



The St. Elizabeth Care Committee has been providing valuable support in the care of the homeless and mentally ill persons in the parish since 2004.

The committee operates from three locations. Under the leadership of then Mayor of Black River, Daphne Holmes, and first chairman, the late Joyce Francis, the first care centre was set up on the premises of the St. Elizabeth Parish Council. In 2009 another facility was established in Junction and late last year, the Santa Cruz Care Centre was opened.

Homeless people can visit any of the centres where they receive cooked meals, baths and benefit from counselling services. The St. Elizabeth Health Department and the Southern Regional Health Authority (SRHA) play a key role in providing medication and treatment for the clients, most of whom are mentally ill.

Beacons of Hope

Lauding the work of the volunteers, Minister of Local Government and Community Development, Hon. Noel Arscott, says he is a “fervent believer that great things that can happen when the local authority and a well organized and progressive community group come together for the good of all citizens”.

The Minister says the volunteers stand as a “beacon of hope and rescue for the homeless, mentally challenged and destitute across the parish, offering spiritual guidance, physical care and regular provision of medication.”

Explaining to JIS News why he has been giving his time to the care of the homeless, caregiver with the committee, Lorenzo Orr, said some of them have made valuable contributions to society. He reasoned that any of his own family members can lose their sanity and end up on the streets, and if that happens, he would want the best care for them.

"Sometimes they can be hostile, but as caregivers, and as people trying to help people, there are a lot of things that we have to go through. You can only understand people when you get involved with them. I look back and say, 'it could be my grandson that falls into that trap', so it motivates me to help. Young people should get involved," he said.



Homes for the Homeless

Mental Health Officer in the parish, Jennifer Chambers, tells JIS News that the volunteers have made the work of the officers easier. She says that there is greater organisation in monitoring the progress of clients and ensuring that they receive their medication.

"The (care centres are) like a home for them. The support that they get there... they are given a bath, food, and we nurses, we come here to do their medication. We ensure that when they go back on the streets, you have to look twice to see that they are street persons. They are clean, they are in their right minds, most of the times. This group is a blessing in disguise," she said.

Director at the Santa Cruz Centre, Patrick Thomas, tells JIS News that a bond has developed between the volunteers and the homeless, which in many cases, is like a friendship.

"I am a business person in the town and from time to time, some of them will come by my location. Sometimes, when I am on the street, they will see me and because of the bond that has been created here, the care that has been offered, this has fostered into a relationship beyond the care centre," he said.

"It is good to see that we can make an impact and these people are appreciating it. I will do this over and over, the other volunteers share the same vision of caring for those who can't care for themselves," Mr. Thomas said.



Another Centre on the Horizon

Chairman of the committee, Beryl Rochester, tells JIS News that discussions are taking place for a centre to be established in Balaclava.

She says that the group's mission is to improve the quality of life of persons living on the streets of St. Elizabeth.

“‘People care’ is what we are about. I am involved in other community voluntary activities, but frankly, this is the one that I get the most personal satisfaction from,” she explained.

She says there is a sense of fulfillment in seeing some of the mentally ill recover to the point where they can do “light duties”.

Mrs. Rochester credits the business community in the parish, the St. Elizabeth Parish Council, as well as private individuals, who have funded the work of the care committee. She is appealing for more donation of clothing for the clients, especially the males.

“We have been fortunate in terms of the people who have partnered with us. We would love to have more people come on board; it can't be too much. We are always in need of clothes...and if we get all the things that we need, in terms of kind, we really don't need to have cash,” she said.

She is also urging residents in the parish to assist the mentally ill.

"I implore that even though there might not be an established programme in your area; do what you can to assist people on a daily basis. Let us stretch our hands to our less fortunate brothers and sisters," Mrs. Rochester said.