

Youth shared-housing program that serves Richmond could be a model elsewhere

September 9 2024, by Geoff LoCicero



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For two Virginia Commonwealth University social work professors and their collaborators, it started with "radical imagination"—a youth shared-housing model in Richmond unlike any in the country.

Three years later, Marsha and Marian's Neighbors has successfully served more than 40 local households with individuals ages 18–24 who identify as LGBTQIA+, pregnant and/or parenting. And as the program enters its fourth and final year of funding—more than \$2.25 million total—from Virginia Housing Trust Fund Homeless Reduction Grants, co-founders Maurice Gattis, Ph.D., and M. Alex Wagaman, Ph.D., are working to transition management from VCU's School of Social Work into the community.

"There are just so few evidence-informed, co-designed interventions for this population," said Wagaman, who is now serving a one-year term as special advisor on [youth homelessness](#) to the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. "This program is a real contribution, and we're excited to see how the community can implement it or embrace it."

Gattis said Marsha and Marian's Neighbors is the rare program that relies on lived experience and then rolls that into leadership opportunities.

"This doesn't happen in places—the idea of who's involved," he said. "It has come full circle. We're now at a place where we have graduates [former residents] who have transitioned to our [advisory board](#) and are informing the future of the program. That's big."

Staff with Marsha and Marian's Neighbors provide case management and individualized services ranging from therapy and workshops to GED tutoring and legal support. The Swingset Society consists of parents and caregivers or those interested in [child development](#), including past residents who have graduated. Households that have participated include 11 with children, 27 identifying as LGBTQIA+ and three that are both LGBTQIA+ and parenting.

"Maurice and I both felt called by the young people and our partners to

radically imagine, what if we were to build something from the ground up in a way that we wanted it to run. Just start at the very beginning—no assumptions," Wagaman said. "We entered a process with these folks, and it was really beautiful. We were putting our radical imagination into practice as a form of change, to prove that things could be done radically differently."

Destiny, a 20-year-old former resident, expected to be in Marsha and Marian's Neighbors for two months but stayed a year. Now she is on the program's advisory board.

"It helped me in so many ways, and it humbled me," she said. "I was so relieved and blessed, and I gained many resources and good friends throughout my experience. I was scared to get help, scared to ask for it. I was scared to share a space with someone I had never met, but I regret nothing, and I made an amazing lifetime friend from my experience. I am beyond grateful for Marsha and Marian's Neighbors."

Most residents have not connected with the program from other services for those experiencing homelessness. Wagaman said mutual-aid networks and LGBTQIA+ youth-serving organizations such as Side by Side are the primary funnels.

"One of the things our planning team said is that you [traditionally] have to find the right person who can open this magical door for you to get into a program, which seemed really inequitable and an additional barrier," Wagaman said. "So a lot of people have come through these informal networks or are self-referred."

Local agencies partnering with Marsha and Marian's Neighbors include Birth in Color, QueerWell, LaunchPad Counseling, Daily Planet Health Services, Richmond Creative Counseling and Fraser & Associates Complete Therapeutic Services. Additional funding from the Richmond-

based Schaberg Foundation has supported essential services such as therapy, workshops, community events, parent coaching and doula care.

Naya Williams, a board member who has worked in the youth homelessness space for eight years, praised the program for meeting residents "where they are in their journey."

"This support can make a difference to a life-changing degree, no matter how big or small that support system is," she said. "That's why Marsha and Marian's Neighbors means so much to me. My dream is for it to expand beyond Richmond, for that name to be known as a safe haven and potential pathway into the community."

Gattis noted that any model for local implementation will vary based on the community, connections and resources. The team has documented its process in an [article published in 2023](#) in the journal *Youth*.

"It's not like you could take Marsha and Marian's Neighbors and move it to Provo, Utah, and do exactly what we did," he said. "Part of the replication is replicating a method of doing the local work. This might not work in Miami in this same way."

Wagaman said the team's primary goal has two key elements. One is to sustain the momentum of Marsha and Marian's Neighbors in Richmond as an agency-led resource.

"Richmond is not any different from most communities across the country that don't have enough resources and supports for young people experiencing homelessness," she said. "We hope to figure out how to contribute to our local community by keeping it going."

The other element extends far and wide: to provide a framework for other communities to adapt in creating their own youth shared-housing

programs.

"I'm excited about us being able to contribute a new model, co-designed with young people, to communities and to the nation that people can adapt to their local context," Wagaman said, "helping us move toward ending youth homelessness."

More information: Maurice N. Gattis et al, Developing Marsha and Marian's Neighbors: A Shared Housing Intervention to Address Homelessness among LGBTQ+ and Pregnant/Parenting Youth, *Youth* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/youth3010022](https://doi.org/10.3390/youth3010022)

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

Citation: Youth shared-housing program that serves Richmond could be a model elsewhere (2024, September 9) retrieved 11 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-09-youth-housing-richmond.html>

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