

CATHOLIC CHARITIES OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF DENVER:

IN THE ARMS OF MARY



“We take care of people from conception to natural death. The early life issues are just one piece of that continuum, but they are tied into all the other pieces...”

— Larry Smith, President and CEO of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Denver



Larry Smith, President and CEO of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Denver (CCAD), must like jigsaw puzzles, not the children’s variety with 10 or 12 large tiles, but the wonderfully complex ones with hundreds of tessellating pieces that, when finally fitted together, present one beautiful work of art made from many parts.

A perfect example of this kind of work, according to Larry, is the Continuum of Care that CCAD offers its clients. Larry was asked specifically about CCAD’s services to women in need, who have an unexpected pregnancy or have children with no means of support, but he wanted to set those services in a broader context: “We take care of people from conception to natural death. The early life issues are just one piece of that continuum, but they are tied into all the other pieces, because you can’t take care of a child in the womb unless you’re taking care of the mom, and the family, and sometimes the mom’s family, and the dad, and all these other pieces of the puzzle.”

In terms of the “other pieces,” CCAD has been serving northern Colorado since 1927 with multiple ministries. According to Larry, CCAD manages about 60 properties connected to various services across 40,154 square miles comprised of 25 counties. This area goes from the Kansas-Nebraska border to Utah, basically the top northern third of the state of Colorado, corresponding to the boundaries of the Archdiocese of Denver.

CCAD has four primary divisions (exclusive of emergency services, such as rental and utility assistance, immigration services, etc.):

(1) Archdiocesan Housing, which consists of 26 apartment buildings, with number 27 scheduled to open next year; (2) Housing and Shelter which includes three major shelters for the general population. The shelters offer two programs: overflow and extended stay. Overflow allows the client to come in at night and leave the next morning. Extended Stay is a case-managed program that allows families to stay up to four months. During their stay, family members have to do chores and participate in some kind of training, whether it is working on education or job skills; (3) Family and Child Care Services includes six childcare centers for children aged six weeks to five years old, as well as in-home counseling for families and senior services and kinship care; (4) Women’s Services rounds out the divisions and includes helping women with early life issues, a primary focus for CCAD recently.

The focus on women and early life issues came about through a basic realization that Larry explains: “We believe that simply saying ‘don’t have an abortion’ is not enough; what’s needed is giving that woman compassion and love, trying to show her that you care, and to bring that love and compassion of Jesus Christ to her.”

The focus has to be on the whole person, which goes back to the concept of Continuum of Care. Larry says that CCAD’s Women’s Services has been fine-tuned and expanded recently to bring that realization to life. For instance, CCAD’s pregnancy centers have been rebranded as “Marisol Health.” The name “Marisol” evokes the beauty and essence of nature, with *mar* meaning sea and *sol* meaning sun. It’s also a combination of Maria de la Soledad –

Our Lady of Solitude – referring to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Larry says, “We wanted to be in the arms of the Blessed Virgin in all that we do.”

The new approach to Women’s Services at CCAD is manifested in a number of concrete ways. Three in particular will be detailed below: pregnancy centers; housing for single mothers and children; and housing for homeless women. Undergirding and supporting them all is the Office of Respect Life, which is under the direction of Lynn Grandon.

Lynn describes her work as helping “to build a culture of life,” which means she and her many volunteers are praying and educating a lot. Emblematic of the prayer effort is “Prayer in the Square,” which brings people together in public spaces to pray for the sanctity of all human life, from children in the womb to men and women suffering religious persecution in foreign lands. On Saturday, June 4, 2016, for example, the Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, 300 people gathered in six public locations across the archdiocese to pray that the dignity of the human being will be respected always and everywhere.

Lynn also visits many schools to educate students about life issues, and how those issues relate not only to faith but also to science. On a visit to an eighth-grade classroom, Lynn had brought a model of a 30-week-old baby, which is used to teach about the gestation process. Lynn says it’s always a joy to help students see pregnancy and birth in a positive light. She will never forget one girl in particular, who held the model baby in her hands and perceived, as if for the first time, how God brings life to the world.

