

# NOW



Magazine

A Publication of Project NOW | Vol. 3 | April 2025

PLANTING IN A NEW LOCATION  
TO ROOT OUT POVERTY

*Challenge*  
**Collective** *Mindset*  
*Commitment*

EXCLUSIVE  
INTERVIEWS!

Shelter in Place  
Level Up  
Art as Healing  
Book Club Behind Bars  
Drug Court Success





**PROJECT NOW**  
LIFT CENTER

## Something Has to Change:

### A New Mindset to Eliminate Poverty and End Homelessness

**W**e have entered a new season; Spring is upon us. we have begun a new year with a new President of the United States of America. It's a new day embedded with new opportunities. Yet, there is something that seems to be eerily familiar, even painfully persistent to the point it has traveled with little obstruction with us. Its walk is slow but persistent, somewhat like that of the monstrous villain, Jason Vorhees of Friday 13th, horror motion pictures of my childhood past. And no matter how fast the character in the movie runs the attempts to outpace the villain prove only to be both futile and fatal. Jason continues to viciously walk them down, until the characters realize there must be a confrontation to end the terror. The national and local antagonist is poverty! Nationally, poverty is the 4th leading cause of death; over 800 people a day die of poverty or poverty related impacts totaling over 250,000 per year. Every 8 seconds in this country there is an eviction. More than 52 million people don't have access to clean drinking water and 48 million are either uninsured or underinsured and all of this combined, makes poverty more than inconvenient, it makes it intolerable to people who care.



**DWIGHT L. FORD, M.Div, CCAP**

Executive Director, Project NOW, Inc

Locally, Rock Island County is designated as the 5th leading geographical area in the state with extreme poverty; people living at half of the federal poverty level. In a year's time, the state of Illinois' homeless population grew 116%. We have witnessed an increase in homelessness of 44% over the last year in Rock Island County, and approximately 480 individuals a night are without shelter in the Quad Cities Region. Sadly, we are one of six locations in the state of Illinois, where homelessness grew by more than 40%. The number of unsheltered is magnified once we take into consideration those sleeping on sofas of friends and family members, bunkered down in the back seat of a SUV in a Walmart parking lot, or those out of sight crammed into crooks and crannies between buildings, abandoned cars, vacant homes and garages that number is closer to 1,500. In the state of Iowa, Scott County led the entire state in evictions, leaving families with a curbside pile up of personal possessions and rental records which will bar them from future opportunities. The persistence of poverty rears its head in households as 1 out of 5 children in the Quad Cities are food insecure, not having enough to satisfy nutritional needs and the pangs of hunger. It shows up in the many who have returned from incarceration with a felony conviction or arrest record which becomes a scarlet letter, presenting obstacles in employment, housing, healthcare, education and justice. They return to an economic status of low-income in class but are essentially forced into a caste – due to the permanent punishments that follow them, regardless of the life-changes they make.

I draw attention to our challenges, not to embarrass our region but to embolden our collective spirit to meaningfully address the issues. Let us face and confront an old challenge in new ways. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds us, "We are wasting and degrading human life clinging on to old ways of thinking. Nothing about poverty cannot be solved in our lifetime." Sadly, what we have been doing has not worked and what is even more sad, is that we have not changed our thinking and behavior regarding such.

Our actions in the past have not worked in ways we envisioned them, but they have provided valuable lessons for new approaches. As an example, each year the Quad Cities has a Low-Barrier Winter Overflow Shelter from December to April 15th. This shelter has for many years been situated in Davenport, Iowa and hosted by King's Harvest and most recently Humility Homes. The model is built around regional buy-in, where each city invests financially into the host site. On the theory this seems logical but in practice it is highly problematic. First, the host city feels overrun as people from various locations within region converge in an area where businesses and neighborhoods have negative interactions with people experiencing homelessness. This breeds contempt for the sister cities which in their minds send their "problems" to them. Second, when only one city has a low-barrier winter overflow shelter, those experiencing homelessness have to uproot themselves from their surroundings where they have established routines for survival, friendships, and relationships. This sense of uprooting dislodges them from people who support them with food, or a few dollars, or at the very least people and family members who keep an eye out and know where they can generally find their severely addicted or mentally ill loved one.

