from her children's faces as they slept. Her children are at school, so thankfully she's getting some rest."

Amazingly, her children are at school.

I thought of my three children and the nightly routine that has taken place on school nights in our home for as long as I can remember. Homework, check. Dinner, check. Bath or shower, check. Teeth brushing, check. Bedtime story or meditation, check. A restful slumber, check.

While rare, disruptions

do occasionally occur. A late afternoon or evening activity. A visit from a relative. An unexpected illness. A drink of water. A "bump" in the night. All manageable, yet still sometimes disruptive enough to result in a missed alarm, a missed bus, or an otherwise delayed start to a school day.

How does a mother spend two hot, humid, and mosquito-infested nights with her three children in a car and still manage to get them to school on time before taking care of her own need for sleep? Apparently, she is not the only homeless parent to accomplish this seemingly impossible feat.

Last year, according to the Florida Department of Education, a total of 423

homeless students attended at least one day of classes in the School District of Indian River County. While 68 percent of these students lived in shared housing that was not their own, the remainder lived in motels, shelters, cars, or outdoors.

Children sleeping outside, exposed to the elements, subject to violent crime or other dangers: These are descriptions that, at a glance, might seem to apply to refugees fleeing war zones. Instead, these are some of the faces of homelessness in our community.

They stand in stark contrast to some of the more convenient myths that Indian River County's homeless population is exclusively made up of people who are mentally ill, addicted to drugs, or otherwise lazy misfits who brought this suffering upon themselves.

Thankfully, Indian River County has a strong network of health, housing, and human services organizations working to meet the needs of this vulnerable population of homeless children and their families. In the short term, these



Childcare Resources has been providing help to local families and children for more than 25 years.



The Homeless Children's Foundation provides camp opportunities each summer for families who are unable to afford care for their children.

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needs include emergency shelter and food assistance provided by organizations like the Hope for Families Center; medical assistance provided by organizations like Treasure Coast Community Health; childcare and related support services provided by Childcare Resources and the Homeless Children's Foundation.

Over time, however, the trauma caused by the myriad conditions associated with homelessness among children requires a systems-based approach that can

be sustained only with adequate public funding, including the tax dollars collected by the county and distributed through the school district, the Children's Services Advisory Council, and the Indian River Hospital District, to name a few public sources.

Charles "Chuck" Cunningham, president of the Hope for Families Center's board of directors, tells me that plans are underway for expanding the organization's capacity to serve more homeless children and

families. The ideas being discussed include more rooms for children and their parents, plus the addition of several independent on-campus housing units to support successful families as they transition to longer-term, more permanent housing. This expansion will certainly help alleviate some of the problems, but it will not solve everything. A comprehensive solution is complicated.

My 9-year-old son, Grant, has a unique and unvarnished way of

reminding me that my adult answer of "it's complicated" is not satisfactory when he asks about how we can help homeless children like the one he has befriended at his elementary school.

"He lives with his mom, dad, and two siblings in a motel, Dad," Grant tells me. "You run the Community Foundation. Your job is to make money and help people."

Make money. Help people.

It's really not that complicated. ✿