

Title: Community Service Alliance: A Faith-based Approach to the Homelessness Crisis in Cleveland

Author: Jeff Nichols (Community Service Alliance)

Abstract:

Community Service Alliance (CSA) was formed in 2004 as a faith-based 501 (c) 3 organization to respond to the profound homeless crisis in Cleveland, Ohio and a “disconnect” in the perception and understanding of homelessness between people of means and the homeless themselves. CSA has created an initiative to engage people of faith – both rich and poor – with those who live on the margins –at this point primarily men - and who have the will to reintegrate with society in wholesome and productive ways. The operative word to describe this new faith-based approach to homelessness is catalyst. CSA is comprised of people of faith serving together with the homeless and near-homeless as match makers and, in a very real sense – “deal makers”. CSA’s volunteers know a lot of people and resources – and have a willingness and a passion to make things happen. The activity is to “do deals” – to put people together with other people - to cause a “chemical reaction”- a “catalytic” reaction that forms a new relationship- one that puts a landlord with a potential tenant; a business owner with a potential employee; a training institution or agency with a student in need. Relationship-making is at the core of what CSA does. It is in the organization’s tagline: Relationships that make a difference; and, it is interwoven in the organization’s mission: To be a catalyst of targeted training, subsidized low-rent housing, and transitional job opportunities for homeless individuals so that shelter populations and accompanying public costs are reduced. CSA is about creating a new paradigm in the field of homeless services.

This new paradigm begins with the community as a whole. CSA engages 8 support communities (landlords, neighborhood residents, local government, employers, social service agencies, foundations, people of faith and the homeless themselves) in an interconnected dynamic to work alongside each man in 3 primary areas: training, jobs and housing. All three areas must be considered at any one time with each person – there is no separating them – they must be factored together in a holistic manner. Each man works with a team of volunteers and staff to craft an individualized program and timeline to meet individualized goals and expectations. The relationship continues through reintegration and into the future. Once you are in the CSA family, you are family in all ways: on the one hand celebrating the joy of finding an apartment in a “clean” area of town, and on the other - living through the pain and frustration of relapse and extended treatment. Family means being together throughout life – life in all its movements.

Based on the biblical imperative in Jeremiah 29:11 that God has a plan for each of us, CSA works with each man and takes them where they are in life and accompanying them on the journey toward wholeness and Oneness under the gaze of a loving and infinitely benevolent God...a God who always loves us and never forsakes us no matter what we do. Through faith, each person enters into the mystery that God holds – whether Christian, Jew, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or other – CSA serves each man by being present and available as the spirit leads.

In CSA's first residential facility – a converted convent housing up to 22 men – specific life goals are defined prior to residency and managed biweekly in group and 1-1 sessions with CSA's Community Coordinator. Success is measured by incremental attainment of these goals. For one it may be securing a part time job at slightly more than minimum wage – for another it may be getting to a doctor's appointment on time. For others still, it may be making it through another day without using crack cocaine. Success is client-driven and staff supported.

Since 2004, CSA has formed life-long relationships with over 600 men and saw the placement of 102 in transitional, part time or full time jobs. CSA works actively with 8 landlords; 10 employers and 75 volunteers from 18 faith communities. Funding comes primarily from private sources – foundations, corporations and people of faith. In every measurement the numbers are growing as CSA continues to offer the homeless of Cleveland a new community-building; life-transforming strategy to get on with God's plan for them.

The paradigm of “doing for” the homeless is shifting to one of “being with and coming alongside” them, as all of the partners in this dynamic move deeper into life's journey of faith...a journey that enriches all, excludes no one and seeks to transform the world one person at a time.