

# MIAMI TODAY

WEEK OF THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2022

A Singular Voice in an Evolving City

WWW.MIAMITODAYNEWS.COM \$4.00

MIAMI TODAY 9

WEEK OF THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2022



## Economic Rebound Beyond Covid

### Nonprofits under pressure in work to uplift the underserved

By ABRAHAM GADIAN

For the past two years, local nonprofits have been at the forefront and taking on the disproportional impact the pandemic has caused to the most vulnerable, and this year will be no different.

Working along with Miami-Dade County, municipalities and each other, nonprofits are committing to providing resources and services to people who were already underserved prior to the pandemic.

The Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust is to continue fundraising, in partnership with The Miami Foundation, to secure and operate dedicated permanent housing facilities, which include supportive housing for two growing homeless sub-populations, senior citizens and unsheltered single adults with special needs, said Ronald L. Book, the homeless trust's chairman.

"Of course, the underlying premise of our 2022 priorities is to further reduce sheltered and unsheltered homelessness. The county has been working tirelessly to prevent and end homelessness despite a very competitive housing market and a dearth of low-income properties," he said. "We have rehoused nearly 2,500 households since March 2020, but we have hundreds of households that continue in their housing search, including nearly 400 households with emergency housing vouchers in hand trying to find suitable units in the community."

The Homeless Trust continues its housing navigators are working overtime to connect landlords with prospective tenants, Mr. Book said.

"But we need more landlords willing to work with us. We simply



Miami-Dade County's Homeless Trust works with a group of unsheltered single adults with special needs.

can't solve current and future challenges without housing options," he said. "Yes, we have been able to avoid mass evictions and our homeless numbers remain low, but the housing shortage and expensive rental market continue to work against us."

Since opening its doors in 2006, Casa Valentina has served Miami's former foster care and homeless youth by providing safe, affordable housing and critical life skills.

"Our ongoing efforts in the last few years have centered on upgrading our affordable housing to create an environment at Casa Valentina that holistically addresses all aspects of our youths' development,"

said Janice M. Graham, executive director for Casa Valentina. "Residents have reported how important this sense of 'home' is, and how much their upgraded living spaces have enhanced their motivation to succeed."

With renovations at the nonprofit's new community room and apartments nearing completion, Casa Valentina is now pivoting to strengthening its program model by enhancing employment and education.

"While we work on diverse aspects of life skills, our focus is for our youth to understand financial literacy and how important having a solid credit score, savings plan, and budget is to their future," she said. "In addition to money management skills, we are working on creating a culture of career-mindedness in our youth. Through employment workshops

and mentoring opportunities, each resident is guided to a learning environment that best suits them."

Aligned with the same principals, the United Way Miami's main focus continues to be leveraging the leadership role to ensure that everyone in the Miami-Dade community has access to quality education and the opportunity to lead healthy and financially secure lives, said Joe Zubi, interim president & CEO for United Way Miami.

This year, United Way Miami will launch the "2022 VITA Tax Season Campaign," which is part of a coalition called Miami Tax Pros, led by branches that offer IRS-certified volunteers to provide free tax preparation services to eligible residents. The Mayor's Ball will make its return April 29 at the Adrienne Arsht Center and is gearing to raise more than \$1 million.

"While we know 2022 is still a fluid year, we are optimistic and excited to begin shifting more toward in-person events and interactions with our donor network as well as re-engaging with the community through volunteer efforts," he said. "However, the last two years have opened the door to opportunities for virtual connections, giving us new ways to serve our communities and communicate more consistently to a larger audience."

The last two years have been incredibly challenging for the low-income housing industry, and unfortunately, 2022 shows no signs of letting up, said Mario J. Artecona, chief executive officer for Habitat for Humanity of Greater Miami.

Availability of land continues to be a major challenge, and the increase in costs of housing and construction materials, plus labor shortages coupled with stagnant wages are making it difficult to provide affordable options for families, he said.

"Among our goals is to strengthen our relationships with Miami-Dade County, building on our stel-

lar track record of building on county parcels, to secure a steady pipeline of properties on which to build our homes," Mr. Artecona said.

"It is also a high priority to engage the corporate and philanthropic communities in the sponsorship and construction of our homes."

"The need for a program like Habitat is higher than ever," he said, "and we are determined to continue providing affordable homeownership opportunities to our most marginalized residents."



Mario J. Artecona



Janice M. Graham