

Helping Most Vulnerable Neighbors

Individuals with mental illness represent a disproportionately high percentage of the homeless population.

BY RUSSELL SNYDER

Once in a while you read or hear about mental health illness, probably in this very paper. However, more often than not, mental illness is discussed only when a tragedy occurs that brings it to the forefront of the national dialogue. We should strive, as a community, to change that.

More than 260,000 adults in Virginia live with serious mental illness. In the Fairfax-Falls Church community approximately 1,350 people are homeless; more than half of those individuals suffer from serious mental illness.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

Individuals with mental illness represent a disproportionately high percentage of the homeless population. With statistics like those above, this is an issue that needs our attention all year round.

For readers that do not know, Volunteers of America operates Bailey's Crossroads Community Shelter, a 50-bed emergency homeless shelter in Fairfax County for men and women. In our shelter, clients receive case management based on individualized service plans. They attend various life skills groups to empower them to make positive changes. Bailey's also has an outreach partnership

with the Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board. A Community Case Manager works directly with our clients who have been identified by staff as having a mental health diagnosis. These individuals receive services and support to build their self-sufficiency, the end goal for all of our clients in every single program we run.

It takes many resources to help homeless individuals with a mental health diagnosis find their way to recovery, but it is possible to accomplish this goal with programs like Bailey's and collaborations among community partners.

If you would like a behind-the-scenes look at the work Volunteers

of America Chesapeake is doing to assist those that are homeless and challenged with mental illness, call Tonya Fulwood, Vice President of Homeless Services, at 240-764-2661. Be an advocate and help us create awareness so we can continue to help our neighbors travel the road to self-sufficiency.

Thank you to the Fairfax community and our partners throughout Northern Virginia for your support as we continue to serve our most vulnerable neighbors in the fight to prevent and end homelessness in our communities.

The writer is President/CEO of Volunteers of America Chesapeake, a faith-based health and human services nonprofit assisting more than 8,000 people each year at 31 programs, many serving the homeless and mentally ill. Bailey's Crossroads Community Shelter has been the community's primary emergency homeless shelter since 1994.