

NOW



Magazine

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Project NOW Celebrates 55 Years of Moving People Up and Out of Poverty!

Inside:

- Saving Seniors Money
- Living The Dream
- Providing Second Chances
- and more...



Five Pillars and 55 Years Later



DID YOU KNOW?

PAST AGENCY DIRECTORS

- Si Roberts, the first director in 1968
- Jim Collins (1968-1970) the first full time director
- Larry Pollard (1970-1974)
- Vince Thomas (1974-2001)
- Lucinda Mohr (2001-2004)
- Maureen “Mo” Hart (2004–2020)

As Project NOW commemorates 55 years of public service in the Quad Cities region, we reflect on the driving forces—the values that inspire us on a daily basis.

Rooting out poverty by planting seeds of opportunity has been at the heart of Project NOW’s mission over the past 55 years.

Our mission, since our founding, is to strengthen communities by helping people help themselves and one another. Or, as expressed by President Lyndon B. Johnson when he signed the Economic Opportunity Act into law on August 20, 1964 (the law which created community action agencies across the country to serve as the lead organizations to combat poverty):

“Our American answer to poverty is not to make the poor more secure in their poverty,” said President Johnson, “but to reach down and to help them lift themselves out of the ruts of poverty and move with the large majority along the high road of hope and prosperity.”

President Johnson’s blueprint for erasing poverty continues to fuel our engine for change. Five pillars—justice, housing, health, economics, and education—make up the values-based foundation that drives our engine of social and economic justice.

We put our values into daily action through a variety of services which include:

- Utility Assistance
- Basic Needs Assistance
- Head Start for 330 children
- Housing Programs
- Homeless Services
- Food Pantry & Mobile Food Truck
- Property Rentals
- Weatherization
- Senior Services
- Rural Public Transit (RIM)
- Eviction Diversion
- Economic Scholarships
- The Justice Network

I’m proud of our hard-working staff who show up every day and report to duty. Day in and day out, they help lift the poor in our midst onto a new ladder of opportunity. They are putting the words of President Lyndon Johnson into action—creating a more perfect union by lifting the poor out of poverty and moving them along the road of hope and prosperity.

Happy 55th to Project NOW!

Dwight L. Ford
Executive Director (2020-present)
Project Now, Inc.

Quad City Child Care Options Improving

The Child Care Challenge is Real

A lack of quality child care options for low-and-middle-income working families and single parents has become a national challenge that hits home right here in the Quad Cities.

Some states, like Illinois, are taking the challenge seriously. That's why Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker, for example, made a stop in the Quad Cities on February 23, to outline his new "Smart Start Illinois" initiative.

Pritzker hailed the program as a multi-year investment that will create new opportunities for every three- and four-year-old child to have a child care option.

Some cities, like Moline, are applying the same intensity on a parallel policy platform. The Moline City Council approved a plan to allocate up to \$500,000 in individual grants of \$50,000 to help spur new child care programs across the city. Grant recipients in the first year include: \$35,000 for Two Rivers YMCA, \$50,000 for Western Illinois University-Quad Cities Riverfront Campus, \$50,000 for Skip-a-Long Day Care Center, \$50,000 to P & J Tender Care, and \$50,000 to Project NOW.

"Zip code and economic status should not determine whether a three-year-old child has access to a pre-school opportunity. Project NOW is determined to work with strategic community partners to eliminate child care deserts in the Quad Cities."

— Dwight Ford, Project NOW Executive Director

"Supporting families by increasing funding for our early childhood education and child care infrastructure was a priority for me when I took office," said Moline Mayor Sangeetha Rayapati. "It is a joy to see the response so far and to look forward to the results of this work as expansion and improvements in these facilities take shape."

One of the new child care programs will be opening soon at the Esperanza Center (335 5th Avenue, Moline) under the leadership of Project NOW. After some minor sprucing up, the Esperanza Center will open in August for the 2023-2024 school year with a projected

first day of August 21, 2023, according to Project NOW Head Start Director Andrea Flannery.

"Our goal is to serve up to 80 children (pending DCFS approval)," said Flannery, who noted they plan to host a series of events to launch the new site. "We want to invite the community to see the Esperanza Center all set up and ready for the kids," she added.

She said there will be a community open house in conjunction with their "Bridging to Literacy" events, along with an "Unpack your Backpack Night" for enrolled children and their families who will be starting in late August.

To sign up for the new child care center opportunities at the Esperanza Center or at any other Project NOW child care locations, please contact Andrea Flannery at aflannery@projectnow.org or 309-792-4555. ❖



Project NOW Head Start Director Andrea Flannery in one of the new child care classrooms at the Esperanza Center location.

Let's keep this SHIP sailing:

Reducing Health Care Costs for Seniors

Michelle Dyer, Project NOW's Senior Services Director, received news she never thought was possible—the agency saved a woman nearly \$110,000 on her health care plan for one year.

