

History of FaithWorks' Ministry to People Who are Homeless in Glynn County

Introduction

Southeastern Educational Services, Inc. d/b/a FaithWorks is an ecumenical ministry which falls under the umbrella of the South Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church as an extension ministry with the purpose of identifying, studying, and creating areas of ministry beyond the walls of the local church. It is essentially a parish ministry rather than a membership ministry which is supported by over 80 churches in Glynn County, Georgia. It began in 1995.

FaithWorks has been addressing healthcare and poverty related needs in Southeast Georgia (primarily Glynn County, but some services are provided in surrounding counties) since 1997 when FaithWorks partnered with the Southeast Georgia Health System to direct its **Pastoral Care Program**. A number of ministries have emerged over the years as connections have been made with persons in need, churches, service providers, and organizations which provide resources. These ministries include: **The Sparrows Nest** (a clearing house for local churches which provides food and financial assistance), **The Cancer Network of Hope** (a service to persons getting cancer treatment who have little or no social structure), **The Samaria Initiative** (which connects those who live outside impoverished areas with those who live in poverty), **The Well** (a daytime hospitality and resource center for persons experiencing homelessness).

This history and the remainder of this document will focus on past, current, and future work with those experiencing homelessness.

Homeless Awareness and Services

Since 1997 when the partnership between Southeast Georgia Health System and FaithWorks began, the Chaplain (and eventually Chaplains) which is provided to the Health System by FaithWorks receives calls from physicians, nurses, patients, families, resource managers and others to assist in many matters such as emergencies, end of life care and decisions, pastoral care, connecting a person to his/her pastor or church, and other areas. In listening to the many stories from a diverse people, gaps in community services are determined. FaithWorks then explores how to fill those gaps if no one or organization is mobilizing to address the needs. In practice, this process has informed all the work we have initiated on behalf of men and women who are homeless.

To illustrate, early on, a gap in services was determined for those persons who were homeless who were ready to be discharged. By law, the Health System cannot discharge a person to the street, but the patient must have an address for transfer of care (home, shelter, mental health provider, skilled nursing facility, etc.). Thus the Resource Manager or the Discharge Planners would call the Chaplain and ask "can you help us with this situation?" Which really meant "Will FaithWorks place this patient in a motel

room for the night?” The Chaplain then made arrangements for a room so the hospital could appropriately discharge its patient. Payment was provided through FaithWorks Benevolence Funds.

This became quite costly, so FaithWorks began to look at other possible solutions. In October of 2010 with the help of a local grant and other donations, a three bedroom house was purchased at 1200 R Street. A homeless couple were provided accommodations at no cost with the requirement that they say “Yes” whenever the hospital called. The hospital provided cab fare, and the guest could stay a maximum of two nights on the property. A case manager employed by FaithWorks would meet the guest at the house and offer assistance for his/her next step. Some went to family, some chose to go to a rehab facility, some went to friends, and a few went back to the street.

Eventually, the first management couple decided to move to another place, and a second couple moved into the house. This worked well for awhile until the couple separated and divorced. The wife left and the man stayed which allowed us to only help with males discharged from the Health System.

During this period, we became known to many of the homeless population in Glynn County, but we were soon to find that the population was much larger than thought. A local waitress called Reverend Culpepper one day and told him that she had someone for him to meet. At the appointed time, they met on Bay Street where she then took him to an abandoned warehouse just south of the Georgia Ports Authority Building. Entering the building, there were numerous signs of a homeless population staying there. Mattresses, cots, blankets were spread throughout many rooms. Eventually, Reverend Culpepper was taken to the back of the building to the area next to the river. There, he was introduced to Christina.

Christina was loud and liked to drink a lot of beer, but she was kind of the “mother” to the other homeless in the area. Christina had been a house painter and painted many high end houses around the area. But, she developed cataracts and had no means to pay for surgery. Instead of asking for assistance, she became discouraged and started drinking heavily and eventually found her way to the streets.

We began to visit Christina every Tuesday and she began to introduce us to the other people who stayed in the building. Each had his/her own unique story of how they found their way to Brunswick. Eventually, Christina began to introduce us to others who lived in the area including outbuildings around Knight’s Seafood Company, shrimp boats, tents in overgrown areas, etc. We visited and brought sandwiches every Tuesday and soon became aware that there was a large group of people on the streets of Brunswick.

