

ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS in the OCEAN SPRINGS COMMUNITY

An Overview of Recommendations

Prepared by the

Ocean Springs Homeless Council

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Introduction.....	3-4
II.	Executive Statement.....	4
III.	Definition of Homelessness.....	5
IV.	Philosophy behind the OSHC.....	5-7
V.	Ocean Springs Homeless Statistics.....	7-8
VI.	Map.....	8
VII.	Subcommittee Reports.....	9-11
VIII.	List of Recommendations.....	11-19
IX.	Additional Public Input.....	19-21
X.	Conclusion.....	21
XI.	Glossary.....	22
XII.	Members.....	23
XIV.	Identified Resources.....	24-40

I. INTRODUCTION

National statistics indicate that the unsheltered homeless population has surged by approximately 30 percent nationwide since 2016. The City of Ocean Springs has been no exception, experiencing a similar increase in the number of persons who appear to be temporarily or chronically homeless while regularly staying in the Ocean Springs community. Different geographic areas of our city are impacted by the issue of homelessness, each in ways specific to that given area of town. For example, the homeless population visible in downtown Ocean Springs seems to interact with the community in ways that are different from the patterns of the homeless population seen along the main highways or wooded areas in east Ocean Springs. Regardless of where they are staying in our community, homeless persons are unsheltered and vulnerable.

There is obvious and heartfelt community concern, compassion, and human empathy for any individual who finds themselves without a safe place to call home. Because of this, direct aid efforts are ongoing by individuals, organizations, and faith-based groups in Ocean Springs who seek to provide some comfort to those who seek assistance, and to those who do not.

Issues related to homelessness affect not only the homeless persons themselves, but these issues impact the community where they stay as well. Not addressing homelessness issues at this time has the potential to create deep and lasting negative implications for the growth of our city. Addressing these issues in a coordinated effort has the potential to change lives and to reveal the true character of this community.

In an effort to spark the process of developing an actionable plan to reduce existing incidences of homelessness, as well as to work to prevent future homelessness, Mayor Kenny Holloway and the City of Ocean Springs encouraged the formation of the Ocean Springs Homelessness Council (OSHC) in October 2021. This group was put in charge of studying existing homelessness in our city and developing a set of recommendations designed to improve our community's current and future response to this issue. The members of the OSHC have put forth considerable time and effort over a six-month period to form both short-term and long-term suggestions aimed at addressing the issue of homelessness through a communal lens. Like thousands of other cities across this country and around the world, the OSHC recognizes the complexities of this complicated social issue. There is no "silver bullet" or "quick fix" to this issue, making it incumbent on this Council to create a roadmap for our city to constructively address the issue of homelessness.

Since the crisis of homelessness impacts different parts of the community in different ways, the OSHC identified three main categories for discussion, ultimately creating three subcommittees:

- A Safer, Cleaner Downtown
- A Growing, Thriving East Ocean Springs
- A Fresh Look at Community Assets and Programs

With results gleaned through five full-council meetings, numerous subcommittee meetings, as well as input from both the general public and advocates across the city and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the OSHC now presents our community vision and action plan to (1) provide short-term and long-term suggestions to address the needs of the city's homeless population, (2) provide short-term and long-term suggestions aimed at reducing and preventing homelessness in Ocean Springs, (3) offer the outline of a roadmap to city leaders to assist them in developing and implementing policies and ordinances that will serve to connect those unsheltered and vulnerable in need of assistance with area resources available to assist them, and (4) to continue to protect, preserve, and enhance the assets that make Ocean Springs such a special place for residents and visitors alike.

II. EXECUTIVE STATEMENT

The following Statement is from the members of the OSHC Executive Committee:

This Overview of Recommendations to Address Homelessness could not have been produced without the generous assistance of the people of our Ocean Springs community. Just as has been proven time and time again throughout our history, the people of Ocean Springs truly care about this beautiful city we call home. Our Executive Committee wants to express our thanks to Mayor Kenny Holloway and the Board of Aldermen for their leadership in recognizing the need to address this important issue. We thank them and all other city leaders for taking the time to consider our recommendations. We firmly believe that if the recommendations presented in this outline are considered and become part of an actionable plan, the current homeless population numbers in Ocean Springs will be reduced as people find benefit through resources available to them and that the number of those among us who could experience homelessness can be reduced and prevented.

III. DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

One of the initial items on the OSHC agenda was to discover what all falls within the definition of homelessness. According to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), there are four categories for defining homelessness. They are as follows:

- I. Individuals who are living in a place not meant for human habitation (sidewalks, parks, woods, etc.), in an emergency shelter, in transitional housing, or are exiting a temporary residence where they stayed for up to 90 days after being in a shelter or a place not meant for human habitation.
- II. Individuals who are losing their primary nighttime residence (apartment, house, hotel, motel, etc.) within 14 days and lack the resources to find a different nighttime residence.
- III. Families with children or unaccompanied youth who have not had a lease or ownership interest in the last 60 days, have had two or more moves in the last 60 days, and are likely to continue to be unstably housed due to disability or multiple barriers to employment.
- IV. Individuals who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, have no other residence, and lack the resources to obtain other permanent housing.

IV. PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE OSHC

"Most of us in this room are one hurricane, one natural disaster, or one missed paycheck away from being homeless."

Those were the words spoken by Deacon James Lewis during the opening OSHC meeting on October 28, 2021. Although this statement seemed unsettling to some, it was agreed to be true for the vast majority of members present at this first meeting and deemed to be true for much of the population of our community. That remark from Lewis started the conversation that became the philosophy behind the Council's work over the six months of their effort and set the stage for what would prove to be an enlightening process for all involved. In simplest terms, the Council felt "There but for the grace of God, go I." As a result, we asked ourselves *should helping individuals who are homeless and willing to accept a hand-up not be considered a moral community responsibility?*

That being asked, the community of Ocean Springs — and any community for that fact — must recognize all factors, both the benefits and the liabilities

involved in the prospect of developing an effort to help the homeless. This is why the OSHC took the broad categories of homelessness referenced in Section III and narrowed them down even more so.

The OSHC identified the following categories of homeless individuals:

- Those who welcome help;
- Those who refuse help;
- Those who suffer from diagnosed and/or undiagnosed mental and/or physical health issues;
- Those who suffer from substance abuse;
- Those who have fallen victim to domestic abuse;
- Those who have temporary, negative situations such as financial downfall or familial issues;
- Those who lack identification;
- Those who have complicated legal or immigration issues;
- Those who cannot locate affordable housing;
- Those who choose to be homeless.

