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Interfaith Hospitality Network keeps families together during toughest times

'We are ministering to our neighbors in need'

BY: [Lucy May](#), [Emily Maxwell](#)

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CINCINNATI -- Terana Boyd arrived in Cincinnati on a Greyhound bus with her two children, a bag of clothes and \$20 in her pocket.

She had left behind a heap of problems in her hometown of Pittsburgh, but she had a new one: She and her kids were homeless in a city where she didn't know a soul.

Boyd called 513-381-SAFE, the local phone number for individuals and families seeking shelter. Luckily for her, the [Interfaith Hospitality Network of Greater Cincinnati](#) had space for Boyd, her 6-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son.

For 25 years, IHN has relied on a network of local religious congregations and volunteers to provide shelter for families experiencing homelessness. Unlike some other shelters, IHN serves entire families, including dads, grown children, grandparents and even pets if they're part of the household.

The families get help during the day at the organization's offices in Walnut Hills where staff members connect adults with job training, medical appointments and any other assistance they need to get back on track and find a place to live.

Terana Boyd used the services of the Interfaith Hospitality Network to get her family out of homelessness. Emily Maxwell |

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In the evenings, families stay at one of the network's local churches, synagogues or mosques, where volunteers provide meals, evening activities and a safe place to sleep.

"They never judged me," Boyd said of the IHN staff and volunteers. "I couldn't imagine where I would be without Interfaith Hospitality Network -- and especially the volunteers."

Boyd's story is far from unique. Thousands of families experience homelessness in Greater Cincinnati each year.

IHN provides shelter for as many as 130 families annually, said Executive Director Stacey Burge.

The organization's model gives families the support they need during the day and a break from the shelter environment in the evenings, she said.

"They get to be families for the night. They get to relax," Burge said. "They're served a wonderful dinner, and they get to not worry about being homeless for a while."

The model also gives IHN's partner congregations and volunteers a chance to learn more about homelessness and understand how much they have in common with the families they're helping.

"We are ministering to our neighbors in need, and this is what all our faiths have in common," she said. "I think for our volunteers, that's very powerful."

Making a difference

It's certainly powerful for the volunteers at [First United Church of Christ in College Hill](#).

First United is a host church that houses families experiencing homelessness as part of

IHN, and a larger group of churches in College Hill contribute meals and volunteers, Pastor Dan Weyand-Geise said.

Linda Krebs, Interfaith Hospitality Network Coordinator for First United Church of Christ, and Pastor Dan Weyand-Geise.

Emily Maxwell | WCPO

Supporting families as a team of churches allows smaller congregations to have a bigger impact than they could on their own, he said.

"A lot of smaller congregations love Interfaith Hospitality Network because of that," Weyand-Geise said. "It allows them to make a difference."

When it's time for First United to host families, the church typically welcomes four families -- as many as 16 people -- at a time. Church volunteers begin getting rooms ready for the families several days before they arrive. The church converts its downstairs classrooms into apartments with rollaway beds and gift baskets the volunteers place on each bed.

The families arrive in the evening, have dinner and play games or do homework with the volunteers before they go to sleep.

By 6 a.m. the next day, volunteers wake the families, serve breakfast and help the adults pack lunches for themselves and their children. An IHN bus typically picks up the families between 6:30 and 7 a.m. to take them to IHN's offices in Walnut Hills. From there, the kids go to school if they're school-age or stay with their parents as the adults work with case managers to try to reach their goals and get out of homelessness.

First United Church of Christ partners with Interfaith Hospitality Network to provide rooms and volunteer services for homeless families. Emily Maxwell | WCPO

The bus returns to IHN's Walnut Hills location around 4:30 p.m. or so and takes the families back to the churches again. Families stay at host churches for a week at a time before moving on to another location.

"To me as a pastor, this is a no brainer," Weyand-Geise said. "It's rewarding. It's humbling. It gets you out of your comfort zones, I think. It makes you aware -- this

could be me. This could be us."

'It becomes like a family'

Jackie Othman is a member of [Ihsan Community Center](#) in Milford and has been volunteering for IHN for about eight years. Although the Muslim community center doesn't host families, Othman has helped by cooking meals and taking them to a church in Hyde Park where families stay.

"I love every second of it," she said. "It becomes like a family, like you're sitting down at a dinner table with 10 or 15 people."

Sometimes families want to talk about how they become homeless, and sometimes they don't, she said. Othman leaves it up to them.

"They'll tell you this is not where they want to be, but they're grateful to IHN for taking them in," she said.

That's certainly how Boyd felt when she and her kids were homeless, she said.

Terana Boyd outside of the Cincinnati Works location in Roselawn. Emily Maxwell | WCPO

It was 2013 when they arrived in Cincinnati, just before winter.

Boyd felt lost and alone. But IHN helped her get enrolled in school to get her associate's degree. The organization helped her get a two-bedroom apartment right before Christmas and helped her furnish it.

Boyd was still suffering from depression, but a case manager kept in touch and helped her through that, too.

She was so appreciative that Boyd went back to IHN to volunteer, and the organization hired her to work part-time as the weekend coordinator. Now she also is working for Cincinnati Works as a member of [Public Allies Cincinnati](#), an AmeriCorps organization that trains people in partnership with local nonprofit organizations.

Boyd has been in a healthy relationship for two years and had a baby just a few months

ago -- a little sister to the son and daughter she brought to town on that Greyhound bus.

"Just imagine if I didn't have that helping hand from my case manager there and the churches and the volunteers, getting me somewhere safe to sleep," she said. "I had a meal for my children and a bed for them to sleep in. I am truly grateful."

More information about Interfaith Hospitality Network of Greater Cincinnati is available online. The organization will have a 25th anniversary celebration fundraiser on Oct. 15 called "We Are Family." More information about the event is available on IHN's [website](#).

Lucy May writes about the people, places and issues that define our region – to celebrate what makes the Tri-State great and also shine a spotlight on issues we need to address. Childhood poverty is an important focus for her and for WCPO. To read more stories about childhood poverty, go to www.wcpo.com/poverty.

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