

The logo for MirCi E-Newsletter features the word "mirCi" in a blue, lowercase, sans-serif font. To the right of the text are several thick, wavy lines in orange, pink, blue, and green, creating a sense of movement and connection. The entire logo is set against a light grey background and is framed by a thick orange border.

mirCi

E-Newsletter

## Making it Easier for Midlands Organizations to Collaborate



People trying to navigate the challenges of mental illness and the chaos of homelessness are often unaware of how to access help. Complicating things, non-profits, health care providers, crisis teams, government agencies and emergency responders often operate in a siloed way. Mirci makes collaborating with other Midlands organizations a priority.

"We form partnerships with other organizations because none of us can provide or do everything, and it really does take a village," said Dianne Miller-Fields, Mirci's Director of Outreach and Benefits. "When a person comes to us for help, if we can't help them, we always search for a local resource that can."

Last year, Miller Fields began trying to rebuild and strengthen Mirci's valuable network of partnerships after it was eroded by pandemic isolation

and closures. She began hosting a monthly meeting that brings together shelters and other charities, mental health care providers, police crisis teams, EMTs and others who may play a part in getting people the help they need.

"We are up to about 15-25 people a month," Miller-Fields said. "At each meeting one organization speaks to the group about what exactly they do and how they can help and also what they need. This has helped everyone get a

clearer understanding of the resources that are out there."

In addition, Mirci's Outreach Teams continue to visit area shelters several times a week to offer screenings that could qualify people for Mirci's life changing services.

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## Leo's Odyssey

As a child growing up on a family farm north of Tallahassee, Leo learned how to repair pretty much anything with whatever materials were at hand. His self-sufficiency and adaptability helped the 45-year-old Air Force veteran survive 10 years without a home.



"After I got out of the Air Force, I went to work for a carnival," Leo said. "During the seven months the carnival was traveling, I was able to sleep in a bunk house. But the other five months of the year, I would sleep wherever I could find."

The carnival that employed Leo was stationed at Dutch Square in Columbia just as the pandemic shut everything down. Leo lost his job, and, lacking transportation, found himself stranded. He stayed in several emergency shelters including Transitions and Oliver Gospel Mission, but the shelter environment felt overstimulating to him; he wasn't comfortable having to talk to people constantly. Eventually, he moved into a parking garage, and later, into a friend's garage.



The years-long struggle for shelter added paralyzing anxiety and depression to Leo's existing health conditions, which included mild autism, learning disabilities, and a severe and persistent mental illness.

"People sometimes think that people who are homeless are carefree," he said. "But that is so far from the truth. You're always wondering if you will be able to get something eat and if you'll be attacked or even murdered

while you sleep."

Leo first came to Mirci's Outreach Center for help in the Spring of 2022.

"At the time he was pretty unstable," said Dianne Miller-Fields, Mirci's Director of Outreach and Benefits. "We arranged for him to see one of our psychiatrists. As is often the case, as soon as he began taking the right medication, he was fine."



After Leo's efforts to find housing through another agency failed, Miller-Field's team reached out to Rapid Shelter Columbia to get him placed in temporary housing. Operated by the City of Columbia, Rapid Shelter's pod of 50 pallet units allow each person to sleep in their own space, which worked well for Leo. Before he reached the three-month limit for a stay in

the city-run facility, Mirci found him a permanent apartment.

On move-in day, as Mirci Housing Support Specialist LaTonya Benjamin showed him around his furnished, one-bedroom home, Leo asked her, 'How long can I stay in this apartment?'

"I told him, this is permanent housing, you just have to follow the lease agreement," Benjamin said.

Leo raised his hand in the air saying "thank you Jesus."

"It feels amazing, just *amazing* to be able to shut the door," he said a few days later. "I haven't slept this well in years. It's really been the best sleep of my life."





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