

A 25-Year Struggle to Put Families First

HomeFront New Jersey's Story

by Linda Bazerjian

Traffic signs point to the Trenton-Mercer Airport, but the GPS veers off the main roadway toward a three-story pink building behind a shiny black wrought-iron fence. A small public bus shelter stands empty just outside the fence. Visitors are greeted by a sign on the building that reads, “HomeFront Family Campus,” in huge black letters. Locals will tell you that it was the site of a Marine Reserve Center until its closure in 2011. What was once part of the military industry has been transformed into a vital community resource for Mercer County families.

A Building That Fosters a Sense of Community

When you walk through the floor-to-ceiling glass doors of the public entry way, there is a calmness amid an undercurrent of activity that runs counter to the empty industrial park just outside. Another entrance on the side is used for the 38 homeless families with children who reside in the multi-purpose building to give them privacy and a sense of normalcy in their temporary home. An attentive staff member tries to fix a beautiful water feature mounted on the lobby wall. A staff meeting is taking place in the main hallway's glassed-in “ArtSpace,” an area which does double duty as a therapeutic art studio for homeless and formerly homeless clients and a meeting room. The giggles of young children as they mimic the letter

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Connie Mercer is the founder and executive director of **HomeFront**, a Mercer County, New Jersey-based social services nonprofit. Mercer believes the solution to family homelessness lies in the models advocated by New York City's **Homes for the Homeless (HFH)**. **HFH**

advocates community residential resource centers to address the underlying causes of family homelessness: domestic violence, trauma, incomplete education, and lack of job skills or job history. Simultaneously, the community residential resource centers meet the short-term basic and long-term developmental needs of the children living there. At the top of the priority list are safe housing, food, daycare, afterschool activities, recreation, and health care. The family campus of HomeFront realizes HFH's vision for the community resource center.

The bottom floor of the three-level family campus is the hub for workforce development and basic education. Through its **Hire Expectations** program, clients who currently or previously resided at HomeFront's shelter, as well as in the community, participate in a variety of classes and workshops on site, such as a six-week customer service certification. Clients can stop in to talk with one of the staffers for one-on-one assistance. They can take high school diploma coursework on-site in preparation for the **TASC** test (formerly the GED). HomeFront partners with **Mercer Community College** so those who pass the test can walk in high school graduation ceremonies or move on to college classes.

sounds their teacher makes comes from a daycare room down the hall. One resident mom who is picking her child up from daycare gets a big hug and tells a visitor, "she never wants to leave daycare," pointing to her daughter. "At first I was worried; I thought I was doing something wrong that she didn't want to be with me and liked daycare better but then I got it," she continues. "I'm doing something right."

From an interior design and program model perspective, the "family campus" main building is more like a college campus in miniature than a homeless shelter. Each client room has a private bathroom for the family. Common living spaces are strategically placed throughout campus. Some are tiny nooks with rocking chairs to encourage one-on-one parent-and-child reading time. Others, like the library, are sun-filled with wall-to-wall books, bean bag chairs, and child-friendly rugs. There's even a small salon to encourage mothers to do each other's hair while talking about their day, helping to build a support network, and "save money," as one resident says while rocking her infant son in her lap as another resident is working on her hair.

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Daryl, a client who will soon start working at TD Bank, talked with Lynne Wise, head of HomeFront's workforce development programming, about a one-on-one tutoring session she had with a HomeFront volunteer who had worked for TD Bank. "I got the job. I start Tuesday but I was worried that maybe the job was a little too advanced for me," she says, "But then getting to talk with someone who actually worked there, who could explain things like

loan interest ... I know I'm ready." Mercer helped Daryl find a job, prepped her for the interview, and set her up with one of the organization's vast network of volunteers to allay her new-job jitters. Mercer, who seems to know every client and person who walks through the campus, reminds Daryl, "make sure you go to the [HomeFront FreeStore](#) and stock up on some clothes for work so you are set."

