BEHAVIORAL HEALTH: Meeting the Residential Needs of Our Community

For some people, managing the everyday responsibilities of living independently can be overwhelming – and can increase the risk of homelessness, anxiety, and poor mental and physical health. For those recovering from substance use disorder, the challenges can be even greater.

Pittsburgh Mercy is at the forefront of serving these at-risk individuals. We operate a variety of residential programs for individuals with chronic behavioral health issues. This care includes various levels of housing and treatment and is provided throughout Allegheny County. Some programs are temporary, either responding to an emergency crisis or helping people as they move toward more independent lives; others are longer term. “It’s gratifying to help people live in the community as independently as possible by providing the residential support to assist them,” said Doritta Pelc, Behavioral Health Residential Senior Manager.

Garden View Manor sits on nearly five acres of shady trees, beautiful gardens, and expansive lawns in Wilkinsburg Borough. It was built in 1869 by one of Pittsburgh’s early philanthropists, Jane Holmes, an Irish immigrant who opened the building in 1871 as the Home for Aged Protestant Women. For 136 years, it welcomed women, and eventually men, who needed a home but could not afford the upkeep. Pittsburgh Mercy has operated the facility since 2009, continuing a mission not unlike that of Holmes: to serve people with mental health issues.

Fairweather Lodge: a key stepping stone to independence

A spirit of support and cooperation – that’s what makes Pittsburgh Mercy’s Fairweather Lodge an important stepping-stone on the path to independence for those recovering from mental illness and substance use disorder.

Located in Pittsburgh’s Knoxville neighborhood, Fairweather Lodge is a voluntary, employment-focused rehabilitation and residential program based on the work of the late Dr. George Fairweather, a pioneer in recovery. The five residents – currently all men although the Lodge can be co-ed – have private bedrooms and share all other living quarters as well as responsibilities, decision-making, and chores. Most importantly, they support each other in recovery.
“We encourage strong peer support and we run a tight ship,” said Vicki Baumann, Fairweather Lodge supervisor. “It’s our most independent living facility and a true vocational program.” How long a resident stays is based on their readiness to work; the average stay is two-and-a-half to three years, depending on whether schooling or training is part of future employment plans. The state Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) often helps pay for training at places like Bidwell Training Center, and Pittsburgh Mercy colleagues also help residents find funds.

To be considered for residence, individuals must be “pretty far along in their recovery,” according to Baumann, and also must meet several eligibility requirements:

- Have a mental illness diagnosis
- Be in recovery from substance use
- Be able and willing to work
- Be homeless
- Pass an interview with Pittsburgh Mercy staff and house members

The last requirement is essential since the Fairweather contract stipulates that residents can vote out any resident for violating house rules. If an individual is asked to leave, Pittsburgh Mercy helps locate another arrangement.

Residents make their own medical appointments, and some attend psych rehab programs, external or in-house Narcotics or Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and/or relapse prevention groups. Most work with Pittsburgh Mercy’s Supported Employment Program, in which employment support specialists guide clients in their efforts to find competitive employment, as well as build life skills such as budgeting and communications. “They have to work and pull their weight at Fairweather,” said Maureen Tarr, program team lead. “We assist them in finding employment and do so at the job seeker’s pace. Our job is to build them up so they can be successful. Everybody’s different. We look at the individual.”

**Coming Soon: Our Spring Appeal Letter**
Pittsburgh Mercy's Spring Appeal letter will be mailed to you in April. We’ll be sharing details of the critical work planned for 2022 and invite you to partner with us in meeting our community's growing need for behavioral health services and support care. Prefer to give now? You can do so [HERE](#). Thanks in advance for your generous support!