

Open Door to Care

Our walk-in clinic model ensures that compassionate therapeutic support is accessible to all women in our community

Walk-in Wellness Clinics at The Women's Initiative provide women with an immediate access point for free one-on-one, evidence-based care with a therapist. In 2018 we offered 756 walk-in sessions, and that number is on the rise as we expand our walk-in clinic to five days a week, including our first-ever evening hours.

For many women who are uninsured or underinsured, the walk-in session may lead to individual counseling at The Women's Initiative. But what happens even in that single walk-in session can be transformative.

"What you can do in thirty minutes by listening to someone and validating them and providing a few essential coping skills that they never thought of before, is huge," says Clinical Services Director Ashley Barlow, LPC.

A SAFE PLACE TO TALK, AND LEARN YOU'RE NOT ALONE

Research indicates that nearly one-third of all mental health consumers seek out a single counseling session and often attribute that one intervention to the sense of well-being experienced after receiving nonjudgmental support.

"In a world where oftentimes our feelings are not validated, we're told to buckle down and get through, it's truly impactful to have a place that's safe to come and talk, for someone to say, 'I understand. Tell me more,'" Barlow says.

Most women seeking services at The Women's Initiative have experienced trauma in their life. The symptoms of post-traumatic stress can be particularly severe and isolating, from emotional swings to nightmares, from outbursts of rage to intense feelings of guilt or shame.

"One of the hardest things about complex trauma symptoms is that people think they're crazy because they're having these experiences that they don't see anyone else having," Barlow



WELCOMING & SAFE TWI staff Molly O'Halloran, left, and Andrea Mayfield provide a warm welcome to clients at our weekly walk-in clinics.

says. "In talking with a therapist, they learn that what is going on is because of the trauma. That psychoeducation can be really beneficial."

A ROADMAP FOR HEALING

In a single session, clinicians can provide tools to navigate anxiety and stress that are affecting a person's work or home life. They can teach coping skills such as breathing exercises, grounding techniques, and progressive relaxation. They can also discuss the benefits of self-care practices such as journaling, meditation, or time in nature.

Therapists also help women take full advantage of the many paths to healing offered at The Women's Initiative, including support groups, social support and mind-body offerings, such as:

- Healing & Growth Group
- C'ville Walks
- Trauma-informed gentle yoga

A therapist can also build a bridge to additional affordable community resources, for example:

- Referral to Common Ground Healing Arts for acupuncture or massage to help release toxic stress from the body.
- Phone call to ReadyKids to help a mother access counseling for her child.
- Information about the Charlottesville Free Clinic for affordable medical care.

Our weekly walk-in clinics are a welcoming starting point for mental health care. And they are also a powerful tool to decrease stigma and empower women to find hope and healing.

Free Walk-in Clinics
5 Days a Week

MONDAYS

10am-12pm
Westhaven Nursing
Clinic, 803 Hardy Dr.

TUESDAYS

9am-12pm
Jefferson School
Office, 233 4th St.

WEDNESDAYS

2-5pm
Main Office
1101 E. High St.

THURSDAYS

5-7 pm
Main Office
1101 E. High St.

FRIDAYS

10am-12pm
Main Office
1101 E. High St.

Local need reflects national and global issues

A Message From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

As The Women's Initiative enters our 12th year of providing counseling, social support and education services, Bebe Heiner's original vision to create a safe space for women to heal is as vital for our community as ever.

This past year we have seen many national and global stories echo in the day-to-day lives of the women who seek care with us here in Charlottesville. A few examples include the #MeToo movement; the increasing prevalence of suicide; and the UN report showing the continued threat that domestic violence poses in women's lives across the globe.

Sexual assault and intimate partner violence are at the core of the trauma histories our clients share with us. In addition, we are also seeing more clients who contemplate suicide and require more significant safety planning. Many women come to our walk-in clinic not really believing in their own capacity to heal, due to the enormity of their traumas and/or the severity of their current symptoms.



And racism plagues this nation. As I type this letter, the President is declaring a State of Emergency to build a wall at the southern border. In February, several top Virginia officials admitted to using blackface. These public affronts toward whole

communities mirror the private and painful acts of racism and discrimination that our clients share during counseling sessions and that lead to health disparities for women of color here in Charlottesville.