For more than 25 years HomeFront has been serving the community and amassing public goodwill in central New Jersey. The Family Campus is the most recent addition to a growing list of services the nonprofit provides to the surrounding community. Its programs are designed to help pull families out of poverty and homelessness for the long term. Mercer does not subscribe to the notion pushed by the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#) that in all cases homelessness is ended the instant a family is moved into housing. Mercer finds one-size-fits-all policy edicts meaningless on the front lines of family homelessness. Although she often deals with the harsh realities of government policies on her organization's ability to meet the needs of the community it serves, it's the longer term results she is after. To achieve those results, Mercer feels a variety of approaches work better because every family needs a

different intervention or a different level of intervention. As she puts it, "I wear a size ten shoe. One-size-fits-all doesn't work for socks in the same way that it doesn't work for policy solutions."

When Funding and Policy Priorities Align . . .

More than 200 families with children comprised of over 600 family members have entered the family campus' doors since it opened in August 2015. On any given night up to 38 families are staying in one of the rooms on site. That number doesn't account for the thousands of homeless families and working poor whom the organization helps keep afloat through its homelessness prevention program, rapid rehousing initiative, permanent supportive housing, afterschool and evening activities and summer camps for homeless children, food pantry, and furnishing-a-home initiative.

Similar to many localities around the United States, Mercer County finds its most concentrated poverty in its urban city center, [Trenton](#), where the median household income in 2010 was almost half that of the county (\$36,000 compared to \$71,000). However, the families HomeFront serves come from across the county. Most are young, single African-American mothers in their early 20s with one or two children who come to

HomeFront directly from emergency shelter or because they've been kicked out of living with family or friends. The majority of children are under the age of one.

The impetus for the redevelopment of the old Marine Reserve Center was the impending sale of the property where HomeFront's main shelter was previously located. HomeFront now

ArtSpace's clients engage in therapeutic art programming aimed at alleviating the trauma of homelessness. Client work is showcased in galleries at local private schools and at the offices of HomeFront's corporate partners.



HomeFront offers extensive adult education and training for clients living in the shelter and from the greater community.



owns both the facility and land where the family campus stands. HomeFront will save over \$300,000 a year because it is no longer leasing space. The organization can put that money to better use, as well as help more diverse clients. For the first time in its history, HomeFront can also provide shelter to fathers and intact families. Provisions in its previous lease prohibited men from living at the shelter.

At the ribbon cutting for the family campus in 2015, [New Jersey State Department of Community Affairs](#) Commissioner Chuck Richman noted he had visited the property before it was acquired and didn't originally share Mercer's vision for how the site could be transformed into a one-stop-shop of services. But Richman did have faith that Mercer could make it happen.

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“Acquiring excess government land is a complicated process,” says Mercer, who has never run away from complications. She founded HomeFront 25 years ago when she was a corporate recruiter, and a pediatrician friend told her about the plight of families who were living along Route 1 in shabby motels. Mercer immediately mobilized her extensive contact list to bring food and other necessities, and hasn't stopped since.

“It was a blessing that homeless providers were given a leg up,” she notes when talking about the priority that service providers are given in the labyrinthine process of

acquiring decommissioned military installations.

While the process was arduous, Mercer believes that it is an example of government involvement gone right. She is also effusive when it comes to Commissioner Richman, calling him “the salvation of the nonprofit community in New Jersey.” He is willing to see, embrace,

and enact the visions of agencies like HomeFront. The site for the new campus may have been acquired for free, but the price tag on renovations to the main building was six million dollars. Funding was made possible through a public-private partnership, coming from the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs and HomeFront's generous base of donors. Throughout the new campus, everything from individual resident rooms to the cafeteria are marked with tasteful plaques commemorating the individual, foundation, or grant that helped make the campus a reality. Even the boiler and mechanical room have plaques.

