

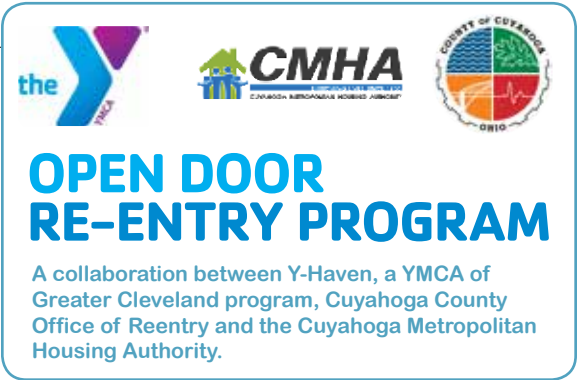


Reentry Review

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES • OFFICE OF REENTRY

Open Door is Changing Lives

Open Door Re-Entry Transitional housing opened its doors in late 2010 at 6001 Woodland Avenue as part of the Greater Cleveland Integrated Reentry Project (GCIRP) pilot program—a collaborative undertaking by the Cuyahoga County Office of Reentry, the Cleveland and Gund Foundations, and the United Way. At the conclusion of GCIRP, the Office of Reentry assumed financial responsibility for the program, which has blossomed into a one of a kind program made possible only through the unique collaboration among the Cuyahoga County Office of Re-entry, The YMCA of Greater Cleveland and the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority.



Open Door houses up to 45 men at a time who willingly take the opportunity to use the re-entry, sober- living environment to get on their feet and live law abiding lives. Program Director Jennifer Lasky will tell you, “This program is not for everyone.” She visits prisons, drug courts, treatment centers, and probation and parole offices on a mission to find formerly incarcerated men who are ready to live differently and make positive changes. She says she knows what works, and if the men are hopeful, patient and willing to listen to suggestions, she opens the door to them, willingly, but firmly.

Open Door is located on the eighth floor of the Carl Stokes building. They serve over 100 men per year. The men each share an apartment with one or two others. They cook, clean and live independently. Daily routine is a must. You must be working, going to school or finding employment. Lasky states, “This is not a flophouse.” To be admitted to Open Door you must be a male, over the age of 18, a Cuyahoga County resident, and have been incarcerated within the last six months, and have been working with a case manager for three months. To be successful, you must attend 3 AA or NA meetings weekly, pass random drug and alcohol screens, have no new criminal activity, and abide by the rules and curfew. Men willing to follow the rules get the opportunity to reside at Open Door for up to 18 months—rent free. After being a resident at least six months, the men are able to apply for their own CMHA apartment and their wait time is significantly less, having finished the program successfully. It is during the 6-18 month stay that change and growth begin to appear. Lasky says that when given the opportunity, men have the time they need to get a job which, with their criminal records, does not happen overnight. She goes on to say that child support, court fines, restitution, driver’s license suspension fees are being paid off as the men are not pressed to pay for the roof over their heads. Lasky firmly believes those outside agencies likely would never have seen any money from these men if this opportunity did not exist. The program, therefore, benefits not just the participant, but their families and the greater community (i.e., taxpayers) as well. In addition to paying their financial obligations, they can save for their security deposit, first month rent, furniture and other necessities.

The goal of Open Door, originally, was to reduce recidivism rates. In other words, if you give an otherwise homeless man a home and his basic needs are met, will he continue to commit new crimes? Lasky said that last year two men out of 110 were re-arrested and convicted for new criminal activity. She said those numbers absolutely prove that recidivism rates are lowered when men are given the opportunity of Open Door. The Office of Reentry is currently undertaking a recidivism study that includes the participants of Open Door, to see if alumni of Open Door continue to remain law-abiding citizens after completing the program.

Lasky, however, isn’t as moved by numbers as she is by the stories of her clients. Each client is unique and the lives touched by the program are not just those of their clients, but of their families. The heroin epidemic has changed the makeup of Open Door in the past few years. Lasky sees Open Door as extended sober living environment for the men she sees go from jail, to drug treatment and then into Open Door. These men have used up their families and become homeless upon exiting drug treatment. When they come from treatment to Open Door, they can continue to work on their sobriety, find new sober peers, attend meetings, and continue to battle the disease of addiction while working on making amends. Life Skills specialist Joseph Walls completed the Y-Haven drug and alcohol treatment program, another YMCA program located in the Carl Stokes Building. He guides the residents to meetings, facilitates Big Book meetings at Open Door and is a constant support to those seeking help with their recovery. Although Open Door does not provide treatment, 99 percent of the residents have past alcohol and drug convictions of some sort. Residents are mandated to attend 3 AA or NA meetings weekly.

Success Stories about Open Door Experience

Jeff still remembers wondering where he would go upon his release from Mansfield Correctional. He was headed back home to Cleveland, with no family and nobody he could count on to take him in. Jeff was 45, had six felonies and was being released for the sixth time. It was shortly before his release that his prison case manager mentioned a place called Open Door in Cleveland. Jeff took the opportunity to meet with Jennifer Lasky who he heard came to the prison monthly to meet with offenders who were being released and were homeless. Jeff said, "Ms. Lasky said Open Door was not a halfway house, all the clients were there by choice and I could live there for free while I got on my feet. I was skeptical but didn't have anything to lose."

