



## **WHY IS A SOCIAL WORKER AN ESSENTIAL PARTNER IN THE BRIDGE OF HOPE NEIGHBORHOOD?**

One of the greatest strengths of the Bridge of Hope Neighborhood is the freedom it offers a group of Neighboring Volunteers. By incorporating a social worker into this partnership to address complicated obstacles to family stability and to provide accountability, Neighboring Volunteers are freed to concentrate on developing neighboring relationships with women and children who are homeless.

In the Bridge of Hope Neighborhood, the social worker and the Neighboring Volunteers hold distinctly different roles. The social worker is better equipped to discern the source of the challenges, whether societal, institutional or individual, and to tackle them appropriately. The Bridge of Hope social worker is professionally trained with an understanding of the difficult issues homeless women often confront, including poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health concerns. The social worker, who has extensive knowledge of community resources and relationships with other service providers, is able to link families to appropriate resources in the community. The social worker also assists the family to determine current needs, plan for the future, access resources, develop practical skills in areas such as budgeting and parenting, and monitors progress toward goals. Additionally, the social worker determines the best way for Bridge of Hope to provide financial help in the context of the family's situation and available community resources. In short, the social worker empowers a homeless woman to dream of, plan for and work toward a better future, then holds her accountable to her own commitments and goals.

With the expertise and accountability that the social worker brings to the Bridge of Hope Neighborhood, Neighboring Volunteers are freed to focus on developing relationships that provide tangible support and encouragement with the single mother and her children. The Neighboring Volunteer does not need to identify needs, locate resources, train, or monitor progress. The Neighboring Volunteer has no responsibility for determining how funds are spent to assist a family that is homeless. The Neighboring Volunteer does not have to be an expert in homelessness, poverty, or any other social problem. And the Neighboring Volunteer doesn't need to hold the participant accountable to her goals or commitments, except those made to the Neighboring Volunteer. Instead, the Neighboring Volunteer can provide encouragement and emotional support, model positive relationships, provide tangible supports, and engage with the Family in life and faith conversations.

There are, admittedly, some challenges inherent in the Neighboring relationship. Differences in life experience, opportunity, and even faith can make mutuality in relationship difficult to develop. The temptation for Neighboring Volunteers to "take charge" can on occasion lead to misuses of power, however well-intended. If relationships do become difficult for whatever reason, the social worker is there to mediate challenges, engage those involved, and foster healing. The social worker is a resource and support to both the group of Neighboring Volunteers and the family served by Bridge of Hope.

What does this mean for the woman in Bridge of Hope? It means she knows who to call when she has questions about a child subsidy application and who to call when she just wants to talk about a difficult day at work. It means she can call her social worker when she loses her health insurance and her Neighboring Volunteer when she wants company watching her son's ball game. It means she can develop relationships at a comfortable pace, without Neighboring Volunteers knowing everything about her history and life challenges until she's ready to share it with them. It means she responds to a Neighboring Volunteer's invitation out of a desire to connect rather than a sense that she is obligated because of the financial or other help she is receiving. It means she will see Christ's love lived out by someone other than the person who is being paid to do a job. And when she no longer needs the support of a trained and experienced social worker, it means she still has support.