

PATIENT STORY

# Empowering Others Through Healthcare Connections

Working with the unhoused population in downtown Grand Rapids, William Williams has seen people go through devastating health conditions, from loss of frozen limbs in winter to overheating in the summer. He feels confident in telling people that they can receive care at Catherine's Health Center, just like he does. "Seeing people's faces light up and they say, 'I can get health care?' ...It feels empowering to be able to connect people."

William has been a patient at Catherine's and an employee at Mel Trotter Ministries for about seven years, and he has been helping the downtown community for even longer. Born and raised in Grand Rapids, William felt an early passion to work with the diverse community downtown. William first started working at Mel Trotter in the emergency shelter. He saw right away that there were a lot more people who were not accessing the shelter who still needed the same support. William is now the Outreach Coordinator of Mel Trotter, coordinating a robust outreach program that delivers care and services to people outside the downtown shelter. Every week, William and his team serve over 100 people by providing showers, hygiene materials, food, and other resources. "Once people get fed and get cleaned up, they're more inclined to talk about housing, talk about employment, talk about wellbeing and health," William says. "Catherine's is able to offer those things about wellbeing, and I am able to connect people to that."

When William first established care at Catherine's, he had gone several years without regular health care, and was

looking for a small clinic that would help him as a person instead of treating him like a number. William found that health care home at Catherine's. His provider educated him on his high blood pressure and walked him through the effects of the condition and treatment options. William describes why getting his blood pressure under control was so important to him: "My health and longevity, my kids, grandkids, and me being around for that—it's huge." He was unsure about starting a new medication, so his provider worked with him on other treatment plans, including various diet and exercise programs. "She didn't force me, but tried every other option. She personalized it for me in that sense...she allowed me to be a part of my own health care."

In 2023, William joined the Catherine's Health Center Board of Directors. He serves on the Board with twelve other members, all with varying professions and expertise, to make decisions on how to best serve the community. William describes it as "eye-opening" to look

at things on a bigger scale and learn more about the struggles that people experience with the health care system. He is now equipped to educate others on how being healthy and able to care for yourself is important, leading to better quality of life and more time spent with loved ones. William provides a unique perspective to the Board as a long-time Catherine's patient and as someone who works with the unhoused community.

*"It feels empowering to be able to connect people."*

Through his work at Mel Trotter, William refers many people to care at Catherine's. He shares his own experience with them: that Catherine's treats patients holistically, working with them on a case-by-case basis to provide quality and individualized care. William tells people that "Catherine's walks alongside you... For me to be able to connect them to something that can help them—it's awesome."



William, pictured above.

## STAFF FEATURE

# Healthcare for the Unhoused

Catherine's Clinical Director, Mark Contreras, has a vision for Catherine's to be the community leader in healthcare that is truly accessible for the unhoused. "This will require dynamic services delivered outside the walls of our health center," he shares. "Strategies such as street medicine, robust enabling services to address social drivers of healthcare, and place-based clinics with community partners will build the foundation for accessible healthcare for the unhoused. We are challenging ourselves to think outside the box and reconceptualize the healthcare experience for the unhoused."

Homelessness is one of the most talked about issues in the greater Grand Rapids area. In 2023, a point in time census identified more than 1,200 community members experiencing homelessness in the greater Grand Rapids area. Despite

several worldclass health systems, Grand Rapids still lacks a coordinated and comprehensive response to serving the healthcare needs of the unhoused. Catherine's is trying to change this.

"We know well that being unhoused is associated with significant health disparities and traditional healthcare is nearly inaccessible for this population. Without a dynamic and creative solution, many of our neighbors will end up being chronically homeless with a mortality rate 3 to 4 times the general population and a life expectancy 17 years shorter than those who are housed."

While we have always had open doors to those experiencing homelessness, we have been intentional in the last year about working with partners, organizing similar efforts, and earning

the community's trust while filling gaps in care. Catherine's services are informed by those we serve, and we maintain a fierce commitment to delivering quality and accessible healthcare to all.

