

In 2018, our community became another dreaded US location of a school shooting. A teacher barricaded himself inside his classroom and discharged a firearm. Luckily, no one was physically injured, but the emotional trauma was felt throughout the community. In the aftermath of this incident, we found ourselves asking a multitude of questions. Are we doing this right? What are we missing? When did things go so wrong? Two things became clear that day. One, our overall health as a community is suffering. Our neighbors, family, friends, and co-workers are dealing with life-threatening issues right under our noses. Second, we are not responding to warning signs that indicate an oncoming crisis. Events like school shootings do not happen overnight. The warning signs are there. And Dalton, GA is not alone. The “drive it until the wheels fall off” approach to life is plaguing our entire nation.

In light of the current pandemic, the importance of our health has never been clearer. Research links chronic illness, obesity, type-2 diabetes, COPD, certain serious heart conditions, cancer, and smoking to severe health risks and complications when contracting Covid-19. The more underlying health conditions someone has, the greater the risk.

For decades, U.S. citizens have been falling off the proverbial cliffs of mental and physical health problems. Doctors, teachers, mental health professionals, politicians, and activists have all been to the bottom of those cliffs trying to help their fellow man, only to find that people just keep piling up. At City of Refuge Dalton (CORD), we want to be at the top of the cliffs, striving to help people before they fall.

City of Refuge Dalton is a place of opportunities for individual and community advancement. CORD serves more than 2500 people per month who fall within the GA poverty guidelines, assisting with food, clothing, housing, mentoring, and community resources. During the current pandemic, our services have not only continued, but also increased by 60%. We are eagerly making a concerted effort to impact our youth.

From its small, grassroots beginnings in 1995, CORD has worked to empower people in our community. Dalton, GA has a significant Hispanic/Latino population at 50.8%, compared to the state at 9.3%. The poverty rate in Dalton (27.6%) is much higher than the state (9.3%). Contributing to the high rate of poverty and low incomes is the city's low educational attainment, which has a staggering 36.7% of adults (25 or older) without a high school degree or equivalent.

The social workers of the City of Refuge are designing and implementing a program that focuses on awareness and prevention for middle and high school aged youth. This program educates youth on holistic health and wellness by putting healthy practices into action. We are a place that is accessible to all. We do not want cost to be a barrier and we do not want to turn people away because they do or do not meet criteria for a mental health or physical diagnosis. We strategically focus on preventing problematic behaviors and situations in the lives of teenagers before they start, especially before they have turned into a crisis.

Our program seeks to increase participants' wellness in 8 pivotal dimensions: Social, Physical, Intellectual, Emotional, Spiritual, Environmental, Financial, and Occupational (Swarbrick, 2012). Staff and volunteers meet weekly with a group of students. We share a hot meal together, provide wellness education, and participate in activities and conversations to assess and encourage growth in each dimension. We also participate in recreational events and service projects. By focusing on our youth and holistic health and wellness, CORD proactively targets major problems that plague our communities.

It is our goal to provide a state-of-the-art Youth and Family Center that will have a wider-reaching and broader impact on our community. This program is a more individualized approach with improved needs and strengths assessments as well as the ability to reach a larger number of youth, their families, and the community at large.

Wellness will not only be taught but put into action. The center will be open to our clients during after-school hours Monday-Thursday, providing high school and middle school students each with open access 2 days per week. To support the 8 domains, the Youth Wellness Center will provide a gym, yoga/exercise room, media/recording/music room, art studio, computer and STEM lab, counseling/group support room, library, and an inviting cafe area with healthy snacks and comfortable seating for studying, socializing, playing games with, or reading. In addition, there will be regularly planned, structured activities, such as soccer, art classes, yoga, chess tournaments, cooking classes, parent engagement sessions, and support groups.

Via our café and local business partners the Youth Wellness Center will incorporate a workforce development program. The program will provide youth an opportunity to learn important innovative job and organizational skills.

Our social workers will educate youth and their families on Wellness and the 8 dimensions. They will assist youth and families in identifying strengths and needs. Based on these assessments, they will help youth and their families create comprehensive Wellness Plans. These Wellness Plans will serve as the backbone of our program, guiding activities and informing interventions. Wellness plans will include goals that, when met, can radically change the life of the participant. Our Youth and Family Wellness Center will become a welcoming location where youth can grow in body, mind, and soul.

Social workers will follow up with each participant to complete reassessments, reformulating ways to meet needs and celebrating successes. When goals are met, youth will have gained knowledge and healthy habits, making a positive impact on their future, their family, their peers, and their community.

We have the professionals and leadership, an industrial building allowing adequate space to launch this life-changing program, and youth within our community that desperately need our help. We also have the support of the community and enjoy incredible trust and goodwill with other partner agencies, businesses, local government, area churches, and the local school system. By receiving additional grant funding, we can transform our community into a model of wellness, altering the health and wellness trajectory of everyone involved. In pioneering our future, we will start with our youth, we will break down barriers, and we will start before they reach the cliff.