We also became aware of the work Naphtalie McNeely, a local community leader, was doing to feed those who were homeless in Brunswick. Every Saturday morning, she fed McDonald’s biscuits to a large group with whom she had built relationships. Even though she and her husband, Walter, were pillars of the community, she often had to relocate her brief offerings due to complaints of Brunswick residents and businesses.

Mrs. McNeely's group was different from the group FaithWorks served on Tuesdays. Additionally, we became aware that St. Vincent DePaul provided canned goods and other items periodically through their back Alley door to persons experiencing homelessness. Additionally, Manna House (who feed the hungry and not solely the homeless) and Salvation Army provided lunch and supper to the homeless population. At the time, Salvation Army was the only nighttime shelter provider in Glynn County. While shelter was offered to approximately 25 people, their supper crowd was much larger.

Working with County and City

In 2013, FaithWorks was asked to conduct the Federal Government's Point in Time Count which occurs every 2 years in February. We looked at previous reports, and realized from our experience that the numbers for Glynn County were woefully underreported. Volunteer groups fanned out across the county and went to camps known to us and to other camp locations provided to us by County Police. More than 200 people were found (though the official report from the state reported a smaller number that year). However, we were able to show a more realistic number, though we knew that the number was higher. Due to the time it would take to interview one person, others would disappear before we could speak with them.

There are several pages of questions provided by the Government survey such as age, race, veteran status, HIV status, number of times being homeless, length of current period of homelessness, etc. Our volunteers were instructed to ask one additional question which was "If the local churches could do one thing for you, what would it be?"

We received a list of items, but three needs were clearly at the top of the list. These were: safe housing, showers, and laundry. It is from those answers that FaithWorks determined the next gap to fill. While we knew that safe housing would be expensive and difficult, we believed that we could determine a way to provide laundry and shower services.

Meeting the Challenge

It took over a year before we could find a location and another year before services could be provided! There were certain criteria needed to create a day time hospitality center, but there were no available places that could meet the needs. Knowing that many of those experiencing homelessness desire to be outside unless the weather is inclement, there was no location that offered indoor and outdoor space. While there were many empty buildings, they were landlocked and offered no outdoor space. There were a number of vacant lots, but FaithWorks did not have the wherewithal to purchase property and build a suitable building. We looked for almost 11 months.

In early January of 2014, the Polar Vortex fell on Brunswick. The weather up until the sudden shift of temperatures had been a little warmer than normal. On the morning of January second, the radio began to report that there would be a sudden drop in

temperature bringing about a hard freeze. We immediately thought of all those in Brunswick who had no idea what was coming their way. Fortunately, First United Methodist Church made a large room available and an email blast lined up many volunteers and meals. FaithWorks staff and volunteers traveled around the city to warn those who stay outside at night that dangerous temperatures were coming and that shelter would be provided at the church. A few dozen showed up and were protected from the freezing nights.

On the first night of the temporary shelter, one of the guests stepped outside to smoke and was out for an extended period of time. Fearful that something might happen to him if he stayed out too long, Reverend Wright Culpepper stepped outside and looked around. It was at that moment that Reverend Culpepper noticed the Greyhound Bus Station located across the street from the church. "It was glowing from the street lights shining upon it, and was as if God was saying, 'there is your space,'" Culpepper said.

Knowing that Greyhound has decided to close its Brunswick station and to relocate out to Exit 29 on the Interstate, Culpepper was able to track down the property management department for Greyhound in March. Negotiations began, and eventually, FaithWorks closed on the property in July of 2014.

It was about that time that FaithWorks made a public announcement of the coming Daytime Hospitality and Resource center and stated that "we need \$70,000 in 70 days" mistakenly believing renovations of the building would cost about that much. FaithWorks actually raised \$100,000 in less than 30 days, but the announcement created a stir which divided many of the residents and businesses in the City. Many saw the need while many believed it to be a threat. There is a philosophy that no services to persons in need should be offered in the downtown area. In the few years prior to FaithWorks beginning its ministry to those experiencing homelessness, a number of programs, including, but not limited to the Glynn County Health Department, Gateway, and Social Security had relocated to other parts of the county. The belief was (and still is with many) that if the services providers are elsewhere, then the persons in need will be elsewhere.

Yet, even with the services gone, there were dozens of homeless persons living in the downtown area. FaithWorks believed that God was calling them to service a particular subset of the homeless population - those living in Brunswick. However, while many supported the cause, those opposed to it were very vocal in their disapproval which complicate time and costs.

