



## BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROGRAMS

### Offer a Sense of Community and a Place to Call Home

Forty-five years ago, Todd's mother, Dolores, knew her son would need a strategy to stay active and connected to the community. It was 1978 and Todd, just 21 years old, had received a significant behavioral health diagnosis. She encouraged him to enroll in Partial Care, a relatively new day program for individuals discharged from psychiatric facilities. Dolores expressed gratitude for the support her son has received over the years. "Catholic Charities offers so many resources and provided Todd with a lot of help he wouldn't have been able to get on his own."

A lifelong advocate for her son, Dolores served as the president of Family and Consumer Exchange (FACE), a support group for individuals with mental health diagnoses, their parents and social workers. Founded in 1981 and affiliated with the New Jersey Alliance for the Mentally Ill, the group met bi-monthly to share resources and advocate for better services, housing and legislation related to issues affecting the lives of families and individuals with behavioral health challenges.

Dolores also served as a monitor at Ancora Psychiatric Hospital, where she helped improve the facility's operating procedures. "The monitors were volunteers, mostly family members of patients, who toured the hospital and made recommendations to the administration. We were instrumental in making some positive changes," she said.

### TIME FOR A CHANGE

For most of his life, Todd lived with his mother in Burlington County. Two years ago, during a group session, Todd learned of a vacancy in one of the group homes operated by Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton's (CCDoT) Residential Services program. He decided to apply, completed the paperwork and moved into his new home in June, 2022. At 64, he was ready to start living independently. "I wanted to live here," said Todd, "because I knew people from the program who lived here."



## A Message from the **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Dear Friends,

You may notice a theme throughout this issue of *The Spirit*. We proudly celebrate the 20th anniversary of Mobile Response Stabilization Services. Additionally, we recognize and appreciate the loyalty of one of our clients, who has been with us for 45 years, and the dedication of their social worker, who has been a part of our team for 40 years. These significant milestones highlight our enduring commitment to serving our community and fostering meaningful relationships.

Considering these milestones, contemplating the breath and the depth of the services we provide, I realize there is no way to fully measure the impact we have had in the community or on lives over the past 111 years. While it is incalculable, we do know it is life changing and life-saving.

We will serve over 110,000 individuals this year. And, it's essential to recognize that the impact of our services often extends beyond the individuals and families we directly assist.

Our work generates a ripple effect, creating waves of hope, wellness and stability that touch the lives of countless others within the community. The positive impression we make through our efforts contributes to a healthier and more resilient community for all.

As a supporter of this organization and someone who ensures the good work we do continues, I'd like to remind you of a passage in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, *May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting encouragement and good hope through his grace, encourage your hearts and strengthen them in every good deed and word.*

Thank you for working with us to support our neighbors in need with vital services. Our hearts are strong, and together, we are there.

With blessings and gratitude,

Marlene Laó-Collins  
Executive Director



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# BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROGRAMS

Offer a Sense of Community and a Place to Call Home (continued)

He shares a large, four-bedroom home in Burlington with three other men. It's a semi-supervised living situation, with staff on-site to assist residents from 2 to 10 pm each day. Todd has his own room and has been learning new things while enjoying a greater level of autonomy. Dolores admitted she was a bit surprised when Todd announced he was moving out but is thrilled that he has found a stable living situation and gets along well with his housemates.

## A NEW LEVEL OF INDEPENDENCE

Todd said he feels good about his decision to move. "Everybody in the house is nice, and I like the staff. They help me with my medication plans." The Housing Specialists have been teaching Todd how to do his laundry and cook, and he follows a weekly schedule of chores. On Saturdays, he enjoys making breakfast for everyone. The house is on a bus route, so Todd can travel independently to the movies on Saturday afternoons and to church on Sunday mornings.



▲ Dolores is proud of her son Todd. Even though he moved into a home of his own, the two still share Sunday dinners together.

Housing Specialist Donna Futchko, a social worker with 40 years of experience at CCDoT, has been helping Todd learn the skills needed for independent living since he moved into the group home. "Todd is a good self-starter. He's been learning new skills and making great progress. I've shown him how to pay his rent and the Xfinity bill. He's managing his own laundry and grocery shopping. Right now we're working on reading bank statements."

Donna said Todd has adjusted remarkably well to living in the group home and has even helped newer residents acclimate. "The men look out for one another." For instance, when a fellow resident had chest pains one night, Todd promptly called 911.

Todd is also an active member of the Riverbank Self-Help Center, where he attends programs two or three times a week. He enjoys the outings and the community dinner on Wednesday nights.