Every single one of these types of individuals — exempting those who refuse help and those who choose to be homeless — should be able to be matched with assistance to improve their current vulnerable status on the street.

The OSHC feels strongly that a majority of individuals experiencing homelessness desire a helping hand, rather than a handout. These recommendations, if enacted, can chart a route for those individuals with an opportunity to change their lives for the better, which will, in turn, result in an improved quality of life for them and for our city.

The OSHC recognizes and understands that Ocean Springs exists as a community-focused city with a strong mix of family, faith, tourism, and local businesses. Residents and business owners expressed concern about the negative impacts that can come along with a growing homeless population. We feel that if the recommendations in this document are followed and built upon, and if the community remains engaged in supporting this plan, any negative impacts will be lessened as many currently homeless individuals are transitioned to housing through available resources. Further, as the City, our faith-based community, and our citizens work collaboratively to address this common concern, this effort serves to promote the reputation of Ocean Springs as a close-knit and caring community.

It is important to remember that once the helping hand is extended, it will be up to each homeless individual to exhibit personal responsibility. The solutions we offer are not one size fits all, because not all persons who are experiencing

homelessness may be physically, mentally, or emotionally capable of making the best decisions available to them. Specialty skills and experience in direct care with the homeless population will be required to successfully work this plan. Creating a process that bridges the current gap between those in need and those resources existing to assist them is vital to the success of this plan. Part of this plan must include addressing transition assistance for those who are incapable of making decisions to protect themselves.

“At the end of the day, the Council has come to realize the most effective resolution for homelessness is for homeless individuals to recognize the value of taking some initiative to help themselves, assisted by advocates and skilled professionals on a person-by-person basis.” - OSHC Chair Joe Cloyd

V. OCEAN SPRINGS HOMELESSNESS STATISTICS

While the number varies contingent on whom you ask, the consensus is that the homeless population of Ocean Springs is not only prevalent but growing.

With the help of local churches, businesses, organizations, the Ocean Springs Police Department (OSPD), and the Ocean Springs School District (OSSD), the OSHC was able to locate some estimated numbers of homelessness across the community.

According to OSPD, there are 25 “hardcore” homeless adults within city limits, all of whom are male. According to John McCarty of the Open Doors Homeless Coalition, the organization’s unofficial count of homeless individuals in Ocean Springs stands at 14.

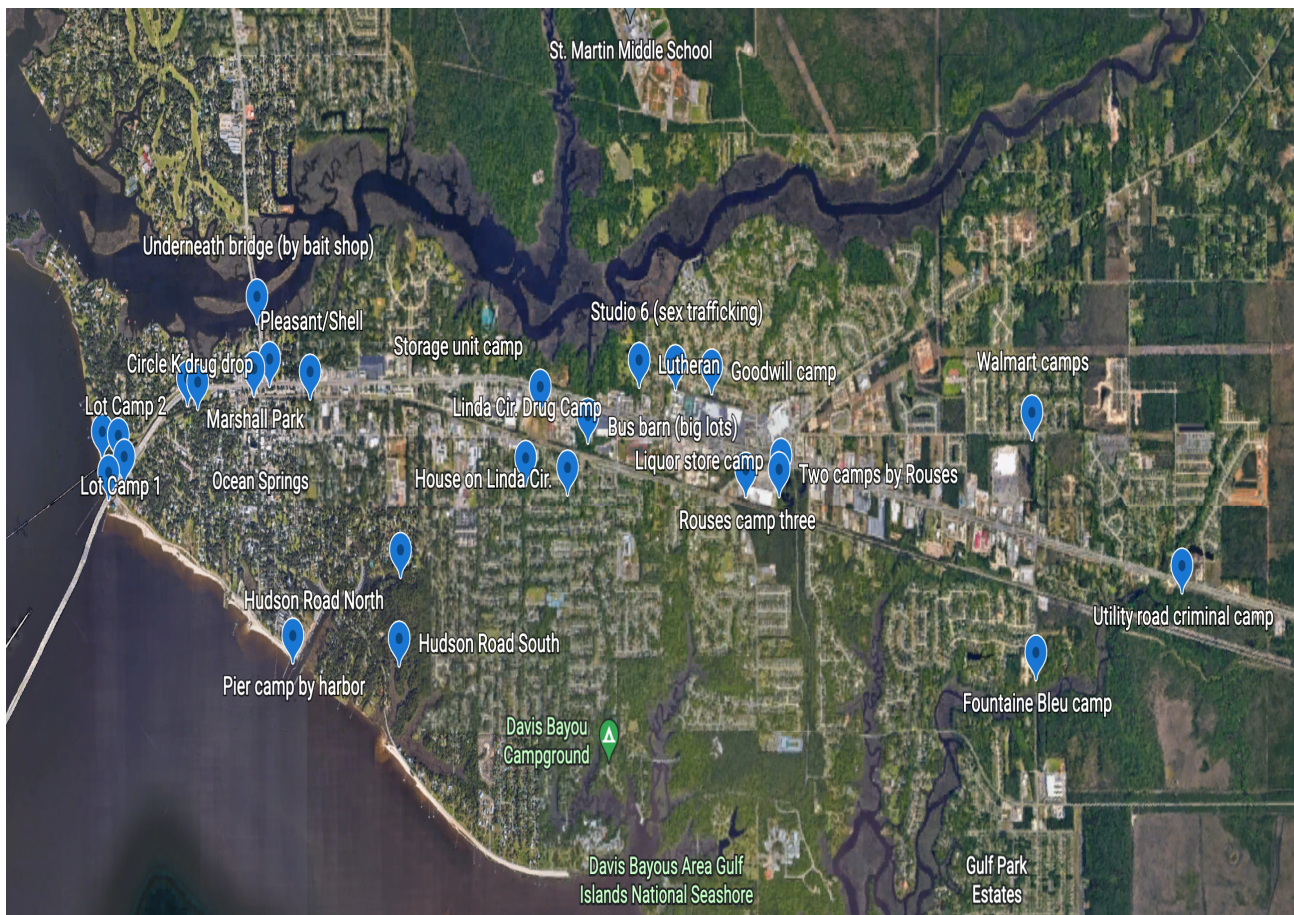
Adrian McCullum and Nancy Snodgrass are the core staff of *If My People*, a small but notable Jackson County organization that has been providing regular direct aid to area homeless for nearly two years. Their services include traveling to known homeless encampments in the Ocean Springs area and delivering food and basic supplies. According to *If My People* staff member Nancy Snodgrass there were 26 homeless camps in Ocean Springs as of March 1, 2022 (See Section VI). Each of these camps, accordingly, consists of approximately 10 to 12 individuals and is typically found in thickened forests or alongside railroad tracks and interstates. Snodgrass also mentioned that a majority of these camps are defined by similarities within the people. For example, she spoke about camps with alcoholics, camps with drug abusers, camps with females staying

together for the purpose of protection, camps with inner sex trafficking rings, etc.