For example, the Fire Marshall required the installation of a sprinkler system which added \$30,000 to the cost saying that the building would hold 350 people even though about 30 percent of the building was bathroom, office, catering kitchen, shower, and laundry space. Additionally, the building had five exit doors and windows covered most of the walls providing easy exiting were there to be an emergency. Rarely, if ever, have more than 100 people been in the 5000 square foot building at a time.

Additionally, due to FEMA regulations requiring that renovations to properties in flood zones involve less than 50 percent of the area, additional delays and costs during the designing process were incurred. Demolition of the parking lot to create a park like setting was lengthy and costly as well. In total, the renovation was well over \$200,000 even with the help of many volunteers.

However, the only thing on the wish list that we were not able to provide was to create space for a clinic. City officials said that a clinic would require variance rezoning, and knowing the animosity that was coming from city leadership, the clinic portion was dropped and other plans were made to work with the Health System and Coastal Community Health Services by assisting with making appointments and providing transportation

The Well opened in March of 2015 with small numbers (about 30 per day) making their way to the site for respite, showers and laundry. Many of the homeless were hesitant to come at first as they needed to develop some trust of the new program and staff. Soon, the numbers moved to about 60 per day as those a bit stand offish began to make their way inside the building.

Forging Partnerships

The big surprise with the opening of The Well was the discovery that FaithWorks was not alone in seeing the need for such a facility. Almost immediately Gateway and the VA (and other Veteran's groups) sent staff to The Well to reach the population experiencing homelessness. These organizations had money budgeted for homeless services, but they did not know where the homeless were. The homeless did not know that services were available. The Well provided a convenient place where those in need of services and the service providers could meet. Additionally, there were individuals and churches that wanted to work with the homeless population, and many came to provide critical services that helped many to address health issues, to return to family, to find jobs, and eventually to find safe housing.

Soon, we realized that the objective of meeting the needs of those experiencing chronic homeless was not our only reason for being. Persons experiencing acute homeless were able to address their needs quickly and move back to more stable living arrangements. The VA was able to help people relocate to home or to VA facilities. Gateway was able to provide medications which helped stabilize those who may have been under medicated, improperly medicated, or self medicated. Transportation was offered to those needing physical or mental healthcare, and a world of resources opened up to those who had been suffering. Georgia Legal Services has offered many legal counsel and assistance in removing obstacles preventing successful moves from the streets.

The Well basically relocated persons who were homeless seven blocks East of Newcastle Street during the day. Upon closing, these individuals would walk to Salvation Army for supper. About 25 of them would stay there, and the others would move back to warehouses, empty storefronts, abandoned houses, shrimp boats and other areas for the

night. While many in the core area of downtown expressed appreciation for our helping to relocate the homeless during the day, there still were those who criticized our work.

Changes Impacting Public Perception

Several things happened simultaneously that affected both the operations of The Well and public perception of the Well. These included (in no particular order), but are not limited to:

1. Economic development of the downtown area (particularly Newcastle Street). When the Well opened in 2015, many of the downtown building were vacant and were used as de facto night shelter. However, with businesses like Richland Rum, Silver Bluff Brewery, Reid's Apothecary, Basil and smaller boutiques and shops, a resurgence of life has occurred in the downtown area. Two things tend to attract people who are homeless - poverty and economic opportunity. It is why persons experiencing homeless can be found in wooded areas near interstate exits, Walmart, Target Shopping Center, and the like. There is an opportunity to disappear into the poverty while accessing places to panhandle or to find resources. This happens in cities across the country. With the addition of businesses and loft apartments, there are more people who can be accessed by those who are looking for legitimate and illegitimate assistance.
2. The economic development also eliminated the opportunity for persons experiencing homeless to find vacant building for night shelter along Newcastle and other side streets.
3. The Warehouse south of the Georgia Ports Authority Building was razed so those "safe" housing opportunities disappeared.
4. Knight's Seafood closed leaving less opportunity to find shelter there at night.
5. The vacant property next to The Well was developed by Safe Harbor Children's Shelter in 2015 and developed during 2016 and 2017. This construction included the building of a wall directly across from the entrance/exit of The Well to protect the children.
6. COVID. During 2020 and 2021, the pandemic greatly affected operations. The first wave of COVID caused little issues with the homeless population, though social distancing, masks, and other CDC requirements caused us to limit the number of guests in the building at any given time (this reduction clearly shows on visitor graphs) and forced people outside into the parks are surrounding area. Delta COVID wreaked havoc on guests, volunteers, and staff. All volunteers left for several months, one staff member died and another developed long COVID, and many guests fell ill. Fortunately, our partnership with United Way and Coastal Georgia Community Foundation provided assistance through the CARES ACT to provide motel vouchers for those testing positive with COVID. Rooms were secured and food was provided by FaithWorks staff in those cases.
7. The end of the Eviction Moratorium brought a large influx of new people to The Well in October of 2021. Our daily numbers swelled from 80 or so per day to over 100 per day. More people crowded into the area parks, and much of the criticism about The Well began to grow. Eventually, new homeless found places to be and by