Considering this, I simply ask, "why can't we create a Shelter in Place model for each city?" We should not expect them to make an annual pilgrimage every winter or be transported at night out of their community of choice. Let me be clear, I am not advocating for separatism but a collective approach where the region is united to end homelessness and poverty. Like an athletic team, each member plays their role or position. Likewise, each city must do its part and carry its weight of responsibility in areas of poverty elimination and end homelessness for our Quad Cities to win. Each city can share best and proven strategies, coordinate efforts, amass resources, and build public will. If McDonald franchises can have a local effort in a city and collective goal to secure a corner of the market in a region, then surely, we can work locally and connect regional poverty.

Ending poverty and homelessness is neither the sole challenge of City Planners, City Councils, or the Chamber of Commerce, nor is it the sole responsibility of our non-profits. This is our collective challenge, and it must be met with a collective mindset and commitment. If one city in our region is being overwhelmed with socio-economic challenges, we collectively suffer. Every city matters, for we have a shared regional responsibility. Unified we can widen the landscape of economic security and stabilize our region for our urban and rural communities. Second, we must overcome the common enemy of our collective humanity, indifference! It is the one thing which will dim the vision of a bright future. Indifference sinks hope in a pool of despair and submerges possibilities under the flood waters of ethnocentric judgement. We are at our best when we stand up and demand justice, when we step up and demonstrate commitment and speak up to amplify the concerns, aspirations, and challenges of others. Years ago, the great educator John Dewey stated, "What the best and wisest man wants for his children, that must the entire community want for all of its children, anything less is unlovely and threatens to destroy our democracy." What Dewey describes is the essence of a Community of Care and a Circle of Concern. It is an understanding that charity begins at home, but it should never stay at home, because love for people moves us to action.

Finally, we must believe our ability to influence lasting changes in the level of poverty and homelessness is possible. Our goal must be to end the causes of poverty and eradicate its negative impact on the lives of the residents of the Quad Cities. We must envision a day when homelessness, if it is experienced, will be brief, rare, and non-recurring. I am excited about our future, not because I look through rose colored lenses but because collectively the future is bright. We will face our challenges, we will have our losses, we will endure painful realities all in the effort to eliminate poverty and end homelessness but together we will not only secure people but save lives and I don't know a higher goal in this life, than to engage in work that saves and expands life for all. When I leave this earth and time has come to an end, I want to be able and say, "Something changed!"



Dwight L. Ford, President/Chief Executive Officer





# LEVEL *Up Moline*

By Robb McCoy

**T**here is a growing amount of evidence that shows the simple act of giving someone money is one of the most effective ways to help people avoid poverty and other hardships. The results of programs like Moline's Level Up are showing that guaranteed income is an effective way to do real good for residents in need.

"I'm really proud of the Level Up program and the entire council is as well. We continue to get stories from community members who have been positively impacted by it," Moline Mayor Sangeetha Rayapati said. "We continue to find out from people across the state that no one else is doing it, so we're proud of the innovation."

Based on the early results of the Moline program, and supported by dozens of studies nationwide, perhaps more cities should be calling Mayor Rayapati for advice on how to make this work in their cities.

The two tiers of Level Up are simple. People can apply for either a one-time emergency need of up to \$2,000 or apply to receive a \$400 monthly grant, along with support from Project NOW staff.

"Two weeks ago, we got a note from a daughter of a 97-

year-old woman, who in that bitter cold snap, lost her furnace," Rayapati said. "She was told about the Level Up program, qualified for the emergency plan, and was able to get her mom a new furnace."

At a recent city council meeting Joyce Erickson, a participant in the program, told her story publicly to, as she said, "put a face on the Level Up program." Erickson had bought a car with her savings before suffering a debilitating injury which left her unemployed. Her lack of savings from the car purchase, increased utilities, unexpected home repairs, and hotel and travel expenses from her trips to Mayo Clinic for her treatment, would have forced her into deep debt or even foreclosure had it not been for the Level Up payments. "I can walk now, and have a substitute teacher position, but I would not have been able to live without the Level Up program." She is now looking for more sustainable employment as a registered nurse, but having the Level UP money "has made all the difference," while she fully recovered.

Chris Marlin-Warfield is the author of *Radical Charity: How Generosity Can Change the World (And the Church)*. He is also the pastor of First Congregational UCC in DeWitt, Iowa. His book exposes myths of "toxic charity" that have poisoned the hearts of many good-willed people.





