

CGE Raises Great Expectations for the

The Center for Great Expectations (Great Expectations or CGE), a NJAMHAA member since 2012, provides trauma-informed residential and outpatient treatment for homeless, pregnant and parenting women and adolescents, and their children. Great Expectations, which has not stopped growing since the year it was founded in 1998 by President and Chief Executive Officer Peg Wright, started as a small, non-clinical program with a mere two bedrooms serving six clients and no room for children.

Wright started working at Great Expectations Maternity Home, and the guidance and partnership of Sister Rita Woehlke impacted her in a "significant" way. Wright quickly identified a void. "I saw the opportunity to do things very differently - to really make a difference," she said. Although she came from a corporate setting and did not have a clinical background, Wright had the desire to help an especially vulnerable population of women that gave her the motivation to create The Center of Great Expectations.

CGE's administration, trustees, staff and supporters have been committed to providing a continuum of care that led to the introduction of two residential treatment centers in 2008 - including a long term residential program for women with substance use disorders, and a residential treatment center (RTC) to provide intensive services for adolescent mothers. These programs serve 16 families with 32 children. CGE quickly introduced Katy's Place in 2009 to provide nurturing developmental day care so clients could engage in their own daily intensive, individualized programs; in 2010, CGE added an outpatient program in New Brunswick that serves approximately 80 women annually; and in 2012, the agency added its "next right step" in the continuum of care by introducing its supportive housing program, with 16 apartment homes located at Avalon Somerset, just adjacent to Great Expectations. This continuum of care provides homeless pregnant mothers with a safe place, presence, and path to have healthy pregnancies, overcome the challenges of past traumas, and embrace a healthy future of opportunity for themselves and their children.

In 2014, the adolescent RTC began undergoing an expansion to provide additional services for pregnant and parenting teens referred by the Division of Child Protection and Permanency. This \$1.3 million project,

due to be completed in July, will provide living quarters for four additional teenage clients and up to eight children, and an expansion of Katy's Place and living and allied arts space.

Wright and Debbie Ruisard, CGE's Clinical Director and Adult Women's Program Manager, are two of the driving forces behind these successful programs. Ruisard joined in 2010 and has proven to be a vital asset and leader to the highly skilled team at Great Expectations, according to Wright.

"What I brought with me was a lot of experience working with women who had trauma histories and women who have had mental health issues. We integrated trauma-informed care into the program to transform it into what it is today - providing more than just a place to get clean and sober," Ruisard said.

“ Empowering young mothers to break the destructive generational cycle they were born into is the critical step toward a future of health and opportunities. ”

With this addition, the diversified staff became trauma-informed. Wright is a full supporter of the entire staff being trained in trauma-informed care because the traditional addiction treatment model seems to dismiss all of the trauma history many of the women have experienced. She asserts that it must be addressed, or else the treatment will not work. This type of high-level care is what makes The Center for Great Expectations stand out from other addictions and mental health treatment programs, according to Wright.

In addition, the smaller size of the program is advantageous for the type of treatment Great Expectations offers. "I consider everyone a part of the therapeutic environment from the people who answer the phones to the people with the first contact with

Future of Young Women and their Children

the women,” Ruisard said. It enables the women to be more comfortable with each other when they are participating in group sessions, and it creates a family lifestyle in the residential treatment programs instead of a large clinical setting, she explained.

According to Wright, “The cultural piece that we’ve implemented company-wide is based on The Nurtured Heart Approach of Howard Glasser, and it permeates the entire environment; it celebrates the greatness in each of us.” This approach emphasizes building richer relationships between mother and child by not giving much energy to negativity. It fits nicely with the trauma-informed care that Great Expectations offers, which ultimately leads to success.

Another distinct aspect of The Center for Great Expectations is the Parent/Infant Mental Health (PIMH) program that is being integrated into all programs. PIMH provides a unique way to address relationships between parents and their children. Most often there are attachment problems between clients and their children, related to the clients’ own absent or dysfunctional parental relationships. The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) is a way to assess the patterns of attachment in children. Dr. Ellen Israel, the Adolescent Program Manager and lead on PIMH, is currently partaking in the 18-month process in order to be certified to administer and code the AAI. When combined with other interviews, the AAI helps identify what has been disrupted in the attachment process, and then it is incorporated into treatment practice. Israel does this in individual treatment, as well as in group settings, knowing that providing the beginnings of a healthy foundation of relationships will allow mothers and their children to continue what is hopefully lifetimes of healthy relationships.

CGE Meets Even More Needs through Community Collaborations

The Center for Great Expectations has very effective networking within the local community, utilizing these connections to help them improve their treatment by having organizations provide programs for the women in Great Expectations. Ruisard gave the example of having the domestic violence shelter coming and running a six-week course for the women, which is a great adjunct to their program. “We don’t have to reinvent the wheel. If someone is out there doing a

great domestic violence education program, and they’re willing to bring it here, please do! And then also it’s a connection because if I have a woman in my program who needs specific domestic violence counseling, she can go there and get her individual counseling if that’s what she is court-ordered to or if she has a need for that,” stated Ruisard.

Rutgers University and Great Expectations collaborate in many ways to assist these vulnerable clients. CGE is the number one intern site for Rutgers students in this area of study, and Master’s level interns often assist the clinical team in running groups and assisting individual clients, according to Wright. They are very proud of their partnership with Dr. Tracey Shors, a behavioral neuroscientist and a distinguished professor at Rutgers University. Dr. Shors works with the Great Expectations adult clients in her Mental and Physical Training, an eight-week program that combines motor and mental skills instruction. The outcomes have demonstrated positive effects on both brain health and cognitive functions. The connections Great Expectations makes are crucial to the continuum and high level of care that they are committed to providing for their clients.

In October 2014, Governor Chris Christie visited The Center for Great Expectations to announce that he was designating \$12 million in state funds to support specialized services like the ones offered at Great Expectations. The visit ended up being a very moving experience for both parties. He sat and talked to the women and children in the kitchen, and they opened up to him. “It was a heartfelt exchange - it was great,” Wright said. It was an authentic and touching interaction, according to Ruisard.

Wright founded The Center for Great Expectations in order to create a safe place for homeless pregnant women. She soon realized that empowering young mothers to break the cycle – the destructive, generational cycle of trauma, abuse, homelessness and addiction that they were born into – is the critical step toward a future of health and opportunities for both mothers and their children. It is safe to say that she has fostered a nurturing environment for her residents with the support of her dedicated staff, trustees and volunteers.