



## IT TAKES A VILLAGE

New Life Village in Tampa provides a community of healing for Foster Children

by an OurSeniors.net Staff Writer

Tampa, FL, is the number one area in Florida with the highest opioid and affordable housing crisis problem, making it highly likely that kids end up in foster care. There are more than 7,000 children currently in foster care between Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco Counties alone. Unfortunately, moving between families a few times a year, as is often the case for most foster care children, causes mental and behavioral health problems at an alarming rate.

Sister Claire LeBoeuf of the Congregation of Sisters of Holy Cross, identified this issue early during her service with the church. She has been in the Tampa Bay area serving children affected by trauma and abuse for 40 years. Her main objective was to figure out a way to create a stable environment for foster children, especially older children that don't get adopted out of foster care. After seeing a community called Hope Meadows in Rantoul, IL, that reduced the number of kids in foster care, Sister Claire knew the Tampa Bay area needed that. She found seed money and started New Life Village in 2008 and by 2012 acquired a 12-acre development in Palm River that was unfinished due to previous ownership issues. The idea was to create a place where potential parents and grandparents could adopt kids out of foster care and live in the community for an affordable rate.



After eight years of operation, the community now has a total of 104 residents with 20 of them being senior citizens, 32 being households and 20 being families either preventing or getting children out of foster care. Those that join the community know that it's an intentional community where neighbors are in it together for a bigger cause. It's not just an affordable housing option; all residents need to volunteer and be on a mission to positively affect foster care. Those above 55

years old serve as tutors, mentors, babysitters and surrogate grandparents to fill in gaps and offer extra support for the families. Seniors are gifting their retirement and time for a higher purpose. They lead the village as elders and ensure the policies, events, rules and planning are run properly with everyone's best interests in mind.

The foster or adopted parents and grandparents are providing a variety of programs for a well-rounded experience. Seniors can engage in wellness activities, like yoga and tai chi, and learn about diet through functional medicine coaches for overall health. The younger adults are provided classes on financial wellness, health, and special training to understand how to best raise traumatized children. The children are kept busy with activities like art therapy, field trips, game night, movie night and many others where the elders will participate and help. These activities allow the kids to learn how to trust a variety of people. From other kids to other parents and grandparents, it's an environment where everyone's family looks different. Everyone comes together to help one another with an "it takes a village to raise a child" mentality.

While the village is going strong, there is room to keep developing on the 12 acres of land. 16 new units are being planned and are scheduled to break ground in 2021. The village would like to expand its development to accommodate more seniors and families. They are hoping to increase the ratio of seniors to families as seniors provide assistance across all facets of the community. There are also ideas to include more activities and areas for projects like a state-of-the-art garden for families to create their own grow boxes and learn to grow different things. More programming means more ways for the community and its residents to heal.

If the opportunity to live out retirement in an intentional and purposeful way sounds like your calling, you can call **813-304-0623**. You can also donate to the cause through <https://newlifestvillage.org/give/> 🙏