With the year drawing to an end, we at LEFSA are reflecting on a year of ministry. LEFSA’s work is based on forming relationships and community with people who are currently or were formerly homeless, creating a supportive network. LEFSA provides a forum for people who are homeless to meet with one another in order to focus on our lived experiences, the challenges we face, and together seek directions and solutions.

Our work would not be possible without prayers, monetary donations and the kind support of friends like you who believe in our mission. In this newsletter, we will show how your involvement has made a difference in people’s lives.

During 2018, LEFSA team members held weekly gatherings in seven shelters, with each gathering averaging 10 participants. That makes a total of 3,640 participants during the course of the year, not including the countless people we met during outreach. Our street ministry teams distributed sandwiches and drinks to well over 10,000 people, and gave out over 3,600 copies of Daily Words. About 130 people attended our monthly Leadership Study Days, and between 25-30 came to our Men’s and Women’s Groups each month. Our special events were very well attended. In the spring and fall we conducted retreats at Mariandale Retreat Center, each attended by 44 people. We had 79 people come on our 3rd annual summer fishing trip, and 300 people attended our Summer Picnic in Central Park and our Christmas dinner.

In the coming year we hope to continue to be a place of support and an oasis for those who are still without homes. In this year’s newsletter, we want to highlight the importance of individual stories and bring you closer to the experiences that make LEFSA a unique community.

**Weekly Shelter Gatherings**

“I was in a shelter at Ward Island, and one week I was told about a gathering, where they give us food and talk to us. At the time my mom had cervical cancer. She was my partner and confidant. When I met James, he touched me, because before saying hi to him I said ‘my mom is dying.’ The way he grabbed me, it was a beautiful and warm feeling. I started coming to groups. It brought me to a comfort level to know that I wasn’t the only one going through things. To this day I come for the same reason. It is awesome.” —Johnnie

Currently we facilitate groups in one drop-in center, one transitional HIV/AIDS housing facility, three women’s shelters and one men’s shelter. Since spring 2018 we have also been facilitating gatherings in Holy Rosary Bed Program, a newly open facility that houses 34 people.

Each of the shelters has different needs. That is why it’s important that the ideas for themes come directly from the participants, and that we talk about the issues and address the needs that people identify themselves. It has been a model for all we do.
Women’s Empowerment Group. Each second Saturday of the month, around 30 women arrive during early morning hours for the Women’s Group. After breakfast, we spend three hours discussing a theme selected during the previous month. We conclude with a lunch. This year we spent time talking about relationships and women’s independence. We celebrated holidays together, talked about our parents and families, and on Mother’s Day we watched *Hidden Figures* to celebrate inspiring women in our lives.

Men’s Spiritual Development Group. The Men’s Group meets at the LEFSA office once a month on the second Friday. Each meeting begins with a community lunch. Some of the themes discussed by the men this year involved the power of vision, slavery, two roads in my life, and maturity.

“You will know my disciples, because they show love for one another.’ When you come to this community, that is what you are going to get. It takes time to work on people, but it works. It worked on me.” — Timothy

Leadership Study Day. Leadership Study Day is a monthly event with a social justice component. We invite people we meet in the shelters, during street ministry, and send fliers to those participants who now have their own apartments. The event is a wonderful opportunity to connect many people together. This year we hosted various speakers and organizations, who presented on topics such as criminal justice reform, mental health initiatives, career development programs for women, and domestic violence. During Black History Month, a community participant organized a talent show, which brought out many hidden talents. On Easter we discussed the meaning of Resurrection in our lives. We also talked about the importance of voting and the history of voting rights.

“I got involved with LEFSA though my sister Althea about 6 years ago. I attended the LEFSA picnic and was amazed by how many people were there, by the food, camaraderie and the whole good feeling you got. When you were in line, people talking to you made you feel at home. That was before I knew about the Leadership Study Day or Men’s Group. All the people who were coming to the Saturday Leadership Study Day program have a common history; we have all been homeless, or know someone who was, and we don’t forget. We want to make things better for people who are still homeless.” — Cameron

“LEFSA is about sharing, and hearing other people share. It’s about getting with the other people and feeling accepted. I remember going to church with bags, and people making comments, and when I sit next to people on the train they move away. I never came across this in LEFSA. Sometimes it’s just about talking to people.” — Pat

Street Ministry. Since June 2017, we have been able to expand street ministry outreach from Midtown to Harlem. We begin at Penn Station and follow to Madison Square Park. Afterwards we travel to Harlem to do outreach in Marcus Garvey Park and around Metro North Station. We give out sandwiches and supplies such as socks, hats, gloves, and water. But more importantly, we try to build community and relationships with people.

“It’s been our blessing to provide this service. So many people have said to us, ‘we thought you were not coming out today, but it’s a blessing you are here for us.’ And we are there, every Monday, whether it’s cold or warm outside.” — JB
Team Enrichment. During Wednesday Team Enrichment, we focus conversations around themes that help us to develop tools for transformation—anything from anger to time management. The community comes together to share resources and wisdom on what was helpful for them in dealing with various issues.