MARISOL HEALTH CENTERS

Prayer and education are the foundation to working with young, single mothers about to give birth or who have already given birth. At the same time good works are necessary, and specifically for the woman. “Sometimes we forget,” says Larry, “that you have to help the woman

before you can help the child that she’s carrying. And so that is our focus now, focusing on the woman first, meeting her where she is and helping her, and then we get to talk about her baby. And how we can help her keep that baby, and more importantly have a life with that child.”

One major step toward helping women in need has been the consolidation of pregnancy centers to include an affiliation with Bella Natural Women’s Care. Services will be provided at several convenient locations: Denver, Lafayette, Englewood and an information center on the University of Colorado Campus in Boulder. Marketing will include online digital campaigns to reach women who are interested in authentic, holistic care – spanning both medical and social services. The partnership with Bella means that CCAD can offer its clients the full range of OBGYN services. “We want people to think of us as a place where women can get life-giving and comprehensive medical services, and not just an ultrasound,” Larry says.

Larry is quick to point out, however, that “any time you save even one child, that is a success.” Still, since CCAD is committed to bringing the love of Jesus Christ to each person whom they serve, the care has to be comprehensive. Many of the young women who come to CCAD are grasping for a helping hand, after having been abandoned by boyfriends or encouraged by others to have an abortion. Moreover, being steeped in the dominant culture, many of them will say “I’m pregnant, now my life is over, it’s gone, my career, my education, my fun, it’s over.” Larry says CCAD counters with another message: “Hold on, we got you. We really got you. We’re not going to stop helping you until you and your child can live a life of dignity and achieve your dreams.”

Shaina Palumbo, Marisol Health program director in Denver, says that part of the job is simply to help women slow down. They are usually in an intense emotional moment, afraid, and in a crisis mode, especially first-time mothers. “We help women explore all of their options: parenting, adoption, and while we do not refer for abortions, we do talk about the reality of abortions so that when they leave here they can make a

fully-informed decision.” With the expanded services available, Shaina adds that they are able to offer comprehensive care, not only OBGYN services but also housing, mentoring, education, childcare, counseling: in other words, all the many services that come with being part of CCAD.

HOUSING FOR SINGLE MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

If a woman has been helped by CCAD to have her baby and is in need of a home, or for any single mother in need, there are homes run by CCAD where the woman and her child are welcome. One of them is Marisol Home, formerly the Father Ed Judy House. Opened in 2005, it provides an extended stay option for women and their children who have not been able to find stable housing. There are nine rooms available, but usually six or seven families inhabit the space at any one time, depending on the number of children a woman may have. A mother with multiple children is given two rooms. “We’re pretty much always full,” says Theresa Miller, Children’s Program and Volunteer Coordinator. “On average, families are here for three months, and during their stay they meet with case managers once-a-week to work on housing, finance, or whatever other barriers the moms face that preclude them from housing.”

Theresa says that Marisol Home is unique in that, “unlike other homeless programs, this is the only program that extends indefinitely, as long as the families continue to work to find housing and prepare to move out.” Indeed, it began as a way to meet a need in Denver: “Often families would hop from shelter to shelter, so we opened to serve as an in-between for emergency housing and long-term transitional housing.” During their stay, women and children go to work or school, and they are responsible for living as a community, which means keeping the place clean, sharing laundry facilities and food storage space. Case

managers meet each week with families to help them keep on course, and they also make referrals to other services, as needed. Theresa is very proud of the way CCAD takes care of its clients: “It has been amazing seeing all of these ministries really partnering together.” She says that Marisol Home keeps working with families too, even when they have made a successful transition out: “One family has been out for seven years now, and our services with them have waxed and waned with their needs.”