"It's wonderful that Todd is learning how to do all of these things," said Dolores. "I'm so glad he is surrounded by people who take such good care of him."



▲ Since moving into his new home, Todd has been working on learning new things, like cooking. Housing Specialist Donna Futchko shows him how to work the burners on the stove.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION** on Partial Care Services or Residential Services, call 800-360-7711.

# EARLY INTERVENTION SUPPORT SERVICES

Provides a First Step in Understanding a Diagnosis

In September 2021, John reached a turning point in his life. After making a poor decision that led to severe consequences, he became overwhelmed by uncontrollable negative thoughts. These thoughts eventually pushed him to the brink of self-harm. Fortunately, John sought help by contacting a suicide hotline, which connected him to essential resources, including the number for Early Intervention Support Services (EISS) in Hamilton.



“I called and things started to happen right away,” John recounted. He first underwent an evaluation with a psychiatrist, who prescribed him medication. Following this, John began meeting regularly with a counselor assigned to him. “Catholic Charities put me on the right track,” John reflected. “Calling EISS was probably the best thing I’ve ever done.”

As an educator, John was surprised to learn that he has borderline personality disorder, a behavioral health condition that affects one’s ability to manage emotions. Individuals with this condition often experience extreme mood swings, distorted self-image and polarized thinking. After learning more about his diagnosis, John realized that many of his past experiences started to make more sense.

“I realized I was an extreme thinker,” John shared. “For me, things were either black or white. If things didn’t happen the way I thought they should, I’d get angry. I used to get so upset with myself. I labeled myself a loser, and it was hard for me to have relationships. How I lived was not a good way to live.”

▲ Over the past few years, John said his life has been steadily improving, a change that began after he was diagnosed with a behavioral health condition.

## LEARNING TO THINK GRAY

During his treatment with EISS, John was introduced to the idea of thinking in shades of gray. “Things aren’t entirely right or wrong; there are spaces and shades in between. Learning to recognize that has helped me see the beauty in the world,” he shared. John’s counselor at EISS recommended dialectical behavior therapy to help manage his emotions and assisted him in finding a therapist, whom he continues to see weekly. “I’m much more comfortable with myself now,” he said. “Things are better. I no longer have thoughts of harming myself.”

John said that going through this experience helped him realize who his true friends were. “When all of this happened, I just hated myself. Then I realized who was there for me. Turns out, I have quite a support system.”

He has published a psychological thriller with a comedic tone and is now working on another book

that's semi-autobiographical. "I wanted to depict what life is like for someone with borderline personality disorder before, during and after therapy." He is currently taking a screenwriting class with the goal of turning the book into a movie.

"Our EISS team helps so many individuals, like John, who are receiving a behavioral health diagnosis for the first time. No one should have to handle their mental health by themselves," said Dr. Lisa Merritt, Chief Nurse Executive. "Our EISS clinics are here to provide immediate access to behavioral health care, especially for those in crisis. We feel privileged to have helped John with his recovery."

Initially, John admits he was a bit uncomfortable with the diagnosis. "I felt like there was a negative stigma attached to it." However, since therapy has been so life-changing, John now believes it's important to share his story. "I want to bring awareness to mental health issues and let people know it's okay to talk about negative feelings. In fact, that's how you get better."

Early Intervention Support Services (EISS) provides screening and counseling services in a safe, home-like setting for adults 18 and older who are experiencing emotional distress. No appointments or referrals are needed.

### **Burlington County**

25 Ikea Drive  
Westampton, NJ 08060  
609-386-7331

### **Mercer County**

1225-1255 Whitehorse-Mercerville Road  
Building B, Suites 504-505  
Hamilton, NJ 08619  
609-256-4200



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# MOBILE RESPONSE AND STABILIZATION SERVICES

Celebrates 20 Years



▲ Program Director Cynthia Bediako (from left) is shown with Administrative Assistants Ann Fruscione and Sandy Carmichael.

For parents, there's nothing more frightening than having a child who is out of control or in crisis. Twenty years ago this month, New Jersey's Department of Children and Families (DCF) and its Division of the Children's System of Care (CSOC) enlisted Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton to begin providing Mobile Response and Stabilization Services (MRSS) for youth facing emotional and mental health challenges in Mercer County.

The MRSS team is available 24/7 to meet youth and families wherever they are for face-to-face intervention. Services start with de-escalating the crisis and are followed by an assessment to determine the family's additional needs for stabilization. The team remains involved for up to eight weeks, providing follow-up case management services to ensure the family has the necessary resources, skills and tools.