**Moline City officials celebrating the success of the program.**



**Moline Mayor Sangeetha Rayaputi with a Level Up family.**



**Mayor Rayaputi discussing the initial year of the program.**

In a February 21, 2021, interview on the podcast Pulpit Fiction, Marlin-Warfield explains that charity skepticism is rooted in capitalist values that claim poverty is a mindset. While there are mindset changes that happen when people are in poverty, those changes are the symptom--not the cause. "The idea behind charity skepticism really comes down to the idea that poverty is some huge complex set of problems, and the thing about someone not having enough money is just a symptom, and that giving money to people creates a sense of entitlement, erodes their work ethic, and is harmful in some way," said Marlin-Warfield. Dozens of studies on programs like Moline's Level Up reveal something different is going on. "Poverty is, put simply, not having enough money. That is not to say that there aren't psychological effects of poverty, but it all stems from the fact that there is not enough money, and you're figuring out how to deal with that on a day-to-day basis," he said.

Mayor Rayapati is especially excited that Moline recently expanded the monthly grant program from 25 to 31 households and there is also money in the budget to hire a local college intern to help administer the program. "The name of the game here is opportunity," Mayor Rayapati said. "There is opportunity for residents in need as well as a college student to gain experience in helping with this significant program."

Much of the research that supports programs like Level Up can be found at the Mayors for a Guaranteed Income website at [www.mayorsforagi.org](http://www.mayorsforagi.org).



Robb McCoy is the Pastor of Two Rivers United Methodist Church in Rock Island and the producer of Pulpit Fiction, a weekly Bible study podcast for progressive Christians.



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# Project NOW's Housing Anchor Provides a Catalyst for a New Life

By Mary McNeil



Photo by Dave Dwyer

Justin King is in front of Christian Care, a men's homeless shelter in Rock Island. He lived there for six months before Project NOW helped him secure an apartment.

Justin King, who ran a successful landscaping business in the Quad Cities for 20 years, was married, had a daughter, a home and a vacation home. He was living what he thought was a good life until the night he was introduced to meth. Almost instantly he became an addict which ripped his life apart.



He used his business skills to make a business out of his addiction – buying and selling meth. In his words, “I turned into a horrible person. Meth takes and destroys everything – your entire life. It’s the devil!” His business fell apart, his wife divorced him, his relationship with his daughter became nonexistent.

Everyday Justin’s life was about getting high; nothing else mattered. Meth made him “spiral out of control” as he often stayed up for days at a time without sleep. Soon he stopped paying rent, was evicted and eventually found himself living in a drug dealer’s stolen car. He was arrested on four felony charges and given a choice: serve 18 years in prison or go to Rock Island County’s Drug Court. This voluntary five-phase program has been developed to help people get off drugs and alcohol and to stay off them.

Justin chose the drug court option, which involved what he calls the “hard core” program run through the Rock Island County Council on Addictions (RICCA). He began months of intense therapy, probation appointments, weekly court appearances, drug testing, counseling, life skills classes, AA meetings and daily supervision ensuring he was living a clean and sober life. For the first time in a long time, he was being held accountable for his actions. Justin, at first, was resistant to the program saying at the age of 51 he was not interested

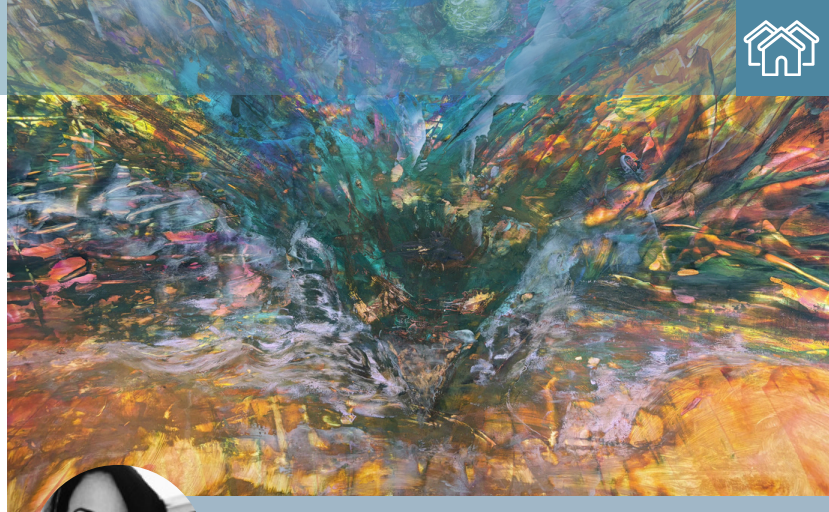
in following the protocols. But he quickly realized if he did not follow the rules he would go to prison. He spent six months at RICCA and got clean. Then eventually he moved into Christian Care—a men’s homeless shelter in Rock Island – and graduated from drug court in December 2024. Once you graduate from the 24–30-month program, and you have been sober for one year, charges are dismissed, and the participant is able to start anew.