That is why we foster a welcoming, inclusive environment where all women can find their path to healing. From the moment they enter our reception area, they are greeted with warmth by staff and volunteers who are dedicated to supporting each woman's unique strength and

resilience. Therapists are trained in evidence-based trauma interventions, and our deep belief in and true connection with our clients is at the core of their healing and recovery. Our own histories of sexual assault, domestic violence or depression and our own pathways to healing deepen our capacity for empathy and belief in the power of transforming challenge into change. Having a diverse team of therapists means that clients can connect with someone who also has had to face the impacts of racism.

As one client recently shared, *"I am so very grateful for Varinia, and for The Women's Initiative. Thank you for the support, the constant warmth, and for mental and emotional care that I would not have been able to afford otherwise. I really can't thank you enough."*

The Women's Initiative continues to cultivate new opportunities for healing for all women in our community, which I invite you to read about in these pages. We've increased our walk-in clinics so more women can begin their own healing journey. Our Challenge into Change event at the Virginia Festival of the Book on March 20 is a public celebration of the power of resilience in the face of adversity. Ecotherapy offers yet another way to build resilience. And we continue to do our part to strengthen our community's investment in trauma-informed care that recognizes the importance of culture, identity and history.

Thank you for believing in each woman's ability to overcome life's challenges. Your support is truly saving lives.

With love and gratitude,

Elizabeth Irvin, LCSW
Executive Director

WHO WE ARE

MISSION

The mission of The Women's Initiative is to provide women with effective counseling, social support and education so they can transform life challenges into positive change and growth.

VISION

All women in our community will have access to innovative, effective, evidence-based mental health care.

VALUES

We believe every woman has an innate capacity for healing that, once uncovered and directed, results in better mental and physical health. We believe it is critical to address each woman's unique emotional, physical and spiritual needs.

THE WOMEN'S INITIATIVE

PH: 434.872.0047 FAX: 434.872.0049

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Charlottesville, VA 22902

Jefferson School City Center Office

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Ecotherapy: Nature connection helps clients on path to healing

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Carolyn Schuyler, LCSW, was the first program director of The Women's Initiative and continues to be a board member today. In 2017, Schuyler founded Wildrock, a nonprofit that provides educational, recreational, and therapeutic programs in nature. Partnering with The Women's Initiative, Wildrock has connected our clients with chances to explore ecotherapy. As one client shared about a half-day retreat at Wildrock's nature center: "I had an amazing day of calm and connection with nature and new friends. It was a day of healing."

What is ecotherapy? Who can benefit from it?

Carolyn Schuyler: Ecotherapy supports people in developing a reciprocal, healing relationship with the natural world. The work can take many forms—equine therapy, horticulture therapy, expressive art in nature, the Japanese practice of Shinrin-yoku ["forest bathing"], stewardship practices, deep appreciation and observational practices, and scientific inquiry. I believe ecotherapy is at its best when people are not only receiving the broad range of social, emotional, cognitive and physical benefits of spending time in nature but also giving back to nature. Ecotherapy practices can help people develop an embodied understanding that their own well-being is inextricably tied to the well-being of nature. There is now a robust body of research revealing that a connection to nature is an important predictor of subjective well-being and ecological behavior.

How did your interest in ecotherapy develop?

I grew up with the freedom to play with my sister in a fossil-rich creek and forest area by my house. I believe my own adult happiness is fed by the reservoir of positive experience I had spending long, relaxed periods outdoors early in life. I have noticed in my years of being a therapist that this was true for many of my clients, too. Time and time again, I heard people telling me that their most hopeful, empowering experiences were times when they were immersed in nature.

How does ecotherapy fit into the overall mission of The Women's Initiative?

The Women's Initiative provides many avenues to support the resilience of women. Given the strong research supporting nature connection as a means for reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression and trauma, it makes perfect sense that TWI would support women in exploring nature connection as a form of self-care. When I opened Wildrock, I came to TWI and offered to run Nature Nurture retreats. This started a wonderful collaboration that has now expanded to TWI offering walking groups in town and workshops at the office to support people in strengthening a healing relationship with nature. Having helped found TWI when I first



wildrock

HEALING OUTDOORS.