February of 2022 the daily numbers returned to normal. However, much negative chatter on Social Media was created during this 4 month period.

These changes created a new traffic pattern for the persons served by The Well. Initially, when The Well closed at 5:00, most moved to The Salvation Army for supper and then dispersed around the city for the night. However, the development removed places to go, and soon, guests from the Well would just stay along the sidewalk next to the wall and on the porch by the front door of The Well. This area became more and more crowded and rightful concerns and complaints came from Safe Harbor and from the McCormicks who owned the house immediately behind the Well property.

While there were public outcries to move The Well, FaithWorks began trying to see what options were available. FaithWorks was deeply concerned about the health and welfare of its guests that had nowhere to go at night. They are extremely susceptible to cold, heat, and rain, and they are likely to be victimized at night by persons from outside the area who come to take advantage of their vulnerability. Drug dealers, persons looking for sex, and other trouble makers (some who were homeless and living in abandoned houses or cars and some not homeless who lived in the vicinity) made life difficult for those we sought to serve. It also increased the number of Police visits to the area.

The simple solution would be to have The Well available 24/7, but that would cause it to be considered a shelter and the City Code officers will not allow that to happen. Additionally, the costs to operate would more than triple due to staffing, but FaithWorks believes that funding could be found for such services.

This caused the Board of FaithWorks to begin looking elsewhere for a location that could provide 24/7/365 services. FaithWorks wishes to meet the full needs of those experiencing homelessness. The ministry also is aware of the increasing cries from downtown businesses and residents who want it moved. Both are important considerations for relocation.

Early 2023

There has always been somewhat of a “simmer” from those who want The Well to relocate. The heat comes from several areas: 1. Those who believe that if The Well moved then the homeless problems will disappear, 2. Those who just do not like people who are homeless due to attitudes about the worth of a person, laziness, neediness, etc., 3. Investors who are putting a lot of money into bring new life to the downtown area, 4. Close proximity to the residences, school, and other businesses along the Gloucester Street corridor, 5. Other complaints.

In early 2023, several events in the downtown area caused the “simmer” to “explode” on Social Media and on local talk radio. These events include 1. A stabbing of a local businessman, 2. A rape of a 14 year old, 3. A stabbing of a person on a bike, and 4. An assault on a patron while exiting a restaurant. All events were reported as being conducted by homeless people.

That may be true, but according to records, only 1 of the 4 had any current relationship with The Well. The person involved with the bicycle was on the sidewalk across from The Well when arrested, though he had been frequenting The Well and utilizing services there. There are no reports that he had been a problem prior to this event. The person charged with assault had visited The Well only twice in 2022. She was basically unknown to us. Likewise, it had been over a year since the man charged with the stabbing of the businessman had been to The Well and likely would have been criminally trespassed had he not stopped coming. He was living in an abandoned house. Finally, the man charged with rape had been criminally trespassed from The Well and was receiving no services. The last two had long lists of issues with the police and the justice system.

However, those four events led to City Council to take action. The result was that the Well has closed for a period of 65 days while discussions are taking place about future services.

Current

The Well reopened on July 5, 2023 and currently serves the homeless population Monday through Friday from 7:30 AM until 5:00 PM with hopes of returning to 7 day services soon. During the closure some new procedures were established and a healthier relationship with the Brunswick Police Department was established which includes a requirement for potential guests to be screened by the Police Department to check for outstanding warrants. Warrants must be cleaned off a person's record before utilizing the services at The Well (we volunteer attorneys that can assist or offer direction for those with active warrants).

Additionally, the guests know that there is a zero tolerance for loitering near the building. So far, the guests have been very cooperative with this request to leave the area when not inside.

