

Friendly Passages

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Life Builders

A Look at how one Treasure Coast organization is helping to turn troubled lives around

I am proud to write my second in a series of articles, which addresses what to me is “truly a dream come true.”

As Public Defender for 22 years, I know now, more than ever, that by taking the time and going the extra mile, lives can be saved. Certainly not all of the approximately 25,000 cases that we represented last year can turn their lives around, but many can, thus, the reason LifeBuilders was formed.

LifeBuilders of the Treasure Coast, Inc., was incorporated as a non-profit agency in 2009 with a Mission to: “Strive to reduce crime, recidivism, and otherwise assist low-income individuals who come in contact with Treasure Coast courts as a consequence of criminal behavior or a dependency action, and strives to expand and enhance services not provided by the courts with the goal of potential autonomy of individuals and entities.”

LifeBuilders’ history has its roots in three programs developed by the Office of the Public Defender, 19th Judicial Circuit, and one established by the Circuit’s Court Administration. The Client Services program, Mental Health Court, and the Ex-Offender Re-Entry Program began in 1998, 2002, and 2003, respectively. Drug Court came into being in 2001. Each reaches past the courtroom to treat low-income individuals whose conditions were the root cause of their criminal behavior. Each program has documented phenomenal results, including reduced recidivism and increased public safety. Collectively, they have forged a continuing collaboration with the courts, law enforcement, and community and state agencies. Each has saved lives that otherwise would be “lost.”

Public Defender professionals working within these programs recognized that clients were successfully turning their lives in a positive direction. However, these clients still had diverse financial needs that could not be met through the courts, public funding, or family resources.

Led by Public Defender professionals, a group of committed citizens developed LifeBuilders as the logical extension to the established court and jail programs. LifeBuilders’ Board of Directors operates as a voluntary administrative work-force, and is comprised of professionals from the justice, medical/mental health, substance abuse, financial/accounting, and business sectors of the Treasure Coast community. The Board, aided by one part-time Administrative Assistant, and a Volunteer Unit of four community members, review client applications for Board approval, monitor client progress and assist clients with the application process. Furthering volunteer efforts, a core of doctors and dentists provide reduced rate treatment. Revenue that gives LifeBuilders’ clients the help necessary for a productive and beneficial lifestyle comes from grants, fund-raising activities, and donations.

The purpose of LifeBuilders of the Treasure Coast, Inc. is to give a “hand-up,” not a “hand-out.” to make a positive impact in the lives of individuals, their children, their families, and, ultimately the entire community. Funding is granted based upon the applicant’s: **Eligibility**, involved in the criminal or dependency court system; **Commitment**, evidence that the individual is actively engaged in changing his or her lifestyle (working, seeking employment, enrolled in an educational/vocational program, living in a stable housing environment, participating in self-help/counseling); and, **Community/Family Resources**, all community resources have been exhausted and family resources have been evaluated. Each recipient of aid from LifeBuilders is asked to “pay it forward” in some way, either with volunteer hours or direct donations to any community agency, thus, instilling a sense of social responsibility.

Life Builders

Individuals are interviewed by volunteers, 90 days, 6 months and 1 year to assess the degree to which they are taking responsibility, and working toward a productive lifestyle. Individuals are asked about their: current activity (participating in, or successfully completing an educational program, working, seeking employment, continuing counseling/treatment); impact of LifeBuilders assistance; positive and negative events that have been helpful or problematic; living arrangements; and any situations that warrant referrals or additional assistance.

Results from these interviews show that LifeBuilders' clients are working toward changing a negative lifestyle into a positive one by becoming productive citizens within the community. Correspondence from clients continues to give LifeBuilders' Board of Directors the evidence that LifeBuilders mission is working. As LifeBuilders reduces the barrier created by the lack of finances, individuals are able to pursue a path toward a lifestyle that extends beyond the individual, to benefit family, friends, and the community.

Several client reports show the progress and success that LifeBuilders assistance has promoted:

- * LifeBuilders purchased a computer for a client enrolled in a design school. This individual has maintained a 3.0 grade point average and contacts LifeBuilders to report her grades and her progress;
- * Another individual secured a job with a water treatment plant within the 19th Judicial Circuit, after completing four vocational modules at Florida Gateway College in Lake City, FL; three paid for by LifeBuilders and one by the individual;
- * A letter from a teacher mentoring a young lady and her brother, who witnessed their mother's death at the hands of their father: "I am forever grateful for the assistance you have so quickly given my student. The student's determination to succeed has taken her through high school and into a nursing program. She works 16 hour shifts at a rehabilitation center on weekends. When she reached the maximum available through school loans, LifeBuilders provided her the final tuition to attain her LPN. She remains successful to this day."

Foundations and agencies supporting LifeBuilders revenue are: The William and Helen Charitable Trust, The Frances Langford Foundation, United Way of both St. Lucie and Indian River counties; John's Island Community Service League, the McCabe Foundation, TD Bank, and Quail Valley. Fundraising events have included golf tournaments, restaurant and wine-tasting events. From these have come additional donations from community members and the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office.

LifeBuilders has forged agreements with community professionals and other organizations that support LifeBuilders clients as well as its organizational structure. LifeBuilders makes payment for all services directly to the provider.

Current programs:

- * Approved requests for education and vocational training, and required clothing or equipment are paid by LifeBuilders;
- * A cooperative agreement for treatment at a reduced rate has been forged between community doctors, dentists and vision professionals. LifeBuilders makes appointments for clients in need of medical, dental or vision care;
- * Payment is made for transitional and traditional housing, utilities, drug test, anger management classes, and behavioral and mental health counseling and treatment;
- * A Voucher System with merchants allows clients to purchase clothing and household items;
- * Organizational support comes from a collaborative agreement with St. Lucie County Information Technology for development and maintenance of a database;
- * The St. Lucie Boys and Girls Club affords LifeBuilders office space and equipment use; and,
- * LifeBuilders Volunteer Unit, open to interested community members, reviews requests for assistance, contact clients, and participate in fund-raising activities.

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