*"Our neighbors all have a desire to be well, but don't have the same opportunity to achieve this."*

When caring for unhoused individuals, we refer them back to an existing Catherine's primary care clinic whenever possible to establish continuity. We are also active partners of the Street Medicine Collaborative and perform weekly street rounds with the Grand Rapids Homeless Outreach Team. Catherine's currently provides services embedded in the community with trusted partners, such as a weekly clinic with a local church and other service providers, psychiatric services to the guests of Mel Trotter, and designated time for youth experiencing housing instability.

In the future, Catherine's hopes to serve more individuals where they are by hosting pop-up clinics in partnership with trusted organizations. Ideally, we will eventually operate a specialty clinic for the unhoused.

Mark shares, "I would encourage everyone to challenge their preconceived notions about the unhoused. Individuals experiencing homelessness often have a history of trauma or uncontrolled health conditions that create barriers to wellness and housing. Our neighbors all have a desire to be well, but don't have the same opportunity to achieve this. Volunteerism at one of our many community organizations caring for the unhoused is a powerful way to get involved and an opportunity to support some of our fantastic neighbors that need a little extra help right now."



Pictured above, Tammy Morgan, Medical Assistant, and Mark Contreras at Crossroads Bible Church.

## PARTNER HIGHLIGHT

# Community Partners Serving the Unhoused

Catherine's wouldn't be able to serve the complex needs of the unhoused without many trusted partners. Below are just a few we have the honor of working with!

## Crossroads Bible Church

Every Tuesday, Catherine's joins other service providers to become a gathering place of resource hub for those experiencing homelessness. We provide primary care and referrals.

## Mel Trotter Ministries

A Catherine's Community Health Worker provides navigation and referrals to guests of the shelter while connecting them to psychiatric services!

## A.Y.A. Youth Collective

After months of a Community Health Worker building relationships at Drop-In, we are thrilled to start offering dedicated medical and behavioral health services to A.Y.A.'s youth.

## Grand Rapids Homeless Outreach Team

Every Friday, a Catherine's provider accompanies the Grand Rapids Fire Department and Network 180 to provide convenience care to those living unsheltered.

## UPCOMING OPPORTUNITIES



**GIVING  
TUESDAY**



## Giving Tuesday at Catherine's

Giving Tuesday is an opportunity for radical generosity and giving back to your community. This November 28th, please consider supporting Catherine's Health Center's services for the unhoused. Anyone can make a difference! You can make a gift online at [catherineshc.org/donate-now-to-catherines-health-center/](https://catherineshc.org/donate-now-to-catherines-health-center/)



**ADVANCEMENT  
COMMITTEE**

Catherine's  
HEALTH CENTER  
Open Doors. Open Hearts. Quality Care.



## Advancement Committee

The Catherine's Health Center Advancement Committee is a group of community partners dedicated to furthering Catherine's mission and spreading awareness in our communities. Catherine's is looking for new community voices to bring their gifts and ideas to the table. To learn more about how you can get involved, contact Ally at [ashook@catherineshc.org](mailto:ashook@catherineshc.org).

## Healthy Tip!

### October is National Dental Hygiene Month!



Though many people are looking forward to eating lots of candy on October 31, it is important to take care of our dental hygiene, which leads to better gum health and reduces the chance of tooth decay.

- Brush your teeth thoroughly twice a day
- Use fluoride toothpaste and a soft-bristled toothbrush
- Floss at least once a day
- Visit your dentist at least once a year
- Limit sugar and alcoholic drinks



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## About Catherine's Health Center

Catherine's Health Center is a 501(c)(3) non-profit Federally Qualified Health Center. Catherine's has provided high quality, affordable and compassionate health care for over 27 years. Today, Catherine's provides comprehensive medical, behavioral health, and dental services at four locations throughout our community.

Thank you for your support! **If you have any questions or would like to make a donation, contact:**

Ally Shook, Development Director  
(616) 336-8800 ext. 1206 | [ashook@catherineshc.org](mailto:ashook@catherineshc.org)

## Follow us!

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## Our Locations

### Catherine's Health Center Creston

1211 Lafayette Ave NE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49505

### Catherine's Health Center Dental

781 36th St SE Suite B  
Grand Rapids, MI 49548

### Catherine's at Streams

280 60th St SE Suite #200  
Grand Rapids, MI 49548

### Catherine's Health Center Wyoming

950 36th St SW  
Wyoming, MI 49509