



“ESPERANZA” A PLACE CALLED HOPE!

The economic downturn that has badly impacted the country for the past six years is finally turning around in many states, but Florida continues to lag in its’ recovery. One major reason is that Florida led the country with foreclosure rates and continues to lead the county as of mid 2014, according to RealtyTrac. Economists predict the foreclosure crisis in Florida will be with us for at least 5 more years, leaving former homeowners with limited options for living arrangements. Many families losing their homes to foreclosure have lost income due to job loss and salary cuts, others to predatory lending practices that took advantage of naïve first-time borrowers. They were often left with ballooning payments coupled with loss of house value, removing the option of a refinance. The one-two combination left the state of Florida, and especially the Tampa Bay area, with a significant and continued foreclosure rate of 24%. The national average at this time is only 8%. The combination of loss of income and/or bad credit due to foreclosure limits housing options for families, and in fact, the Tampa Bay area has seen a boom of homeless families with children in the past year. During the last homeless head count, over 20,000 children were counted homeless in Tampa Bay.

Housing & Education Alliance (HEA) understands that the effects of the economic downturn could have been lessened if we did a better job as a country and community of educating our youth and adults about financial matters. This is why we think it is time to roll out a project that will benefit those most vulnerable and who have suffered hardship with the current economic conditions and who would be most appreciative of a second chance at the American Dream.

The Esperanza Project will be modeled after an award winning housing project in Portland, Oregon. This successful model is an apartment style complex that not only provides safe, decent and affordable housing to its residents; but will also provide a series of supportive services empowering residents and arming them with the financial and social tools they will need to insure a brighter and successful future.

Esperanza is neither a homeless shelter, nor a long term alternative to homelessness, but rather a bridge from hopelessness, homelessness and homeless shelters to a more productive and successful future where new life skills are taught, nurtured and rewarded. Our residents’ goals could range from learning new skills that can help them secure more lucrative employment, or position themselves to purchase a home or even start a business of their own. Some residents may be ready to leave after a year and other residents can stay at Esperanza for a maximum of three years, depending on their level of need. When our clients are working our program of self-sufficiency, we estimate three years as the maximum amount of time for completion of their goals.

Most programs only trap their clients in another form of poverty. We believe **The Esperanza Project** will be successful in treating not just the symptom, but the cause of poverty; which is lack of education and training and by rewarding clients who successfully achieve goals.

The Esperanza Project will implement a Resident Leadership Committee made up of residents, HEA staff and other community participants to make decisions for the good of their community. This will help identify and nurture leaders so they can achieve their full potential and keep the community engaged so when they are ready to leave **Esperanza** they can take the values and responsibilities learned to other communities.

Residents at **Esperanza** will be required to pay market rent and have stable income. A portion of their rent will be set aside to help them achieve their goals. HEA will work to develop an **Individual Development Account (IDA)** to reward residents for working toward their savings and life skill goals. An **IDA** account offers matching their savings from 2 to 4 times the resident’s contribution. **IDA** accounts can be used for housing, transportation or education.

Esperanza is being developed to give a second chance to our target population of families with children, youth aging out of foster care and veterans. This target population will be focused on low to moderate income residents that have suffered a loss of home or job, youth aging out of foster care (18 to 21), and disabled or single parent veterans. All residents will be required to attend monthly financial capability workshops that will be age appropriate and will help residents develop and maintain new positive behaviors giving them a higher probability of financial success in the future. In addition to having age appropriate programs, all programs will be offered in both English and Spanish. Spanish only speaking residents will be required to attend English classes in order to integrate more easily into the general English speaking population.

Residents will identify short and long term goals and work with HEA staff to achieve those goals. Their progress will be tracked and monitored. Various industry-preferred financial tools will be used, some of which have age appropriate training as young as kindergarten and through adulthood. The financial topics that will be offered to residents include, but are not limited to, budgeting, understanding credit, avoiding predatory lending practices, identifying short and long term goals, responsible, attainable and sustainable homeownership, establishing a savings pattern and avoiding identity theft.

HEA will partner with **CareerSource Tampa Bay (CSTB)** to allow our residents to take advantage of their vast menu of programs in order to ensure a more holistic approach to the development of a more secure financial future. CSTB delivers classes to both youth and adults in resume writing, how to have a successful job interview, how to dress for success as well as job training programs for those wanting to learn new skills. A small bus or van will be acquired in order to transport residents to workshops and classes at CSTB.

Other partners will be **Wheels of Success**, a charity dedicated to giving vehicles in good working condition to their clients in order to help them broaden their options for employment. Most vehicles are given at no, to very low cost at zero interest to clients who can demonstrate they have adequate employment income to take on the additional expenses associated with automobile ownership. We will also work closely with **Metropolitan Ministries**, a local homeless shelter, as their residents complete and leave their program they could easily be candidates for residency in **Esperanza**.

At **Esperanza**, once approved a new resident is accepted and enrolled in our **"Prosperity Within Reach"** (PWR) program. They sign a contract stating they agree to attend monthly workshops and counseling meetings to monitor progress and receive more education and information. They are triaged to determine needs. Once needs are determined, they are referred to a partner service provider such as **CSTB**, or **Wheels of Success**. They are given a roster of classes to attend and are set up for their first counseling session. A resident must agree to abide by all the stipulations detailed in the contract including agreeing to move without resistance, or the need for eviction if they fail to comply with contract terms helping to ensure adherence to the program.

Esperanza means much more than building or rehabbing of some buildings. In truth, **Esperanza** is rehabbing lives and families that have been bruised and broken, knowing that when given a second chance at a missed opportunity, those chosen will grasp it with both hands and make a more valiant effort at succeeding.

HEA's **Esperanza** project will be a model that can be replicated throughout not only Florida, but the entire country, as it is a project whose time has come. It is our goal to provide a holistic approach and a nurturing environment to help elevate the lives of those most fragile of society who are deserving of a second chance. Through the **Esperanza** project we will not only bring hope to broken lives and build a sense of community, but help our families recapture the promise of America.

