



Women's Outreach program celebrates 20 years of recovery

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

For an individual with a substance use disorder such as addiction, 20 years of living in recovery is a substantial achievement. In fact, each day an individual goes without using alcohol, drugs or other mind-altering substances is an achievement. Overcoming challenges day-by-day eventually results in years of success.

This September, which is also National Recovery Month, Highland Rivers Health's Women's Outreach program is celebrating 20 years of recovery – that is, helping some of the most vulnerable women in northwest Georgia achieve sobriety, healing and health, as well as employment, stable housing and in many cases family reunification.

Funded by a federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grant, the Women's Outreach program is a 48-bed residential program located in Floyd County, but available to women who live every county served by Highland Rivers.

The program provides comprehensive recovery services, not only helping women stop using drugs and alcohol, but in many cases helping women rebuild their lives. Women typically stay six to nine months. While the program is open to all women, those who are pregnant, postpartum and/or using IV drugs are a priority.

Some of the women who come to the program have had involvement in the criminal justice system and many have co-occurring mental illness. Some are homeless, some are pregnant; some are both. But all of them deserve the opportunity to have hope and to live in recovery.

But like the recovery process itself, the Women's Outreach program started somewhat tentatively and has overcome challenges of its own. Begun in September 1998 with a one-year pilot grant, the first iteration of the program was in a house near Northwest Georgia Regional Hospital in Rome. At first there wasn't even any furniture and participants sat on the floor during group therapy sessions.

But the program worked, the grant was renewed and as it grew, Women's Outreach moved into a bigger building on Board Street in Rome, and in 2004 to a building on Woodbine Avenue – a former juvenile detention facility which now serves as one of Highland Rivers' crisis stabilization units.

After moving to its present location on Mathis Dr. in 2011 (in the same building as our Floyd outpatient clinic), TANF funding in Georgia was suddenly in jeopardy. But a coordinated advocacy effort by women's programs across the state – that included meetings, letters and daily

phone calls to state lawmakers, testimonials and much more – saved funding for the programs in Georgia.

Today Highland Rivers' Women's Outreach program serves approximately 150 women each year. In addition to its residential program, it provides intensive outpatient therapy, supported employment, housing assistance, therapeutic childcare and community support. Every year, babies are born to women in the program (and are able to stay there with their mothers) and in 20 years, no baby born to a woman in the program has tested positive for drugs. Ours is recognized as a model program in the state of Georgia.

Of course, the Women's Outreach program would not be what it is today without an extremely dedicated, compassionate and caring staff – some of whom have been with the program since it started – the therapist, managers, house parents, case workers, peer counselors, cooks, childcare workers, drivers, social service technicians and others who believe in what they are doing, and equally important, believe in the women in the program.

Finally, I want to salute the more than 1,000 women that have participated in the Women's Outreach program over the past 20 years, and those who currently are. The special women who have used the tools and resources and supports the program provides – along with a great deal of courage, determination and hope – to begin their personal recovery journey, and to maintain a life in recovery. You are an inspiration to us all.

Congratulations to the Women's Outreach program on 20 years of recovery!