In addition to following Christian Care’s strict drug/alcohol free program, staff there helped him revise his resume and search for employment. Project NOW stepped in here to help him find a place to live. After meeting with a Project NOW caseworker, he enrolled in Project NOW’s Rapid Rehousing Program. He moved into a one-bedroom apartment in Moline—Project NOW paid for his deposit, four months’ rent and part of his gas bill—and now he is on his own.

“Project NOW was fantastic. I love my apartment—it’s clean and centrally located. Stable housing is a great feeling knowing you can come home to a place, and no one will take it from you,” King said.

With his full-time job at Central Harvest States grain terminal, he has no problem paying his rent or staying sober. He proudly touts his sober date of March 23, 2023. He continues to attend AA meetings to stay strong (sometimes two times a day) and his relationship with his 21-year-old daughter has been mended; he calls the relationship “amazing”.





Rock Island artist, Kasey Moon, says producing these watercolor paintings helped her heal.

By Mary McNeil

## The “Art” of Healing for Kasey

A home and art can heal hearts. That is the sentiment of forty-three-year-old Kasey Moon who has been a victim of domestic violence most of her life. The abuse started with her grandfather and continued with her father, husband, and a childhood friend. Despite her trauma over the years, she held various jobs – hair stylist, a brewing company employee, and a business owner. She says the only way she stayed sane was through art, meditation and somatic dance. “I produce art as a way to heal,” she said.

In January 2024 Kasey came to Project NOW looking for a place to live since she found herself homeless after fleeing a domestic violence situation. Thanks to Project NOW’s Rapid Rehousing Program, we were able to house her for one year. “Project NOW provided me with a place to heal. I had not been homeless since I left my family at the age of 15. The apartment saved my life and my children’s lives who were able to join me. I almost feel like the woman I used to be where I can take care of myself, my kids and my businesses.” Kasey says the ability to use paint and express her feelings at various low points in her life helped her heal as much as Project NOW’s housing did.

Today Kasey and her children are living in a townhouse in Rock Island. We love moving people up and out of poverty. And as our Executive Director, Dwight Ford, always says: “a bump in the road is not the end of the road.”



Justin’s Drug Court parole officer, Robyn Hauser, says this intensive program worked well for Justin. “He was ready to put his old life behind him and move forward. It was a good place for him to get his footing, and with assistance from our team he was able to move forward. The judge, the prosecutor, lawyer, probation officer, and counselors all work as a team to help create new lives for those who want it,” she said. Hauser says the goal of the 20-year-old Rock County Drug Court is to enhance public safety and reduce recidivism by diverting persons with substance dependence disorders for appropriate treatment and support services. She says it saves money in the long run, while giving folks a second chance to overcome drug and alcohol addiction.

Justin has high praise for the drug court team that would not give up on him – even when he had a setback and served some jail time. “The program is an amazing steppingstone to get you back into society and build you up to be the best you can be,” he said. Justin now serves as a mentor to those in the Drug Court program. He supports them in court appearances and gives them rides to AA meetings and counseling – whatever he can do to offer advice and help others get through the program.

Robyn says drug court participants look up to him as a success story. “Justin does not have to stay engaged but he does – he goes above and beyond. Justin is instrumental in helping others graduate to a different life. He is a living testament to how this treatment program works,” she said. Robyn says her team wants people to flourish the way Justin has.

Project NOW’s Executive Director, Dwight Ford, always says housing is the anchor of all other opportunities. By providing Justin with an affordable apartment, he can focus on his job, relationships, his health and building a new life—up and out of poverty. “Housing is the anchor of our communal lives,” said Ford. “At Project NOW, our philosophy is that once you have affordable housing you can focus on essential opportunities like pursuing an education, securing gainful employment, and strengthening meaningful relationships.



Mary McNeil, Executive Media & Communications Manager for Project NOW, Inc.



