

# Getting back on her feet

By Joseph Fitzgerald - The Call - October 16, 2009



*Michelle Normandiaz, a Woonsocket Homeless Shelter resident, greets her daughters, Janeisha, 6, left, and Mikeishla Fernandez, 7, after school Friday. Michelle credits Family Resources Community Action for her recent success.*

WOONSOCKET – A personal struggle with substance abuse coupled with a troubled economy and no job saw Michelle Normandiaz, a 31 year old single mother of two daughters, ending up in a homeless shelter this past spring for the first time in her life.

But the Woonsocket Homeless Shelter was not the place Normandiaz imagined it would be. She had always pictured homeless shelters as over-crowded facilities filled with hopelessness and despair. It was not the kind of environment she wanted her elementary school-age daughters living in.

What she found instead at the Woonsocket Homeless Shelter on Sayles Street, a facility for the homeless run by Family Resources Community Action, was a caring network of support that provided her with the training and resources she needed to help her get back on her feet with hope for a better future.

Family Resources Community Action Program case managers assist shelter residents like Normandiaz with healthcare, employment and establishing permanent housing. Help is also available for mental health issues, addiction, developmental delays in children, parenting and domestic violence. Case managers access services directly through Family Resources Community Action Programs or collaborative agreements with other local non-profit organizations.

“When I came here I was real stressed out, but the people here were so nice and were really concerned about helping me and my daughters,” says Normandiaz who came to the shelter on May 21<sup>st</sup>. “The day we arrived they gave us a room and some blankets. I felt very comfortable. It is a nice environment and the people here really care and want to help.”

Normandiaz and other shelter residents are hoping the community comes out Saturday to join Family Resources Community Action for its 21<sup>st</sup> Annual ShelterWalk to benefit the shelter. The event will begin and end at River Island Park on Bernon Street. The three mile walk route winds

around the city, passing the Woonsocket Shelter. Registration starts at 9am and the walk kicks off at 10 a.m. All walkers will receive a free t-shirt and refreshments and a raffle will follow the walk. Special speakers this year are Lt. Gov. Elizabeth Roberts and Smithfield Town Councilman Steve Archembault.

For over 20 years, Family Resources Community Action has provided emergency housing and support to help families and individuals transition to safe, permanent housing. The Woonsocket Homeless Shelter serves over 300 individuals a year, half of them children, many under the age of five. The shelter is open 24 hours a day, 365 days per year, housing nearly 80 persons per night through the shelter and six emergency apartments. Shelter stays are limited to 90 days, but can be renewed based on progress demonstrated by residents or impending permanent housing. Nominal program fees are assessed based on income.

Normandiaz, who is working with case manager Maria Williams and Harout "Harry" Diarbian, supervisor of shelter and transitional support services, says she was surprised by the intensive counseling and evaluation for people entering the shelter and the opportunities for contact between residents and staff members. In addition to securing housing, residents receive case management services to help identify and address their specific needs. Residents are linked to other services within the agency and community including life skills, parenting support, employment and training, GED and other educational support services, early childhood and after school programs.

Four months after moving into the shelter, Normandiaz's substance abuse problems are behind her, she's pursuing her GED, and she just began a new job at Wendy's on Route 146 – all accomplishments she could have hardly imagined a year ago.

Normandiaz lived in Woonsocket years ago, moved to New York City, and then came back to Woonsocket at the beginning of this year.

"My daughters were born in Woonsocket in 2002 and 2003 and then I moved to Providence where I didn't make the right choices," Normandiaz says. "I went to New York, got myself into a program and got my life together, then I came back to Woonsocket."

She lived for awhile with her sister and her children in Woonsocket, but ended up leaving because there wasn't enough room. With no job or income to speak of, she came to the Woonsocket shelter.

"I was hoping to find a place in the Glenark Landing apartments (on Sayles Street), but there is a waiting list," she said. "The shelter was my only option."

But she's come a long way in four months.

"I'm getting my GED through the shelter and I've got a job," she says. "I don't know where I'd be without Family Resources Community Action. If people find themselves in the same situation I was in they shouldn't be afraid to go to the shelter because there are people and resources there to help them."

Family Resources Community Action officials say this is a critical time, as statewide shelters are stretched beyond their limits and more families are at risk for becoming homeless due to the economic downturn, and increased costs of food, rent and utilities. Due to the support received through the Woonsocket Shelter, over 80% of the families served transition to permanent housing.