

Helping the Homeless at the Jersey Shore



Amanda Mehrman

A group of homeless individuals and guests of the Riverwood Cold Blue Warming Center, along with volunteers, gathered at the Town Hall in Toms River to watch Paul Hulse and Just Believe receive a proclamation from the mayor on behalf of the town to honor their dedication and hard work for the community.

While the Jersey Shore may be perceived by some as affluent, hiding behind the semblance of abundance is the grim reality of homelessness. The quiet yet sizable homeless populations of Monmouth and Ocean Counties have always struggled with securing the basics for survival, and the current pandemic has worsened the situation tenfold. Where can those who have lost everything turn for life's most basic necessities? Fortunately, help is available through three established organizations whose shared missions aid the area's homeless and most vulnerable residents.

Just Believe – Ocean County

Just Believe's CEO Paul Hulse long had a vision to assist the poor and disenfranchised in Ocean County, and in 2011, he brought the "Beat the Street" program he had started earlier that year in Florida to Toms River. Over the last ten years, his vision has become a reality and evolved into the nonprofit organization, a registered 501(c)(3) charity.

"What makes us different from other service providers is we think outside the box," Hulse explained,

"and seeing the lives affected by our work is what is most rewarding."

The organization provides a number of services to those in need and actively posts examples of their advocacy on their Facebook page. "Helping another collaboration to rehab. Waiting for intake," one recent post reads.

Volunteers regularly assist with finding temporary and permanent housing, providing drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, repairing or securing vehicles so that people can travel to and from work and appointments, organizing community meals and food distribution events, and coordinating with social services and other service providers.

"On average, we have served seven hundred families and individuals a week during the current pandemic by providing them with crisis boxes and meals," Hulse said, adding that Just Believe volunteers have worked in collaboration with both the Toms River Community Church and the Alive Again Alliance Church to feed the homeless of downtown Toms River seven days a week.

Hulse and Just Believe's staff and volunteers are a primary resource

for Ocean County's Code Blue Emergency Shelter Initiative, also known as Code Blue. Their work prompted the Township of Toms River to change the trigger temperature for when emergency shelter can be provided from 32 degrees to 35 degrees as well as statewide legislation passed in 2019 that raised the Code Blue trigger temperature from 25 degrees to 32 degrees.

"Our Code Blue shelter is the Riverwood Park Recreation Building in Toms River from November 1 through March 31, and it's open from 6:00 PM to 8:30 AM," Hulse explained. He noted that all Code Blue placements are screened before they are taken in, and those who need medical or mental health services are transported to the hospital. The current Code Blue shelter can accept a maximum of thirty individuals per night and is staffed by volunteers.

The organization successfully placed twenty-three homeless individuals into permanent housing during the 2018-2019 season, but there's more work to be done. "The Code Blue shelter is temporary, but our goal is to eventually build a permanent shelter facility to serve Ocean County. There's an established need that must be addressed, and that's what we hope to accomplish."



80-year-old Godfrey, once alone in a motel without food, found his smile in a small bag of clothes and safety in a nursing home that a Just Believe volunteer helped secure.

As a way to make their goal a reality, the Just Believe Boutique thrift store, located on Route 37 West in Toms River, opened in August with all proceeds earmarked for the Code Blue warming center and community outreaches. "People will support something if they know it's connected to something bigger, and our new boutique does just that," Hulse said.

Visitors to the boutique will notice a wall of pictures and an electronic photo slideshow filled with images of those helped by Just Believe and of their mission in the community. Many of Just Believe's volunteers were, at one time, aided by the organization. Hulse said, "The volunteers, they give back, and these pictures are the heart of what we're all about." With a steady stream of traffic since its doors opened, the store sells clothing and accessories as well as practical household items.

Just Believe is very transparent about the allocation of their funds. "We are a true and genuine 501(c)(3). We have accountability and a great rapport of making sure the public knows where their donations are being spent," Hulse said. "It's not about how much money is in our bank account; it's about how we can bless someone else."