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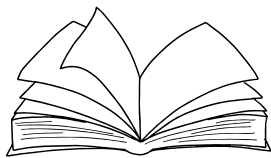


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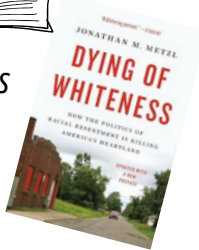
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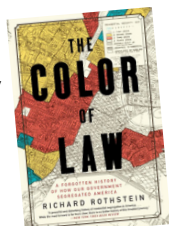
Mar. 26 - *Dying of Whiteness*  
Jonathan M. Metz

Apr. 23 - *Community Forum*  
Dying of Whiteness



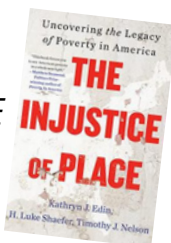
May 28 - *THE COLOR OF LAW*  
Richard Rothstein

Jun. 25 - *Community Forum*  
Visit to Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center



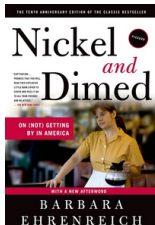
Jul. 23 - *THE INJUSTICE OF PLACE*  
K.J. Edin, H.I. Shaefer, T.J. Nelson

Aug. 27 - *Community Forum*  
A Political Roundtable



Sep. 24 - *NICKLE AND DIMED*  
Barbara Ehrenreich

Oct. 22 - *Community Forum*  
Level Up Presentation



Nov. 19 - *THE TYRANNY OF MERIT*  
Michael J. Sandel

Dec. 10 - *Annual Holiday Social*



Please feel free to join the Rooting Out Poverty Book Club on the fourth Wednesday of every month at 6:00 pm at the Moline Public Library.

The meetings are filled with great book discussions and informative speakers who talk about the issues impacting the lives of the less fortunate in our communities.

# Why I Love My Project NOW Book Club

By Lora Leutzinger

One of my favorite things about our book club is the people who attend. I appreciate we have collected a group of regulars who come together month after month to discuss housing, education, healthcare, economics, and justice (the five pillars of Project NOW's organizational foundation). I have genuinely enjoyed getting to know them, hearing their passion, and seeing just how big their hearts are when we're talking about all of the things we have learned from our latest read or in conversation with our guest speakers. I absolutely love (as I know many of our other members do) this monthly meeting that now includes our remote club members from Kewanee.



The insight, experience, and laughs these men provide adds so much to our discussions and time together as a group. I appreciate, too, that after three years, this club continues to grow and attract people from across the community. I think it shows the things we are reading about are not issues which are fading from people's minds. In fact, the discussions show these issues are concerning to the group and the topics explored are unacceptable to most and there is a clamor for change.

We've read such a wide variety of books: a lot of award winners and landmark works of scholarship, i.e.: *The New Jim Crow* by Isabel Wilkerson. And some newer books that hit closer to home, like *Homesick: Why Housing is Unaffordable and How We Can Change It* by Brendan O'Brien – a Davenport native. Sometimes we're even able to slip a work of fiction in the mix, which in a lot of ways makes the non-fiction information we're reading more real and easily understood. (They always say reading fiction increases empathy, and I think this is a perfect real life example of that). We balance and enhance what we learn from our reading with speakers from the community, by visiting art exhibits and installations, and watching documentaries which relate to the subject of our books. It's a really great system that allows people to feel engaged without feeling overwhelmed by 12 months of reading about the heaviness of the injustice of our past and present.

I am proud of the work we do--the work we each put into educating ourselves on issues at the heart of social justice and poverty. We don't shy away from having hard discussions, we work to view things from each other's perspectives, and we value the lived experience of the community speakers. We are a lively book club, but we're also so much more than that.

Lora Leutzinger is the Adult Services Librarian at the Moline Public Library.





**Project NOW's Executive Director, Dwight Ford & Christy Coulter, Librarian at the Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center. Coulter came up with the idea to merge the two book clubs.**

"I have enjoyed both the books and the conversations they invite. Having been incarcerated over three decades it is enlightening seeing the pain and struggle out in the world. It is also inspiring to be part of the solution even in a very small way."

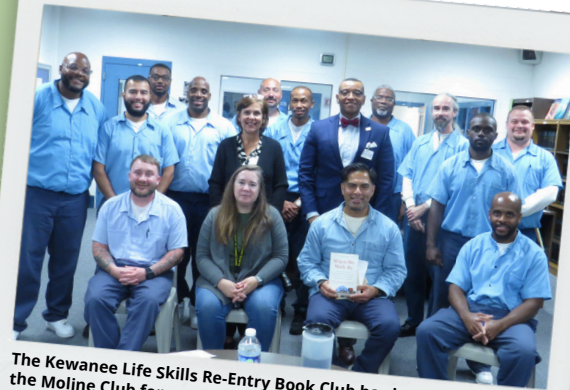
---Mike R

"My experience in connection to the Rooting Out Poverty Book Club has been a truly exciting and informative experience which I'm grateful for. My involvement as an active participant in the Kewanee Book Club has granted me access to connect with an amazing group of readers in which I've been able to further educate and better myself as an individual and reader."