When Priorities Compete

Although the HomeFront Family Campus was created in part thanks to government priorities and officials who incubated innovation, HomeFront is now struggling with other realities common to nonprofits: cuts in funding and changes in policy priorities that impact services. Much of the government funding used to provide social support by groups such as HomeFront stem from public policy that is initially made at the federal level. Programs are implemented, and partially funded, at the state and local level with each entity contributing a portion of the funds. Local needs and resources change policy priorities. According to advocates and news reports, cuts to approval of emergency assistance by the state ranged from 25 to 47 percent. In the past two years alone, HomeFront has seen about half a million dollars less in its total government funding, yet the organization hasn't seen a decrease in households seeking their services.

Each state administers its own social safety net. In recent years, the State of New Jersey has cut funding,

reinterpreted rules governing assistance, and created greater efficiency. According to advocates from groups like the [Anti-Poverty Network of New Jersey](#) and

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the [New Jersey Coalition to End Homelessness](#), New Jersey’s policies are shortchanging its most vulnerable citizens in three ways. First, by providing inadequate monthly stipends to public assistance recipients. Those stipends have not seen an increase in almost 30 years. Second, the advocates say the state has purposely denied more applications in the past two years to reduce the overall aid distributed. Third, they say, the state scrutinizes applications to ensure that only the neediest receive aid. This is a common strategy as government agencies at all levels strive to serve all residents, sometimes requiring more efficient systems of checks and balances or adjusting policy priorities to stretch scarce government dollars.

In written testimony to a state senate committee on the topic earlier this year, [Elizabeth Connolly](#), Acting Commissioner of the NJ State Department of Human Services said, “Emergency Assistance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and General Assistance enrollment has decreased dramatically. While some suggest that this decrease is the result of an effort by the state to restrict access to social services benefits, that statement is simply not true.”

Part of the State’s reasoning for cutting funding to such services is based on the data: a precipitous 40 percent decrease in the number of individuals seeking and receiving financial assistance through emergency and general assistance programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). [A State Office of Legislative Services](#) analysis found that the number of monthly TANF recipients went from

103,202 in 2012 to just 56,239 in 2016.

Further, the state plans to increase funding for compliance-review teams to go over the decisions of local welfare agencies, believing that this will increase efficiencies so that only the neediest receive aid.

One of the more progressive on-site services HomeFront provides to adults, children, and families is counseling and mental health services through a partnership with another local nonprofit, the Family Guidance Center. Beth Hart, the director of development for [Family Guidance Center](#) says “having clinical social workers and an advanced practice nurse on the family campus takes all the barriers away for homeless families who need mental health treatment.”

Hart notes that the Family Guidance Center caters to the whole family. “Children experience a lot of loss and anxiety as a result of homelessness. They need to develop coping skills to deal with those feelings just like adults do.” Family Guidance Center counselors help to provide a safe and secure environment by providing counseling services for the children and working with their parents so that they can help the parent and the whole family through the experience of homelessness. This work extends beyond counseling sessions to

[HomeFront founder and executive director Connie Mercer](#) (far right) cut the ceremonial ribbon at the opening of the organization’s new family campus along [Sheila Addison](#), Family Preservation Center Director (left) and [WorkFirst Director Lynne Wise](#) (with scissors).



referrals to afterschool programs, working hand-in-hand with school guidance counselors, and getting families tied into the right health insurance. All of this is funded through a FGC grant obtained through a local foundation that supports the collaborative nature of HomeFront and FGC.

Beth Hart believes that foundations are fulfilling an unmet need. “To my knowledge, there is no public funding being provided for this type of collaborative project.” In fact, she points to recent trends among states, with New Jersey being the latest, to move to a fee-for-service reimbursement structure for outpatient mental health and substance abuse treatment providers over block grants. “This is going to have a devastating impact on our rate. Anyone who works with mentally ill or substance-using clients knows that they often miss appointments. We will no longer be paid when that happens.”

Currently, its childcare program is running at a \$190,000 a year deficit because the organization has been picking up the slack.

