



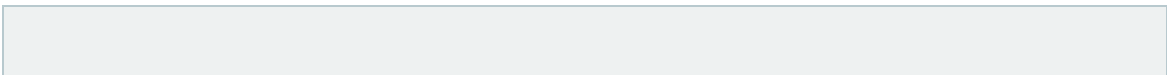
Alnisa Jackson, who got help from Shepherd's House, decorates an early Christmas tree in her new duplex. (Red Huber, Orlando Sentinel)

Struggling charities survive through partnerships, reinvention

Programs such as reborn Shepherd's Promise are bright spots in tough times



Nicole Natoli, a resident of Shepherd's House, arranges the toys of her 4-month-old daughter, Bella. Shepherd's House, a nonprofit organization that helps formerly homeless women and their children get back on their feet, is reopening under the guidance of Catholic Charities. (Red Huber, Orlando Sentinel / November 3, 2009)



By Kate Santich Sentinel Staff Writer

November 4, 2009

Until a couple of weeks ago, 27-year-old Nicole Natoli had been living with her 4-month-old daughter in a series of hotel rooms and a shelter for **pregnant** women. Now she has a furnished duplex she shares with another single mom, day care for her child and help searching for work.

Her savior? Catholic Charities of Central Florida, which took over a once-shuttered program for homeless women and their children in east Orlando. Shepherd's Promise, closed a year ago after losing funding from corporate donors, officially opened as Shepherd's House last month.

"I really like it here. Everybody has been great," Natoli said earlier this week. "I was able to go out job-hunting this morning."

The program, which will have its grand opening next week, is one of a handful of bright spots among Central Florida nonprofit organizations, many of which have struggled to stay afloat during the recession. With donations dropping and demand greater than ever, some of the survivors have had to reorganize, partner with other agencies or reinvent themselves.

Consider the Destiny Foundation, housed in a large, rented warehouse on West Michigan Street in Orlando. It had been serving as many as 10,000 people a month before announcing in September that it had run out of money and would have to close. The charity ran a food bank, clothing bank, medical clinic, emergency-assistance program and counseling center, and its departure threatened to leave a gaping hole in the safety net for Orlando's working poor.

But within two weeks of the announcement, there were plans to reopen as an Orlando branch of the Harvest Food & Outreach Center, based in Vero Beach. Harvest is covering the gap between donations and expenses for now, but it's also working to beef up the former and has scaled back the latter.

"I think we were closed all of one day during the transition, and now it's better than ever," said Pastor Scott George, who had founded Destiny in 2001 and is now the program's campus director. Although only the renamed Community Food and Outreach Center is open now, George said that on Nov. 15 his new partners will launch a community crisis-care center where people can apply for food stamps and temporary cash assistance and get job training, counseling and education. And early next year, the children's medical clinic should reopen.

"Emotionally it was very difficult to close, but this has been a great breath of fresh air," George said. "Sometimes when you're out there alone, you just can't do the things you want to do. This partnership has really brought us strength and sustainability for the long haul."

Meanwhile, in the mostly farming community of Zellwood, a homeless shelter called Anthony House is being reborn. For more than 20 years, Anthony House had been the lone hope for homeless families and individuals in northwest Orange County, but in recent years its funding had dwindled until it closed in March.

That's when LifeStream Behavioral Center, a large, Leesburg-based nonprofit that offers a range of mental-health services, began meeting with Anthony House's board of directors about leasing the property and taking over operations. With help from the Homeless Services Network of Central Florida, LifeStream won a \$375,000 federal grant to renovate part of the facility and bring it up to code.

"It'll take about a year to get it done, but we'll be able to open up as many as 30 units," said Sherry Olszanski, LifeStream's vice president of development. "We're very hopeful for the long term — but the first step is to just get it so that people can live there."

LifeStream will apply for grants for operational costs and for another \$375,000 to do the remaining renovations. Because of the agency's size and longevity, it has a much better chance of getting that money than the old Anthony House could have had on its own. Eventually, the revamped facility could have 72 units, each one home to a single family or individual.

Similarly, Shepherd's House — now able to take up to 16 women and their children — has a \$157,000 grant pending to pay for another 36 beds. Cathy Jackson, executive director of the Homeless Services Network, said the application is a strong one. Her agency also just awarded a \$145,000 grant to the Salvation Army in Orlando to provide transitional housing for people who have been staying in its emergency homeless

shelter.

"There are some signs of hope out there," Jackson said. "It has taken a lot of work, but they are rising from the ashes."

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For more information:

- Catholic Charities of Central Florida: cflcc.org or 407-658-1818.
- Community Food and Outreach Center: 407-650-0774 (no Web site yet).
- LifeStream Behavioral Center: lsbc.net or 866-355-9394.
- Homeless Services Network: hsncfl.org or 407-893-0133.