---Giovanni G

Project NOW and the Moline Public Library teamed up to create the monthly "Rooting Out Poverty" Book Club in 2022 designed to explore books which deal with the five pillars we believe help move people up and out of poverty—Education, Healthcare, Economic, Housing & Justice. In addition to the books we read, we also sponsor community forums at the library featuring local residents who deal with the issues brought up in the books—from poverty and mass incarceration to affordable housing and homelessness.

In March of 2024, our book club invited members of the Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center book club to join us virtually. They were reading similar books and many of those behind bars have life experiences which could augment what we were reading about in a more impactful way. Their librarian, Christy Coulter, explains how it all came about.



**The Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Book Club has been meeting with the Moline Club for more than a year via Zoom. Photo Submitted by Malcolm Russell**

*Even though Moline Public Library is not my home library, they have had wonderful programs over the years, and I find myself going there often. I remember seeing the big posters announcing the books that would be read for the Rooting Out Poverty Book Club on an easel in the lobby of the library and they piqued my interest.*

*Finally, I decided to go to the community forum on February 22, 2023, where they would be discussing, "The Impact of Mass Incarceration"; and I found myself continuing to go when I could in the months after that. One time after the book club was over and the library was closing, I was having a discussion with Rev. Dwight Ford and Mary McNeil in the parking lot – I feel like I remember it was a little chilly that night, but we just kept talking. At one point I mentioned the idea of the book club group at Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center joining in on one of the book club discussions virtually and they thought it was a great idea.*

*After figuring out details on getting it approved, technically set up, and having a great first hybrid book club – we decided to try to keep the initiative going! I had not even considered making it ongoing. I was just grateful for having the opportunity one time and now we have been able to read some amazing books while hearing from some wonderful speakers during the community forums. We definitely look forward to this every month, in addition to the new books and discussions in the new year!*

"Being interested in social justice and the effects of poverty and social inequity on the individual in custody and recidivism, I have had many fruitful discussions."

---Tommy H

"I love discussing books with those on the Webex because I can let others know my feelings about certain things I read in the books that I thought were intriguing. It's great to hear insight from others about what they think. To get their insight about the books brings out the geek in me, which lets me talk on and on about the themes in the book."

---D'Arious B

# Going Home Or Getting Out

By Taji Marshall



The other day some of us were having a conversation about brothers who have served 40-plus years in prison. During the conversation, we remembered a particular brother and how he learned of his release. Out of the blue, he was called to an office and asked if he would like to go home. What he didn't know was that his family was on the line, and once he was asked the question they began to cheer and encourage him to come home. The family cheering and offering encouragement represented every generation since his incarceration began. This brother was indeed going home. Unfortunately, a lot of us don't end our incarceration with going home but getting out.

"Home" is defined by Webster's as:

"The social unit  
formed by a family  
living together."



Using the word as defined by Webster's, how many of us are actually going home? Most of us want to believe that we are still part of the "social unit formed by a family living together", but depending on the length of your individual incarceration, is that realistic? In my own situation, I've come to understand that I can't go home because everything that made home for me is gone. The last anchor to my past family unit had passed away August 5th of 2023--my Pops. I would like to believe I still have family, but how can that be if there is no way for me to meet Webster's definition?

To be honest, the closest I can come to using Webster's definition for family are the brothers I've met during my

incarceration. All the people I left out there are still family in my heart and soul, but do we really know each other well enough to still be a "unit"? These are the relationships I'll have to work on when I'm on the outside, but the family I gained in prison is the family I know. So many of the sisters and brothers being released are actually leaving the mental security of family upon their release, and unfortunately the policies of IDOC don't allow for the recently released to communicate with those still incarcerated, and understanding the policy doesn't lessen the negative mental effects on the recently released.

Finally, we had a visit a week or so ago from a brother who was released in 2022 and is doing well. He gave the group great insight into life after incarceration. One of the points made that stuck out to me was concerning "family"-- those who were involved and those that weren't. His advice concerning the "family" who was absent during my incarceration was useful to say the least. He explained that he had to take each person separately and decide if that relationship is worth saving. According to him, we may be shocked at how many are worth saving, and for the ones that aren't explaining why you feel the way you do allows you to move on. By no means am I suggesting that any of us exclude people in a wholesale manner, but we all have to make those decisions which best help us move forward to regain the family unit we lost during our incarceration.



