

The Trinity Center to Soon Add Eye Exams To List of Unique Programs for the Homeless

By Ashley Gatewood

[Editor's Note: This article was written last spring, but we were recently informed that the eye equipment finally arrived a few weeks ago and eye exams will begin Aug. 18, with a grand opening to follow a few weeks later.]

The Trinity Center in downtown Austin offers a variety of unique programs to assist the homeless and bring a sense of security and caring to those living on the streets. I spoke with the center's first Executive Director, Beverly Williams-Hawkins about how Trinity Center connects with and helps homeless individuals.



Executive Director Beverly Williams-Hawkins

Williams-Hawkins explained some of the exciting services Trinity Center offers. We have a new program, which is our Woman-to-Woman Street Boutique and Tea-Time Program. This is truly an exceptional program that aims to connect with homeless women on multiple levels by giving them the opportunity to socialize and converse with each other in a supportive environment. The program began in late February when Trinity Center took over the women's clothing closet at ARCH to help them free up some space for new staff positions. We wanted to do something more than just open the doors and have women come for a piece of used clothing. We wanted to have the opportunity to form relationships with them and to get to know their needs. Women are a minority in the homeless population and oftentimes their needs fall through the cracks. We feel that this is an area where there is a gap in services and we're looking for ways that we can address some of those concerns. Every Monday morning we set the table for tea and have conversations with the women about issues relating to women, being spiritual beings, as well as how we find strength and fortitude to deal with the issues at hand, she elaborates. In addition to discussion, tea, and clothes, massage therapist Liz Walton gives chair massages. On average the Woman-to-Woman

Program serves between 30-45 women per session and the numbers have been growing.

She is also excited about the eye clinic that is now operating out of Trinity Center in partnership with the Healthcare for the Homeless Project. As she indicated prior to the opening We will be converting our computer room into a full-service eye lane. Right now we're looking at having the clinic open two days a week and we're very excited about it. There's a huge need for it. In fact, this morning a gentleman came in and said "I can't fill out your sign-in book because I can't see it and I need glasses. We see that a lot.

Another useful program Trinity Center offers is their Communication Hour on Friday afternoons to help people with letter writing and making long-distance phone calls. This program began during the Christmas season of 2004 when Trinity Center helped the homeless population write and mail holiday greeting cards. Shortly thereafter it was permanently added to the schedule and became an official program. Some people have come in and they've just been released from prison. They can call and say, "Mom I'm not in prison anymore, I'm OK, and I'm trying to get my life together." "So there has been a very positive response to that program", Williams-Hawkins says proudly.

The Instant Grants Program, which provides direct financial assistance, is offered on Wednesdays and Fridays. Formerly run by past resident chaplain Kern Huff, and now administered by Center Administrator Michelle Gocio, the program is designed to target three main areas the homeless struggle with: getting identification documents, acquiring prescriptions, and purchasing long-distance bus tickets. The bus ticket program is implemented when people arrive in Austin and encounter difficulty making headway here. Via an instant grant, the Trinity Center can assist them in acquiring a bus ticket to return to their family.

Before coming to Trinity Center, Williams-Hawkins was doing freelance ministry related to spiritual direction, retreat leadership, and guest preaching. A friend of hers who was attending services at Saint David's Episcopal Church learned about an opening for the executive director position at Trinity Center through an announcement in the church bulletin. Thinking Williams-Hawkins would be perfect for the job, the friend directed her to the website. Immediately, Williams-Hawkins knew that she belonged at Trinity Center and since taking the post she feels that she touches and has been touched by the clients. Having contact with people so different from her enhances her life and enables her compassion to grow.

When asked what the biggest surprise has been since she took this position, she contemplates for several moments and answers. The biggest surprise has been finding out how hungry people are for a better understanding of what the experience of homelessness is, who homeless people are, and how we can have an impact on their lives. Also finding out how joyful people [non homeless volunteers] become when they realize that all these people have a story just like everyone has a story. And they see that there are reasons why people are homeless and those reasons can be corrected and we can participate in correcting those situations.

Looking to the future, Williams-Hawkins hopes that society will find the creativity and the will to make the needed changes to prevent homelessness. To learn more about the exciting programs at Trinity Center or to volunteer, please visit <http://www.trinitycenteraustin.org/> for more information.