

Women's Center's mission involves keeping women on track

By LISA FREDRICKSON

Tammie was addicted to crack cocaine and lost custody of all her children. Laquita was in jail for drug use and prostitution. Tameika started using drugs after years of suffering in a violent relationship with the father of her children. These are just three stories about Cleveland area women who hit rock bottom before finding The Women's Center of Greater Cleveland and benefiting from its intensive outpatient chemical dependency treatment program, practical parenting education and ancillary services.

The Women's Center of Greater Cleveland was established in 1986 by a group of social workers who were finding that women were falling through the cracks at typical drug and alcohol treatment centers that were mostly geared towards men. According to Executive Director Mary Jane Chichester, substance abuse is a problem men and women share equally, but the disease progresses faster with women. Women also wait longer to seek treatment exacting a greater emotional and physical toll. Professionals at the Women's Center identified barriers women seeking treatment face unique to their male counterparts and put programs in place to address those needs.

The Women's Center provides on-site

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childcare, parenting education classes, bus tickets for transportation to and from the center, group and individual counseling and trauma recovery counseling for women who have experienced violent relationships. "We are providing the gold standard for treatment," she said, "and have a high rate of success." Many women also find the all-female center more conducive to opening up about their experience with prostitution and infectious disease, she added.

Women are referred to The Women's Center by judges, probation officers or the Department of Children and Family Services, and treatment at The Women's Center often represents these women's last chance before losing their children or serving prison time. Each year the center services about 400 women. Clients are individually assessed and enter one of three alcohol and drug treatment programs.

Intensive outpatient treatment is a four week program focusing on the disease con-

cept, defense mechanisms used by addicts, denial and greater understanding of the consequences caused by their use and behaviors. Relapse prevention provides coping skills and responsible and sober life management skills. During this phase, parenting education is introduced as the family engages in reunification. Aftercare helps clients build support networks for continued sobriety. The Women's Center at this time assists clients in securing stable and safe housing, employment and refers them to other organizations such as AA for continued group and individual counseling.

To raise funds for its programs, The Women's Center sponsors "run,jane,run," Ohio's only weekend sports festival including golf and grass volleyball tournaments and five and 10 kilometer races to promote health, fitness and social activity. This year marks the event's 20th anniversary, and it will be held at Edgewater Park from August 15th through the 17th.

The Women's Center currently employs 16 administrative and clinical professionals, and, according to Ms. Chichester, "We are constantly seeking volunteers." The Women's Center needs help with short-term projects such as their newsletter as well as long-term projects, committee jobs and board positions. They are also in the planning process to embark upon a capital campaign for a larger facili-

ty to serve their increasing client population.

In addition, The Women's Center greatly appreciates cash donations. In 2007, The Women's Center provided over \$271,000 in care and treatment of medically indigent women. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the latest estimate for the cost to society of illicit drug abuse alone is \$181 billion. When combined with alcohol and tobacco costs exceed \$500 billion including healthcare, criminal justice and lost productivity. Successful drug abuse treatment can help reduce this cost as well as crime, the spread of HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and other infectious diseases. It is estimated that every dollar spent on addiction treatment programs, there is a four to seven dollar reduction in the cost of drug-related crimes. With some outpatient program total savings can exceed costs by a ratio of 12:1.

Ms. Chichester has worked with The Women's Center of Greater Cleveland for more than 11 years and is encouraged by the progress made during this time. "While the level of addiction has increased significantly," she said, "we are addressing issues and gaining tools to move forward. People CAN recover from the disease."

For more information, please call 216.651.1450 or visit womensctr.org.