Taji Marshall has been writing for the Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center's newsletter for the past two years. Marshall, who has been in prison for 24.5 years, will be released mid-July. As his essay says—he will be getting out; not going home.





## Ethical Medical Care

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# Coming Full Circle With Head Start

By Mary McNeil



**P**roject NOW has a long history —51 years— of providing high-quality preschool education for low-income families. Here in Rock Island, that history includes a former student who cherished her Head Start experience and teacher so much that – years later – she came back to work where her education all started.

31-year-old Allie Louis, spent one year under the tutelage of Chocos Tapia at the Floreciente classroom. And that was all it took to convince her she wanted to be involved in Head Start as an adult. Allie, who graduated from Alleman High School in Rock Island and spent some years working in retail and childcare, returned to Head Start here as an assistant teacher.

She said she loves “getting to know all the kids; they are so sweet, silly and fun. Plus, I love knowing the families and working with my former, favorite teacher.” She remembers coming to Head Start and feeling very welcomed by Chocos, who always wears a bright smile. “I was never scared; I liked coming to school because Chocos seemed happy and welcoming all the time,” she said. Allie, who is starting her third year at Head Start, is pleased to help families living in poverty gain a jump start on education.

Allie’s mother, Lisa Contreras, volunteered in the classroom when her daughter attended and often brought in snacks for the children. “We had a wonderful experience there. Allie made lots of friends, gained confidence, and felt loved there. She was more than ready for kindergarten - thanks to Chocos,” said Lisa. Lisa loves this full-circle story of the student coming back to teach. “Chocos made such a wonderful difference in her life; it’s a beautiful story of how a teacher became part of her daughter’s life, and it continues today.”

Chocos, who is pleased Allie is back at Head Start, says the success stories reaffirm why she loves her job. She has run into many of her students who are “success stories” and believes that her positive teaching style that stresses loving, caring and having fun pays off. “When you teach in fun ways children don’t even know they are learning because they are having fun!” she said. Chocos’ teaching inspiration was developed when she was a preteen. “My parents worked at a migrant school for children whose parents were working the fields. My dad was a recruiter, and my mother was the head cook,” she said. “My dad drove out to the farms to help children receive an education and any services they needed (like our family social workers here at Head Start). I drove along with him many times and saw how these families lived. My parents and I formed great relationships with the families and children that still exist today. I am incredibly grateful for those wonderful years in which I was able to be a positive role model for Allie and others along the way,” she said.

Dwight Ford, Executive Director of Project NOW, said Chocos is a great example of the ripple effect good people can generate over the course of their lives. “When our staff puts their hearts into helping our clients, they can and do have influence that can last a generation,” said Ford. “When our staff makes an investment into the lives of our client, that investment yields a lifetime of return.”



Allie Louis & teacher Chocos Tapia; now co-workers.



Allie Louis with her Head Start friends years ago.





# HAPPY 60TH BIRTHDAY



NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION



**Celebrating 60 years of  
educating young children and  
taking care of families!**







Photo by Dave Dwyer

# First Medical Respite Care Home Opens in NW Illinois Project NOW Leads Regional Efforts

By Porter McNeil

**P**roject NOW, the community leader in Northwestern Illinois in the elimination of poverty for 56 years, is tackling a new challenge: leading a regional effort to provide medical respite care for people who experience homelessness.

"On any given night in the Quad Cities, there are more than 500 homeless individuals," said Ron Lund, Project NOW's Director of Mission Effectiveness & Agency Expansion. "These individuals don't have access to acute or post-acute medical care and recovering from an illness or injury while living on the street or in a shelter carries with it extra challenges."

With roughly 60 shelter beds available across Rock Island County there have been many discussions regarding medical respite care in the Quad Cities. In 2023 Project NOW, with support from community stakeholders like Trinity, Christian Care, and Community Health Care, applied for and was awarded funding through the Illinois Public Health Institute with strong support from the Office to Prevent and End Homelessness in Illinois.

Community Health Care, one of the community partners with Project NOW, has a homeless medical team that travels to area shelters to provide care on a weekly basis.

"The new medical respite program allows Project NOW to work directly with local hospitals on the coordination of medically fragile individuals entering directly into respite care instead of going back to an area shelter or to the streets," added Lund.





Project NOW's medical respite care initiative is one of 18 in the state--the first-ever in Northwestern Illinois and the only one outside of the Chicago area, according to Cathy Jordan, who's spearheading the program as Project NOW's Director of Housing Stability and Homeless Prevention.