Regarding homeless children in Ocean Springs, the OSSD's most recent numbers show that 37 adolescents fall under McKinney-Vento's definition of homeless children (those who "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence").

VI. MAP

The following is a map courtesy of staff with *If My People*. The map shows their estimation of the approximate locations of homeless encampments in the Ocean Springs area.



VII. SUBCOMMITTEE REPORTS

A. Downtown Task Force, Chairwoman Melanie Allen

The Downtown Task Force focused on identifying persons impacted by homelessness in the downtown Ocean Springs area. To do this, subcommittee members sought input from numerous sources that included business owners, religious leaders, residents of the downtown area, volunteers involved in direct aid to homeless persons, leaders of agencies who provide assistance to the homeless, local police officers, representatives of mental health and drug rehabilitation resources, representatives of community health resources, Board members of The Lord Is My Help, the staff at the Open Doors Homeless Coalition, as well as persons currently or chronically experiencing homelessness. The Ocean Springs Chamber of Commerce assisted with the electronic distribution of a survey to their membership, which helped further identify community and business concerns.

While these problems do not necessarily arise on a daily basis, business owners reported that they have had to deal with some of the following issues: erratic and/or frightening behavior from homeless individuals; run-ins with panhandlers who may or may not be homeless who approach patrons; unsanitary conditions created by those using public property and private property as restroom facilities, both during the night or in public during business hours; and in dealing with personal property, trash and debris left from encampments along the railroad tracks and other places. These issues are not unique to downtown but were reported to exist in the business and residential areas of downtown.

Business owners expressed their overwhelming concern for the individuals who experience homelessness and many stated that they currently provide help when they can to the homeless, some of whom they see on a daily basis and know stay in their vicinity. Many expressed a willingness to participate in any coordinated community effort to offer aid, such as by providing water, donating food, setting up donation boxes, etc. Most expressed their desire for a recognized community effort to address the issue as well as concern that without such a plan, our homeless population may continue to grow and potentially impact the positive image associated with Ocean Springs as a popular, tourist-friendly, and safe destination location.

Residents of streets near the entertainment district expressed concerns for safety and trespassing on private property. Many stated they did not know whether the issues they experienced were the result of actions by homeless individuals or by individuals using impaired judgment but felt their safety issues warranted concern.

From religious leaders and those involved in faith-based activities in the area, we identified that there are multiple efforts to address the hunger and comfort of the city's homeless population. We recognize there is a need to coordinate these efforts to maximize their impact on the population in need, as well as to minimize duplication of effort between groups.

Residents and businesses expressed that local parks and public spaces, specifically Marshall Park, wooded areas along the railroad tracks, and the public area under the highway 90 bridge, are regularly utilized as living and sleeping quarters for many of the area's homeless.

Business owners, religious leaders, and citizens of downtown Ocean Springs also stated that they recognize a need for simple and clear guidance on how best to interact with homeless persons, and how to most efficiently and effectively report a person deemed to be vulnerable, or in need of non-emergent assistance.

B. East Ocean Springs Task Force, Chairman Vincent Burke

The East Ocean Springs Task Force studied many of the same issues as the Downtown Task Force except they focused on the eastern portion of the city. Subcommittee members spoke directly with business owners, religious leaders, and residents in order to identify the impacts homelessness has on east Ocean Springs.

Like the Downtown Task Force, the East Ocean Springs Task Force found that there are multiple churches, organizations, and residents attempting to address the hunger and comfort of the city's homeless population. However, there is minimal coordination between those leading the efforts.

In speaking to residents and businesses, the East Ocean Springs Task Force received input that mirrors the input received by the Downtown Ocean Springs Task Force — that being most are worried about the continuation of a brand that the city has worked so hard to build. A key difference between homeless activities between downtown and east Ocean Springs was identified as panhandling. Nearly all major shopping centers and intersections frequently endure safety and nuisance concerns caused by panhandlers.

Subcommittee members also noted it is very clear that Ocean Springs, as a whole, lacks the necessary assets and facilities that other municipalities along the Mississippi Gulf Coast have already developed to address issues related to homelessness.

C. Community Assets and Programs Task Force, Chairman Josh Danos

The Community Assets and Program Task Force focused on identifying available assets and programs accessible in and around Ocean Springs. To do this, subcommittee members recorded input from the Open Doors Homeless Coalition, If My People, the Mental Health Association of South Mississippi, Singing River Health System, Coastal Family Health Center, The Lord Is My Help, Back Bay Mission, the Gulf Coast Center for Non-Violence, as well as a multitude of local churches.

Through conversations with the above organizations, it was found that, while most large-scale resources provided support in surrounding areas (predominantly Gulfport, Biloxi, and Pascagoula), there is little to no direct resources currently serving Ocean Springs, except for local non-profits like the Lord Is My Help, If My People, and the faith-based community.

Diving more so into that discovery, it was found that one of the reasons these large-scale resources do not have as much of a presence in Ocean Springs is due to the lack of communication between the City and these available resources.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

After listening to both public input and updates produced by each subcommittee, the OSHC presents the following recommendations for consideration by the City. The OSHC believes the combined effect of these listed actions can offer an affordable and efficient route to a reduction in the number of persons experiencing homelessness in Ocean Springs. Further, and perhaps equally as important, is the effect of this plan in serving to prevent the advent of homelessness for those individuals whose economic, health, and/or domestic situations make them imminently vulnerable to the loss of safe shelter.

A. Resource Directory with Web Links

Early in the learning process, it became apparent to the OSHC that no singular document existed that served as an up-to-date or comprehensive resource document listing all available information and sources of assistance for homeless individuals or those working with homeless individuals.

The council accessed an impressive, multi-page directory of community resources that was created several years ago by members of the Northwood Church in Gulfport. Working off the document from Northwood Church, we have attached a non-exhaustive resource directory at the end of this report. This document could serve as a starting point for creating an expanded up-to-date

resource directory, that can be shared on multiple platforms. To make contacting these organizations easier, the directory is categorized by specific homelessness issues.

The OSHC recommends that the directory itself or a web link to the directory should be available on the official website of the City of Ocean Springs (oceansprings-ms.gov), on the official website of the Ocean Springs School District (ossdms.org), as well as any other city-oriented or community-oriented websites that would like to do so.