Volunteer Amanda Mehrman, who handles much of the marketing and promotional work for the organization, has been with Just Believe since its inception. "I am grateful to be a part of this amazing organization and watch all of the lives that are being changed and affected by our impact in our community. We are living in a time where division is catching fire, but we are bringing water to that fight," she said. "We are reaching out, filling voids, connecting resources, and restoring hope. Most of all, we are bringing a voice to the voiceless, sight to the overlooked, and changing how people see the impoverished as we bring the focus back to our community."

Just Believe strives to eliminate the stigma and misconception about

homelessness. "People are people. They have a name behind their brokenness, and our current pandemic is only going to make things worse," Hulse said. "They might have been a lawyer, a wife, a husband before tragedy struck and they had nowhere to go and nobody to turn to. Our purpose is to provide support and bring hope to those in helpless situations."

Destiny's Bridge - Ocean County

Destiny's Bridge is another 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that evolved out of the former "Tent City" homeless encampments in Lakewood, and more recently, in Howell.

Led and founded by former Tent City coordinator and longtime advocate Minister Steve Brigham, Destiny's Bridge assists the homeless by providing shelter, food, clothing, and necessities, all of which are in more demand today because of the current pandemic. "Churches that hosted dinners for the homeless stopped having them. I'm getting daily messages of the dire need for food and water," Brigham said.



In Lakewood and Howell, tents in the woods have been serving as the primary home of many homeless people in the region.

In order to fulfill the growing need, Brigham makes the rounds each week to pick up donations at a number of drop-off locations, which are then distributed through weekly "Town Square" giveaway events in downtown Lakewood. "Destiny's Bridge is endeavoring to stand in the gap and fulfill a real and vital need in our community by supplying the basic needs of those who are homeless," he said.

Brigham sets up aisles of tables at

courtesy of Steve Brigham



People in need attending a Town Square giveaway event in downtown Lakewood. Organized by Minister Steve Brigham of Destiny's Bridge, volunteers pick up donations at a number of drop-off locations for the weekly events.

the weekly Town Square distributions with whatever food, water, clothing, and supplies have been donated throughout the week, and those in need are welcome to take whatever they need.

Just because the original Tent City was shut down by local officials in 2014, and the municipal land for its second and governmentally approved location in Howell was sold thus shuttering the camp in 2018, doesn't mean the homeless magically disappeared. Rather, the homeless Brigham assists are now more spread out. "Two or three individuals might be set up near each other in one area, where a family of five might live a mile away in a different section of woods," Brigham explained. "Yes, there's still a number of homeless living in tents in the woods. Most people drive by every day without realizing that someone's home is a tent right out of eyeshot, and our Town Square giveaways have a steady stream of needy people coming all day long."

Like Hulse, Brigham urges the public to abandon their assumption of the typical "homeless" stereotype. "These are people who want to work but either cannot land a job or do not have a way to get back and forth to a job," he said. "There was not one incident at our former Howell encampment that warranted a police call, and drugs and alcohol were strictly off-limits."

There's no doubt that the cost of living at the Jersey Shore is high, and

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many individuals are not able to earn enough money to make ends meet. "The homeless cannot move forward when there's no way to earn enough to pay for food or even a small place of their own. I know a mother with two adult children and all three work minimum-wage jobs, but together they do not earn enough to afford basic rent. These are hard-working people who want to do the right thing and carry their weight, but can't." Brigham said that the family goes from living in a tent to hotel rooms then back to a tent in the woods on a regular basis.

Brigham shared the stories of two homeless men, both named Michael, who recently passed away to illustrate the fact that the homeless rarely have access to medical care and are more susceptible to illness. "The first Michael, who was an original Tent City resident, lived in his tent outside a Lakewood church and was employed by one of the stores downtown. He fell and hit his head one evening but had no way to call an ambulance. He slipped into a coma and died. The other Michael lived in Neptune in the woods off Route 66 and had a seizure issue during the night. Friends found him the following morning, but it was too late."

