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### **Commitment to D.C. families deserves honor**

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By Adrienne T. Washington - One indication that Satira Streeter, a licensed clinical psychologist and founder and executive director of Ascensions Community Services (ACS), is committed to helping dysfunctional families is her refusal to accept a salary for her treatment services for more than three years.

"I have friends who every now and then heard my stomach growling and fed me," said the native of Columbus, Ohio.

Ms. Streeter, 32, who "has definitely made D.C. my home," said "inmates pushed me to come this way," explaining how her work at a federal prison in Petersburg, Va., led her to the District. About 75 percent of the inmates had been transferred from the now-closed D.C. Department of Corrections facility at Lorton.

"I kept telling them they had been bamboozled into thinking it was OK to sell drugs in their community," she said. "They kept saying time and time again that if they had people to talk to surrounding their issues and to open their eyes, they thought they wouldn't have ended up in prison."

So they urged her to "go to D.C." to help their brothers, sons or other relatives. She obliged.

Last week, Ms. Streeter was told that ACS would be honored for its community work during an awards ceremony next month.

In its three years of operation, ACS has been singled out by community and media groups. The nonprofit mental health care agency was selected to be listed in the Washington Catalogue for Philanthropy in October. Washingtonian magazine included ACS in a "Best Bet" for holiday donations "where a little goes a long way." Ms. Streeter also received a leadership award from the Washington Area Women's Foundation.

But it was a \$50,000 grant from the African American Women's Giving Circle that prompted the ACS board of directors to authorize a modest salary for Ms. Streeter. "And I'm glad to have it," she said.

Ms. Streeter said, however, that she is more pleased with helping 400 families who have walked through the doors of ACS in Anacostia since 2005.

"I'm not doing this for me; I'm doing it for the people I serve," she said.

She recalled how ACS started in 2003 in the living room of her first home in the Deanwood area of Northeast, where she also met with clients. A year later, she had secured enough financing to buy a building on Howard Road in Southeast.

Ms. Streeter had been working as a psychologist at a private school for special-education students (mostly D.C. children) in Springfield when she quit her job to run ACS. "Lord knows, all I had was my little \$40,000 salary, good credit and a lot of prayers," she said.

She said she prefers "my mini-solutions" to solve problems. Ms. Streeter arranged to have back-to-school nights at the Martin Luther King Library downtown when she discovered that D.C. parents had no transportation to get to their children's special-education school. She ultimately determined that it was necessary to set up a free mental health facility in the community where most of her students lived.

"No way can a school be disconnected from parents. For mental health needs and educational needs, parents have to be engaged. You can't just work with the child and send them back to a dysfunctional home," she said.

Ms. Streeter said she consulted with the Association of Black Psychologists about how to establish an effective community health care organization "because we have to do more than just having someone coming in for 45 minutes a week and going back home doing the same thing."

She has been told that she is the only neighborhood-based licensed clinical psychologist east of the Anacostia catering to entire families.

Among her challenges are the stigmas associated with mental illness in the black community, such as "St. Elizabeths is only for crazy people."

"We try to take 'crazy' out of their vocabulary," she said.

Ms. Streeter tells her clients that people sometimes get stuck in their problems. "My whole purpose as a therapist is to get you unstuck and help you come up with solutions for your life and situation."

Some of her patients have health insurance, but most are treated at no cost. The first money she raised to found the organization came from selling T-shirts at a conference.

"I had to split my time between being an excellent psychologist and being an excellent

executive director of a nonprofit organization," she said, adding that she had no training for the latter.

She enrolled in programs, such as Fair Chance, that help nonprofits succeed.

"Satira doesn't just talk the talk. In other words, she walks the walk through her actions and visionary leadership," said Bonnie Gordic of Fair Chance, which provides training and technical support to community groups.

Now that ACS is established — with help from community volunteers, therapists and student interns — Ms. Streeter is looking to expand. She plans to open a women's healing center this month, start a teen-parenting class in next month and sponsor a "Mommy and Me" health fair in June.

Ms. Streeter, a member of Union Temple Church, insists that she doesn't deserve the credit for her good works. "It's all God," she said. "I tell people all the time that, when you're trying to do the right thing, He puts stuff in order."

- *For information about ACS, visit [www.2ascend.org](http://www.2ascend.org) or call 202/889-4344.*