Additionally, the OSHC recommends that first responders should each have a hard copy of the resource directory. This way, the appropriate organization can be called when aiding a homeless individual in a non-emergency situation. Further information on this is referenced in Section XIV of this document.

B. Coordination of Advocates

As noted in subcommittee reports from the Downtown Ocean Springs Task Force and the East Ocean Springs Task Force, there are multiple churches, organizations, and residents attempting to address the hunger and comfort of the city's homeless population.

"Local churches can only do what local churches know about, and a lot of times, it could be repetitive of what somebody else is doing," Rev. Mike Barnett explained.

Members of the OSHC agreed that the effectiveness of this effort could be improved if a local multi-denominational group was formed with the help of the City to coordinate the efforts of these valuable faith-based initiatives. The OSHC recommends the City's official website could feature a "Want to Help?" button that leads to a spreadsheet with donation sign-ups and drop-off locations. It would be logical for this button to be featured on the same page as the resource directory.

The OSHC also recommends City Hall be used for the initial coordination meeting between churches, organizations, and other advocates. At this meeting, a spreadsheet would be created, instructions on how to edit the spreadsheet would be distributed, and advocates and advocacy groups would discuss their respective donation goals and how to accomplish those. After the initial meeting at City Hall, following meetings and efforts would be held at churches or other venues throughout the city.

This coordination group, along with City leaders, should prioritize encouraging community members to donate to the organizations involved, rather than directly to homeless individuals. Direct donations not only create a tendency among homeless individuals to spend money quickly – partially due to not having a way to save money – but also attract more homeless individuals.

The OSHC's worry is that if citizens and tourists increase direct donations, the homeless population could multiply. The alternative of designating one's donations to local advocacy organizations provides a lasting and more efficient solution to the structural issue of homelessness.

C. Modified City Ordinances

Residents across the city expressed concern about the negative impacts homeless individuals have on parks and public spaces, as mentioned by both the Downtown Ocean Springs Task Force and the East Ocean Springs Task Force.

In order to reduce and prevent these negative effects, the OSHC recommends the City adopt ordinances and policies that:

- Enable or increase enforcement of City regulations regarding vagrancy and/or disruptive behavior in parks and public spaces. *Ordinance.*
- Transition public park benches into benches that do not have a back and have armrests down the length of the bench to discourage sleeping. *Policy.*
- Encourage local and out-of-town property owners to allow public works and/or the police department to disrupt homeless camps on private property. *Policy.*
- Prevent panhandling within 50 feet of an intersection or business. *Ordinance*
- Limit access to outdoor electric outlets and water faucets by locking them. *Policy*
- Improve lighting and maintenance of shrubbery of public property. *Policy.*
- Require the locking of dumpsters or dumpster enclosures at bars and restaurants unless they are actively being used. *Ordinance.*

D. Hiring of a Homelessness Outreach Coordinator

Members of the homeless population often exhibit characteristics such as mental and emotional instability, vulnerability, and insecurity. When these forces are added to conditions brought about by financial poverty, many individuals

experiencing homelessness seem to not have much, if any, trust in people who are not also experiencing homelessness. Fear of change or of a loss of control over their own lives prevents many homeless from interacting with representatives of agencies who seek to provide assistance. This existing gap between those in need and those offering assistance must be bridged for any plan to be effective.

The OSHC has vigorously considered methods to create a more functional relationship between the City and the homeless population of Ocean Springs. Members agreed that the most efficient method to bridge this gap would be to establish a Homelessness Outreach Coordinator position within the City. The position could be filled by an employee or through a contractual agreement.

This person or organization should have skills and previous experience working directly with members of homeless populations. The Coordinator's main responsibility will be to serve as the primary point of contact for non-emergency interactions between the City and the area's homeless. Currently, the police are the primary contact for all issues regarding homelessness in Ocean Springs. While the OSHC strongly encourages an increased local presence from agencies like the Open Doors Homeless Coalition, Back Bay Mission, Coastal Family Health Center, and the Mental Health Association of South Mississippi, we recognize the limitations of these resources. A City Coordinator designated to triage the situation and connect the homeless with the best-fitted resources would be invaluable. The Coordinator will be responsible for documenting the need of a specific person deemed homeless and connecting the homeless individual with appropriate resources. The goal of this effort will be to document the needs of the individual and to begin the effort to transition the individual from their vulnerable, unsheltered situation to housing.

Another key responsibility of the Homelessness Outreach Coordinator would be to work closely with OSPD, relieving police from being solely responsible for dealing with calls involving homeless individuals in need.

The Homelessness Outreach Coordinator would also serve as the City's main representation at monthly meetings held by the Open Doors Homeless Coalition, which promotes networking amongst homeless resources and advocates from across the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The Open Doors Homeless Coalition, whose offices are in Biloxi, is designated by the Department of Housing and Urban Development as the region's Continuum of Care agency. The Continuum of Care program promotes and supports a regional, community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness. The program provides funding to Open Doors to support efforts by non-profit providers and state and local governments to quickly rehouse homeless individuals and families while minimizing the trauma and dislocation caused to homeless individuals, families, and communities by

homelessness. The program promotes access to and affects the utilization of mainstream programs by homeless individuals and families. The program optimizes self-sufficiency among individuals and families experiencing homelessness. It is vital that Ocean Springs consistently participates in this effort in order to ensure that our community receives any and all support it should in addressing the needs of our homeless population.

At each of these monthly Open Doors Coalition meetings, homeless services and advocates connect with the main goal of working together to address homelessness on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. These meetings are crucial in terms of the appropriation of local and federal funds. The Coordinator would provide updates to City Board meetings regarding the status of the fight to reduce and prevent homelessness in Ocean Springs.

The OSHC recommends the City consider working through an experienced local non-profit to engage a Homelessness Outreach Coordinator on a contractual basis.

E. Revisioning Marshall Park

The Historic Ocean Springs Association (HOSA), a respected local non-profit organization, manages the public Marshall Park green space located at the gateway into downtown. HOSA members acknowledge that they constantly deal with the effects of homeless individuals who reside in the Park, both during daylight hours, and overnight. While HOSA volunteers remain sympathetic and caring towards these homeless individuals, the organization acknowledges disappointment that the influx of homeless individuals has diminished the general public's use of the beautiful and historic area. HOSA has experienced mistreatment of the Park by homeless individuals, citing the almost daily removal of trash and debris. Damage to benches, lights, the Park's sprinkler system, and the historic bandstand has been the result of abuse and overuse by homeless individuals.