Pantry hours and pick-up procedures changed as a result of the pandemic, which adversely affected the homeless population. "Without a car or a phone to call ahead for pickup, the new procedures tend to be difficult for many homeless to get food they used to rely upon," Brigham said. "We're busier now because we will help with such things."

Without organized meals at churches and the like as a result of the ban on indoor dining and gathering of groups, perhaps the pandemic's biggest impact on the homeless is the lack of social contact. "We're filling the gap by delivering food, but they miss that opportunity to just talk to people," Brigham said.

Brigham has long recognized the need for a permanent homeless shelter in Ocean County. "The cycle of living in hotels is a bottomless pit," he said. "If the money spent by the

government to house people in hotels was, instead, put towards a more permanent solution, such as accessible low-income housing, that would be a huge step in the right direction."

The need for tents, tarps, and basic necessities will continue long after the pandemic ends. "When someone tells me they need a new tent because the one they have was destroyed by weather, I'll make sure they receive a new tent immediately," Brigham said.

The colder months usher in a new set of needs for the people Brigham helps, including winter weather gear such as coats and jackets, gloves and hats, and sweatshirts. "We're accepting anything we can get our hands on, but the winter is really tough for these folks," he said.



The Jersey Shore Rescue Mission In Asbury Park.

fifty people a day with meals and shelters between fifteen and forty a night. The Mission has a strong, spiritual foundation, and with a strong community of believers, it is their hope that those they help will claim victory over their struggles.

"The Basic Needs program provides emergency overnight shelter, meals, showers, and clothing," said Phil Richards, Director. "The pandemic has definitely interrupted the usual flow of activity, and intakes for our program and shelter were put on hold."

Richards explained that while the Mission is returning to its previous flow, it has been a challenge because of changes with regards to procedures and service referrals. "We have continued to provide meals to the community on a to-go basis from our front door and our program and shelter are slowly taking in new men, but with restrictive guidelines," he said. "Those seeking help must come via a referral from social service agencies or hospitals and must prove COVID negative."

The Life Change Program is a long-term residential treatment program that lasts approximately nine months and offers a "hand up" rather than a "hand out" to men affected by addiction or other life controlling issues.

"One of the most exciting things that takes place is at our graduation, celebrating the men completing the Life Change Program," Richards said. "Every April, August, and September about fifteen men graduate from each class, and it's there that you will hear life changing testimonies."

Richards spoke of a young man named Clay, who stayed at the shelter just prior to the COVID crisis, to illustrate just one example of how the Mission extends a helping hand. "Clay never held a job and his social security card was lost when he was in grade school. After several attempts to help him, he was finally able to attain his social security card, and shortly after, he was able to obtain assistance from social services and find employment," he said. "Now Clay reads a Bible someone else from our shelter gave him, and he is very hopeful."

The health and safety of all shelter

HOW TO HELP



courtesy Phil Richards, JSRM Program Director

Program participants and shelter guests receive meals in the Jersey Shore Rescue Mission's dining room.

guests, program residents, staff, and volunteers will be of utmost importance moving forward with social distancing guidelines, frequent hand washing and sanitization, and daily temperature checks now standard operating procedures for all Mission activities and events.

In addition to what has already been donated by the public, profits from the onsite thrift store are allocated to the cost of meals, shelter, clothing, and essentials provided by the Mission. The store offers a variety of items in good condition for sale, including clothing, furniture, dinnerware, cookware, jewelry, and working electronics. The store has taken all necessary health precautions to ensure the safety of its community, customers, staff, and volunteers.

The Mission also serves as a Code Blue warming site during the day, and Richards expects the COVID precautions will be a challenge. "The cold weather draws people inside, and the added COVID risks will require additional safety measures," he said. As a way to prepare for the colder months, the Mission is preparing for their annual coat giveaway on November 21, where they distribute between five hundred and one thousand coats to the needy.

The Jersey Shore Rescue Mission's respect of each individual's dignity and its pursuit of excellence and integrity has guided their work to help those in need and will continue to do so, pandemic or not.

