

## Brevard Family Partnership, Truth Revealed International Ministries of Palm Bay partner in Open Table pilot project, national model to address social challenges

By Ken Datzman

Brevard Family Partnership, long known for its work in foster care as the lead child-welfare agency in the county, has formed a unique partnership with Truth Revealed International Ministries of Palm Bay, an organization also known for its community outreach endeavors.

The two entities, leading by example, are hoping faith-based organizations in the region will join them as part of an Open Table Inc. model pilot project.

Open Table, a nonprofit training organization that is 14 years old, is now being used in 28 states around the nation to help communities successfully address daunting social challenges.

Open Table develops licensed models that train people from an array of community sectors — including business, education, faith, health care, and others — to organize and co-invest their “sustainable relational and social capital in individuals with complex needs, and find solutions to social issues.”

The benefits of Open Table are substantial for those who are served. A group of volunteers forms a “Table,” guided by a “life plan” that outlines goals defined by and specific to individuals and families requesting assistance. Over the course of a year, Open Table volunteers meet on a weekly basis to work with the individual or family seeking support to create positive change.

“A couple of months ago, we had the idea of finding a special church that would open its heart and have a vision to partner with us in a collaborative manner to work with families, not just families within the system, but families that are upstream and — maybe individuals — that are on the cusp of coming into systems of care or other jurisdictions,” said Phil Scarpelli, the chief executive officer of Brevard Family Partnership and its family of agencies.

He added, “Bishop Merton Clark of Truth Revealed International Ministries and Terri Smith of HELPS Community Initiatives are ‘angels from heaven’ who walked into our lives in such a compassionate and humble way. They wanted to learn more about what we do. They are affiliated with others in the community who are also passionate about helping people, particularly youth who are in foster care, are aging out of foster care, or have aged out of foster care. These are three targeted audiences with unique needs.”

Smith is programs director for HELPS Community Initiatives Inc., the outreach arm of Truth Revealed International Ministries. “HCI is an extension of our ministry, a care organization to help our community thrive,” said Smith.



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Brevard Family Partnership and Truth Revealed International Ministries are looking to change lives through a collaboration that centers on helping youth who age out of foster care. They will be using the Open Table model. Open Table develops licensed models that train people from an array of community sectors, including business and education. From left: Laurie-Anna DeGennaro, Brevard Family Partnership, board and community liaison, and community engagement coordinator for the Open Table project; Terri Smith, programs manager, HELPS Community Initiatives; Bishop Merton Clark, senior pastor, Truth Revealed International Ministries; and Phil Scarpelli, CEO, Brevard Family Partnership.

Bishop Clark is the founder of Truth Revealed International Ministries and HCI. His organization is piloting a program with Brevard Family Partnership to support youth who are aging out of foster care, and is involved in Brevard Family Partnership’s “Just One,” a foster parent recruitment initiative.

In Florida, there are more than 24,000 youth in foster care, according to state statistics. On any given day, there are roughly 250 children living in foster homes in Brevard County. They have been removed from their families because of abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

“We have been helping our community for more than two decades,” said Bishop Clark, the senior pastor at Truth Revealed International Ministries on Palm Bay Road. “But right now, it’s becoming more visible because of the partnerships that we have been developing. Through partnerships, we are able to do great things. Years ago, I believed that we needed to build bridges from our church into the community, and that’s what we have been doing. I

am so happy that Phil (Scarpelli) and his team are collaborating with us. When you have a true partnership, you eliminate weakness.”

Laurie-Anna DeGennaro, Brevard Family Partnership’s board and community liaison, is playing a lead role in the Open Table model that her organization is integrating into the collaboration with Truth Revealed Ministries and HCI.

“When Bishop Clark and Phil (Scarpelli) decided to enter into a partnership using the Open Table model, I became the community engagement coordinator for the project,” she said.

“Brevard Family Partnership will also be the referring agency that will be working with Truth Revealed International Ministries or HCI. We are piloting two Tables. Using the volunteers at each Table, we plan to ‘wrap around’ the individual to help him or her meet the needs they have expressed. The volunteers use the community resources that we bring to them to

make this happen.”

Wraparound intervention has proven effective in strengthening vulnerable families. It’s a concept used by Brevard C.A.R.E.S., a Brevard Family Partnership agency. The acronym stands for Coordination, Advocacy, Resources, Education and Support.

