

## **Healing a Community From the Inside Out: How Bridgeway's Social Workers Are Advancing Minority Health Care in Union County**

In Union County, New Jersey, the path to mental health and wellness is not the same for everyone. For residents in the county's predominantly minority communities, particularly Black, Hispanic, and working-class families, accessing care has historically meant navigating weeks-long waitlists, a lack of culturally appropriate services, and a system that often exacerbates urgent care needs into full-on emergency room crises or worse, law enforcement intervention. The barriers have been insurmountable for many families.

At the forefront of confronting this challenge are the social workers of Bridgeway Behavioral Health Care, who are redefining what it means to advance minority health care through on-the-ground action, advocacy, and systemic reform.

The need in Union County is acute. Recent needs assessments consistently identify mental illness and substance use as the top health concerns in the county.

Healing from the inside out is Bridgeway's superpower. With the help of Woods System of Care, Bridgeway's affiliated umbrella company, the organization's new Center for Outpatient Services and Substance Use Treatment at 567 Morris Avenue, in Elizabeth, is expected to open this summer. The social workers at The Center will be ready to confront barriers to access by scheduling appointments when people are available, and providing culturally competent care. The Center will offer walk-in urgent care. Their goal will be access to clinicians and prescribers within 24-48 hours from when a person first walks in the door. As for other barriers, Bridgeway's social workers will begin by honoring each person's individual needs and involving them in their own care and treatment.

For a minority resident in crisis, this immediate access and personalized care can mean the difference between getting help and ending up in the criminal justice system.

Bridgeway's social workers meet people where they are, which can mean truly listening to people who are seeking a new path. It can also mean offering appointments before and after a person's work hours, offering telehealth appointments, or meeting people in places where they feel safe.

Bridgeway programs, Homeless Outreach Support Team (HOST) and PATH, take social workers to the streets of our communities, building trust with individuals who are experiencing homelessness and serious mental health challenges.

What truly defines the social work role at Bridgeway is the focus on the *whole person*. They connect clients to supportive housing, employment services, and educational support, the stability factors that are essential for long-term mental wellness. Bridgeway is on the forefront of providing integrated care.

Opening a Center for Outpatient Services and Substance Use Treatment in the City of Elizabeth, the city where Bridgeway was founded more than 50 years ago, has been a priority for Bridgeway since the pandemic had a limiting effect on in-person care. By renovating a long-standing, well-known facility, and involving themselves in the community, Bridgeway's social workers are ensuring that help is not just available, but that it is anti-stigma, secure, accessible, and rooted in the culture of the community.

At The Center in Elizabeth, social workers at Bridgeway will not just be service providers, they will be the architects of a more equitable and responsive mental health system for minority populations.

Throughout March, we celebrate Social Work Month, a time to honor the professionals who champion human rights and uplift the most vulnerable among us. Social workers don't just respond to crises; they build bridges to resources, advocate for systemic change, and empower individuals to overcome life's greatest challenges. This month, we recognize their unwavering commitment to strengthening our community, one *whole person* at a time.