

Essex County Wellness Respite Services Helps Those In Crisis At Better Life



Essex County Wellness Respite Services Program Manager Kenisha Bakayoko, Wellness Associate Melanie Nascimento and former guest Donald Williams, left to right, complete a puzzle, which is one of the activities respite guests participate in during their 10-day stay.

Dealing with mental health issues like anxiety and depression or substance abuse issues can be overwhelming and even debilitating. For individuals in crisis, hospitalization has been the traditional course of action. But now, thanks to New Community Corporation and Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey (CSPNJ), people have a new option: Essex County Wellness Respite Services.

Respite services are available to people in crisis for short-term stays at Better Life, located at 101 Fourteenth Ave., Newark. There they learn skills to cope with their issues and have a place to relax and reset to get back on their feet.

Respite guests stay at Better Life for 10 days. They sleep in their own private room on the first floor of the facility, which has a bed, a chest of drawers and a closet. Guests have access to the Respite Living Room, which has a television

and computers, and Kitchen, which is fully equipped with an oven, a dishwasher and a coffee machine. The Kitchen also has a TV and phone line for guests to use. They participate in one-on-one sessions with staff members for one hour per day during their stay and also do a variety of other activities like art therapy which can be done in groups. They do other group activities as well, including movie night on Fridays and family meal night on Sundays, where staff members and guests cook dinner as a group.

New Community Corporation owns and manages Better Life and CSPNJ runs the respite program, as well as the Engagement Center, which is also on the first floor of the facility and is open to homeless individuals Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

NCC CEO Richard Rohrman sees the respite program as another way to improve the lives of community members.

“The respite program at Better Life is a critical piece in intervening in someone’s life at a time of crisis. It can be the net that catches someone in a free fall. We are very excited at NCC to have this ability added to our comprehensive health and housing related initiatives,” he said. “Health and housing have to work hand in hand for better outcomes for those in need. Better Life is a prime example of how partnerships work to create better outcomes for clients.”

Former Respite guest Donald Williams was having issues with anxiety. At the time he was living in a shelter that had closed and he came to Better Life after someone told him about it, not knowing respite services were available.

“Before I got here, I wouldn’t even get on the bus because it gets too crowded. Then when I was here, I started getting on the bus a little more,” Williams said. “They taught me about breathing techniques and taught me how to kind of block out a lot of things. They gave me all kinds of tools. And if one way doesn’t work, they’ll start another. And they go on like that until they find something that works.”

Williams didn’t want to leave the facility when his 10 days were up, but he opted for follow-up services, which lasts an additional 30 days. The first seven days of that period, Respite staff members call the former guest every day and for the remaining three weeks, they call twice a week. The calls are meant to see how the individual is doing and ensure that they’re continuing to work on their wellness.

Even though his stay and follow-up services have ended, Williams still keeps in touch with respite staff and continues to come to the Better Life Engagement Center. He also keeps in touch with some of the other respite guests he met during his stay.

Essex County Wellness Respite Services Program Manager Kenisha Bakayoko said the main goal is to stabilize the crisis of the guests, offer an alternative to hospitalization and provide them with skills to help them cope with future issues.

While hospitals stabilize patients in crisis with medications, Bakayoko said respite services stabilize through skills.

“If you’re not a danger to yourself or others and you’re just having a hard time, you have a lot going on and you need a place to just reset and relax and get those skills that we sometimes lose when we’re in crisis, this is the place to come to,” she said.

The program accepts individuals who self identify as being in crisis and guests must have mental health or substance abuse issues to be approved. Five respite guests can be accommodated at one time. Essex County Wellness Respite Services opened in September. In its first five months, it served 69 guests.

Bakayoko said the majority of people who call are accepted into the program. Those who aren’t are usually experiencing homelessness but don’t have a mental health or substance abuse issue. In those cases, callers are referred to the Better Life Engagement Center resource specialist who can refer them to local shelters. Callers who are actively using substances are encouraged to go to detox before entering the respite program.

Essex County Wellness Respite Services has a team of seven: the program manager, a senior coach and five wellness associates. A staff member is on site 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The wellness associates are peers, meaning they have experience in the areas that guests are struggling with.

“The skills that we teach here we actually use ourselves,” Bakayoko said. “We’re not telling you to do a mindfulness practice and then say, ‘OK no, I’m not going to use that.’”

Guests meet with staff members for one hour per day during their stay. Times for sessions are flexible, which means guests are able to continue working or going to school for the 10 days.

“We have sessions as early as 9 a.m. and we do them as late as 8 p.m. We have people that are working full-time jobs and still coming to our services. Some people that are in school,” Bakayoko said. “You can still do what you need to do.”

Some guests are homeless, but respite staff members explain to them before they enter the program that they are not permitted to stay past the 10 days. That means if they don’t find stable housing or a place to go, it will result in them going back on the streets.

“We just try to connect them as much as possible,” Bakayoko said, explaining that staff members provide support, motivation and help filling out applications. “The majority of them get connected.”

Individuals who complete the 10-day respite program are allowed to return after a 60-day holding period if they find themselves in crisis again.

“We want to be very therapeutic but we don’t want them to feel super attached to us like, ‘Oh I can’t live without respite.’ Because that’s not the goal,” Bakayoko said. “The goal of respite is to give you the skills you need to stabilize you and get you back moving forward.”

If you or someone you know identifies as being in crisis and suffers from mental health issues or substance abuse, call Essex County Wellness Respite Services at 862-229-1401 to complete the 40-minute intake process.