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**NEWS**

# How a North Texas nonprofit addresses homelessness holistically

The McKinney-based program is the only one of its kind in the region.



Christina Belcher at The Samaritan Inn of McKinney. (Jason Janik/Special Contributor) (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)



By [Haeven Gibbons](#)  
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Christina Belcher woke up in her teal Hyundai Elantra after a restless night in the Albertson’s parking lot. The stay-at-home mom of two boys, a 9-year-old and a 13-year-old, couldn’t believe this is what her life looked like that July with her 33rd birthday around the corner.

Just six months after moving to McKinney by way of Oregon, along with her sister’s family, Christina separated from her husband — the fighting had taken its toll. She took her boys to her sister’s house and stayed there for a couple of nights, but the space was cramped and tensions were high. She searched Google for women’s shelters but couldn’t find anything other than Dallas homeless shelters.

“I’m not taking my boys there,” she thought.

She had an idea. With a \$20 bill from a birthday card her grandmother had sent her, she picked up her boys from her sister’s house and took them to a thrift store.



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“Something to take our minds off of everything,” she said.

Her boys browsed the shelves of Inn Style Resale Store for books and games. At the checkout a poster plastered to the wall read, “The Samaritan Inn.”

“What is that?” the young mother asked the woman who rang up their items.

“It’s our homeless program down the street. Everything that sells here goes toward the program,” she told her.

Christina checked herself and her boys into [The Samaritan Inn](#)’s last available family room the next morning. She’d spend the next four months finding a job, taking career classes and saving enough money to support her family on her own.

The Samaritan Inn is the only comprehensive program to help people overcome homelessness in North Texas, serving women, men and families alike, said Kellie Maynard, The Samaritan Inn’s chief development officer.

The program’s holistic approach is rooted in four key pillars: financial literacy, career, counseling and case management with the goal of helping willing people gain independence, Maynard said. As the largest provider of shelter in Collin County, she added, the program is key for much-needed support among a vulnerable population, especially as homelessness rises with increasing rents and ends to pandemic-era aid.

## How it works

Samaritan Inn started 40 years ago as a 10-bed men’s shelter. Today, 225 beds serve families, men and women — 30 family rooms can sleep up to six people, 10 female rooms and 10 male rooms can each sleep up to four people. On any given night, an average of 176 beds are filled with at least one-third of those being children.

During this year’s Jan. 25 point-in-time count, Collin County reported 516 homeless, with 402 people being sheltered, according to Heather Molsbee, chief program officer at Samaritan Inn. The Inn housed 38.8% of those who had shelter that night, Molsbee said.

All kinds of people go to the Inn for help — some are experiencing generational homelessness while others find themselves in their cars, hotels or on the street after losing a job or being unable to pay rent. While there is no time limit on the program, the average stay is 5½ months, but some stay for up to 18 months, Maynard said.



The Samaritan Inn of McKinney in McKinney, Texas, on Jun 1, 2023. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

“We really try to have a growth mindset of forward thinking and try to, in the best way we can, get them to that point where they can rebuild their lives,” Maynard said.



While staying at the Inn, residents are required to get a job within the first 30 days, each resident is assigned a counselor and a case worker to develop a plan, and classes are offered in things such as parenting, financial literacy and career development to help with interviewing skills and resume writing.

Over the past 40 years, the program has built a strong network with businesses within 10 miles of the Inn. That way, residents who don't have cars can bike to their jobs with bikes provided by the program. Residents work in anything from warehouses to banking jobs, Maynard said.



The job board at The Samaritan Inn of McKinney on Jun 1, 2023. (Jason Janik/Special Contributor) (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

A key to the program's success has been providing all resources on-site. In 2019, the Inn moved from its original location to a 15-acre plot of land donated by a local family, and expanded resource space.



A dining room cafeteria doubles as a space for other activities, like crafts for the kids and yoga. An intake area leads down a hall opening up to a lounge for families to hang out and watch TV. Near the lounge, there's a space to work on the computer, classrooms, a teen lounge, a play-area for kids and a chapel.

Three meals prepared by two full-time chefs are served each day with donated food from area grocery stores. About 60 lunches are also prepared each day for kids to take to school and parents to work.



Jane Lilliston (left) and Debbi Livingston make sandwiches at The Samaritan Inn in McKinney. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

## Rooted in dignity

At Samaritan Inn, dignity is vital, Maynard said.

Everyone has a badge, so you can't really tell the difference between those who work there and those who live there, Maynard said. This helps foster a feeling of community. Kids are the first ones to get on the school bus and last ones off, residents can shop for their own clothes with clothing vouchers at the Inn-style Resale Store and during the holidays, donors give to a \$10,000 gift card campaign that allows residents to shop at Walmart or Target for gifts.

