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## Single mothers, children find homes at new apartment complex

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### Homelessness is growing problem

By Samantha Joseph

Staff writer

MARTIN COUNTY - Over the last few weeks, **SchonnaGreen** has helped put the finishing touches on Butterfly Gardens, an apartment complex that will help its 40 female tenants hold their lives together.

As executive director of Mothers and Infants Striving for Success, or MISS, an 11-year-old nonprofit, she's seen clients escaping domestic violence, poverty and unemployment.

Many of them have been homeless, she said.

"We've had ladies pull up at the MISS office with everything they own in their vehicle," said Ms. **Green**.

At the newly built development, on Cleckley Way in Stuart, single mothers and their school-age children get a chance to start over, thanks to a program with a long list of sponsors that includes the Martin County Board of County Commissioners, Federal Home Loan Bank of Atlanta, TD Bank and Badcock Home Furniture.

It features 20 furnished two-bedroom, two-bath apartments, a computer lab, library, laundry room and on-site security.

For many of the tenants, many of who earn less than \$14,000 annually, Butterfly Gardens offers something they've lacked in a long time: a place to call home.

"These ladies do work, but typically, they can't afford standard apartment housing. Often, they live with family, friends and they move from place to

place. Their children lack stability and that's not good," Ms. **Green** said.

"Once they get here, within a week, the children's personality begins to change, because they know this is their home. You don't have pajama parties in the homeless shelter, so our goal is to try to give the children the little things, so they can feel like all the other children they see in the public schools."

The new housing comes at a time when Martin County's homeless population is growing and changing, and women and children are emerging as the fastest growing segment, according to area social services agencies.

When the Treasure Coast Homeless Council compiled the result of a one-day street count of Martin County's indigent population at the end of January, it found 220 children under age 18, 110 women and 187 homeless men.

At the time the report was compiled, surveyors found 57 additional families facing eviction within one week, due to foreclosure or nonpayment of rent.

Of the homeless, 69 had not worked for more than a year, while 76 had been looking for work for less than 12 months.

"A lot of people think the homeless are adult men, but that's just not the case," said Louise Hubbard, executive director of the Treasure Coast Homeless Council, which has provided nearly \$1 million in rental and utilities assistance to 2,000 residents in Martin, St. Lucie and Indian River counties since last September.

"What we know is that the average person just doesn't make enough, or has lost a job. There's a new population of homeless, and a lot of women and children are in that group," she said.

One of these women was Shawn Yergey, a MISS tenant who thought she would be forced to live in her truck with her children after she lost her job and then her home.

But the single mother of two has come a long way in six months, enrolled in college and is helping to settle new residents at Butterfly Gardens.

"I'm just really happy," she said. "I could be in a way worse place, but I've been very lucky."