

LONG ISLAND

As donations falter, MOMMAS House fears loss of one of its havens for young moms in crisis



By Denise M. Bonilla

denise.bonilla@newsday.com [@denisebonilla](#)

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A Wantagh-based nonprofit that provides transitional housing for homeless mothers is facing an unprecedented drop in donations due to COVID-19 that may result in the shuttering of one of its homes.

MOMMAS House Inc. runs four properties for unwed women ages 18 to 24 and their children to stay for up to two years. The group was founded in 1986 and serves young women across Long Island.

Like all small nonprofits, the impact of COVID-19 has resulted in a steep decline in donations, according to the group's founder and executive director, Pat Shea, 79. More than half of MOMMAS' \$830,000 annual budget comes from private money, Shea said. She estimates the group is already down by \$200,000.

"It's a big hit for us," she said. "Right now the bills are paid and we're not in debt, but it's getting scary."

MOMMAS House, a Wantagh-based nonprofit that provides housing to young homeless mothers on Long Island, is worried about the future since COVID-19 has halted all fundraising. Credit: Newsday / Reece T. Williams

Shea said the women at MOMMAS often come from broken homes, and having children is their way of creating a family they never had. The organization gives them baby necessities and sets them on a track toward independence, helping them with everything from parenting skills to learning how to cook and filling out job applications.

The women meet with social workers and are encouraged to seek therapy and also to attend college or learn a trade while setting goals for themselves. In return they must maintain the house, abide by rules such as a curfew, and show they are working toward their goals.

Brielle Bratton, 28, said it was a tough adjustment when she came to MOMMAS in 2014. At the time she was 23 and had a 2-year-old son and a daughter who was a week old.



"I never in a million years thought I'd be in a shelter, and it's sobering when you go to a place that you never thought you'd have to go," she said.

Bratton said she was resistant to the guidance at first, including house manager Erika Ventura encouraging her to go back to college.

"I didn't believe in myself and I didn't believe that I could do it, let alone with kids," she said. "But they believed in me."

Bratton, who earned an associate degree from Nassau Community College, credits the group with helping her be a better mother and Ventura for helping her become a healthier person by suggesting therapy.

"She planted the seed for me for years later to think about it when I was really not OK," Bratton recalled. "I remembered Erika's words . . . and it was one of the best decisions of my life."

Ventura, 40, said the women often "don't see their own potential," as she knows from her own time at MOMMAS 20 years ago.

"I feel like I'm able to relate because I was in the same situation as a lot of these residents," she said.

Shea said the group's donation base has dealt with several deaths from COVID-19 and their two annual fundraisers have been canceled. She fears the crisis may lead to closing one of the houses.

Bratton said she hopes MOMMAS can continue its mission.

"They gave way more than a roof," she said. "It set me on the path of fixing things in my life that needed to be fixed."

MOMMAS House

Founded: **1986**

Serves: **Nassau and Suffolk counties**

Individuals served since founding: **1,700**

Residents: Young women (**age 18-24**), pregnant and/or parenting (**newborns to 5-year-olds**)

Locations: **4 – homes in Glen Cove, Jericho, Hempstead; transitional apartments in Massapequa**

House capacity: **5 families**

By Denise M. Bonilla

denise.bonilla@newsday.com  @denisebonilla

Denise Bonilla has worked at Newsday since 2003 and covers the Town of Babylon, including the villages of Lindenhurst and Amityville.