Recent cuts in other areas have caused HomeFront to shutter a program that worked with pregnant homeless mothers. The next program that may be on the cutting block, or may have to change how it runs, is the on-site daycare, the [Atkinson Child Development Center](#), a licensed childcare facility for 30 children located at the family campus. It includes eight [Early Head Start](#) slots and 22 slots for families sheltered at the campus or who are utilizing its array of services. Mercer has her fingers crossed that the state will welcome a recent proposal for a pilot program to establish a secure funding mechanism for childcare providers, like HomeFront, who serve an extremely high-need population like homeless children. Things like stringent attendance requirements and the inability to enroll new children throughout the year are barriers in the existing funding structures for these providers. The transient nature of—and the inability to plan ahead for—slots in a childcare



Each family at the Family Preservation Center lives in a safe, clean private room including a bathroom. Upon arrival, they receive essentials, such as toothpaste and laundry detergent.

room come with the territory of working with homeless families and children but funding mechanisms haven’t caught up with the real needs. For instance, HomeFront typically sees three to five new families a week. Currently, its childcare program is running at a \$190,000 a year deficit because the organization has been picking up the slack. Without an intervention or change in policy that allows funding to be used more flexibly, children who don’t meet the various voucher and emergency assistance or [Work First](#) criteria will not receive funding support to attend the childcare center. The States of Washington and Massachusetts have found creative solutions to the funding barriers for serving homeless children by offering more child care subsidies and creating designated slots for homeless children with childcare providers.

In 25 years, Mercer says, “we’ve never turned anyone away, but we’re very close to stopping that policy because of financial constraints.” Homefront is stepping up its already active development efforts in the hopes of compensating for some of the changes in government priorities.

“I’ve been a volunteer,” says self-described community member, advocate, volunteer, and former head of the

Educational Testing Service (ETS) social investment fund Eleanor Horne. “When my grandson was 14 he volunteered at HomeFront and it changed his view of the world. It made him realize how fortunate he was. He had no idea how many resources it takes to support a family in a minimal way. At 24 he still talks about his experience volunteering.” She continues, “I’m concerned about homelessness.”

Horne believes that HomeFront is a win-win for corporate and foundation funders, calling it a “clean” charity, one that both corporations and their workers feel good about assisting. It provides not only opportunities for monetary support, but also for employees and their families to get involved and learn about the issue first hand through activities like backpack drives and spending time at the shelter with the families.

At 25 years and counting, Mercer’s experiences echo those of Horne and her grandson. “I just got off the phone with Angel, who told me her book had just been accepted by a publisher,” said Mercer. “Angel

is now a PhD-level nurse who teaches other people to be nurses. When I first met her, at a grim welfare motel in the mid-nineties, she was a 12-year-old child who had not been to school in three years. She had instead been crisscrossing the country with her very mentally ill mom. Our volunteers wrapped her in services and she began to blossom.

“Yesterday I was checking out at Sam’s Club and the cashier said shyly, ‘Thank you, HomeFront helped me and my baby last year. Now we are good.’ Friday, one of our young woman passed the math portion of her high school equivalency test,” says Mercer. “So how can I not do the work I do?” ■

The playground is part of the “family campus.” It includes toddler-friendly areas, as well as activity centers designed for the developmental needs of older youngsters.



Resources

HomeFront <http://homefrontnj.org> Lawrenceville and Ewing, NJ ■ Homes for the Homeless <http://hfhny.org> New York, NY ■ Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, A New Path: An Immediate Plan to Reduce Family Homelessness. February 2012. http://www.ICPHusa.org/filelibrary/ICPH_ANewPath_021312.pdf ■ New Jersey State Department of Community Affairs <http://nj.gov/dca/> ■ *Hearings Before the State Oversight Committee*, 2016 Leg. (NJ 2016), written statement of Elizabeth Connolly, Acting Commissioner, NJ Department of Human Resources, p. 20–25. ■ http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/legislativepub/pubhear/slo09292016_appendix.pdf ■ Brush, Chase. “Advocates Clash with Administration Over Number of Poor in New Jersey,” NJ Spotlight, September 20, 2016. <http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/16/09/30/advocates-and-administration-clash-over-number-of-poor-in-new-jersey/> ■ Family Guidance Center Corporation <http://www.fgccorp.org/> Hamilton, NJ.