HOSA states that Marshall Park is and will always be a public green space welcome for all to enjoy it as long as one's behavior is not abusive to the Park or to the public. This guidance goes for anyone, not just homeless individuals.

Marshall Park was gifted to the City of Ocean Springs by the Lemon family in 1998, with HOSA named as stewards of the property through 2038. Because the Park is owned by the City, the OSHC recommends the following actions be taken by HOSA and the City together:

- Provide an appropriate decorative fence around the perimeter of the Park with a method to close the entrance to the Park from dusk until dawn, as is consistent with all other City parks.
- Improve visibility into the Park by increasing lighting and by selectively removing vegetation within the Park.
- Add signage that outlines rules of behavior for all who wish to enjoy the Park.
- Improve the relationship with the City Police Department, so that City rules and ordinances involving public behavior within the Park are enforced to protect both Marshall Park and the public.

F. Homeless Education Programs

The need for increased public education on issues related to homelessness became apparent early in the OSHC process. Considerable conversation during Council meetings focused on the need to develop and publicize an efficient way for concerned persons in Ocean Springs to report and bring attention to unsheltered and vulnerable persons.

Circling back to the belief that many homeless individuals have minimal trust in persons who are not also homeless, it is important for community members to become knowledgeable of simple and efficient methods of how best to communicate with and/or about homeless individuals in an effort to connect the person with resources.

For that reason, the OSHC recommends the development and distribution of homeless educational messages released as public service announcements. These messages should have the goal of introducing and reinforcing correct contact information that the public can use to report issues related to homeless individuals. Developed by the City with input from staff at Open Doors, the Homeless Outreach Coordinator, members of the Police Department, residents, and business owners can be taught effective procedures regarding interaction with homeless individuals, how to report a homeless individual in need of help, and how to report a homeless individual who is trespassing on private property, among other issues. Perhaps a community campaign with a memorable telephone contact number like "OS CARES" could be developed.

The OSHC also recommends that members of the police department receive ongoing training on current laws and protocols regarding law enforcement's response to the homeless. Recent court adjudications across the nation regarding dealing with homeless populations require law enforcement to work within legal parameters. While efforts to humanely transition individuals who are endangering themselves by being outside during instances of frigid weather,

officers must constantly be aware of the personal rights of homeless individuals. Resources that are available or not available in the community will often dictate what an officer can or cannot do in dealing with vulnerable, unsheltered persons. Ongoing training is required to ensure that officers are sensitive to the needs and rights of homeless individuals while also enforcing community laws. Homeless education courses will also be essential for the implementation of the strategy set forth in this document. As previously stated, the community must remain fully engaged if the reduction and prevention of homelessness in Ocean Springs are to happen.

G. Community Human Resources Center

The final and perhaps the most important recommendation of the OSHC is for the City to establish a resource center, serving those who are homeless and to provide information about resource programs for those who may be on the verge of temporary homelessness. The goal of the Center will be to provide temporary shelter and transitional assistance to those homeless individuals who are seeking or need aid.

The Community Human Resources Center should be appropriately sized to address homeless issues of the Ocean Springs population and should be centrally located, ideally proximate to the public safety complex on Highway 90. The Center should be staffed by one or more persons and in coordination with representatives of local social services and non-profit organizations. Staff will need to possess social work skills and be capable in this environment as motivational interviewing will be vital for this transitional environment.

The Resource Center need not be a large facility, reducing the possibility of serving to attract homeless individuals as more than a transitional Center. Estimated to require approximately 1,800 square feet, the OSHC recommends the Resource Center have three components: a multi-purpose in-take area, a commercial kitchen (ideally operated by a local non-profit), and two modest sleeping quarters.

The multi-purpose area should contain washers and dryers, showers, a water fountain, individual lockers, and limited access to a public computer. The lockers will offer safety for possessions. The location can provide a temporary mailing address for homeless individuals as an address is an important step toward accessing benefits. Without an address, individuals cannot receive forms of identification, disability benefits, Social Security payments, or Veteran's benefits. Bank accounts are often required to collect everyday wages from employers and are impossible to open without an address.

Regarding the two small sleeping quarters, the Council recommends this portion of the facility have separate exterior doors, whereas it would not be internally connected to the multipurpose area or the commercial kitchen. Ideally, the two bedrooms would share a Jack and Jill bathroom with each bedroom having a facility-based bed, a dresser, and a kitchenette. The OSHC has worked with the staff of the Open Doors Homeless Coalition to envision a draft facility model that is similar to those that have worked successfully in other cities across the nation.

The Open Doors Homeless Coalition received federal funding in 2021 sufficient to provide over \$7 million in rental subsidies during that calendar year along the Gulf Coast. Open Doors has agreed to work with the City of Ocean Springs and the planned resource center to place willing individuals into homes through their rapid rehousing model. Mary Simons, Open Doors CEO, explained that without sleeping quarters as such, homeless individuals in Ocean Springs will more than likely never make it to permanent housing.

"Instead of going back outside, a person can stay there for two to four weeks while we're working on a connection to affordable housing," she said. "What all of us want to do is prevent homelessness where we can, make any bout of homelessness very short, and get people into the solution."

In terms of funding for the construction and continued maintenance of such a resource center, the council has identified federal and state resources that the City could qualify to seek for the construction of such a facility. During discussions of this project, multiple local faith-based and non-profit organizations have already offered to dedicate a portion of their donations to support such a local resource center in Ocean Springs.

Additionally, with the Open Doors Coalition organization submitting a yearly Continuum of Care document to HUD aimed at sufficiently addressing the needs of our coastal communities, Ocean Springs should be able to offer and submit proposals for housing and services programs specifically for our community.

H. The Lord Is My Help

Over the course of the OSHC meetings and subcommittee meetings, we had the benefit of input from several Board members and staff from The Lord Is My Help, The LIMH was founded as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization in April 1983. Their location is 1205 Desoto Street in downtown, as it has been for over 30 years. As the Board of Directors of the LIMH stated in a letter to the OSHC, "The Mission of The Lord Is My Help, Inc. is to provide, in a spirit of faith and love, nourishing meals and a food pantry in an atmosphere of acceptance and

caring for those in need in the geographic area of Jackson County, Ms, west of the Pascagoula River.” Currently, we understand that the Lord Is My Help serves nutritious meals to an average of 10-15 homeless individuals daily at their resource location in downtown Ocean Springs. Their on-site meal service constitutes a very small part of the mission of The Lord Is My Help. Their primary service is to serve Meals On Wheels to hundreds of elderlies and shut-ins in our community.