Organizations that are interested in learning more about this project can contact DeGennaro at (321) 266-0603 or Smith at (321) 914-6117 or [helpscommunityinc@gmail.com](mailto:helpscommunityinc@gmail.com).

Based in Phoenix, Ariz., Open Table was founded by Jon Katov. It was after a man experiencing homelessness asked a group of people at a local mission if he could visit their church.

Scarpelli said he has known Katov for more than 20 years. “I reached out to him about our relationship with Truth Revealed International Ministries and the passion Bishop Clark and his team have for Open Table.”

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"I told Jon I think we have something unique, and it's part of the vision that Gov. DeSantis and the First Lady have for the state of Florida. They want to see more community-based care lead agencies like Brevard Family Partnership uniting with the faith community. And that is our history. We have long been doing that."

Scarpelli continued, "Now more than ever is the time for us to have this partnership with a dedicated faith institution such as Truth Revealed International Ministries and a dedicated child-welfare organization like Brevard Family Partnership. And then to further open our arms to the greater community to build these Tables of people, who are called 'Friends.' They unite to share resources and help individuals and families in need."

Soon after taking office, Gov. DeSantis established the Governor's Faith and Community-Based Initiative. It serves to collaborate between state government and Florida's faith-based institutions and community organizations, enhancing agencies' existing work to support Florida citizens.

Within the framework, each state agency works to identify mutually beneficial partnership opportunities to help fulfill their needs with available resources.

Gov. DeSantis also set up the Florida Faith-Based and Community-Based

Advisory Council, which partners with state agencies to provide volunteer opportunities for faith-based and community-based organizations in every community.

Locally, HCI, which was incorporated in 2016, is already a faith-based leader in the community. It has established the Palm Bay Cold Night Shelter facility on Palm Bay Road.

"One of the things that was needed in the community was a cold-night shelter for the homeless," said Smith, adding that HCI partnered with Truth Revealed International Ministries, Mosaic Church, Tomoka Christian Church, South Brevard Sharing Center, and the City of Palm Bay to make that happen.

"We found out there was not a cold-night shelter in our area of Brevard County. The word went out and the faith community rallied around our project. Originally, we had acquired a building across the street from Truth Reveal Ministries and had planned to make it a community outreach center, until the spread of COVID-19."

Recently, when the temperature in Brevard dropped below 45 degrees, the Palm Bay Cold Night Shelter opened. "We had a young man come through," said Smith.

"We fed him and gave him a place to sleep. We had the opportunity to get to

know him. He shared his life's story with us. He is 19 years old and aged out of foster care when he was 18. He had nowhere to go. All of us just looked at each other and our hearts broke. But then a bell went off in my head — Brevard Family Partnership. Isn't that the target market we are going to work with, helping youth aging out of foster care? So the opportunity was right in front of us."

The state has extended the age a child may stay in foster care from 18 to 21 (22 if the individual has a disability).

Smith added, "We could not let him go back on the streets. So I immediately started making phone calls. In a short time, we had him in a stable shelter location. Now we are working to get him back into foster care, thanks to Brevard Family Partnership and Crosswinds Youth Services. He's going to have permanent housing and full support to see him through his journey in life."

Smith said this individual will be the first "Friend of our Open Table. We are committed to working with him for one year. That's the Open Table model. We are going to have six adults from our church, and other people help him set his goals and achieve those goals. Hopefully, it will make a permanent difference in his life after the one-year period of mentoring. He has already told us he plans to finish school and go on to college."

With Open Table, the individual is in charge, said Smith. "They are the ones who tell us what their goals and dreams are in life."

Research on Open Table has shown that the direct, one-on-one volunteer support involved transforms not only the lives of the Friends who are supported by the Tables, but also Table members who provide the support. Initial research with Table members demonstrates a deepening understanding of their human purpose and the power of relationship and reciprocity.

Published research documents the impact of the Open Table model on 2013 Table graduates two years later. Ninety-five percent of young adults/families remained in a relationship with their Table members; 85 percent of the graduates had a better job or were in college or technical school after their Table experience ended; and 95 percent reported that they were optimistic about their future ability to be self-supporting.

"I believe the beauty of what we have embarked on is the ability to collaborate and leverage people and resources to help better the lives in this community," said Scarpelli. "And we're doing that in Brevard with two organizations that share the same mission."

"We are helping people who have been left behind," added Bishop Clark. "That is a great feeling. It brings tears to my eyes."

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