

Industry Focus: Against The Odds

A New Jersey pediatric medical daycare soldiers on

By Antoine B. Craigwell

When attorney Beverlyn Grissom, former aide to New Jersey's Acting Governor Donald DiFrancesco, and Michelle Bunting, a former executive at a pediatric day care organization, first met in 2001, both recognized the need to respond to the challenges of medically fragile children in their immediate New Jersey community. In May of the following year, they formed Mercer County Children's Medical Daycare Center to provide services and education to such children. Located in Hamilton, N.J., the center is the largest in the state to accept infants and children under four years old who need nursing care. Many of the children at the center are the offspring of teenagers, some of whom are drug users, gang members and prostitutes from impoverished neighborhoods in Trenton.

"Mercer County Children's Medical Daycare is a calling to serve the needs of vulnerable children," declares Grissom, the center's vice president, who grew up in East Orange, N.J., an area similar to where she now lives and works.

Grissom and Bunting, both in their 30s, and Bunting's husband, Charles, a retired state corrections officer, obtained a \$300,000 loan from the U.S. Small Business Administration to add to the \$400,000 needed to launch the facility. The center opened for business in July 2003, the same year the New Jersey Supreme Court ordered the state to commit \$350 million to improving services for children. Using flyers in inner city Trenton, hiring someone with "street-speak" to spread the word and engaging a bus service to facilitate transportation, the center has been able to serve 70 children with disabilities ranging from asthma to developmental delays, some with evidence of sleep deprivation, malnourishment, and physical and sexual abuse. The center boasts a team of 53 professionals, including nurses, therapists, social workers, a pharmacist, a dietician and an on-call pediatrician. Medicaid and Social Security pays the cost of care for each child.

Margaret Carroll, grandmother of a one-year-old infant with developmental challenges and of a two-year-old with acute asthma, says both children have improved since she took them to the center. "The social worker from the daycare visits the home and keeps in touch with the parents to make sure everything is okay," Carroll said.



From right to left, Michelle Bunting and Beverlyn Grissom, principals, with staff of the Mercer County Children's Medical Daycare.

Carmen Gonzalez, an employee of New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services, whose three-year-old daughter has epilepsy, says the center gives her peace of mind while she is at work. "I was at a loss to find a place to provide care for her."

The center is not without challenges. In July 2003, the day after the center received its license, the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services revoked its previously issued permission for 70 slots, limiting the number of children the center could accept to 27. The center sued the state, enjoining them from taking action. At press time, the two sides were still negotiating the number of allowable slots. With the talks dragging out, the center's case before a state judge is about to be placed on an inactive list. In spite of its legal battles, the center in 2005 spent approximately \$150,000 in other legal costs to save two medically fragile and abused children and to reunite a child with his developmentally disabled parents.

Grissom and Bunting plan to move the center from its present 5,000-square-foot facility to a 10,000 square-foot space that will include a dentist, child psychologist, social workers and guidance counselors as part of its high school outreach and family support services workers. The center expects to be certified this year by the state Department of Education to provide pre-school services.