The Near Future

Prior to the current situation, FaithWorks began making preparations to relocate and a contract was placed on a two acre property at 2919 Altama Avenue which is close enough to downtown to still served the Brunswick homeless population, but removed from the downtown area of restaurants and shops. This property is in an area zoned General Commercial.

During 2022 and 2023, FaithWorks staff has had numerous meetings with representatives from Southeast Georgia Health System, Gateway, The Glynn County Commission, the Sheriff, former leaders with the State Legislature, and retired leaders with NAMI (National Alliance for Mental Illness). Through these discussions, the plans moved from building a shelter that offered services to a comprehensive center for

education and service to the larger community which also encompasses a shelter for persons experiencing homelessness.

This center will include, but not be limited to:

1. Relocation of FaithWorks offices and volunteer recruitment and training to the site
2. Relocation of Sparrows Nest, an very active food pantry and financial assistance ministry
3. The development of a comprehensive training center to teach the public (nurses, teachers, clergy persons, law enforcement) about behavioral health and how to address it. FaithWorks is just completing a Pilot Class which involved instructors from Gateway, Southeast Georgia Health System, the Glynn County Schools, FLETC, NAMI, and other organizations who address behavioral health. This is needed since there are few dollars available to actually treat behavioral health issues, and lay people can render assistance in many cases.
4. The creation of a triage center that would be serviced by the Southeast Georgia Health System and Gateway which would offer cost savings to both institutions
5. Enhanced security systems where only those who have been determined as homeless can stay in a safe, clean environment. Non homeless persons will not be allowed in the area designated for homeless only.
6. Support services such as case management, resource management, outpatient mental health services, first aid, etc. will be available.
7. Beds, showers, laundry, library, chapel, kennel, art studio, barber shop, community space (indoors and outdoors in a cloistered environment), food services, and more will be offered.

The Behavioral Health Center, as it relates to homelessness, will operate under the same operating procedure as The Well except that there will be safe shelter and additional services offered to the guests including shelter. The goal will always be to help persons who experience acute homelessness to move on quickly. This will be accomplished in many ways such as partnering with new organizations such as the Hand in Hand Tiny Homes, Veteran's Village, Saved By Grace , and Open Doors (another FaithWorks ministry which offers housing while persons are on wait lists for other housing programs) who all offer a step up the ladder to health and productivity.

However, the focus of the center will be on those who have it bottom and have no place to turn. We believe that the above programs that offer a step up will help many. We also believe that those who can get their medications correctly prescribed and receive counseling or case management can quickly move to productivity (the history of those who are guests at the Well show that 55% of acutely homeless guests leave in less than a week and over 80% stay less than 1 month. Of the remaining 20%, many will be gone for a few weeks and then back due to their financial situation (we hope that comprehensive services will help will reduce the number of those who return). There are a small percentage who have health issues (heart disease, stroke or traumatic brain injury, diabetes, etc.) who may never be out of a homeless circumstance but will benefit from the services such a center provides.

Anticipated Numbers

Based on past history, we would anticipate the following statistics for the first year of operations:

- 1.** 50 Persons participating in Introduction to Behavioral Health Classes to understand the needs of those experiencing crisis and how to help someone in crisis.
- 2.** 20 persons in advanced classes for understanding Behavioral Health needs.
- 3.** 350 new people making an initial visit to the Homeless Resource Center (walk-ins, referrals, triage center guests)
- 4.** 190 new guests leaving in less than one week due to quickly making contact with family or other resources available to them.
- 5.** 90 new guests leaving in less than thirty days once they receive a ID, get back on Mental Health Medications or into rehab programs.
- 6.** 50 of the guests will divide time between the Center and motel rooms as they get income from SSI, pension, etc.
- 7.** 70 guests will get on waiting lists for housing (Brunswick Housing Authority, Tiny Houses, Veteran's Village, Saved by Grace, etc.)
- 8.** 5 -10 guests will become a part of FaithWorks' Open Doors program which provides bedrooms for those who are moving near the top of the housing waiting lists so they can be prepared for independent living.
- 9.** 5-10 guests will become a long term resident of the shelter due to physical or mental health conditions which inhibit success in current community programs.
- 10.** 100 will receive financial help with prescription medication assistance
- 11.** 100 will receive Government Issues ID's
- 12.** 100 beds will be available at the Center
- 13.** 160 persons will receive guidance with a Case Manager/Resource Assistant
- 14.** All guests will be provided a safe and clean environment to allow respite care, physical and spiritual nourishment, and creative ways to discover pathways out of homelessness.