

Case Statement

Building Support for the Keeler Women's Center

A Ministry of the Benedictine Sisters
2220 Central Avenue
Kansas City, KS 66102
913.906.8990

Empowering Women in the Urban Core

There are many organizations, both government and public charity, that address health, hunger, safety, education, housing, employment, social issues of poor women in the Kansas City area. The Keeler Women's Center is unique in its approach to meeting the needs of women, all women, but especially those in the urban core, in a holistic way.

Mission

The Keeler Women's Center is focused on empowering women in the urban core through education, advocacy, personal and spiritual development. Our most important activity is hospitality which gives warm, compassionate and non-judgmental welcome to each woman.

History and population served

The Keeler Women's Center is a ministry of the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica, Inc. who have served women in this area since 1863. The Keeler Women's Center opened in the fall of 2003 as the result of long range planning by the Sisters that focused on the question, "Where do we want to put our resources, both personnel and financial, in the future?" The desire to assist women, especially poor women, led the Sisters to establish the Center. Because of their long history with the Sisters who started the college, Donnelly College provided the first space for the Center. By the fall of 2007 we had outgrown our space at Donnelly College and in early 2008 moved into the Catholic Charities building at 2220 Central, Kansas City, KS.

We have no boundaries or restrictions so we welcome a very diverse population. We serve women from throughout the metropolitan area and beyond, but many of the 300 + women who come are single parents living in poverty. We serve approximately 25 men each month but we make decisions based on needs of women. We give childcare to approximately 20 children each month. Many of these are children of women living in one of the nearby shelters who come for parenting classes or counseling.

Structure

A staff of three Benedictine Sisters, one counselor and 70+ volunteers help us fulfill our mission each month. We partner with other agencies and organizations to provide

programs and services that are sorely needed by women to enhance the quality of their lives, but which are often not accessible to those in the urban core. Women are referred to us by many area non-profit organizations located in Kansas and Missouri as well as former participants, area churches, government agencies, case managers, etc. All of our programs and services which seek to improve the quality of life for women in the urban core are offered at no charge.

Our funding comes primarily from the Benedictine Sisters who provide the three staff members. Monies for their salaries come from the income generated by other sisters as well as donations to the sisters for their ministry fund. Grants and donations to the Center assist with programming and operational costs. Catholic Charities and the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas provides the space at no charge.

Members of the Sisters' Monastic Council form the Board of Directors which approves the mission and oversees the budget. An advisory group includes women who have used the Center's services and meets monthly to carry out the organization's strategic plan, which includes goals such as program development and program evaluation as well as "friend" raising and marketing.

The Challenge

Our mission speaks to a holistic approach to the needs of those of living in poverty, especially generational poverty, because we know that women living in poverty lack not only money for utilities, rent, medical bills and food.*

- ◆ They also lack emotional resources – emotional energy. Many of the women we see are depressed and severely stressed. Many suffer from addictions or have been abused.
- ◆ A large number of women lack basic skills of reading, writing, arithmetic, and speaking; others lack a GED or high school diploma.
- ◆ Because of poor nutrition and lack of preventative health care, many women in the urban core lack good physical health.
- ◆ Poor women are isolated by their unsafe neighborhoods, or abusive boyfriends or husbands, or lack of transportation; they are often in co-dependent relationships and lack positive support systems and appropriate role models.
- ◆ In many ways the women we serve are smart. They know many things about basic survival such as where the best food kitchen is, how to survive without a telephone, or how to post bond. But often they don't know how to present themselves in formal situations. For example, they may need a job but don't know how to write a resume, or dress appropriately, or answer questions in a job interview.
- ◆ The women may be very religious but often don't see themselves as loved by God – or worthy of being loved by God;
- ◆ They lack beauty in their lives. And often they lack peaceful quiet.

*taken from "Framework for Understanding Poverty" by Ruby Payne

Impact

The Keeler Women's Center strives to meet the plethora of needs of women living in poverty:

