

## **An Integrated Approach With Real Impact**

By Jon Neschis

The first thing that strikes you as you enter Inspirica and approach the front desk is the impressive air of organization and professionalism. It feels and looks like an educational facility or an up-and-coming business' lobby, and with its proximity to downtown Stamford, Conn., it fits right in. What is Inspirica? It's a home, a school, and an office. But most of all, it's a place of hope.

Inspirica is built on the foundations of an organization that began in the late 1870s at St. John's Episcopal Church in Stamford to help the burgeoning immigrant community. Growing and adapting to the times, today, over 130 years later, Inspirica is the largest provider of services to the homeless in Fairfield County. The organization's motto reads Moving People from Homelessness to Home, and few organizations in the nation do this better. With programs to help clients find (and keep!) jobs and learn life skills - including money management, time management, and conflict resolution - to an incredible childhood development and parenting center, it's easy to see why Inspirica was the recipient of last year's \$100,000 Impact Grant- the first of its kind- from Impact Fairfield County, a collective giving organization.

Homelessness is a real issue in Fairfield County, though that might sound hard to believe when you consider its location on Connecticut's Gold Coast.

"It does seem counterintuitive," agrees Inspirica CEO, Jason Shaplen. "We live in Connecticut - one of the wealthiest states in the nation, in Fairfield County - one of the richest counties in the nation. And we're in lower Fairfield County, which is the wealthiest part of the county. How can you have homelessness?"

Nevertheless, the answer makes perfect sense. A key reason Shaplen cites: The cost of living has continued to soar and wages have remained stagnant - if not declined - in the state. Combine this with the fact that Connecticut still hasn't fully recovered from the jobs lost in the recession and you have a perfect setup for homelessness. Shaplen is quick to mention that homelessness went up 1 percent in 2016 in Fairfield County while it went down nationally and across the rest of Connecticut. More astound? Street homelessness increased by 35 percent in one year. The numbers declined in 2017, and although that's good news, and Shaplen is hopeful we're turning a corner, he's sobered by the fact that the numbers are still where we were in 2010 at the height of the recession.

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Those numbers are dramatic, but they haven't scared Shaplen and his team for searching for solutions to the problem. Inspirica has created a fully integrated one-stop-shopping approach to successfully deal with many of the core problems that come with varying levels of homelessness, from finding physical homes and jobs to teaching life skills.

"There are only 10 to 15 organizations around the country that do what we do - that manage to pull together the full residential side of homelessness combining it with the ability to address the underlying root causes of the issue and put them on the same platform," Shaplen points out. "When you do that, you eliminate gaps in service; you allow programs to leverage each other and get an exponential increase in your success rate."

Impact Fairfield County not only awarded Inspirica its first \$100,000 Impact Grant, but delivered them a new COO, Gina Mello. A member of the Impact Financial Review Committee and a participant in the grant voting process, Mello learned all about Inspirica when she accepted Shaplen's open invite to check out the facility first hand.

"Jason [Shaplen] issued an open invitation to anyone from Impact to get a tour. I came over, took the tour, and was absolutely blown away," admits Mello. In fact, she loved what she saw. "At the end of the tour I said 'if you need someone, I would love to help out.'"

Shaplen took Mello up on her offer to volunteer and consult and was soon impressed enough by her business acumen and dedication to offer her the COO position.

Mello and Shaplen both feel passionately about Inspirica's programs and how they help alleviate homelessness - especially the ones that help children. It's a sad study in socioeconomic cause and effect to see the lifetime of despair children face when their developmental skills are stymied at the most critical time of basic learning because of homelessness.

"Eighty percent of children in shelters don't read at grade level," Shaplen laments. "If you don't read at grade level by age 4, you have a 65 percent chance of ending up on welfare or in jail. So doing early childhood education for our population is crucial. For our infants to toddlers (0 to 2.5 years)," continues Shaplen, "it's less curriculum-based and more about development of fine motor skills. Our 2.5 to 5 year-olds are on an actual early Head Start curriculum."

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In a wonderful chase of charitable symmetry, it was the \$100,000 Impact Grant from Impact Fairfield County that helped to build the early childhood center within Inspirica, which makes it easy to see how important and meaningful winning the grant was. Shaplen breaks down the grant win in three equally important parts: "Part of it was the money, which is huge," he acknowledges. "Second is the validation. This was the 'it' award last year. Everyone wanted to win Impact. The validation means so much to us. And the third piece - but no less important - to winning the Impact Grant is that it brought Gina Mello to Inspirica."

"The past year our ECPP [Early Childhood and Parenting Program] has been a big success, one we could not have achieved without Impact Fairfield County's support," Shaplen enthuses. "The award has proved catalytic in terms of impact, and we are now fully operational and moving into the next phase of the program's growth."

Thanks to the program, 72 percent of infants/toddlers and pre-k children (ages 0 to 5) saw their communications scores within one month of entry—a 33 percent average increase in communications scores. And 50 percent of infants/ toddlers and pre-k children saw their fine/gross motor skills scores increase within one month of entry, with a 65 percent average increase in scores.

These inspiring numbers showcase the tangible difference the program is making and prove that the Impact Fairfield County's grant is a gift that will keep on giving, allowing Inspirica to positively affect multiple generations of Fairfield County residents. This reality is not lost on Shaplen: "Thoughtful, effective philanthropy is a really difficult thing to pull off well. This organization [Impact] does it supremely well. If you're new to philanthropy or new to the world of Impact Fairfield County, there is no better organization in terms of understanding where the needs are, how to achieve success, and how to make sure you're getting it done in the most thoughtful, impactful way possible."