Jeff came to Open Door very unsure about his future. He had very little money and his options were limited. He came in for intake with the clothing on his back and little else. He sat down with Lasky again and remembers her saying, "We are going to talk about your past criminal record this one time and then we are done with it, you are moving forward." Jeff quickly remembered how hard it was to find employment with his criminal past. Days turned into weeks and Lasky could see his frustration and worried he would go back to the only way he knew because things looked bleak. It was at that time Lasky heard the YMCA was looking for cleaning help. Jeff had the skill set to obtain the job and was hired as a cleaner for the YMCA. His paychecks help to pay off his parole fees, court fines and obligations, and his child support order is being deducted. Jeff says that with the help of having a stable housing situation he no longer looks for ways to make fast, easy money. He takes it day by day, paycheck by paycheck and lives a law abiding life.

Lasky said her hope for Jeff is that he takes the full 18 months to reside at Open Door because it will take time for him to pay off the wreckage of his past and he will need the rest of the time to save for the things he will need to have his very own apartment. Lasky says, "Jeff was given the opportunity of living at Open Door and he took it, not everyone can humble themselves enough to do it. He remains grateful, follows the rules, takes suggestions and I can't ask for anything else!"

Tony heard about Open Door while he was at CATS treatment center. Tony was on the road to getting clean from heroin addiction. Lasky was about two years in on the job when she met Tony. She still gets choked up talking about this man in particular. She remembers thinking, "I had never seen someone so broken." He was the son of a police officer, came from a good home, was a husband and a father and how he lost it all to heroin was devastating." Tony sat one day in her office and just recounted how he went from the Cuyahoga county jail floor, to treatment and was sitting in her office and had no clue how he was going to do this or IF he could do it. Tony's wedding band stood out to Lasky. Tony was married but was separated physically from her during jail and treatment and then it came out she too was in a women's rehab center for her drug addiction.

Tony's daily job was staying sober. He gives Open Door a lot of credit for giving him the time he needed to focus on his recovery. Tony said, "I was able to focus on finding the root of my troubles. Which for me was through AA and the 12 steps." He continued on taking his recovery day by day and found side jobs in snow removal and landscaping so he could make payments on his court costs and fines. Tony stayed 13 months at Open Door and was able to get assistance with future housing for him and his with through the Veterans Administration. Tony was able to pay off his fines and obtain his drivers license. He went on to trucking school and is now a Steel Hauler and loving his life. He is clean and sober now for 3 years and 11 months. He and his wife attend numerous meetings weekly and try to help others as much as possible. His gratitude is overwhelming. Lasky keeps a picture in her office of him as a reminder on her very hard days, that change is possible. Lasky said, "It's hard to see it some days, but I look over at him, in that picture with that huge smile knowing all he has accomplished and it gives me HOPE for all my guys."

Critical Performance Measures

Open Door Transitional Housing

Year	Metrics			
	# unduplicated clients served	# securing permanent employment	# securing temporary employment	# securing safe housing option
2013	78	24	11	17
2014	69	29	5	34
2015	92	39	14	27
2016 (Jan-June)	39	16	2	10
TOTALS	278	108	32	88

Jennifer Lasky

The Woman Keeping the Door Open

Since its inception, some 5 ½ years ago, the face behind (and in front of) Open Door has been its program director, Jennifer Lasky. She had the opportunity/responsibility to turn the concept of a supervised, independent transitional housing program within a sober-living environment, into a reality (see related story on p. 1). She has done all that, and more!

When it began as part of the Greater Cleveland Integrated Reentry Project, GCIRP service providers created a steady stream of referrals to the new transitional housing program. Once GCIRP and its successor Second Chance program concluded, however, it sometimes became difficult to keep the program operating at full capacity. Although there is many times the number of homeless male ex-offenders as there are beds in Open Door, the strict program prerequisites—release within the past 6 months, receiving case management services, agreement to being part of a sober living environment—recruitment became a problem. Jenn took it upon herself to make regular visits to a number of correctional facilities to promote the program and serve as case manager to interested individuals, so that they would be eligible for Open Door upon release. Today, there is a waiting list for admission to the program. Jenn has the uncanny ability to provide two, seemingly contradictory, qualities at once—she combines the nurturing of a mother with the toughness of a drill sergeant. The residents seem to appreciate both; they have come to both love and respect her.

In addition to her responsibilities at the physical premises, Jenn is the voice and face behind Open Door throughout the county and beyond. Lasky talks about the mission everywhere she goes. It is her hope that other counties will come forward to open similar programs for their residents. Lasky receives letters from prisoners all over the state asking to come to Open Door. She said it is hard to turn people away but knows we can't afford to take all the state's offenders. Lasky is filled with gratitude for the three agencies that continue to fund the program. She said, "Cuyahoga County is a pioneer in the re-entry field and should be the model for others."

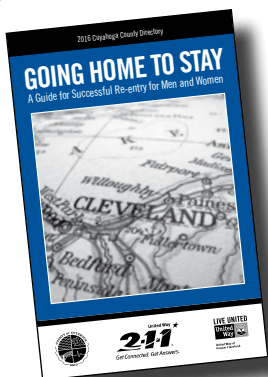
Lasky's commitment to the program far surpasses her job description. Every year she gathers alumni and current residents in November for a Thanksgiving celebration. She started the annual dinner so the alumni could come back and inspire the current program participants and one another, and share their stories of hope and success. She states, "It's my favorite day of the year!" How is she able to sponsor such an event, since it is not included in her budget? She gets her family and friends to prepare most of the food. The woman behind the buffet table, piling the food on the guest plates, with a big smile on her face, is Lasky's mom. Jenn isn't looking for thanks for what she does. Instead, she asks the men to write down what they are thankful for, so she can pass it along to the funders of the program. She says that without the continued financial support of The Cuyahoga County Office of Re-entry, the YMCA of Greater Cleveland and the Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority, this could not be possible. By all means she makes it known that the program works, is needed, and should be expanded and duplicated. The real challenge would be to duplicate Jenn Lasky.



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