

AGENCY HISTORY & PROGRAM EVOLUTION

The history of Lighthouse reflects the unwavering commitment and dedication to our mission. Over the past five decades, the Agency has evolved and adapted to serve our community in the best possible ways. We have advocated for system change at the local, state, and federal levels, leaving our mark on many successful initiatives. Today, the Agency is a comprehensive youth and family services organization providing a full continuum of care, including emergency shelter, residential treatment, foster care, educational services, juvenile justice, transitional and independent living programs, and in-home care for families in crisis. Over 300 full-time and part-time employees, more than 140 foster parents, and an amazing network of volunteers assure the continued success of our programs.

The Early Years and Housing Services

In 1969, a group of African American women from the Baptist Women's Fellowship met with Hamilton County Juvenile Court Judge Benjamin Schwartz to discuss the importance of providing aftercare for girls returning to the community from youth detention centers. Determined to make a difference for these girls, the group founded New Life for Girls, known today as Lighthouse Youth & Family Services. Our early leaders included Mrs. Edythe Hyde who served as our first Board President, and Mrs. Ethel Lankford, president of the Baptist Women's Fellowship. With the help of many other civic leaders and funders, the group successfully opened the *Charles J. Schott Group Home for Girls* in 1971 on Lincoln Park Drive in Cincinnati. In 1987, the Schott Group Home was renamed *New Beginnings*. A home in Pleasant Ridge housed New Beginnings for decades. Over those years, New Beginnings transformed into a place providing residential treatment for girls with serious emotional and behavioral problems, most of whom had experienced significant trauma. In December 2021, the program moved to 47 East Hollister in Mount Auburn following extensive renovations to the building. The new site greatly improved our capacity to serve girls in residential treatment.

By 1973, it became clear that most of the girls sent to juvenile detention had repeatedly run away from home. The Agency began exploring the best ways to serve runaway and homeless youth. When the *Lighthouse Runaway Shelter* opened in 1974, displaced, abused, or neglected kids had somewhere safe to go for the first time. It was Cincinnati's first runaway shelter and continues to be the only one for teens today. Later known as the *Youth Crisis Center*, it is now known as *Mecum House* (in honor of our long-time CEO Bob Mecum) and provides an accessible, safe refuge for children, ages 10 to 17.

In 1979, the Agency received a grant from the Ohio Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Program to develop a diversion program for youth at risk of being committed to the Ohio Department of Youth Services. The Agency bought a facility in the Madisonville neighborhood of Cincinnati and started the *Youth Diversion Program*. The kids received counseling, peer leadership training, and educational support. When the grant ended, the Youth Diversion Program then became the *Youth Development Center*, a short-term residential facility for youth in the custody of Children's Services. The Youth Development Center today provides long-term residential treatment for boys, ages 12 to 17.

Also in 1979, the Agency began offering foster care services, expanding those services to include a broad age range over the years. In 2015, *Lighthouse Foster Care & Adoption* became the first

program in Ohio to be designated a “Leader in Supporting and Serving LGBT Families and Youth.” It was awarded the All Children - All Families Seal of Recognition, the highest level of accreditation from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC).

In 1981, the Agency began its *Independent Living Program*. It offered teenagers aging out of the child welfare system the opportunity to live in their own furnished apartment while learning life skills and working toward self-sufficiency. It was an instant success. The *Transitional Living Program* for older homeless youth coming directly off the streets followed a few years later. Both programs are part of *Youth Housing Opportunities* and have been recognized as national models for their efficacy. Our inventory of apartments exceeds 120 with many of these contracted through local landlord relationships.

Expansion into Juvenile Justice, Education, and Clinical Services

In 1986, the Agency opened a juvenile correction facility. *Lighthouse Youth Center at Paint Creek* is on the site of a former sports camp in Bainbridge. It was Ohio’s first private correctional facility for youth. Young men who live there have committed serious offenses and been deemed moderate to high risk for re-offending; however, the campus has no bars, fences, or guards. Instead, the program at Paint Creek is based on positive peer culture. Everyone, staff and youth alike, work together to create an environment in which hurtful behavior is challenged, caring is desirable, and change is possible. Our on-site school, *Paint Creek Academy*, utilizes a restorative justice model to engage youth in service learning and community service projects while targeting academic advancement and employability skills.

In 1996, the Agency expanded again when it opened *Montgomery County Community Juvenile Justice Services* to serve youth returning to their homes from juvenile detention. This includes therapy services, community engagement activities, GED preparation, and workforce development. Outpatient sex offender-specific treatment services are also available.

In 2000, *Lighthouse Community School* opened as a unique partnership with Cincinnati Public Schools. The school served students in Lighthouse residential services and other children in the child welfare system in Hamilton County who struggled academically or with behavioral issues. In 2020, after 20 years of service, we transitioned ownership and operation of our school to our long-time partner, Cincinnati Public Schools. Lighthouse continues to operate our community gardens and our Agricultural Learning Center in the Madisonville community. Called Lighthouse Green Learning Center powered by Groundwork, the center provides year-round learning opportunities. The center opened in May 2020.