Carolyn Schuyler, LCSW, left, helps connect TWI clients to opportunities for self-care and stress reduction in nature at Wildrock.

moved to Charlottesville 11 years ago, it felt fitting to start ecotherapy work with TWI in this new chapter of my career.

How can clients incorporate ecotherapy practices into their healing process?

It can be as simple as women putting pictures of nature up around their desk at work (even looking at pictures of nature has been found to improve productivity and reduce stress). It may mean that women take regular mindful walks, find a special location in nature to visit repeatedly, or help with local stewardship initiatives, such as planting pollinator gardens. On our retreats, we provide women with a list of experiences that are evidence-based approaches to ecotherapy.

Tell us about your vision for the partnership between TWI and Wildrock.

I hope that we will continue to offer Wildrock retreats in the fall and spring, workshops on how to incorporate nature connection into a treatment plan, and regular in-town meet-ups to support ecotherapy practices. I would love to do a research study to explore how practices specifically impact anxiety.



CREATING LEADERS IN TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE FOR DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

The Women's Initiative is committed to providing **safe, welcoming mental health care to women of all backgrounds**. This means creating programming that meets women where they are and supports them in healing from culturally based trauma—for example, our Sister Circle Program for Black women and women of color; our Bienestar Program for Latina women; and Trauma-Informed Cross-Cultural Psychoeducation, in partnership with the International Rescue Committee and VCU School of Social Work, for immigrant and refugee communities.

We now offer trainings to empower more leaders and service providers in our community to take a trauma-informed, “culture-informed” approach to their work. In the fall, TWI staff members Ingrid Ramos, LPC, and Joanna Ajex, MA, led a six-week training for people in helping professions—from therapists to social workers to teachers—to become leaders in trauma-informed care for diverse communities. This training will be offered again in 2019. Additionally, The Women's Initiative will offer **workshops for the community in cultural humility**, a philosophy of care that emphasizes the importance of culture and identity in individuals' paths to healing.

Contact Joanna Ajex to learn more:

jajex@thewomensinitiative.org | (434) 872-0047 ext. 118

Volunteer Spotlight: Tonia Alexander

Supporting women to share their stories of struggle

Since 2008 Tonia Alexander has been a volunteer for The Women's Initiative's Challenge into Change Writing Contest, an annual celebration of women's stories of hope and healing. As a member of the Challenge into Change Committee, she helps guide the vision for the program and the culminating event at the Virginia Festival of the Book, our largest outreach event of the year. A Senior Self-Sufficiency Specialist at the Department of Social Services, Tonia also continues to inspire her clients to share their stories in each year's contest.



Tonia Alexander

and I was trying to find a place that was very welcoming to her. The Women's Initiative was nearby, so we were able to walk over and inquire about the services that were available. Charlottesville has a lot of resources, but it was great to have a resource directed towards serving women. We were able to make use of several opportunities available right from the beginning.

What inspires you to volunteer for Challenge into Change?

Over the years I have found that sometimes people will not be successful as they move towards self-sufficiency because of the additional stressors they're dealing with. It has felt great to be there for these women—not only are they able share their stories in writing but their voices can be heard.

I have shared each year's book with so many women who may have been facing some type of struggle. I wanted to show them they aren't alone. I think it can be empowering to know that, 'Hey, my sister, my friend has overcome these things, and if they can, so can I!'

How would you describe the impact of the Challenge into Change program on the authors who participate?

Every woman's story is different, and it has made each book different over the years. Whether you're sharing the first book or the most recent, there is always a woman that the book is able to speak to. Challenge into Change creates a connection between the authors and the readers that you can't find in other books and I think that's powerful. To be able to read the words of women from our own community, our own neighbors, to have an opportunity to share an encouraging word with a neighbor or a sister in a town that continues to heal, that is impact in itself.

Tell us about how you got involved with The Women's Initiative originally.

I have always found myself looking for resources that would serve my clients—something sustainable in the community that they would be able to access long after their time with me. I first found out about The Women's Initiative when I was looking for a resource for a client who was dealing with major depression



Join The Women's Initiative to celebrate this year's Challenge into Change at the Virginia Festival of the Book, feat. author LaTanya McQueen, **Wednesday, March 20, 6-7:30 p.m.** at Carver Recreation Center.