To foster conversation, the OSHC shared a draft of this report with the LIMH through their Board Chair. A copy of the letter of reply from their Board is attached as a reference to this report. An earlier draft of this OSHC report did indeed include wording as to the LIMH organization’s current location, and a desire to see the LIMH be supported as part of a new Resource Center, which we have envisioned could include expanded commercial kitchen facilities for their use. Our draft report did state that we feel the LIMH location will likely become even more challenging over time from a transportation and logistical perspective. When the LIMH was founded by generous people of this community all those years ago, it is undeniable that downtown Ocean Springs was not as it is today. The physical location of the LIMH is now at the center of the business and entertainment districts of this city.

The OSHC does recommend The Lord Is My Help strongly consider moving or expanding its operations to a more geographically central location in town, and becoming a key part of the proposed Community Human Resource Center. Should The Lord Is My Help choose to relocate their operations, the OSHC recommends the City of Ocean Springs provide equal or better leasing terms within the newly constructed resource center. If The Lord Is My Help chooses not to relocate or expand its operations, the OSHC recommends The Lord Is My Help consider suspending or significantly reducing the on-site meals served at its downtown location as meals will be readily available at the new centrally located resource center.

IX. ADDITIONAL PUBLIC INPUT AND CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout the six months of their work, the OSHC has offered multiple outlets for public input including the opportunity to attend and participate in Council and subcommittee meetings, the publication of an email address that sent messages directly to the Executive Committee, and the distribution of a survey open to all Ocean Springs Chamber of Commerce members. These routes allowed the OSHC to receive input from nearly 100 sources.

While all of the recommendations in Section VIII spurred from community input, below is a list of further input that was presented to members of the OSHC.

A. Public Restrooms

Several members of the public and the OSHC suggested public restrooms are needed in the downtown area, as well as in all City parks. Regarding City maintained parks, restrooms are already available at six of the 12 parks. If the City of Ocean Springs Parks and Recreation Department decides to install and maintain bathrooms at all public parks, the OSHC Executive Council feels that action should be in response to the needs of park users, and not as a means to specifically address the needs of the homeless population. If the City determines a need for public restroom facilities aimed at the comfort of shoppers and visitors to the City, that need warrants consideration as well.

That said, public restrooms available to the homeless population are a priority to the OSHC Executive Council. Restrooms and shower facilities are included within the recommendation that the City considers the construction of a staffed, non-congregate resource center serving the homeless population.

B. Removal of Park Benches

During the process, it was suggested that public park benches be removed entirely. The OSHC executive council believes all people deserve the dignity of the right to rest and removing all benches should not be an option.

Nevertheless, members of the Council also understand the truth in complaints received that homeless individuals in Ocean Springs often monopolize, sleep, and seemingly live on public benches. Because of this, the executive council recommends the City transition public park benches into benches that do not have a back and have armrests within the length of the bench.

C. Mobile Showers

Mobile showers for homeless individuals have proven successful in many places across America, including Jackson, Montgomery, and Birmingham. The OSHC executive council decided, that instead of bringing in a nonprofit to provide showers for a temporary period of time, showers should be provided to the homeless population of Ocean Springs all of the time. That is why showers are included within the recommendation that the City allows for the construction of a staffed, non-congregate resource center in Ocean Springs.

D. Expansion of CTA Routes

Another suggestion was the expansion of Coast Transit Authority (CTA) routes in Ocean Springs. With the CTA being a nonprofit provider of public transportation, it is up to CTA officials to use their discretion in the alteration of routes in Ocean

Springs. Currently, Route 7 can be used to get across town to Walmart, which is a retailer already playing a huge role in aiding the homeless population of Ocean Springs. The OSHC does recommend that routes, schedules, and the CTA Riders Guide should be posted at the non-congregate resource center. Staff at the center can assist individuals with questions about the transportation system.

E. No Trespassing Signs Throughout the City

Private property owners, as well as renters, have the right to post “no trespassing” signs on buildings, premises, or land. As that is already allowed by 2010 Mississippi Code 97-17-97, the OSHC executive council did not include a suggestion that “no trespassing” signs be encouraged by the City in its final recommendations.

X. CONCLUSION

The OSHC would once again like to thank each and every person who contributed their time and talents over the six months of this planning project. The work that was put in was intended to be the foundation of a community plan that has the potential to impact many lives for the better. The community's intent and empathy are obvious, and we believe will undoubtedly be reflected in the results of all efforts to address homelessness in Ocean Springs. The OSHC firmly believes if the seven main recommendations are accepted and are incorporated into a city plan with the support of an engaged community, the coercion will inevitably result in the reduction and prevention of those experiencing the cruelty and vulnerability of homelessness in Ocean Springs.

XI. GLOSSARY

Continuums of Care are local planning bodies responsible for coordinating the full range of homelessness services in a geographic area, which may cover a city, county, metropolitan area, or an entire state.

Homeless describes a person who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (for a full definition from HUD, see Section III).

Facility-based beds refer to beds located at a specific site, or multiple sites, that are owned, operated, or sponsored by a homeless assistance provider for emergency shelter.

Individual refers to a person who is not part of a family with children during an episode of homelessness. Individuals may be homeless as single adults, unaccompanied youth, or in multiple-adult or multiple-child households.

Motivational interviewing is a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with particular attention to the language of change. It is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person's own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion

Point-in-Time Counts are unduplicated one-night estimates of both sheltered and unsheltered homeless populations. The one-night counts are conducted by Continuums of Care nationwide and occur during the first portion of a calendar year.

Rapid Rehousing is a housing model designed to provide temporary housing assistance to people experiencing homelessness, moving them quickly out of homelessness and into permanent housing.

XII. COUNCIL MEMBERS and PARTICIPANTS

Joe Cloyd, OSHC Chairman
Melanie Allen, Downtown Task Force Chair
Vincent Burke, East Ocean Springs Task Force Chair
Joshua Danos, Community Assets & Programs Task Force Chair
Mindy McDowell, Executive Committee Member
Alwyn Luckey, Executive Committee Member
Rev. Mike Barnett, Executive Committee Member

Rebecca Alston
Hema Bahakta
Kimberly Barta
Joyce Battle
Nicole Bedsole
Jennifer Burgess
Dana Clark
Pamela Cox
Trinette Crump
Kay Daneault
Terry Dickson
Mark Dunston
Heather Eason
Mike Ezell
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Derek McCoy

Adrian McCullum
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Theresa Mohler
Bill Moore
Jan Munn
Stephen Parks
Paul Perkins
James Pennington
Monique Rigdon
Barbara Ruddiman
Bruno Schroeder
Nancy Snodgrass
Susannah Snyder
Kait Sukiennik
Cynthia Sutton
Alma Waller
Amy Weaver
Lisa White
Karen Whitley
Jaklyn Wrigley

XIV. IDENTIFIED RESOURCES

The resources identified through the attached directory have all proven to be helpful across the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The listed resources should be a starting point for creating an expanded, more Ocean Springs-oriented directory that can be shared on multiple platforms. While this directory is categorized with the goal of making communications easier, it is worth noting that the bulk of the organizations listed below serves in more than one capacity.

