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## **Brunswick agency's proactive approach keeps families on their feet**

Ocean Isle Beach | To hear Bruce Talbott tell it, a helping hand supports you in a time of need and deserves payback so others can reap the benefits.

Talbott and his two school-age children are among 50 families whose fortunes and futures are being changed by a supportive housing program begun this summer by Brunswick Family Assistance. Finding himself on the verge of eviction because of the vagaries of unemployment, divorce and single parenthood, Talbott, 35, says he's better able to care for Bruce Jr., 6, and Sabrina, 5, after finding a job - and a way back to stability - with BFA's help.

The nonprofit emergency assistance agency, which once championed opening a homeless shelter in Brunswick County, provides housing and social services for the families that once faced homelessness, said executive director Joe Cannon.

The E. Richard Gerety Supportive Housing Program is designed to stabilize at-risk families and provide services and training to get them back on their feet, Cannon said.

So far, the program has helped 34 families find homes through a two-year commitment of rent support, and others have received partial or one-time subsidies, he said.

"Sometimes it's cheaper to cure rental eviction or foreclosure than to find new places," Cannon said. From the sale of a house once proposed as a homeless shelter, the BFA board of directors set aside \$100,000 in an escrow account to start the program.

Talbott stopped at BFA offices in Shallotte this week to deliver rent money - income earned from the custodial job procured for him by BFA at Brunswick Community Hospital.

Talbott said he hopes to repay the helping hand he got from BFA.

"It's not easy being a single parent. But in two years, I hope to be out of debt and be able to have my own place, land and everything," he said.

His outlook stems partly from the fact the program is not just about housing. It takes a holistic approach to solving problems that homelessness worsens, Cannon said.

At the BFA helm since May, Cannon has made arrangements with a spectrum of public, private and human service agencies to provide support services for BFA clients, all of whom sign two-year commitments to receive agency aid.

Job counseling and health and child care needs are some of the issues faced by BFA clients and met through links with other agencies, he said.

A financial literacy course provided by Dot Hoerr of First Bank on managing a household budget, credit repair and starting a savings plan is a standard regimen for clients.

"Full involvement in a community is like a lake," Cannon said. "You want to make sure they have access to the lake, and that the lake is not polluted" by bad habits that ultimately undermine the goals being sought, he said.

BFA outreach in the county will expand Oct. 23 when the agency has a grand opening of a satellite office in Leland. The agency will share office quarters on Perry Avenue with Hope Harbor Home domestic violence shelter and services.

Cannon said the agency, which has operated on annual budgets of roughly \$200,000 in past years, continues regular emergency assistance for utilities and food pantry needs.

The BFA Christmas basket program will take place in December, and the agency's annual fund-raiser comes Feb. 14 with a benefit concert featuring the Ink Spots.

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