

## ALZHEIMER'S Q&A



### Cognitive issues could point to other culprit than Alzheimer's

Is hypothyroidism linked to dementia?

According to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases approximately 5 out of 100 Americans (5%) have hypothyroidism. This translates to an estimated 16 million people in the United States.

Hypothyroidism, or underactive thyroid, is a condition in which the thyroid gland doesn't produce enough of certain crucial hormones. Untreated, the condition can cause a number of health problems, including heart disease, obesity, joint pain and cognitive decline. If a person is experiencing concerns about lack of focus and signs of memory loss, they should also be aware of other symptoms associated with hypothyroidism. These include fatigue, weight gain, fluid retention, enlarged tongue with teeth indentations, cold intolerance, hair loss, dry skin, depression, joint pain, constipation, headaches, brittle fingernails, elevated cholesterol and enlarged thyroid gland.

These symptoms often lead to a person thinking that they might have the onset of Alzheimer's or dementia. The person shouldn't rush to judgment about possibly having the beginnings of Alzheimer's disease. Rather, the symptoms of memory loss and lack of focus might be related to low thyroid function.

Because the brain uses so much energy, people with hypothyroidism (slowed metabolism and less energy) tend to experience a decline in their mental acuity — the "brain fog" that many individuals describe as they experience the symptoms of the disorder.

Hypothyroidism is often associated with mood disturbances and cognitive impairment, meaning that the thyroid hormones are critical for normal brain function. Specifically, hypothyroidism has been associated with several cognitive deficits, including general intelligence, visual-spatial skills and memory.

Hypothyroidism can often be diagnosed with a simple blood test. With some people, however, it may be more complicated, and more detailed tests are needed. In an individual with an underactive thyroid gland, the blood level of T4 (the main



Kids play with bubbles at Popp Fountain in City Park during a past Bubbles and Bubbly fundraising event for the Women and Children's Shelter in New Orleans. This year's event will be held March 30.

PROVIDED PHOTO

# Where the heart is

*This shelter keeps children with their parents. Why is that so rare?*

BY RACHEL MIPRO  
Contributing writer

**O**ne area shelter has a novel take on tackling homelessness in New Orleans: letting families stay together.

Standing in their new facility — new enough that the kitchen and other areas have yet to be finished — Dawn Bradley-Fletcher, CEO of the New Orleans Women and Children's Shelter, showcases little touches: a Desmond Tutu quote on the wall, children's books in the library, the alphabet rug in the intake room.

"We're in it for the long haul," Bradley-Fletcher said. "We're here to meet community needs."

Despite the name, dads are welcome with mothers and kids, and single dads looking to enter with their kids are also accepted. As the only shelter that allows families in the metro region, the shelter is constantly busy.

The New Orleans Women and Children's Shelter moved into the Iberville Street location in late January, occupying a building that formerly housed a hotel. Besides temporary housing, the shelter offers services like employment help, education and life skills train-



Gift baskets are part of the fun at the Bubbles and Bubbly fundraiser.

ing for adults.

### Where families blossom

The new space, with 21 bedrooms, doubles the shelter's capacity, bringing capacity up from 50 to 100 participants. The front hall is lined with flower-themed bedroom names like "Tulip" and "Daffodil."

Rooms utilize space-saving measures like trundle beds and bunk beds to accommodate families of all sizes — the largest to date has been a family of 13.

Less than 2% of the roughly 4,700 people served by the shelter have returned to homelessness. Bradley-Fletcher attributes the program's success to its emphasis on a family-first approach.

A year or two into the shelter operations, a woman who had been staying there tried to leave because her 12-year-old son could no longer live with his aunt, and she didn't want to stay in the shelter

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# SHELTER

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while her son had no place to live.

Organization members had a meeting and decided to change the rules.

"Since then, we've been breaking all the rules," Bradley-Fletcher said. "If it doesn't make sense to us, then we're going to fix it, because who made that rule? Where does the 12-year old boy go?"

## 'It just got to be too much'

Program participant Tiara Glenn said having her family with her helped her during a difficult time. Glenn entered the shelter in July five months pregnant, and with her 6-year old son and 4-year old daughter.

Glenn said she was having a tough pregnancy and was told to stop working and go on bed rest. She kept moving between her boyfriend's assisted living place, where he wasn't allowed to have people stay with him, and her mother-in-law's one-bedroom home, while trying to keep her children from realizing their situation.

"I was trying to keep life as normal for them as possible, without them realizing we're really going through a struggle right now," Glenn said. "I tried to keep up with all the things that they were doing ... it just got to be too much."

When she decided to accept assistance, Glenn said the shelter was welcoming.

"I was a little scared," Glenn said. "I was a little skeptical about going, because I have never been in that type of situation in my life ... It was actually a great experience. It was almost like being home."

## 'I'm very blessed'

A few weeks into their stay, she lost the storage unit that had contained all of her belongings.

The shelter helped her with baby items, furniture and everything she needed when the family, complete with a new baby daughter, moved into their own new apartment in late November.



PROVIDED PHOTO

New Orleans Women's and Children's Shelter Chief Philanthropy Officer Madeleine Briscoe, left, poses with CEO Dawn Bradley-Fletcher. Besides temporary housing, the shelter offers services like employment help, education and life skills training for adults.

Now settled in and about to start a new job, Glenn said the organization is still in contact, reaching out periodically to offer help and resources.

"Sometimes it can still be overwhelming," Glenn said. "I was a little scared at one point, because I was kind of scared about being in a new apartment, just leaving a shelter, just having a baby, it was a big life transition for me. So in a sense, I'm still kind of processing everything. Just picking up the pieces, and building everything so it's OK. I'm very blessed by the situation."

## Looking to expand

Funded through a mix of government dollars, private donations, family foundations and other donors, the shelter is always looking to expand services as it grows. The organization itself has been around since 2007, created in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

"The city was sort of coming back to life," Bradley-Fletcher said. "But the biggest part of this is homelessness had really spiraled."

While a basic women's facility opened to food and shelter directly after the storm, funding ran out in 2007. Founders Jackie and Dan Silverman created the New Orleans Women's and Children's Shelter to fill the void, emphasizing support for New Orleans families.

Bradley-Fletcher, after working in a pediatric AIDS program and later working on finding homeless men employment, had decided to leave the nonprofit world and start her own business after Hurricane Katrina. But when she heard from a friend that a couple was looking to start a shelter, she knew she wanted to be on the front lines of the program.

"Back then, it was a lot dealing with homelessness, because you really didn't have the resources like we have now," Bradley-Fletcher said. "We've sort of used, over the years, our time to create resources. That's why we have so much programming in-house. I remember, Katrina, we didn't have anyone to help with employment. We had to do it ourselves. It was just different."

Eighteen years later, the New Orleans Women's and Children's Shelter is gearing up for one of its largest annual fundraisers. Bubbles and Bubbly will be held March 30 in the Arbor Room at Popp Fountain in New Orleans City Park. Donations will go toward operational costs.

"It's a really fun family event," said NOWCS Chief Philanthropy Officer Madeleine Briscoe. "We have bubbles for big kids and little kids and everyone in between."