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Guest columnist



## Abandoned store highlights plight of the homeless

As an organization helping rebuild lives by addressing root causes of homelessness, we are saddened to see men and women active in addiction living in deplorable, unsafe conditions.

A long-abandoned store adjacent to our campus has been such a place — like abandoned buildings across America, it's a campground of squalor, filth, and debris where drug abuse proliferates. With the building unfit for habitation and activities, there is a detriment to surrounding businesses and homes. We implored law enforcement and the city-parish administration to help seal the building to eliminate the drug trade there and prevent loss of life.

Securing the building is one step, and our team has been reaching out to addicts and the mentally ill, working with men and women rebuilding their lives from addiction, helping them become sober and self-sufficient. Those who have escaped the streets and are now employed and reunited with their families are testaments that it's possible to escape such a sad and miserable existence.

As anyone with a loved one trapped in addiction can attest to, it's a long and difficult road to recovery and sometimes the treatment process must be repeated several times over. If anyone has walked that road with an addict, they know it takes tough love and an empowering hand up instead of an enabling hand out. But combine a sincere desire to change with skilled counseling, mental-health medication and life-skills training rebuilding a sense of purpose and self-worth. Recovery is possible.

Take for example Nora, who traded the streets and decades of addiction for her new apartment and her own business. Or Rachel, a young woman now managing a deli, reunited with her daughter and pursuing dreams of a career as an artist. Or Bruce, who left addiction for a home with his new wife and a new life and returned as an Outreach Center case worker.

We applaud our local leaders for responding to requests to secure buildings that are drug havens. It will take the partnership of concerned citizens, city administration and law enforcement as we work together to improve the quality of life in our community.

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*Valerie Keller is CEO of the Acadiana Outreach Center.*