—Jill Ocone

JUST BELIEVE

P.O. Box 5441, Toms River, NJ 08754

(732) 279-6157

www.justbelieveinc.org

Email: Paul@justbelieveinc.org

Facebook and Instagram:

@justbelieveinc

Twitter: @JustBelieve087

Just Believe Boutique

734 Route 37 West, Unit 5

Toms River, NJ 08753

(732) 279-6157

Hours: 9:00 AM - 6:00 PM

Monetary donations are accepted through their website or by mail.

Interested volunteers can contact Paul at paul@justbelieveinc.org or Amanda at amanda@justbelieveinc.org.

Call the Boutique to inquire about donating the following: new and gently used clothing, jewelry, shoes, decorative items, purses and accessories, housewares, china, collectibles, and working electronics.

DESTINY'S BRIDGE

P.O. Box 692, Lakewood, NJ 08701

www.destinysbridge.org

Email: Destinysbridgefoundation@gmail.com

Facebook and Instagram:

@destinysbridge

Twitter: @DestinysBridge1

Monetary donations are accepted through their website, by mail, and through PayPal at Destinysbridgefoundation@gmail.com.

Interested volunteers should visit the website for information.

Items that are needed: tents, tarps, sleeping bags/blankets, pillows, propane heaters, propane refills (gift card for BJ's or Walmart), one-pound propane tanks, propane camping stoves, battery operated lights/flashlights, batteries (AAA, AA, C, D), paper towels, toilet paper, paper plates, plastic ware, trash bags, bottled water, hand soap, shampoo, canned goods (tuna, SPAM, vegetables, chicken), towels, washcloths, socks, new underwear, clothing (especially cold weather items such as hats, gloves, coats).

Drop-off Locations:

10 Bucknell Drive, South Toms River

Mon. - Fri. 9:00 AM - 6:00 PM; Sat.: 9:00 AM - 2:00 PM. Please leave items behind the van in the driveway.

72 Maxim Drive, Forked River

Please leave items in front of the garage.

1 Lorelei Drive, Howell

Please leave bags on the porch.

51 John McGuckin Drive, Brick

Please leave items on the front porch.

461 Aurora Drive, Brick

Please leave items on the front porch.

JERSEY SHORE RESCUE MISSION

701 Memorial Dr., Asbury Park, NJ 07712

P.O. Box 1289, Asbury Park, NJ 07712

(732) 988-0242; Fax: (732) 361-8194

www.jsrescue.org

Email: prichards@marketstreet.org,

shelter@jsrescue.org

Facebook: @jsrescue

Instagram: @jerseyshorerescuemission

Onsite Thrift Store:

(732) 897-5990

Hours: Tues. - Sat. 9:30 AM - 5:30 PM

One-time and recurring monetary donations are accepted through their website or by mail at the P.O. Box.

Interested volunteers should call

(732) 988-0242.

Donations of the following items are accepted onsite by appointment or call

(732) 807-3506 to schedule a pickup (available for furniture only). Please label your box with a category as follows:

Clothing Room: towels, washcloths, disposable razors, shaving cream, shampoo, conditioner, soap, lotion, toothpaste, toothbrushes, non-aerosol deodorant, first aid supplies, socks, t-shirts sizes L-XXL, slippers, pajamas, bathrobes size L-XXL, twin sheets, blankets, comforters, pillows.

Thrift Store Needs: items big and small in good condition including furniture, clothing, housewares, working electronics, collectibles, jewelry, accessories, small working appliances.

Kitchen: ground coffee, canned goods, dry goods, staples, powdered drink mixes, aprons, oven mitts, dish towels, sponges, paper products.

Academic/Administrative Aids: pens, pencils, spiral notebooks, pocket folders, backpacks, highlighters.

The Jersey Shore Rescue Mission also accepts donations of cars and trucks in running condition.



courtesy Phil Richards, JSRM Program Director
A sampling of the furniture for sale at the Jersey Shore Rescue Mission Thrift Store in Asbury Park.