

MICAH House makes families a priority

By Shannon Smith

With the assistance of a local church, one couple founded the MICAH House to respond to family homelessness in the Council Bluffs, Iowa area.

The MICAH House is a haven for families and individuals experiencing a housing crisis. The shelter provides the resources and support necessary to regain self-sufficiency and re-enter the community.

Families are the priority at the MICAH House. The facilities are unique to its guests in that the MICAH House offers 21 family rooms and two rooms that can hold four single females. Larger shelters in the area hold 400 to 600 people but the MICAH House averages at about 80 guests at any given time.

Due to the staff-to-guest-ratio, executive director Jaymes Sime says it's easy to have one-on-one interactions, which is important.

"I think that makes it real. And I think that's what gets missed sometimes," Sime says. "These are people and we are people. Let's not complicate it more than that. We have a desire for them to achieve great things and our goal is just to assist them on their way to doing that."

One particularly beneficial aspect of the small numbers is the relationships Sime builds while leading a class each Thursday night. Sime says the "Transformation Thursday" class is completely focused on positive psychology. Sime takes an hour and a half each week to share his story with the guests and to listen to their own stories as well.

"It's really positive," Sime says. "They say that seven out of 10 thoughts that one thinks in a day's time are negative. I'm sure for our folks it's probably nine out of 10 thoughts, maybe even 10 out of 10 given their individual situations."

While it's hard to determine the actual legitimacy of the idea, Sime says staff members at the MICAH House do the best they can by meeting guests where they are (mentally, financially, physically), being understanding, comforting and giving them necessary help.

In 2008, the MICAH House relocated to its current home in the Charles E. Lakin Human Services Campus. The campus, which is home to many resources for the MICAH House guests, jointly serves the area's most vulnerable residents. The partners include five nonprofit agencies: The Salvation Army, American Red Cross, Boys & Girls Clubs and Heartland Family Services.



Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless



Guests can use an on-site, fenced in playground. The facilities are very kid-friendly and family focused.



The MICAH House is part of the Charles E. Lakin Human Services campus in an effort to use its neighboring resources.



The Teen Resource Center is a place for older children to hang out. They can use a handful of computers and a television.

The collaboration has paid off—the campus is one of 18 semi-finalists of 350 applicants for The Nonprofit Collaboration Prize. The organization recognizes nonprofit organizations that choose to permanently collaborate in response to challenges or opportunities in order to maximize the impact of their work.

One example of collaboration is the agreement between the MICAH House and the Boys & Girls Club.

“Any kid over the age of 6 gets a free scholarship to the Boys & Girls Club when they stay with us,” Sime says. “Fifty-three percent of people we serve are children – so last year, that’s over 450 kids. It’s pretty significant.”

A program that has recently been introduced at the MICAH House is the BUDDY (Building Upon Dreams. Developing Youngsters.) program. Sime introduced the program to the MICAH House in hopes to restore normalcy to children’s lives, help them learn social skills, critical thinking skills, creativity and self-control.

The BUDDY program has proved particularly helpful in giving special attention to children while parents are busy working with the case manager and social work coordinator, Sime says.

The MICAH House’s facilities include the bedrooms, each laid out with a set of bunk beds – full on the bottom, twin on top – and another twin bed. The three different wings in the building each hold one adjoining room for larger families. The House features a children’s library, education station and an on-site playground. Three meals and two snacks per day are served in the cafeteria in accordance with the Child and Adult Care Food Program – which is the same program used in schools.



A chalkboard in the Imagination Station reminds the children of basic play rules. Volunteers often entertain children in these facilities while parents are busy with staff members.



The Omaha Children's Museum inspires the setup of the MICAH House's Imagination Station. Some of the play areas include a mini hospital, Hy-Vee and a bank.

Sime says he's looking forward to the opening of a new all-care health center. A nurse practitioner will prescribe medicines, give immunizations and treat soon-to-be and new mothers on site every Tuesday.

The MICAH House continues to change and grow under Sime's direction. A year from now, Sime says he hopes to see many changes based on research regarding guests' individual needs.

For now, MICAH House remains dedicated to fostering relationships to assist individual progress and grant accessibility to everyone who walks through the doors.

"We're doing good things and hopefully bigger things to come in the very, very near future," Sime says. "Families are always our priority. We are trying to figure out how we can meet their needs better. We don't have the direct answer yet, but we're always working toward providing more for them."



The Children's Library offers a creative space for kids and family. The door remains locked while not being used to keep children safe.