- ◆ Hospitality and Peace: We offer hospitality and welcome, beautiful space, quiet music, fresh flowers and fruit. Many women come just to sit in the peaceful quiet. They tell us that they leave with renewed energy and ability to interact more peacefully with the children and others.
- ◆ Counseling: We offer counseling regardless of ability to pay. Evaluations indicate that women feel they are making significant progress in dealing with depression, stress and addictions.
- ◆ Tutoring: We provide tutoring in basic literacy for women and men.
- ◆ English: We offer very basic conversational English for immigrant women who desire to provide a better future for their children.
- ◆ Health: We offer programs to education women about basic health issues such as diabetes and we provide referrals to the safety net clinics. We schedule times when the poor can be pre-approved as a patient at Duchesne Clinic, which keeps them from using the emergency room when they simply need to see a nurse or a doctor. We partner with *Early Detection Works* to ensure that women can be screened for breast or cervical cancer.
- ◆ Education and Support: We offer education and support groups for women dealing with abuse, sexual assault, addictions, as well as for women who want to learn better ways of parenting, how to keep their house clean or prepare nutritious meals on a small budget, etc. Many women come for financial literacy classes.
- ◆ Employment: We offer assistance with the soft skills of preparing to look for a job – setting goals, addressing obstacles such as lack of child care or transportation, writing a resume, preparing for an interview, doing a job search, etc. We also offer workshops on dressing for success and make-up tips for the workplace. If women are coming regularly we are able to help them with haircuts/styles and take them shopping for clothes appropriate for the workplace or interview. Women report feeling more confident when they apply for a job. They learn the important habits needed to keep a job and many come back to us if they experience problems with co-workers or the boss and are tempted to leave a job. We help them find ways to address the issue without walking away from the job.
- ◆ Spiritual: We pray for the women every day and when they wonder where God is in all of this, we offer spiritual direction. Our Holy Women series helps a very diverse group of women (and men) reflect on "What is holiness?" and how very different women seek God. We welcome women of all faiths to prayer, programs, and to spiritual direction. We have served Christians and non-Christians. We never proselytize.
- ◆ Community Resources: We assist 80 - 90 women each month by offering referrals and advocacy to help them find assistance they need in any area of their lives

One Story

Laura (not her real name) came to the Center a year ago in October. That morning her husband had abruptly walked out on her. He left her with bills and debts. She was alone and terrified of what the future held. Her self-esteem had been crushed.

As she walked into the Center on that Thursday afternoon, Laura was crying – she was barely coherent. We welcomed and listened and responded. Because of her husband's risky behavior, one of the first things we did was make an appointment for her to have a physical exam, specifically, an HIV/Aids test. We made appointments for her to meet with our counselor and with Sr. Agnes for a massage on the first Monday of the month. We gave her bus passes. We helped her find assistance to get her lights and heat and water turned back on. Her husband had been very controlling. He had not allowed her to leave the house and her work skills were rusty. She registered for our 5-week Job-Seeking Skills program. She wondered where God was in all of this and signed up for spiritual direction. Soon she was taking advantage of a full array of programs offered. It took time but she gained confidence. With counseling for her depression, she began to look different. After she completed the Job-Seeking Skills series, she enrolled in the Keyboards to Success program offered by El Centro and began volunteering at the Center and at Catholic Charities in order to polish her skills and have something current to put on her resume. We provided her with job leads, a phone and fax machine. Last May she obtained a good-paying job with benefits and worked through the summer. She is very bright but, as a product of foster care, growing up had been difficult and her high school education was spotty. She did have a GED. She expressed a desire to go to college. We began tutoring her so she would be able to pass the entrance exam. We encouraged her to apply for financial aid and helped her apply for and win a scholarship from the Kansas City, KS Women's Chamber. Currently she is enrolled in her 2nd semester at Donnelly College. She's making A's and B's and is very proud of her accomplishments. Laura continues to come for counseling, for advice and support, for tutoring in algebra, and to volunteer. She is meeting weekly with our social work intern who is helping her address goals. Recently she completed the All My Money financial literacy program we offer. As she completed that program, we were able to give her \$100 from a small grant we had received so she could start a savings account. Our intern did some advocacy with a bank so that could happen. Her teen-age daughter is now coming for counseling and support. It is common for Laura to spend hours at the Center each week. Here she is surrounded by fresh flowers, fresh fruit, soft music, an orderly space. She is a very transparent kind of person and often we hear her telling her story to other women who need encouragement and support. Often we hear a kind of "I did it, you can, too!" tone in her voice that borders on tough love.

We are very proud of Laura and all she has accomplished. She is unique– not in her needs or the help we are able to provide – but because once she got started, it was full steam ahead. She is unique and yet she is every woman we see who finds herself in a situation that is beyond her control and beyond her resources. Many of the women we see are so depressed and their energy and confidence so low that they move more

slowly and it takes longer for them to accept the resources we offer. They may have more starts and stops. Every day Laura gives us inspiration and hope as we help women address needs that often seem overwhelming. As we fulfill our mission of “empowering women in the urban core through education, advocacy, personal and spiritual development.”

How You Can Help

We want to serve more women. To register for one of our programs, call 913.906.8990 or register on-line at www.mountsb.org/kwc/ .

We are also seeking additional volunteers to assist with hospitality and child-care. We partner with individuals and organizations that offer programs and services for women. If you wish to volunteer or partner with the Keeler Women’s Center, contact the director at 913.906.8990.

We also desire to increase our visibility in the metropolitan area and to diversify our funding by increasing our individual donor base and gifts from foundations and grants. Donations may be made to Mount St. Scholastica, Inc. for the Keeler Women’s Center. Or call 913.906.8990 for more information.