

Angels House

The word “shelter” is sometimes used to describe Angels House. But the word doesn’t do justice to this transitional home for female veterans in Columbia, S.C.

Operated by Lutheran Services Carolinas with partial funding from the Veterans Administration, the goal of Angels House is to prepare residents for self-sufficiency, says Program Director Roberta Lockwood. Homes like Angels House are meeting a growing need: from 2006 to 2010, the number of homeless women veterans doubled.

The six residents of Angels House function as a family, sharing household responsibilities such as cooking and cleaning. They receive transportation to the VA Medical Center in Columbia and are also supported in their job searches and educational pursuits.

Lockwood, who initially got involved with Angels House through Christ the King Lutheran Church in Columbia, has been with the home since 2009.

A former Army drill instructor at Fort Jackson, Lockwood is a pragmatic mentor unafraid to dole out tough love when necessary. And Michelle Porterfield, for one, is grateful that she does.

Fighting depression before coming to Angels House, Porterfield had stopped showing up at work. Lockwood, she says, encouraged her to make amends with her employer and get her old job back.

For Porterfield, Angels House means peace of mind.

“I’m settled here,” she says. “My brain is relaxed. My mind is on working and doing what I have to do to get on my feet.”

Shelley Murray-Smith agrees that Angels House is a place to regroup.

“I was starting to live my life recklessly,” says Murray-Smith, a Navy veteran who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder last year. Medication and a women’s therapy group have given her the tools to manage her depression.

“I think it’s helpful if you use it in the right way,” she said of the support available at Angels House. “But you have to motivate yourself.”

Andrea Carlos, a former Navy operations specialist who has traveled the world, recently found herself homeless after her son started a fire behind their apartment complex. Her uncle recommended that she seek help from the Veterans Administration, which is how she found out about Angel’s House.

“I’m blessed and glad I’m a veteran and had this place to go to,” she said. “What if I wasn’t a veteran? Where would I be? I couldn’t imagine being in a shelter.”

Since it opened in 2009, Angels House has served 60 clients and has averaged a 75 percent success rate, Lockwood says.

Lockwood sometimes hears back from former residents sharing good news. One called to report that she had worked her way up from being a part-time Sam’s Club employee to supervising the whole tasting department. For Lockwood, hearing such stories makes it all worthwhile.

Story by Katie Scarvey, Communications Specialist