

HIA-LI CEO BRIEF

FEATURING SISTER PAT GRIFFITH , EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MERCY HAVEN

Tell us about how you/your company started.

Since 1970, I have been blessed to be a part of the Islip community, serving and advocating for the needs of the poor. First at an elementary school, I shifted my focus to the needs of the Bay Shore community and created the Hospitality Center at St. Patrick's parish. This was in response to the numbers of persons seeking assistance and the increase visibility of persons moved from state psychiatric centers into communities like Bay Shore, without the adequate preparation of the community or expansion of services that would be needed. As a member of the Sisters of Mercy, our focus is on caring for the poor "who need our help today, not next week" (CMcAuley, foundress).

Creating a Non-profit Agency

The parish had become a 'home' for people recently mainstreamed back into communities from state psychiatric hospitals. The mainstreaming movement was a good idea in theory; however, communities were not ready, and there were not sufficient services to transition people from their known environments within the hospital to the 'outside' world. Members of the Social Justice Board of St. Patrick Parish needed to become strong advocates for those who frequented our Hospitality Center when, in 1985, the Town intended to close a building that was home to over 100 persons formerly in the State Psychiatric Hospitals. I, along with the volunteers, quickly learned the details of advocacy and negotiating the governmental quagmire. Joined by S. Kathy Nolan we began working together with this group of concerned citizens in an initial effort to prevent 116 residents of the Baybright Hotel from losing their home. Out of this effort, Mercy Haven was born.

What was a turning point for you/your company?

Early in Mercy Haven's existence, we realized that providing housing was only the first step, not the last step, on the journey to ending chronic homelessness. It was apparent that the supportive services offered to the residents were essential to maintaining their health, both physical & mental, and ultimately their housing. It was also recognized that the work had to move beyond Mercy Haven's walls, and influence both the community

at-large and a system that often fails to care for and 'lift up' the most vulnerable populations. These realizations led to Mercy Haven's creation of a number of support programs including a legal advocacy program; social, recreational and employment training; outreach and education for the homeless; a community garden and an ever evolving community education and outreach focus.

What is your philosophy at Mercy Haven?

Our philosophy is that each of us deserves to be in safe and supportive communities. Our friends, the poor and persons living with mental health issues, deserve an outspoken advocate willing to aid in destigmatizing poverty and mental illness. We seek to be that advocate, while creating the space to initiate the hard conversations on how these issues affect all of us, in our personal lives and communities. We are driven by our mission to acknowledge the dignity and potential of people who are homeless, living with mental illness, or living in poverty by providing housing, advocacy, education, and life skills development. We envision communities where diversity and inclusion are valued and individuals reach their full potential. Moreover, we are committed to being a place where experience and creative solutions come together to open the door of possibility for those most in need.

Tell us about your companies profile today.

For the past 32 years, Mercy Haven has been advocating and caring for those who find themselves challenged by homelessness, poverty and/or living with mental illness. We've grown from those humble beginnings in Bay Shore to an agency that now provides safe, affordable housing and services to individuals and families throughout Nassau and Suffolk counties. Housing programs now include the elderly, limited income individuals and families who have been homeless, veterans and persons living with mental illness. Today we manage 74 different sites, representing 105 apartments,



and supportive services to 340 persons including 60 children. We also collaborate with other local non-profits providing emergency shelter and services to children through the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

What opportunities do you see in the future?

An organization that has survived the ebb and flow of the social service industry for 30+ years is proof of strong leadership and the organization's ability to adapt, grow, and foresee any changes. The ever-changing federal and state mandates placed upon organizations that provide housing and behavioral services requires a successful organization to remain clear and focused in spite of the complexities of impacting long-term outcomes for people living with mental illness with a history of homelessness. With that in mind, we are empowering staff to establish a Theory of Change, an outline of the program and services needed to meet the agencies long-term outcomes and the benchmarks that are essential for the organization and its residents to be successful. We are also dutiful in keeping an eye on this new federal administration, its focus and any changes that may impact our communities. Empowering the persons who choose to live with us to advocate for themselves has created hope in hearts that sometimes have grave reasons to despair. New collaborations must be created and our agency is, and will be, at those tables of change.