



## The Branches Outreach – Our Story

The Branches opened in 2007 in one bay of a strip mall as a place for parishioners of St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Stone Harbor and members of St. Barnabas by the Bay in Villas, to come together for coffee and conversation, Bible studies, and special events.

With the church thrift shop next door, there were lots of walk-in visitors and it became apparent that there was a growing population in need in Rio Grande. The Branches started providing meals, clothes, and other support for those experiencing homelessness and financial difficulties. Word rapidly spread throughout the county and soon churches, restaurants, local agencies and individuals were donating food, clothing and their time to care for the growing underserved population. The mission and services were expanded and we became *The Branches Outreach*, an official 501(3)c non-profit.

Sandra and Fr. Ron Lockhart started a mobile ministry – loading up cars and delivering food and basic necessities to several nearby motels. In 2021, The Branches Outreach purchased an official van to handle this ministry. Soon after the food pantry opened, where people can select groceries for the week.

In 2015, Terri Mascione, having tragically lost her son, joined The Branches Outreach staff in his honor. In addition to working alongside Sandra and the volunteers, Terri began special programs for children – a day at Morey's Pier, birthday parties, and holiday gift events.

As demands increased, The Branches Outreach expanded its services and programs to clients, those experiencing homelessness, and the underserved of Cape May County. Guests can enjoy breakfast, lunch, clean clothes, and free haircuts. Clients can meet with advocates for assistance with navigating the Social Services system, arranging important appointments, and addiction and housing issues. The Branches Outreach Center provides clients with a warm place to stay before being transported to local warming centers when the county calls a Code Blue.

Thanks to a very generous benefactor, The Branches Outreach Center moved into a new building located at 201 Hirst Avenue in Rio Grande in September, 2022. The building has been completely renovated to our specifications to meet the growing needs of the clients. The volunteers warm and serve meals from the well-equipped kitchen, seat 30+ people in the social room, provide showers, and sort and store clean donated clothes.

Maria Elena Hallion, PhD was named our Executive Director on September 19, 2022. She joins Sandra Lockhart, Operations Director, and Terri Mascione, Program Director, working to expand the services offered by The Branches Outreach.

***The Branches Outreach mission is to provide services and programs for the relief of the poor, distressed, and underprivileged residents of Cape May County and to provide the daily needs of our guests with dignity and respect.***