

## Jericho Family Support Center Poses No Threat

As Americans, like it or not, we are people of faith. Putting aside logic or religion, it is enshrined in our Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that **all men are created equal**, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

From a scientific perspective, none of this is “self-evident,” but the values our imperfect founders enunciated remain a beacon of hope for billions in our country and around the world. So, the faith we have—atheist or believer, black or white—is that all of us should have equal opportunity to realize our potential.

Those values presuppose the obligation of all of us to help the homeless achieve the self-sufficiency and independence when they fall off the track.

I co-founded Community Housing Innovations in 1991 based on a radical new social services program at the time. Our chief program officer, Elizabeth Starr Thomas, helped develop the program adopted nationally known as Family Self-Sufficiency. She worked for CHI for over 20 years before retiring, introducing “opportunity contracts” for the homeless, executed between case manager and client, committing both to taking defined goals for improving health, education, getting a job and of course, quickly finding permanent housing. It is why CHI has among the lowest lengths of stay in our transitional facilities—an average of six to nine months.

We introduce a caring and compassionate environment, one that recognizes the terrible trauma that homelessness places on parents and their children. It counters the learned helplessness and despair that accompanies this condition. Our services include access to childcare, vocational resources and health care, along with budgeting and linkages to resources in the community.

Because most of our residents are children, we place a high value on safety and security. The Jericho Family Support Center will have 24/7 security with 100 cameras connected to DVRs. Our Resident Support Specialists will insure that no drugs or other contraband pose a threat. The measures we take are welcomed by the overwhelming majority of families, who want a safe, nurturing environment to focus on getting back on their feet and into permanent housing.

This is why crime goes down in the surrounding community. I can guarantee this because our facility will replace four “welfare motels” in the Jericho area, where unsupervised homeless families and single individuals have languished for years without security or services.

Contrary to some statements in the press, very few of our children will attend the Jericho School System, which is rated the best in the state. Families with only 19 children have expressed interest in sending their kids to the school in a district of over 3,000. This is because homeless parents choose to keep their children in their home

district to avoid disruption, and in recognition that state law requires they relocate to schools in their home district once they find permanent housing. They understand that it is highly unlikely they will find affordable housing in Jericho.

Establishing this facility becomes more logical during the pandemic because leaving homeless families in crisis to languish in motels without services leaves them and the community vulnerable. As someone who has taken three courses in Risk Analysis and Risk Communication at Harvard Center for Risk Analysis, I and our agency stayed ahead of the curve, developing protocols that kept the disease out of our homeless facilities. In fact, among the more than 740 clients served from February through July 2020, we have experienced only 10 positive cases. Pursuant to our protocols, they were isolated and then transferred to a county quarantine facility. We are in full compliance with New York State's business reopening safety plan requirement.

Therefore, I would like to assure the Jericho community that our 29-year proven track record, currently operating 30 such facilities on Long Island of varying sizes and in varying communities, should provide a degree of confidence. In addition, we welcome community engagement. As a start, we intend to establish a "Homework Buddies" program for the many community residents who have called to volunteer their talents to help our children and adults escape homelessness and move on to self-sufficiency.