HOUSING FOR HOMELESS WOMEN

One of the more surprising needs of women, even pregnant women, has been emergency housing. As CCAD began focusing on fine-tuning and expanding women’s services, they realized that, whereas there were around 2,000 homeless shelter beds in Denver, maybe 50 to 60 of them were for women. Larry says, “I think part of the reason is by accident. Men are more visible. Women hide. If you’re a woman on the streets, you’re more likely to be physically abused than a man. Most of the women in our homeless shelters have been raped and are victims of domestic abuse. Women are more likely to sleep in cars, couch surf, and use motels.”

The response to this situation, once realized, was swift. In December 2014 CCAD opened the Holy Rosary Shelter, which began at a parish of the same name but has since moved to a section of the Samaritan House, CCAD's very large shelter in downtown Denver which provides 127,000 nights of shelter each year and serves 455,000 meals in the same time period, including food for low-income children in daycare. Holy Rosary is able to offer 300 women a place to sleep each night in the Samaritan House and an additional off-site shelter.

Stephanie Walters, who is the director of Holy Rosary, confirms that there is a growing need: "We just can't pedal fast enough. Three times a night we have a bus that ferries women from Samaritan House to the off-site shelter." According to a June 15 study by the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative, 690 women are homeless on any given night in Denver. CCAD estimates that between 30 and 40 percent of these women are over 60 years old. Holy Rosary is seeing more of the women, Stephanie says, because it's a safe place to go. Many women would prefer to remain in a broken, even harmful, relationship rather than take the risk of going to an unsafe shelter. "I really believe it's because of our mission statement and the faith we put into treating the ladies with dignity and respect, meeting them where they're at, that we now see them coming out of the woodwork. It's amazing," Stephanie says.

Holy Rosary also is the gateway to the other services provided by CCAD. "There are so many different ladies that we see here," Stephanie says. "You've got pregnant women, seniors, Department of Correction ladies. It's really interesting." However, the women who come to Holy Rosary do have something in common: "They're constant rule breakers," according to Stephanie. The reason is that many of them are dealing with multiple, underlying issues like substance abuse, abandonment, and rejection. Some of the women are not ready, or not able, to work on those issues. When they do make some changes and demonstrate the ability to enter a more structured program, CCAD is there to help them.

Stephanie says, "It really comes down to the dignity and respect and the faith-based piece: we just love everyone who comes through the door and try to help her get from point 'A' to point 'B.'"

Considering the amazing work of CCAD, and the passion of everyone involved, from the president and CEO to staff members and volunteers, the maxim of St. James comes to mind: "Be doers of the word and not hearers only" (1:22). When the people of CCAD say they will help you, it's not a hollow comment. When it comes to women's issues in particular, the services truly respond to the needs of the whole person. "When a woman comes to us," Larry says, "we say, 'hey, we love you; how can we help you?' If she's pregnant and has medical needs, we've got that covered. If she needs a place to live, we've got that covered. If she needs her GED, we can help her with that. Job training too. We have case managers who work with the women, to get whatever they need. So within the context of Catholic Charities, a woman can find a place to live, get food to eat for her and her baby, educational services, job search, apartment search, childcare, and counseling. Through our combination of medical and social services, we provide literally a continuum of care."

Larry says that he is asked often a familiar line of questioning: How many ministries do you have? Who are the people you help? How many people do you serve? What kinds of demographics are you working with? They are important questions and the answers impact the management of a social service organization. Yet, Larry also speaks about the beauty of Catholic Charities, which cannot be captured in statistics: "We have the most complex groups of services, faith, history, love and tradition, and it can be boiled down to a simple and elegant concept. We help only two kinds of people: those with the need to give and those with the need to receive." In other words, when all the pieces of the puzzle are fitted together, what you get is love. ■

“We help only two kinds of people: those with the need to give and those with the need to receive.”

— Larry Smith, President and CEO of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Denver