In the summertime, volunteers help organize kids' activities like rock painting. This past spring, kids made tissue paper flowers. During the winter they'll make gingerbread houses and decorate cookies.



The children's playroom at the Samaritan Inn of McKinney (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

Volunteers also take kids to summer camps and sports games.



Maynard noted that this helps kids just be kids and helps parents focus on their work and classes.

"You can't get back on your feet until your mind is right," Christina said. "Samaritan Inn provided that sense of safety and security. I had peace, and that helped me to be successful."

When she was staying at the Inn in 2011, Christina would pick up food from the cafeteria and eat it outside picnic-style with her boys. It was just a little thing to help them create special moments as a family and create a feeling of dignity despite the situation, she said.

## Limitations to success

Space and funding are the biggest challenges staff face at the Inn.



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On most nights, the Inn is full and people are turned away. Maynard said space is tight because more people are staying longer, as rent continues to rise, and because it is the only program of its kind in the area.

So far, in 2023, the Inn has received 440 applications: 82 of those were family applications, 62% of which were denied due to no room. And 54% of single men and women have been denied for the same reason. In 2022, 973 applications were received: 52% of families were denied and 40% of single men and women were denied, both due to lack of space.

While physical space is an issue, Maynard said it always goes back to the funding: If the program had more money, it would build more residences on site.



Charles Nash prepares a room for an incoming family at The Samaritan Inn of McKinney (Jason Janik/Special Contributor) (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)



The program has an annual budget of \$5.3 million. Individual contributions make up 61%, program income makes up 14%, special events make up 12% and grants make up 13%. However, grants include city funding, which has dwindled in recent years.

“The funding we receive is integral to making this happen for all our residents — regardless of their starting point,” said Molsbee. “Although we receive funding from cities, the county or other governmental endeavors, their contribution doesn’t touch what we actually do for their residents who seek our assistance.”

To bring in extra funds, all proceeds from Samaritan Inn’s thrift store — which brings in \$650,000 a year — go toward the program. Samaritan Inn also hosts a big event each year, either a luncheon or a gala and has several online fundraising campaigns

“Our key to success comes from individuals, foundations, companies and our supportive community who recognize that our efforts should be devoted to the residents we serve, and not bureaucratic processes,” Molsbee said.



## Tracking progress

According to Samaritan Inn data, 50% of parents who stay for more than 29 days significantly increase their self-sufficiency, 65% of parents who complete required job readiness courses and training reduce their employment barriers and 65% of parents who complete required financial education courses and training increase their financial capability.

During Christina’s stay, she learned how to type, how to write a resume, got better at reading comprehension and learned about the basics of business. She got good at asking for help and building a support system.

“I was able to dial in on my learning because I wasn’t stressed about other things,” she said. “I’ve always been a person that goes after goals and dreams. I had just never had the opportunities.”



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Now, Christina has three kids, is a business partner at McKinney Fit Body Boot Camp, a business partner with Jumpy Parties and is one of the founders of McKinney Babes in Business, a company for empowering women business owners. She wrote a book and is an ambassador for The Samaritan Inn.

When residents leave the program, they can apply for the Gateway Apartments at reduced rent, however, no matter what apartment residents choose to move to, Samaritan Inn has partners who furnish the entire unit. Maynard said this costs anywhere from \$7,500 to \$10,000, as they provide everything from couches and mattresses to spoons, forks, lamps and towels, and residents get to take everything with them if they move again.

But it is a challenge to know if the people they help stay out of homelessness once they leave the program.

“Unfortunately, we do not have a great tracking system for those who leave us and whether or not they stay out of homelessness,” said Molsbee, who has worked at Samaritan Inn for 11 years.



She said that while the Inn has tried different ways to obtain follow-up information over the years, they have not found a reliable way to do so.

“Oftentimes, once they leave us, their door to homelessness has closed, and it’s not something they wish to revisit,” Molsbee said. “Others will change their emails and phone numbers and what we have is no longer valid. We will hear from past residents — both successful and not — but not in a strong, trackable way.”



[Haeven Gibbons](#), Staff, Reporter. Haeven Gibbons covers Collin County with emphasis on McKinney. She formerly worked as a summer intern with the Dallas Morning News Education Lab before receiving her Bachelor of Arts in Journalism with a minor in Spanish from Texas Christian University in December. She previously interned for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and AM New York.

✉ [haeven.gibbons@dallasnews.com](mailto:haeven.gibbons@dallasnews.com)