

NO LONGER ALONE

The UNITY collaborative has driven down homelessness by 85 percent since Katrina by housing families like the Newtons, who sought UNITY's help after elderly relatives died in the storm, leaving the young family with no one to turn to.

When his family was homeless earlier this year, Dyrick Newton would

park his car by a 24-hour restaurant, so that his five children could run in and use the bathroom if they woke up in the middle of the night.

When his family became homeless, Dyrick Newton, 43, would park his car outside a 24-hour restaurant, so that his five children could run in and use the bathroom if they woke up in the middle of the night.

As his children slept, heads leaning on shoulders, sitting next to boxes containing all of their earthly

possessions, Newton often sat in the driver's seat, hoping for help and thinking back to a different time. Before his diabetes got so bad that his kidneys failed. Before his eyes began to fail, rendering him legally blind. Back then, he had never doubted his ability to work hard and provide for his family.

He also thought back to Hurricane Katrina, the source of some of his most difficult memories. The older generation of Newton's family, like many of the city's elderly, were hard-hit by the disaster. Within a six-month period, Newton lost his grandmother and mother along with his uncle, who

had been like a father to him.

Until then, Newton had deep family support. "If they would have survived, I can pretty much guarantee that me and my kids would've been okay – we would have never been homeless," he said.

Newton's story helps to explain one of the layers of post-Katrina homelessness. When the levees broke in 2005, many New Orleanians became literally homeless, after 80 percent of the city was flooded and destroyed, leaving people without longtime family homes and stable apartments. Others, like Newton, were left more fragile and alone, which left them vulnerable to homelessness in the long term.

"The levee failures wiped out the city's stock of affordable housing, shattered systems that provided medical and behavioral healthcare, and tore apart the extended family and community networks on which so many vulnerable people once relied," said Martha Kegel, UNITY's executive director

By doubling down to address the root causes of chronic homelessness and using best practices like rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing, the UNITY collaborative and its government and philanthropic partners have reduced



Dyrick Newton and his son Dyrick Jr. prepare the grill for a Saints game.



Former UNITY client Dyrick Newton and his five children, all A students: from top left, Dyrick Jr., 15; Daenelle, 17; Dominique, 19; and the twins: Daena and Danae, 11.

the numbers of chronically homeless and vulnerable people by more than 85 percent since the post-Katrina explosion in homelessness in 2007.

“We’ve made remarkable progress addressing the wave of homelessness brought on by Katrina and its aftermath,” Kegel said. “The tenth anniversary of the disaster gave us an opportunity to pause and reflect on those successes, but also plan for the work that lies ahead.”

Across New Orleans, more families are finding themselves homeless, because low wages simply can’t keep up with today’s steep housing costs. Before Katrina, 58 percent of all apartments rented for less than \$500 a month; now the fair-market rent for a one-bedroom is \$767, far out of reach of many low-wage workers, whose wages have remained stagnant. While national data showed that 10 percent of people living in poverty become homeless at some point each year, that number is even higher – around 12 percent – in New Orleans.

Dyrick Newton’s situation was particularly grave because his health deteriorated post-Katrina, without the care of his regular doctors and

clinic. In 2014, after suffering a series of severe health setbacks, he and his children ended up living out of their car.

Fortunately, UNITY outreach workers were quick to step in. Within a day of contacting UNITY, he and his family had moved into Baronne Street Transitional Housing, run by Catholic Charities. A few months later, with UNITY rental assistance, the family moved into a house in eastern New Orleans. “UNITY stepped into my world when I had no one else to lean on,” he said. “And through all of our ups and downs, they’ve been there for us.”

Newton and his children are thriving. They still live in the same eastern New Orleans house. And, though their household budget is still tight, Newton is proud that to say that they no longer need UNITY’s help paying the rent. “We’re able to make it on our own,” he said.

When Katrina struck, sending the family bouncing from LaPlace to Houston to Shreveport to New Orleans, Newton’s baby girls, twins Daena and Danae, 11, were only a few months old. They now bring home A’s on their report cards, as does his

son, Dyrick, 15.

Meanwhile, his teenage daughters, Dominique and Daenelle, have become some of the top scholars at their school. Dominique, now a senior, is being sought after by colleges. “She’s been getting college offers left and right,” Newton said. She is now leaning toward attending Louisiana State University to study sports medicine. “I tell my kids all the time, ‘I’m 100 percent proud of y’all,’” Newton said, beaming.

Even though his children are getting older and are heavily involved in extracurricular activities at their school, they designate one weekend evening as family night: a time to watch a movie together or play the Monopoly and Jenga board games that UNITY caseworkers gave them two years ago.

In mid-2014, after Dyrick Newton had eye surgery to treat the glaucoma he’d developed since Katrina, he reconnected with his best friend from high school, Kendra, whom he’d taken to senior prom. That October, they got married. “First UNITY helped me, then Kendra came back into my life. It seems like magic,” he said. 🌟



HOME AT LAST

*the newsletter of UNITY
of Greater New Orleans*

2475 Canal Street, Suite 300
New Orleans LA 70119

unitygno.org

A nonprofit founded in 1992, UNITY is the lead agency for a collaborative of 60 organizations providing housing and services for the homeless.

House the homeless by donating to UNITY on May 3rd – GiveNOLA Day: <https://givenola.org/>