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CONTACT: Judy Burr, Director  
Project Hope for the Homeless  
P.O. Box 2035/25 Freedom Road  
Painesville, OH 44077  
T: (440) 354-6417

August 12, 2009

Project Hope graduates get new support  
Aftercare program continues to meet needs

PAINESVILLE TOWNSHIP – When Tonya Deering completed an internship at Project Hope for the Homeless eight years ago through classes at Lakeland Community College, she never dreamed she'd return to work at the only emergency homeless shelter in Lake County.

She went on to complete internships at the Salvation Army and Forbes House before moving on to work in the social service field.

"I had been with my previous employer for six years, and the population was adolescents and young adults with severe behavioral issues and offending behaviors," Deering said. Her position as program director for multiple group homes was time-consuming, leaving little time for her own family, she said.

"That's why I knew that the Project Hope opening, a part-time position, was meant for me and my family," she said.

Deering began in June as the aftercare support worker at Project Hope, a position that was created in 2007 to address a gap in service for shelter guests ready to transition into their own housing, but without a support system in place.

Judy Burr, executive director at Project Hope, said often times, guests tried to sabotage their transition, knowing that once they left the shelter, they would be on their own.

"We have had between 50 and 60 aftercare clients each year," Burr said. "The recidivism rate has dropped as a result, and guests are maintaining their independence through the support of the aftercare support worker."

The position, which has been fully funded since its inception by the Ridgecliff Foundation, includes making regular phone and face-to-face contact with former guests, along with providing referrals for area services and monthly meetings with topics ranging from childcare and budgeting to healthy eating and addiction issues. Guests at Project Hope for the Homeless can stay for up to 90 days, provided they follow all of the rules and work to successfully improve their quality of life. Between 60 and 75 percent every year come in with mental health diagnoses, addictions or both. Despite that, more than 50 percent of the almost 300 guests transition into a better quality of life.

This number includes the 30 children who stayed in the shelter in 2008.

So far in 2009, there have been 151 guests, 11 of whom were children. Of those, more than half have transitioned to positive outcomes.

Deering said there is much she is looking forward to about the position.

"I really enjoy working with a mixed population," she said. "I really like coming in and working with the clients that are currently in the shelter to build relationships for the aftercare program. I'm going to try and be creative with the aftercare meetings and keep the past clients active and participating."

According to Program Director Denise Jones, that is something past clients are looking forward to throughout the growth of the program.

"The program has grown in several areas," she said. "One is the number of clients attending aftercare functions. We have seen an average of five to 10 people instead of two to five. Also, the number of individuals who are willing to participate in testimonies and programming is overwhelming."

Jones said there were several reasons Deering was hired for the position.

"Tonya has completed her internship here, at the Salvation Army and Forbes House, and is working on completing her social work degree," she said. "She was chosen based on her experience and enthusiasm for the direction in which she could take the program."

Guests, Jones said, are "begging to give back in many ways, including volunteering in the shelter, helping with food boxes and testimonies, leading Bible studies, participating in skits and offering ideas for further aftercare functions."

Several aftercare guests will be participating in a new ministry called Firebrands 11, which will feature those people who have crossed through trial and tribulation and want to share this with others. The group will have skits and artwork, and will travel to area churches and groups to share their stories.

For more information on this, or any of the opportunities available at Project Hope, call (440) 354-6417 or visit [www.projecthopeonline.org](http://www.projecthopeonline.org).

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PHOTO CREDIT: Submitted photo

PHOTO CUTLINE: Tonya Deering has been hired to lead the aftercare program at Project Hope for the Homeless, helping former guests successfully transition to and maintain a positive outcome.