

Erin MINOR

CEO of
Harvest House



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It's one of our area's thorniest human services issues, but also one of its most visible and sometimes results in polarizing opinions ranging from contempt to compassion with a lot in between. But that homeless individual walking downtown, while in need, is just a small representation of what it means to be homeless in Sarasota County and beyond.

There's an excellent source for understanding the full picture in Erin Minor, the CEO of Harvest House in Sarasota. The nonprofit that she leads sees diverse populations such as veterans, young adults 16-24, families, single moms, adults with a history of incarceration and substance abuse and more—all needing a place to stay, a place to learn new skills, a place to start over or simply, receive compassion.

And it's understandable that the true depth of the homeless problem is not readily visible. Many seeking Harvest House's services want their privacy or simply, they're busy trying to make ends meet or reboot their lives.

I was curious about young adults and their situations. It was eye-opening to learn that many are aging out of foster care and have no place to stay. Others are leaving dysfunctional families. Some are LGBTQ and are not welcome at home. Others are told you're 18 and (paraphrasing) leave and go support yourself. The phrase "couch-surfing" at friends' places is one I hadn't heard before, but they'll do it to survive until they can find housing of some sort. For young adults Harvest House offers outreach, a drop-in center, case management, and emergency and supportive housing, according to their website.

You may not have heard of Harvest House perhaps because they're just so busy doing what they do best — helping people. They have nine campuses - places where specific groups of people stay, but also receive what Erin calls "wrap-around" services such as counseling, training and a lot more. Their words for it are "service-enriched housing."

"Over the past decade we've gone from 100 to 380 beds," she explains, and they've seen over 1,000 annually come through their doors and in 2021, they provided 11,6781 "bed nights."

This year they'll open a life-enrichment campus to add to their 9 supportive housing campuses and 25 affordable rentals. According to their website, "The Life Enrichment Campus will be a highly visible pillar of strength for people who are looking for purpose, home, health, and community. This building development will be the first infrastructure expansion that is exclusively focused on the wrap-around support services that are so crucial to client success."

So, I conclude they're kind of like Salvation Army, kind of like SPARCC, kind of like the Food Bank, First Step and many other agencies. The key difference is Harvest House does it all.

"Collaboration is big," Erin explains, "We have our own affordable housing stock, but we're only one agency and our rentals are full." She explains that she and other agencies have weekly "triage" calls where they discuss specific families and where they can go and who has space for them.

If that's not enough, they contract with the Florida Department of Corrections and the Sarasota County jail offering residential recovery and housing — things that are almost impossible to get if you're leaving jail or prison. Some with substance abuse challenges work during the day and live at Harvest House because it gives them continuity and someone to support them in their recovery.

You could call Harvest House the "family business" if the business deals in caring for humanity, that is. Her parents, Jim and Peggy Minor, founded Harvest House in 1992. They started by offering a food pantry at their church (which is called simply "Harvest") where they're both pastors. Quickly thereafter they were offering six beds for men in recovery from substance abuse. They believed that a church, as Erin tells it, "should be a solution, not a problem."

Erin oversees a staff of 26 who are kept very busy by the most labor intensive part of what Harvest House does: supportive housing. And speaking of housing, the current local spike in rent has brought more people to them. "Our calls are up 52% in the last three months. Unfortunately, we don't have a lot of answers." And that's because Harvest House is usually full "with over 100 applications waiting, which causes others not to apply," she explains.

She's spoken to Sarasota County Commissioners about the problem and is hoping that part of the upcoming \$25 million coming from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) will be used for affordable housing. Some think \$20 an hour is decent pay — at first — "but when 60% of that pay goes to housing, it's not so great," she explains.

Erin feels service is in her family DNA. On Saturdays, her parents would have Erin and her siblings get up early and go collect peppers at Hunsader Farms for their food pantry or else they'd help clean the church. "We knew we'd enter the service field," she explains.

In college Erin had a passion for fine art photography then psychology. She worked at Coastal Recovery while in college and found the experience to be "an eye-opener." Her dad needed a secretary at Harvest House, but that didn't work out she says with a laugh, "because we're very similar." Instead, she worked at Harvest House's Women's Recovery Program "and 15 years later, here I am," she states.

You can tell Erin is high energy by the brightness in her eyes, her engaging way of speaking and self-deprecating laugh. She's learned to pace herself and has brought yoga instructors to Harvest House for staff to experience and to also help them with their stress.

As their website states, "Our programs are not a handout. Instead, they offer a hand-up to those willing to engage and work towards independence. We believe that personal responsibility is a key component of success for the families, youth, veterans, and individuals we serve." As a sign of their growth, Harvest House has added two full-time staffers to create a development and marketing component.

Erin credits foundations like Gulf Coast Community Foundation, Community Foundation of Sarasota County and the Barancik Foundation for their invaluable support plus donations from private donors and community members who believe in their work.

When the new building opens this fall, it will be about case management, not housing, but as Erin explains it's more about "the intangibles - that people feel loved and respected. So often we see ourselves as the 'hospital' for the emotions of humanity." Erin wants Harvest House to be where "the love is louder and the light is brighter."

There's a great line from their website that sums Harvest House up, "We want to be the last transitional center an individual or family enters." You could also add and a place where they leave feeling loved.

Erin stresses that the best way to learn about what they do at Harvest House is to take a tour. For more about Harvest House and to schedule a tour, visit <https://harvesthousecenters.org/>

► Exhibit at Art Center Sarasota

Be sure to view the exhibit on homelessness in Sarasota at Art Center Sarasota. Photographer Susan Sidebottom's photo exhibit illustrates people working hard, but "being left behind in terms of affordable housing," she said.

With her exhibit "A Place in the Sun," Sidebottom shows humanity - not victims - in her sensitive photos. A portion of the proceeds from the exhibit will go to Harvest House. Shaelina Holmes, Harvest House's chief operating officer, assisted with the project.

The exhibit runs to April 30. Art Center Sarasota is located at 707 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota. Visit <https://www.artsarasota.org/onview>.

STORY: Louise Bruderle

IMAGES: Evelyn England