Program Director Cynthia Bediako has been with MRSS for 18 years. The team serves children ages up to 21, assisting families with issues such as non-compliance, running away, truancy, elopement and failure to meet curfews. They also support youth facing challenges in mental health, behavioral health, developmental issues, substance use and suicidal thoughts. "The families we are meeting are experiencing great challenges and trauma. Our role is to help. We link them with other services they may need. We can advocate for them and intervene on their behalf with schools and the court system," said Bediako. A key element of the services MRSS provides, she noted, is the early intervention. "Addressing issues when they first arise helps prevent children from needing services later in life."

The MRSS team works with the Mercer County court system on the Family Crisis Intervention Unit. "Parents don't want to take their children to court. Working with the courts, like we do, allows us to apply mobile response services first."

Mobile Response and Stabilization Services is a part of CCDot's Children and Family Services division. "I am really proud of the work being done by everyone in our MRSS program," said Service Area Director Mary Pettrow. "The dedication everyone has to the families we serve is laudable. The level of composure,

professionalism and compassion this team delivers during times of crisis plays a role in our ability to help create positive outcomes for families."

"In 2015, we were the first county selected to pilot an initiative that assigns a crisis staff from the MRSS team to work with children who are placed in foster or kinship care. In this program, our team meets with the youth and also works with the new caregivers, to help them with any adjustments or transitions, to assist with creating a connection and provide any additional support," said Bediako.

The Mercer MRSS team was also chosen to serve as a model for other state governments looking to implement similar programs. For four years, Bediako noted, the unit hosted personnel from other states to demonstrate how the program operates.

"On behalf of the Department of Children and Families' Division of the Children's System of Care, I would like to congratulate Catholic Charities on the 20th anniversary of their MRSS program," said CSOC Assistant Commissioner Mollie Greene. "I would also like to extend our sincere gratitude to the MRSS Director, Cynthia Bediako, and MRSS Coordinators, Chelsea Batista and Kaye Gorrell for their leadership and dedicated service to the youth and families in Mercer County. The Mercer MRSS team is a valued CSOC and community partner. We appreciate the commitment of their leadership and staff, all of whom are consistently attentive and responsive to youth and their families," Greene said.

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**TO ACCESS** Mobile Response and Stabilization Services, contact PerformCare 24-hour access line at 877-652-7624.

# FOOD PANTRY

## Helps Keep Families Fed

This past June, Christelle, her nine-year-old son and her cousin Esther emigrated from Haiti to begin a new life in America. They chose to settle in Brick, New Jersey, to be close to their family. Haiti, an impoverished nation, currently faces political instability. Christelle and Esther left their homes in Port Au Prince due to poor living conditions and scarce employment opportunities. Esther expressed their desire for better prospects, saying, “We are looking for opportunity here. I would like to work or go to school.” Both women have enrolled in ESL classes and plan to pursue a program to become certified nurse aides.



▲ Cousins Christelle (right) and Esther emigrated from Haiti in June. They have been visiting the food pantry and are grateful for the help keeping nutritious meals on the table.

Despite Christelle having a job, she finds it challenging to make ends meet. “I get a paycheck, but it’s not enough to pay for the apartment and gas,” she shared. Struggling to provide for her son, Christelle learned about the food pantry through a co-worker. Now, Christelle and Esther visit the food pantry weekly to access a variety of nutritious food options, including fresh produce, bread, canned goods and meats. “The food is good, and the people are nice,” said Christelle, expressing gratitude for the much-needed assistance and warm welcome they’ve received.



▲ High school students participating in Mission: Jersey helped create the community garden in front of the Community Services building in Brick.

### AS FRESH AS IT GETS

In addition to the food pantry, Christelle and Esther can also benefit from the fresh vegetables grown in the community garden planted this year. The raised bed, built in the narrow space between the parking lot and sidewalk, was made possible by the efforts of volunteers from Mission: Jersey, a community service retreat for teenagers within the diocese. The garden serves as a source of fresh produce for individuals facing food insecurity, and people in need are encouraged to pick what they like.

Expressing gratitude for the assistance received, Esther said, “We are grateful to Catholic Charities. They make us feel welcome.”

If you or someone you know is facing food insecurity, our food pantries are available and ready to help. If you are interested in volunteering at a pantry or making a donation, your support would be greatly appreciated. Together, we can continue to make a difference in the lives of individuals and families in our community.

### Burlington County Food Pantry

450–460 Veterans Drive Burlington, NJ 08016  
856–764–6940

### Mercer County Food Pantry

(located at Mount Carmel Guild)  
73 North Clinton Avenue, Trenton, NJ 08609  
609–394–8847

### Ocean County Food Pantry

725 Mantoloking Road, Brick, NJ 08723  
732–363–5322



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