



## 2021 ACS Humanitarian Awards **Bridges to Housing Stability, Housing Stability Program Team** *Community Impact Award (large nonprofit)*

Howard County homelessness is the challenge. By the most recent counts there were: 219 homeless people located on a single night in shelters or outdoors; 600 homeless HCPSS students and siblings over the course of a year; and 3,492 seniors and 1665 youth with disabilities for whom affordable housing is nonexistent thereby putting them on the verge of homelessness; over 700 households seeking services from the Coordinated Systems of Homeless Services (CSHS) each year; and 776 households who are on the Housing Choice Voucher waiting list.

The Housing Stability Program has been the primary program of Bridges to Housing Stability (formerly Congregations Concerned for the Homeless) primary since the organization was founded 30 years ago. For 22 years, HSP was focused on transitional housing with exits to permanent housing. The past eight years, in line with national best practice shifts, changing federal funding priorities and the County's institution of the Coordinated System of Homeless Services (CSHS), HSP has focused on homelessness prevention, rehousing and supportive housing.

The five-person Housing Stability Program (HSP) team has a combined total of 64 years of case management and social service experience working with low-income households. The team, comprised of Bola Afolabi, Rebecca Ostroski, Danielle Winston, Kike Fisher-Akinyemi and Tiarra Ford has experience and training in the mental health field, crisis response, mediation, health care management, family systems and disabilities. Program Manager Afolabi has led the team for six years and now supervises the four housing advocates and two interns.

The HSP team has consistently rehoused 45-55 households each year since 2013. In 2019, it rehoused 52 households, which included 395 individuals (184 children, 102 persons with disabilities, 19 seniors, 31 victims of domestic violence and 7 veterans). In addition, this past year the HSP prevented 21 evictions and helped 25 households increase their incomes.

While the predominance of the HSP team time is spent on in-depth case management and collaborating with other agencies and community resources on clients' behalf, the team also takes delight in helping to do the little things that make a big difference in their client families' everyday lives. This past year the HSP team gave 26 new families welcome baskets, 21 children school supplies and provided Thanksgiving baskets and holiday gifts to 40 families.

While there are some similar issues across households, each and every family facing homelessness has its own backstory and set of circumstances. There is, therefore, no cookie cutter approach to helping

people work their way out of homelessness. Factoring in the extreme shortage of housing affordable to low income and otherwise vulnerable households in our County, one easily sees how creativity and innovation are the bywords by which the HSP team must workday in and day out. The following client comments offer insight into the range of issues to which the HSP team must deal to help ensure their families find affordable housing and remain stably housed.

“Rebecca provided everything I needed: an apartment, security deposit, a bus schedule. She helped me get anything I needed and was with me every step of the way. She is so talented and humble; she has great feeling for the people she works with. She goes above and beyond.” Stacia Gilbert

“Danielle is very professional, and even when I tend to be a little too playful, she keeps the relationship professional. She’s an angel, but you can’t see her wings. She says, always call if there’s a problem; keep me informed. I had a problem with old, damaged storm windows in my apartment and with a bathroom faucet. I talked with the landlord who then wanted to evict me. Danielle set up a meeting and de-escalated the landlord. The problems are getting fixed and my relationship with the landlord is better. Bola and others on the HSP team are all wonderful. They are great advocates for all everyone in the program.” Robert Ferron

“We have a very good collaboration between Grassroots and the HSP team, which does excellent work. I worked recently with HSP’s Rebecca to help two chronically homeless clients. Through ongoing case management, she was able to help them maintain their housing even though at times it looked like they wouldn’t be able to manage. Now they have a roof over their heads, eat meals every day and pay their bills.” Gerald Nesbit, Grassroots

“The Housing Stability Program (HSP) has been a major support to me as a Pupil Personnel Worker within Howard County Public School System. The program has maintained or provided housing to many of our students and their families. The staff is always easy to work with and is committed to finding solutions for the unique needs of their clients.” Tracey L. Williams, LCSW-C, PPW

In addition to their commitment to Bridges’ clients, the HSP team recognizes the value of collaborating with and the responsibility to engage with the broader community’s efforts to reduce homelessness. On a policy level, Program Manager Afolabi is an example of the HSP team’s commitment to community involvement. She is an active contributor to the County’s Coordinated System of Homelessness Services’ Prioritization and HMIS (Homelessness Management and Information System) Committees, the HCPSS Homeless Advisory Council and the United Way Family Stability Collaborative. Helping to ensure a continuing stream of well-qualified professionals that will serve vulnerable populations, Ms. Afolabi also serves as the trainer and task supervisor for three Master level social work interns.

On the personal level, HSP team member Ostroski participates on the CSHS community outreach committee helping to plan events such as the Homeless Person’s Memorial Services and Solstice events celebrating successes of people who have overcome homelessness.