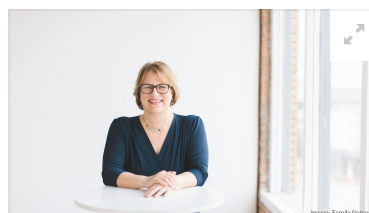


PHILANTHROPY & NONPROFITS

How Family Gateway changed its strategy in tackling family homelessness



Family Gateway CEO and president Ellen Magnis has led the organization since 2016.

FAMILY GATEWAY

IN THIS ARTICLE

Ellen Magnis

Person



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Family Gateway CEO and president [Ellen Magnis](#) has a personal connection to the organization’s mission.

Magnis left home at 17, got married at 18 and had two kids. [It took her 10 years of working full time and going to school part time to get her bachelor’s degree.](#) If she hadn’t gotten her education and built a support system, Magnis knows she could have easily ended up at an agency like Family Gateway.

“When I finished my undergrad, I decided to do an MBA, so I could have something practical,” Magnis said.

“During my MBA program, I really thought about what do I want to do with this? Now I will have an advanced degree, and at that point, I had three kids. If I'm going to take time away from my kids, I want to be doing something that is meaningful.”

Family Gateway is a non-profit organization providing supportive services to families with children experiencing or close to experiencing homelessness. Magnis has led the agency since 2016, and when she arrived, Family Gateway had one downtown shelter operating on a first-come, first-served basis. But the nonprofit found this strategy wasn't helping families in urgent need.

So, Family Gateway started assessing which families needed immediate help and which families could be referred to other resources and services. The organization worked with families to prevent evictions, keep them in their homes and saw the number of families it served quadrupled.

“Sometimes we can help a family very inexpensively by just reconnecting them to their family and putting a little bit of resource there, (so) the people who we bring into shelter really need it,” Magnis said. “They have no family here, or family is not a safe place. They have a very large family size. They have multiple complex medical issues. We want shelter for that population, and we want to help the people who had any opportunity besides shelter go there.”

Magnis spoke to the *Dallas Business Journal* about the need the organization is seeing, changes it made to its strategy and the nonprofit's goal for the year.

What did need look like during the height of the pandemic and afterwards for Family Gateway?

During those heavy years of the pandemic, 2020 and 2021, our request for services declined. If you remember, the federal government was pushing money out every which way and putting it into the hands of families. So, they were getting extra unemployment benefits. They were getting one-time payments. You can actually see in the data when families were getting an extra \$500 a week of unemployment. We can see the ebbs and flows of service need.

Then what we saw last year were all of those protections are gone. All of the extra money is gone. The eviction bans are gone. We saw this big surge of need last year with all of this pent-up demand because people were riding out the moratorium on evictions and not paying their rent. Or (they) couldn't go to work, so they couldn't pay their rent. It hit last year much harder than those prior two years. We're now back to pre-pandemic norms as well as higher needs than pre pandemic. But a lot of it is pent up demand, so it is starting to level off a little bit.

Tell me more about the changes Family Gateway implemented to better serve families experiencing homelessness.

Our agency was a very different one when I got here. We operated with one small shelter and a very small housing program. We had to take a long look at ourselves and say, 'What are other communities doing for family homelessness? What should we be doing? How could we serve more?'

We had to completely shift how we do intakes. Now we do an assessment, and we ask questions that have been cultivated from other communities and with our lead

agency to determine do you need help today? Are you okay for a day, two days, three days or four weeks?

By way of example, I'm a mom sleeping in my car with three kids. I should be seen the same day. If I'm a mom with four kids, or I'm a married couple with four kids. If I'm paying my way in a hotel room. I lost my housing, but I've got a month's worth of income to see me through then we're going to see them in a month.

We're going to try to get the people who are literally in the street, in their cars or checking out of their hotel room after paying for a month and have nowhere to go. We're going to get them on the same day. We're not going to assume that you need shelter just because you're in that place of crisis.

The other thing that we've done is implement a practice called diversion, which is going through a set of questions to find out things like where were you before you were sleeping in the car? What happened? Where's your family? What we found in digging into all of that is a lot of people who are in this place of crisis cannot think of solutions because they're in that place of fear, flight, fight and freeze.

What has been the impact of that change?

The year that I got here, we served 400 families, and last year, we served 1600. Our budget was \$3.3 million then and it's about \$7 million now. So, our numbers quadrupled, but our budget did not quadruple. Shelter is the most expensive way that you can start with, so it's changed everything.

The other thing that we have done is we made the decision that kids should not be sleeping in cars outside. If we ran out of shelter space, then we secure very inexpensive hotel rooms to put families in while we work with them, so that has allowed us to expand our shelter without building a new shelter.

Then I would say the other big thing that's happened during the pandemic is that organizations are working

really closely together. One example is the Salvation Army and our agency now co-manage their family shelter. We're both putting resources into that facility, and we're sharing staffing responsibilities. Sharing the resources makes it very economical for us and for them because neither one of us is paying the full load for that.

What are your goals for this year, and what challenges are you anticipating?

Over the last two years, the city purchased a bunch of hotels. We're operating one of those as a 50-room emergency shelter for families in North Dallas. We wanted that bigger space, and we love that it's an old hotel because it has a kitchenette and a bathroom in every room as compared to our old dormitories in the downtown facility where the bathrooms are like your old college dorm.

We've been slowly phasing out of that downtown facility, which the city also owns. We'll be giving that back to the city, so that we can be fully operational in this bigger facility. We'll have to activate some mobile team to be out and about to pick families up who would normally be brought to our downtown facility. We're going to have to make some operational changes there.

We were hoping to have all the families out of there by the end of July, and then we'll spend a few months packing up stuff, moving it to the appropriate place and doing some closure with our staff and our volunteers who've worked at that facility for years and years. It will go back to the city, and it will become part of the big redevelopment that's happening downtown.

This interview was edited for brevity and clarity.



North Texas Nonprofit Organizations

Ranked by Total income

Rank	Nonprofit	Total Income
1	American Heart Association	\$880.60 million