A. Financial Assistance

Jackson County Department of Human Services

Phone: (228)769-3380

Website: www.co.jackson.ms.us/197/Human-Resources

Address: 2915 Canty St., Pascagoula, MS 39567

Jackson County Food Stamp

Phone: (228)769-3275

Website: www.mdhs.ms.gov/economic-assistance/snap/

Address: 5343 Jefferson Ave., Moss Point, MS 39563

Harrison County Department of Human Services

Phone: (228)897-5790

Website: mdhs.ms.gov

Address: 10260 Larkin Smith Rd., Gulfport, MS 39503

Gulf Coast Community Ministries

Phone: (228)868-8202

Email: gulfcoastmin@cablone.net

Website: www.gulfcoastministry.net

Address: 3914 15th St., Gulfport, MS 39501

Harrison County Community Action Agency

Phone: (228)896-1409

Alt. Phone: (888)603-4222

Website: www.gccaa.org

Address: 500 24th St., Gulfport, MS 39502

Jackson County Civic Action Center

Phone: (228)769-3292

Website: www.iccivicaction.org

Address: 5343 Jefferson Ave., Moss Point, MS 39562

Living Well Ministry

Phone: (228)875-1869

Email: livingwellministry@stpaul.org

Website: www.stpaulos.org

Address: 2820 Government St., Ocean Springs, MS 39564

Back Bay Mission

Phone: (228)432-0301

Email: backbaymission@thebackbaymission.org

Website: www.thebackbaymission.org

Address: 1012 Division St., Biloxi, MS 39530

Catholic Social and Community Services, Inc.

Phone: (228)701-0555

Alt. Phone: (855)847-0555

Website: www.catholiccharitiesbiloxi.org

Address: 1450 North St., Gulfport, MS 39507

Consumer Credit Counseling Services

Phone: (800)850-2227

Alt. Phone: (866)889-9347

Website: www.moneymanagement.org/credit-counseling

Address: 2598 Pass Rd., Suite G, Biloxi, MS 39531

Hancock Resource Center

Phone: (228)463-8887

Website: www.hancockhrc.org

Address: 454 Highway 90, Suite B, Waveland, MS 39576

El Pueblo – Program of Seashore Mission

Phone: (228)436-3986

Website: www.elpueblo-ms.org

Address: 856 Division St., Biloxi, MS 39530

Fatherless and Widows

Phone: (228)234-4567

Website: www.fatherlessandwidows.org

Address: 420 E. Third St., Long Beach, MS 39560

Goodwill Industries of South Mississippi, Inc.

Phone: (228)863-2323

Website: www.goodwillms.org

Address: 2407 31st St., Gulfport, MS 39501

Jackson County Salvation Army

Phone: (228)762-7222

Website: www.salvationarmy.org/msgulfcoast

Address: 3217 Nathan Hale, Pascagoula, MS 39581

St. Vincent De Paul Society – Our Lady of Fatima Conference

Phone: (228)388-1837

Email: fatimasvdp@bellsouth.net

Address: 314 Jim Money Rd., Biloxi, MS 39531

The Nourishing Place

Phone: (228)596-1186

Website: www.thenourishingplace.org

Address: 606 Tennessee St., Gulfport, MS 39506

United Way for Jackson and George Counties

Phone: (228)762-8557

Website: www.unitedwayigc.org

Address: 3510 Magnolia St., Pascagoula, MS 39567

B. Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens

The Lord Is My Help

Phone: (228)872-2331

Email: info@thelordismyhelp.com

Address: 1205 DeSoto St., Ocean Springs, 39564

Feed My Sheep

Phone: (228)864-2701

Website: www.feedmysheepgulfport.org

Address: 2615 19th St., Gulfport, MS 39501

Feeding the Gulf Coast

Phone: (228)896-6979

Website: www.bayareafoodbank.org

Address: 1501 34th St., Gulfport, MS 39503

Long Beach Community Food Pantry

Phone: (228)861-1291

Address: 21081 Johnson Rd., Long Beach, MS 39560

Our Daily Bread Food Pantry

Phone: (601)928-1668

Address: 227 First St., Wiggins, MS 39577

Hancock County Food Pantry

Phone: (228)861-1291

Address: 21081 Johnson Rd., Long Beach, MS 39560

Loaves and Fishes

Phone: (228)436-6172

Address: 1015 Division St., Biloxi, MS 39530

Meals on Wheels

Phone: (228)868-2311

Alt. Phone: (844)822-4622

Website: www.smpdd.com

Address: 9229 Highway 49, Gulfport, MS 39503

Our Daily Bread Soup Kitchen

Phone: (228)769-7510

Address: 3502 Old Mobile Highway, Pascagoula, MS 39567

Twelve Baskets Food Bank

Phone: (228)822-0836

Email: twelvebaskets@biloxidiocese.org

Website: www.catholiccharities.org/twelve-baskets-food-bank

Address: 333 Cowan Rd., Gulfport, MS 39507

Women, Infants, Children – W.I.C. Harrison County

Phone: (228)863-1036

Website: www.fns.usda.gov/wic

Address: 23453 Central Dr., Saucier, MS 39574

St. Vincent De Paul – Community Pharmacy

Phone: (228)374-9097

Website: www.svdprx.org

Address: 715 Division St., Biloxi, MS 39533

C. Housing Help

Community Care Network (Sue's Home)

Phone: (228)215-2662

Website: www.ccnms.org

Address: 7400 Fontainebleau Rd., Ocean Springs, MS 39565

St. Alphonsus Catholic Church

Phone: (228)875-5419

Website: www.osstalphonsus.org

Address: 502 Jackson Ave., Ocean Springs, MS 39565

Open Doors Homeless Coalition

Phone: (228)604-2048

Email: info@opendoorshc.org

Website: www.opendoorshc.org

Address: P.O. Box 4716, Biloxi, MS 39535

Arukah House

Phone: (251)550-0679

Alt. Phone: (228)762-9402

Website: www.arukahhouse.org

Address: 10501 Saracennia St., Moss Point, MS 39562

Biloxi Housing Authority

Phone: (228)374-7771

Website: www.biloxihousing.org

Address: 330 Benachi Ave., Biloxi, MS 39530

Seashore Mission, Inc.