This year we also invited a speaker to conduct a financial management workshop for the participants. Nursing students from the College of Mount Saint Vincent conducted various health presentations.

“I pray that LEFSA is around for generations to come, because it has a tremendous effect on the community and the people they serve. Thank you so much for being so welcoming and accepting us as a member of the family. We love you and hope to visit after graduation.”
—Amoy Chung, nursing student

Retreats. In May and November we hosted three-day retreats for 44 people each. We focused our group discussions on themes of love, personal growth, the journey towards healing, perspective, and forgiveness.

“The retreat was beautiful and overwhelming. I went up there because I knew God had something for me. God placed in my heart the idea to call my son and say ‘I’m sorry.’ In less than five minutes he texted me back and said, ‘we are OK mom, I accept your apology, we love you.’ The group meetings gave me love and hope.” —Grace

Other Special Events and Activities

The 5th Annual Super Bowl Party was a success. About 100 men and women attended. While many are safely home watching the game, we think it is important to give people living on the streets a place to enjoy the game as well. In addition, we serve a warm meal and refreshments to those who come.

Celebrating Major Holidays. Holidays can be a tough time for our community, so we strive to always celebrate together. On Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas we provide a full warm meal and gifts for everyone. And, of course, we could not forget about individual birthdays! Whenever we get a chance we acknowledge personal celebrations. They are important for creating an atmosphere of empowerment and support!

Working for Social Justice and Structural Changes

- This year LEFSA worked with our friends at Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing to address the opening of a new shelter on 58th Street. We attended and spoke at the “Hospitality Initiative” meetings in order to ensure that the residents of the new shelter will be welcomed, and to help address some of the concerns from the neighborhood.

- LEFSA joined the United Nations Working Group on Ending Homelessness. The group aims to include ending homelessness as one of the United Nations’ sustainable development goals.


- The Department of Mental Health and Hygiene conducted a full-day mental health training program in October 2017 at the LEFSA office. Thirty participants were given tools to understand and help someone in a mental health crisis, and received Mental Health First Aid Certificates.
I met LEFSA in 2004. I’d been staying at New Providence Women’s Shelter and was on my way to sign out, and I heard gospel songs, like my mom used to sing. Sr. Dorothy walked up to me and invited me in. The gathering gave me peace. She invited me to the Women’s Group and Leadership Study. I completed my EOP in 2005 and she called me around that time, saying that the team wanted me to join them. I said, “I can’t do what you do!” And she said, “Weren’t you homeless? Just tell people what God did for you and he will do that for others.”

As a team member I go to shelters, Women’s Group, and Leadership Study Day. The shelters are the best part. Being there as someone who cares, someone to listen to the people... when their face lights up, I get it. I want to spread it to someone else.

LEFSA is special, in the hope that we give to people and by always being there. In the shelter, people are just coming in with what’s on their backs. They really minister to me to be grateful for what I’ve got through the gratitude that they have. This keeps me going. When I was sick, the women at the shelter nurtured me. Franklin was one of my first shelters. I remember how scared I was, tears falling down, God why me. What I’ve learned from this experience taught me to be humble, and that’s how I saw God in action. One day at a time. What LEFSA taught me is staying in the now. Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift—that’s why they call it the present. I am a better person because of LEFSA.

**Housing.** Team member James Butler has been working as a housing coordinator for the last couple of years. Seeing the need in the community, he began collecting housing applications for different buildings around the city. In a city that is constantly struggling with increasing rents, the number of people searching for housing has only been growing. Many people also struggle with finding apartments that will take their subsidy vouchers, and turn to James for guidance. We congratulate those participants who received housing this year! Their success gives hope to those who are still searching. In 2018 James had 502 housing appointments, and 13 people received housing.

**THANK YOU... What we do would not be possible without the support of people like you! We have been truly blessed this year with many donations from our friends.**

Our Sock Drive, Toiletry Drive, and Granola Bar Drive started this year. We have received numerous donations of these items from individuals and organizations, including schools! You can find out more about contributing to the drive by visiting our website: scny-lefsa.org. The supplies you send are distributed directly among people who live in the city shelters and during our street outreach.

Thank you to numerous donors for providing other in-kind support items this year such as clothing, toiletry products, coats, shoes, bags, and kitchen supplies; bus rental for the retreat; sponsoring the fishing trip; and food and labor for the LEFSA Summer Picnic. We also want to give thanks for all the monetary donations from individuals, organizations, churches and foundations.

“And because of LEFSA I am stronger, wiser, more spiritual, more confident, not afraid of new challenges. I have been able to weather the storms that have come my way and come out a better person on the other side. So I thank God for this ministry. LEFSA was there for me during my darkest and brightest days. And I appreciate the love and the compassion I was shown through my good times and bad times.” —Diane