"Our medical respite home has great history since it originally was the first property owned by DeLaCerde House in Rock Island," said Jordan. "It made perfect sense to use the history of this home to continue to help people in the community who are needing medical care while experiencing homelessness."

Brandon Cook, Senior Medical Respite Manager of the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, said homelessness and higher rates of healthcare challenges – sadly – go hand in hand. "People experiencing homelessness often have high rates of chronic and acute medical conditions which require some type of medical support to get them medically stable," he said. "Also, because oftentimes there is no safe place to discharge these folks often spend longer stays in the hospital or emergency departments leading to greater expense to the public health system."

And that's where medical respite care comes in – as a short-term home to help patients recover when they are too well to receive hospital care but too sick to return to an emergency shelter. Jordan said the QC-area home has helped three homeless patients with medical respite care so far. "We have an average of a 14-day stay in the Medical Respite program. We are open to accept referrals from area hospitals as well as the local federal qualified healthcare facility, Community Health Care."

Jordan said while the patient is recovering, a caseworker works with the patient to help determine his/her next steps. That may include housing, employment, family reunification, legal assistance as well as applying for food assistance, Medicaid and local transportation needs. Everyone must work with the caseworker to find permanent housing options or be returned to the shelter after the respite care, noted Jordan.

And this effort is being spread across the country, according to Brandon Cook who said there currently are 42 states plus Washington, DC, that have at least one medical respite care program in place. Cook said programs across America are funded from a variety of sources that include hospitals, private donations, local/state governments, foundations, religious organizations, Medicare and Medicaid and the Health Resources and Services Administration.

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Funding, which is key to the survival of this initiative, is a new concern with the changes at the White House and Congress. Cook said health care professionals are "paying close attention because the implications are pretty significant."

"We are waiting to see what the new administration will do with regard to funding and how it will impact the programs and communities we work with so we can better understand how to provide meaningful technical assistance to help programs navigate," he said. "If programs like Medicaid are cut the impact will be significant, especially to states that had previously opted to expand their Medicaid program to cover a greater number of folks including people experiencing homelessness."



Porter McNeil, is a Rock Island County Board Member & Project NOW Volunteer writer.



## Board of Directors

We have 15 board members representing the three counties we serve--Rock Island, Mercer, and Henry Counties. Our board is tri-partite representing the low-income community (C), private sector (Pvt) and elected officials (P).

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Community Action changes people's lives, embodies the spirit of hope, improves communities, and makes America a better place to live. We care about the entire community, and we are dedicated to helping people helping themselves and each other.

### THE MISSION OF PROJECT NOW, INC.

is to strengthen communities by helping people help themselves and one another.

We strive to eliminate the causes of poverty through strategic partnerships and alleviate the negative conditions where poor people live.

### OUR VISION STATEMENT:

We envision the whole community working hand in hand to meet human needs, protect human dignity, and restore hope.

### NOW Magazine

AN AGENCY REPORT OF PROJECT NOW, INC.

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**Editor & Publisher:** Mary McNeil

Executive Communications Manager

**Design & Photography**

Niki Ragsdale, HR Generalist.

# Poverty remains prevasive in Rock Island County

## ABOUT ROCK ISLAND COUNTY RESIDENTS

- **15%** live in poverty
- **44%** of people in poverty face unsafe living conditions
- **24%** live with housing insecurity
- **53%** experience food insecurity
- **18%** lack access to critical services due to transportation barriers

## Why end poverty?

**Poverty significantly elevates health risks**, leading to a 53% increase in anxiety, greater rates of heart disease, stroke, and high blood pressure, and shorter life expectancies. It also doubles the likelihood of violent victimization and raises risks of infant mortality, low birth weight, and infectious diseases.

Children growing up in poverty face 2-3 times **higher odds of mental health issues, developmental delays, and nutritional deficits**. These challenges often result in impaired cognitive development and chronic health conditions that persist into adulthood.

“

“Project NOW helped me get on my feet; they were super helpful and if someone is smart and wants to get ahead, they should contact Project NOW.”



## PROJECT NOW WORKS TO PREVENT POVERTY AND ITS IMPACTS

**18,141**

clients served

**3,231**

seniors supported

**2,207**

people served through  
the food pantry

**11,052**

rural public  
transit rides

**\$5.5 mil**

in heating assistance  
kept families warm  
and safe during harsh  
winters

**1,200**

households kept  
housed through  
targeted assistance

**59,960**

shelter nights  
provided

**74%**

of eviction cases  
resolved, keeping  
hundreds of families  
housed