In 2002, the Agency began providing services through *Early Intervention (Help Me Grow)*, which offers family-centered care for infants and toddlers ages 0 to 3 with a developmental delay, disability, or medical condition likely to result in a delay or disability. We served approximately 1,200 families each year, helping parents better understand and enhance their child’s development and access community resources. In 2022, Hamilton County assumed these services due to changes at the state level, ending our role as the local service coordinator.

Early Intervention is one example of how Lighthouse expanded *Clinical Services* throughout the 2000s. The Agency reorganized case management, school-based counseling, community

treatment, and other behavioral health clinical work into a unified service line. We began billing Medicaid for many of these services in 2007 and have successfully integrated them into our system of care. Along with other community-based work, we continued expanding in-home behavioral care and re-established psychiatric services at Lighthouse in 2022.

In 2003, the Agency began the *Youth Outreach Program* to meet homeless youth in the community. It included outreach workers and a daytime drop-in center called Anthony House. By 2008, the community was experiencing a significant increase in homelessness among the 18 to 24-year-old population. As a direct result of Cincinnati's Homeless to Homes plan, the *Lighthouse Sheakley Center for Youth* opened in 2012 to serve homeless young adults ages 18 to 24. The facility on Highland Avenue in Corryville had a 28-bed shelter and maintained the day resource center and outreach program. The NEW Sheakley Center for Youth opened in *January 2018* and is described in more detail below.

In 2005, the Agency joined with the Hamilton County Juvenile Court to form *Lighthouse Individualized Docket Services*. This innovative approach creates a system for responding to mental health, substance abuse, and family issues often contributing to criminal behavior for youth. For those who must go to a juvenile corrections facility, Lighthouse is ready to help them when it is time to return home. In 2006, the Agency started a *Reentry Program* in Hamilton County. This program incorporates therapy services, community engagement, educational advancement, and workforce development.

Recent Changes and Ending Youth Homelessness

In 2013, Lighthouse announced its strategic priority to *end youth homelessness in Cincinnati*. That same year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) awarded Lighthouse a two-year planning grant to examine the issues of youth homelessness and to develop strategies to end youth homelessness. Two years later, in 2015, HHS awarded the Agency a \$2.1 million implementation grant to serve youth aging out of foster care, one of the groups at highest risk of homelessness. Originally referred to as YARH (Youth at Risk of Homelessness), this High Fidelity Wraparound program was renamed *Watch Me Rise* in 2017. The program ended in 2019.

Also in 2013, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) invited Hamilton County, Ohio to participate in the LGBTQ Youth Homelessness Prevention initiative. Cincinnati was one of only two communities selected in the country. Lighthouse served as the lead agency and in 2014 announced the *Safe and Supported* project. During the next six years, the project launched successful programs, training, and resources to ensure every LGBTQ young person has the housing, resources, and connections to thrive. In 2020, *Safe and Supported's* work became a part of Lighthouse entirely, rather than a separate initiative. Lighthouse has effectively integrated the lessons learned and clinical interventions throughout the agency.

In 2015, *Lighthouse Community Juvenile Justice Services* expanded services for youth engaged in the juvenile justice system in Hamilton, Montgomery, and Ross counties. Assessment, individual, group, and case management services are provided for youth who are considered moderate or high risk for continued involvement in criminal activity.

The year 2016 marked a change in *Lighthouse leadership*. After 40 years of service, Bob Mecum retired as Lighthouse President and CEO. Paul Haffner became the President and CEO in August 2016.

In 2017, HUD awarded Cincinnati a grant of \$3.8 million through the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project. Now called “KEYS to a Future without Youth Homelessness,” Lighthouse is the lead agency working in partnership with Strategies to End Homelessness to implement the KEYS program. The program launched in 2019. KEYS has dramatically increased the effectiveness of our work with young adults. Through Shelter Diversion and a Progressive Engagement housing model, we have achieved impressive outcomes.

In January 2018, the new *Sheakley Center for Youth* opened on Iowa Avenue in Walnut Hills. It’s a multipurpose facility designed to provide a seamless system of care for young adults ages 18 to 24 experiencing homelessness. The facility’s design includes 39 units of permanent supportive housing, a shelter with 36 individual bedrooms, a day resource center, and the Youth Outreach Program, along with various program offices.

In 2019, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation awarded Lighthouse the highest seal of recognition from the foundation’s All Children-All Families Project. Lighthouse received the “Innovator” Seal of Recognition for its work in building and implementing innovative approaches to LGBTQ inclusion. Lighthouse was also a Queen City Certified Leader in Gender Equity, a designation earned in 2018. And Lighthouse is proudly devoted to the work of racial equity in our community. Many staff and board leaders attended trainings by the nationally recognized Racial Equity Institute (sponsored by Greater Cincinnati Foundation) in 2019, and we hosted our staff training with REI facilitators in 2020. Equity remains a key focus of our work at Lighthouse, both for our staff and the communities we serve.