Barn Party raises \$118K for vital care

A gorgeous autumn day at Bellair Farm set the stage for an unforgettable 2018 Family Barn Party. Over 500 guests joined the fun and \$118,000+ was raised in support of vital mental health care for women in need. Yeehaw! As volunteer Indigo Day shared, "It was epic." Monica Prichard, Kristin Cory and Erika Jack's talent and can-do leadership made all the difference. We thank our superb co-chairs, committee, volunteers, sponsors, in-kind vendors and supporters for their belief in our mission! **Because of you, women in our community are finding renewed mental health and wellness.**



PHOTOS BY BROOK ROBINSON



COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- Kristin Cory, Co-Chair
- Erika Jack, Co-Chair
- Monica Prichard, Co-Chair
- Maylisa Baldwin
- Marie Bourgeois
- Catherine Brown
- Pam Calary
- Kristin Clarens
- Hobby Holmes Cole
- Bridget Davis
- Cynn timer Davis
- Marcela Foshay
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- Loring Woodriff Real Estate
- Manchester Capital Management
- Sentara Martha Jefferson Hospital

RED RIBBON

- Red Light Management
- Wells Fargo Advisors

WHITE RIBBON

- Carter Bank & Trust
- McGuireWoods
- Old Dominion Capital Management
- Union Bank & Trust
- Virginia National Bank
- Volvo of Charlottesville
- Woods Rogers



MARK YOUR CALENDAR! 2019 Family Barn Party is Sunday, September 29

To learn about sponsorship & volunteer opportunities, contact Kerry Day: kday@thewomensinitiative.org or (434) 872-0047 ext. 103.



The Women's Initiative
1101 East High Street
Charlottesville, VA 22902

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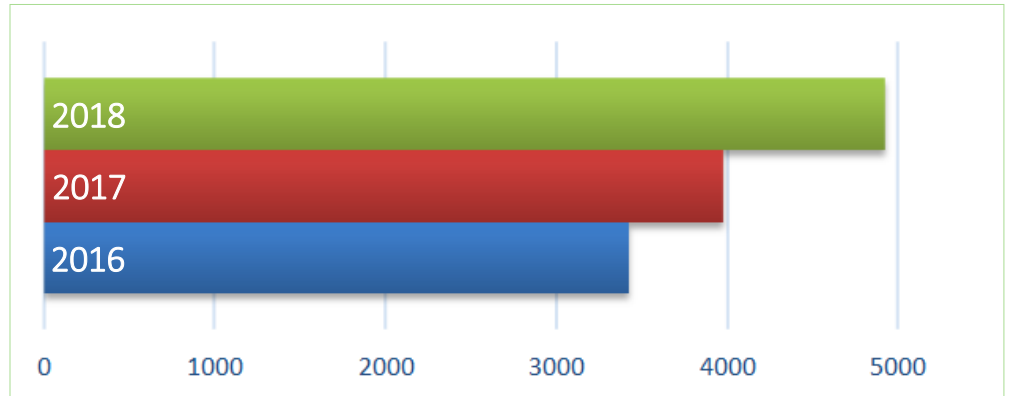
I have done amazing work with my therapist. EMDR changed my life for working through all pain, brokenness and silent suffering. I have new coping skills. I've learned to be resilient.

—TWI Client

**2019 WINTER/SPRING
NEWSLETTER**

Increased Impact: One-on-One Counseling Sessions

Over the previous two years, we've increased the number of individual counseling sessions our therapists provided annually by over 40%. Your support enables us to provide more care to women who would not otherwise have access to this life-saving mental health resource.



SAVE THE DATES



Challenge into Change at the Virginia Festival of the Book

Wednesday, March 20, 6-7:30 pm
Carver Recreation Center
233 4th St. NW

Witness the power of storytelling as healing, featuring LaTanya McQueen and voices from our annual writing contest.



Girls' Night Out Fundraiser

Tuesday, May 7, 6-8 pm
Private Home

An event for women who believe in our mission, value local giving and love great art!