Phone: (228)436-3986

Address: 856 Division St., Biloxi, MS 39530

Shepherd of the Gulf

Phone: (228)229-8980

Email: shepherdofthegulf@netzero.net

Website: www.shepherdofthegulf.org

Address: 14156 Lumpkin Rd., Gulfport, MS 39503

Interfaith Hospitality Network

Phone: (228)388-3061

Address: P.O. Box 8562, Biloxi, MS 39535

Gulf Coast Rescue Mission

Phone: (228)388-3884

Address: 2750 Mission Ln., Biloxi, MS 39531

Mississippi Regional Housing Authority No. VIII

Phone: (228)831-2992

Website: www.mrha8.org

Address: 10430 Three Rivers Rd., Suite C, Gulfport, MS 39503

Rebekah's House

Phone: (228)388-3061

Email: rebekahshouse@outlook.com

Website: www.rebekahshouse.org

Address: 136 Pine Grove Ave., Biloxi, MS 39531

D. Addiction Services

Alcoholics Anonymous

Website: www.aa.org

Address: 705 Rayburn Ave., Ocean Springs, MS 39564

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Helpline

Phone: 1-800-662-4357

Website: www.samhsa.gov

Gulf Coast Region of Narcotics Anonymous

Phone: (601)202-9393

Address: www.mgcana.org

The City of Refuge for Men

Phone: (601)766-5033

Alt. Phone: (251)234-3093

Website: www.corformen.org

Address: 272 Weeks Rd., Lucedale, MS 39452

Youth Villages – Biloxi Location

Phone: (228)354-9700

Website: www.youthvillages.org

Address: 1635 Popp's Ferry Rd., Suite E, Biloxi, MS 39532

Singing River Hospital – Ocean Springs

Phone: (228)818-1111

Website: <https://singingriverhealthsystem.com/areas-of-care/drug-and-alcohol-treatment/>

Address: 3109 Bienville Blvd., Ocean Springs, MS 39564

Singing River Services – Stevens Center

Phone: (228)769-1280

Website: <https://singingriverhealthsystem.com/areas-of-care/drug-and-alcohol-treatment/>

Phone: (228)769-1280

Address: 4905 Telephone Rd., Pascagoula, MS 39567

Home of Grace Addiction Recovery Program

Phone: (228)826-5283

Website: www.homeofgrace.com

Address: 14200 Jericho Rd., Vancleave, MS

Crossroads Recovery Center

Phone: (228)863-0091

Website: www.gcmhc.com

Address: 15094 County Barn Rd., Gulfport, MS 39503

New Beginnings Recovery Home

Phone: (228)863-0091

Website: www.nbrecoveryhome.com

Address: 2311 5th Ave., Gulfport, MS 39501

Biloxi Treatment Center

Phone: (228)207-1248

Website: www.newseason.com/clinics/biloxi-treatment-center

Address: 1989 Pass Rd., Biloxi, MS 39531

Mississippi Drug and Alcohol Treatment Center

Phone: (855)334-6120

Website: www.mississippidato.com

Address: 13251 Reece Bergeron Rd., Biloxi, MS 39532

E. Children and Pregnancy Services

Gulf Coast Family Counseling Agency

Phone: (228)875-6113

Email: gulfcoastfa.m.ilyc@hotmail.com

Address: 509 Jackson Ave., Ocean Springs, MS 39564

CASA Jackson County

Phone: (228)762-7370

Website: www.jccasa.net

Address: 4903 Telephone Rd., Pascagoula, MS 39567

Women, Infants and Children

Phone: (228)539-4220

Website: www.wicprograms.org/ci/ms-gulfport

Address: 12451 Deadeaux Rd., Gulfport, MS 39503

Women's Resource Center

Phone: (228)897-8958

Email: info@wrcgulfport.org

Website: www.wrcgulfport.com

Address: 9155 Lorraine Rd., Gulfport, MS 39503

Boys & Girls Club Jackson County

Phone: (228)818-0518

Website: www.bgcjcga.org

Address: (228)818-0518

March of Dimes

Phone: (228)896-0886

Email: smoore@marchofdimes.org

Website: www.marchofdimes.org

Address: 1092 Acadian Dr., Suite 1, Gulfport, MS 39507

Moore Community House

Phone: (228)436-6601

Website: www.moorecommunityhouse.org

Address: 684 Davis St., Biloxi, MS 39530

F. Domestic Violence Programs

National Abuse/Neglect Hotline

Phone: (800)222-8000

Gulf Coast Women's Center for Non-Violence (Adrienne's House)

Phone: (228)-762-8267

Website: www.gccfn.org

South Mississippi Child Advocacy Center

Phone: (228)868-8686

Website: www.mycanopy.org

Address: 2315 17th St., Gulfport, MS 39501

G. Other Resources

Bethesda Free Clinic

Phone: (228)818-9191

Website: www.bfhcd.com

Address: 6912 N. Washington Ave., Ocean Springs, MS 39564

Boat People SOS

Phone: (228)436-9999

Email: daniel.le@bpsos.org

Website: www.bpsos.org

Address: 181 Lemeuse St., Biloxi, MS 39530

Mississippi Access to Care

Phone: (28)868-2312

Alt. Phone: (844)822-4622

Website: www.mississippiaccesstocare.org

Address: 9229 Highway 49, Gulfport, MS 39503

Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services – Vocational Rehabilitation

Phone: (228)575-3795

Website: www.mdrs.ms.gov

Address: 13486 Fastway Ln., Suite D, Gulfport, MS 39503

Retired Senior Volunteer Program

Phone: (228)896-0412

Alt. Phone: (228)861-0007

Website: www.co.harrison.ms.us/directory

Address: 842 Commerce St., Gulfport, MS 39507

Volunteers in Medicine – Gautier

Phone: (228)497-9713

Email: vimg72@att.net

Website: www.vimgautier.org

Address: 2550 Indian Point Pkwy, Gautier, MS 39533

Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act – SCSEP

Phone: (228)868-2311

Alt. Phone: (800)444-8014

Website: www.smpdd.com/workforce-services/senior-community-service-employment-program

Address: 9229 Highway 49, Gulfport, MS 39503