



One of the Best Kept Secrets

By Darbi Durham, Business Services Assistant, Illinois Chamber of Commerce

A Safe Haven Foundation provides essential needs such as food, shelter, and services to more than 5,000 individuals including men and women of all ages, children, youth, and veterans.

A Safe Haven is a story of organizational success and the arc of a personal story from the view of an immigrant family whose struggles and challenges only finding them today “saving lives.”

Coming from such humble beginnings, A Safe Haven Foundation’s President and Co-Founder Neli Rowland and her husband Brian Rowland saw firsthand the challenges families would face each day from the issues of substance abuse and poverty. “Our families instilled in both of us the im-

portance of giving back and helping those in need,” Neli said. Once they became parents, their ultimate goal was to teach their children by their actions and values based on the Biblical quote from Luke 12:48: “From those to whom much is given, much is expected,” she explained.

Neli and Brian began their quest by creating the vision they had for the organization. They wanted it to be a place where people in crisis could come for food, shelter, treatment, medical care, job training, safety etc.

As a first step, the Rowlands began investing in distressed and broken properties. Then, they hired professionals to help provide the medical and therapeutic services so badly needed in their target population.

They continued with starting conversations in the community and ultimately began inviting those in need to stay at their properties for free. In return, each resident had to follow the rules and customized plans to help them learn to live in recovery and achieve sustainable independence.

After a lot of work and some trial and error their project became A Safe Haven. A Safe Haven Foundation provides essential needs such as food, shelter, and services to more than 5,000 individuals including men and women of all ages, children, youth, and veterans.

The foundation makes approximately 1,500 job placements a year through their social business enter-

prises which enables many of their clients to find affordable housing. “We know that our model works, and that it can save millions of lives from the dangers associated with homelessness, drug addiction and disease,” Neli said.

While there are many paths to recovery, A Safe Haven’s approach focuses on addressing all of an individual’s physical economic, social, and spiritual needs, in a holistic way by providing things such as: critical practical, frontline defense for people in the depths of emotional, mental, and financial crisis.

“The people we meet and assist in this process don’t need handouts; they need empowerment,” Neli said. A Safe Haven Foundation does all of this by offering respect, encouragement, and all the resources possible to help get people’s lives back on track and become theirs again.

“The COVID-19 pandemic continues to hold a major impact on everything we do from day to day,” Neli said.

A Safe Haven first learned of the novel coronavirus back in January, with the focus on not knowing what it would bring to the table, A Safe Haven began taking all the precautionary steps to strengthen their infection control policies and purchase supplies to protect the organization.

Once they heard the news in March that the virus had the potential to impact the homeless and the most vulnerable due to the lack of shelter, isolation in the crowded spaces, something had to be done.

After mitigating all of their risks by installing negative air systems and taking other precautions, A Safe Haven was not only able to contain the 1,400 people that they serve from the outbreak but was also to achieve the remarkable goal of having experienced 100% survival rate for every one of their residents at A Safe Haven and in their Medical Respite.

A Medical Respite is a free resource for anyone who has tested positive for the COVID-19 virus and is in need for a safe place to be able to go and isolate themselves from others. It provides medical and behavioral support that may be needed to get back on track.

By building the A Safe Haven Medical Respite in April in partnership with Rush University Medical Center and Chicago Department of Public Health they hope to expand this new delivery system to become an integrated part to the community based on behavioral healthcare systems that will be seamless and sustainable for the future to come. “For 26 years we have fought to have our work recognized as part of the healthcare delivery system,” Neli said. Adding article here

“We’ve helped over 130,000 people since we started, and we are still considered by many as a best kept secret! Neli said.



Chicago’s Magnificent Mile



Neli Rowland
President and Co-Founder
Safe Haven Foundation



“If we can accomplish keeping health care a community-based behavioral healthcare delivery system, we can achieve the highest standard of care and continuum care which then might lead to a positive outcome.”

—Neli Rowland
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Like most other charitable organizations, when the pandemic hit, A Safe Haven was not financially prepared for the costs associated with the guidelines on keeping everyone in one shelter all together.

“We learned that the homeless programs were not necessarily part of the emergency response critical infrastructure that allowed them funds to providers such as nursing homes and hospital systems,” Neli said.

Overnight, A Safe Haven was responsible for a sudden increase in overtime pay and overhead costs of providing 24/7 care and supervision, housekeeping, quarantining, security, etc. beneath the pandemic. They were also seeing an increase in demand for services focusing on substance abuse, mental health, and severe financial

crisis. In spite of these challenges, A Safe Haven was able to overcome the obstacles by working together and trusting that it would all be okay in the end. “We kept everyone safe and healthy and we have continued to provide services,” Neli said.

The foundation’s dedication paid off and they were even recognized this year for their actions and response to the COVID-19 pandemic by multiple organizations seeking to highlight the important work that is continually being done on the frontlines of helping the most vulnerable.

They were the recipients of the Crains Chicago Business: Healthcare Hero Award –for the importance of their continuous health care work made possible by the building of their innovative A Safe Haven Medical Respite center. They also received the prestigious Chicago Innovation of the Year Award: Best Response to COVID-19 Pandemic Award for their incredible response in helping Chicago’s most vulnerable people when they needed help the most.

A Safe Haven Foundation has made it their mission since day one to keep their goal to always influence a paradigm shift in a way that allows them to address, heal, and solve poverty issues in a way that leads people back to a positive productive member into society and most importantly the workplace.

As winter comes quickly, Chicago has sadly reduced the number of homeless beds available due to

budgetary restraints. The homeless beds went from 4,000 pre-COVID-19 beds down to 3,200 beds today. “We are extremely concerned and hopeful that the private and philanthropic giving community will step up to help us meet some of the financial gaps,” Neli said.

A Safe Haven Foundation keeps hope that the stress test of the COVID-19 pandemic that has happened throughout most the year would raise more awareness and can garner more support to those who have successfully met this challenge.

“As we are at a crossroads in our nation and we seek positive disruption, we hope that we will consider supporting more proven and comprehensive solutions, benchmarking our government budgets and the pay scale of our services and expanding Medicaid and private health insurance coverage to allow people in need to have immediate access to services that can mitigate catastrophic social and economic consequences,” Neli said.

“If we can accomplish keeping health care a community-based behavioral healthcare delivery system, we can achieve the highest standard of care and continuum care which then might lead to a positive outcome.”

For more information about how to get involved, inquire about housing, or information for other services. Please visit: www.asafehaven.org