This is record-setting for the agency.

It is the highest amount of money Project NOW has saved a Medicare recipient...ever!



Emma Rivera, Michelle Dyer, and Amanda Martensen make up part of the SHIP counseling team. Every fall they work to find healthcare savings for seniors.

Michelle Dyer, who along with Amanda Martensen and her team head up the Rock Island County Senior Services Medicare/Medicaid team that helps citizens in Rock Island County navigate through often complicated Medicare Advantage, Medicare Supplement, and Medicare Drug Plans. They lead what's called the SHIP (Senior Health Insurance Program) for Project NOW—an initiative funded by the Illinois Department on Aging and the Western Illinois Area Agency on Aging.

The SHIP, which falls under the Illinois Department on Aging, was initiated in the fall of 1988 by the State of Illinois as a way to help seniors save on their annual health care costs.

During the annual open enrollment period, which will be October 15—December 7, 2023, this year, seniors have the opportunity to make changes in their Medicare Advantage or Medicare drug plans.

“We meet with seniors to review their existing health care plans, with an eye toward finding ways to maximize their coverage while saving them dollars in the process,” Dyer said. “Given the increasing costs of health care and the complex

policy changes, seniors face difficult challenges every year. We're able to save them money, which allows them to afford life-saving medications.”

Helping seniors in the region reduce premiums and pharmaceutical costs is done by identifying new strategies during the review process. “We're able to identify opportunities to save money—sometimes significant money—by comparing existing plans with new ones. We run the numbers and arrive at savings for seniors,” Dyer added.

In one case, the area SHIP team helped a local woman reduce her health care costs by \$109,841 during calendar year 2022. Dyer said that if she hadn't come to the SHIP team for help, her annual health care premium plus costs would have been in excess of \$109,000. “How on earth can people afford these health care costs,” Dyer asked.

But after the SHIP team reviewed her plan, came up with changes and scrubbed the numbers, they were able to come up with a comparable plan for an annual cost of \$8,041.

And those savings were added to other SHIP team victories for seniors in 2022 to reach a total of \$389,287 saved—more than the last three years combined locally.

“This is one of our highest numbers in recent years,” said

Outreach Worker, Amanda Martensen, helps Althea Redd look for the best drug plan which will save her money.



Amy Phillips, who along with Ashlie Mettler, helps manage a ten-county area under the Western Illinois Area Agency on Aging.

Phillips said the success of the SHIP is a sign that the counselors can do more good for the region. “Our SHIP counselors are well trained and eager to serve older adults in Western Illinois,” she said, adding that they advertise in the 10-county area to increase public awareness.

“Michelle and her team at the Rock Island County Senior Center have and continue to offer SHIP counseling, among other services, of the highest standard to older adults in Rock Island County,” added Phillips.

“The SHIP team is an incredible asset for seniors in Rock Island County and throughout the region,” said Dwight Ford, President of Project NOW. “Through their hard work and research, they saved area seniors close to \$400,000 in health care costs. We owe it to the seniors of our community to continue to spread the word far and wide about this gem in our midst. Let’s keep this SHIP sailing forward.”

Any senior interested in learning more about this service should call (309) 788-6335 or check out the website at www.projectnow.org. ❖

OUR ORIGINS

Project NOW had its beginnings as a grass roots organization in the mid 1960s when Father Tom Murphy and the former Father Jack Real, as new pastors of Sacred Heart Church and St. Joseph’s Church, decided people in the neighborhoods needed more help than they were getting. Members of their churches and neighborhood residents got together and planned ways to bring attention to the problems families and individuals were experiencing. What was first The Catholic Interracial Council became the Rock Island County Interracial Council, and the membership base increased. This resulted in more pressure on the decision makers to bring about changes. There were a few successes, but much remained to be done.



After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the organization was recognized as one that deserved financial support. In May, 1968, Neighborhood Outreach Work, Inc., was established and officially recognized by the local governments. The budget of \$12,500 was supported by members, fundraisers, and a generous donation from The Deere Foundation. The next year, Project NOW—as it soon was called—received federal funds and federal recognition as a Community Action Agency. Today, Project NOW helps serve tens of thousands of individuals and families in Rock Island, Henry, and Mercer Counties in Illinois. From an original staff of three, today there are 107 employees on the payroll with an annual budget of approximately \$18 million. ❖

Sometimes the Stars Line Up — for Justice

David Staples stands in front of his home in Rock Island. He has been released from prison after serving 29 years for a crime he did not commit.

“Justice too long delayed is justice denied,” to quote Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and sometimes the wait for justice challenges even the most patient among us.

Enter Project NOW, which in 2021 began spearheading an innovative multi-stakeholder, multi-not-for-profit collaboration called The Justice Network. The network is a division of Fully FREE—a state-wide, multi-year effort to remove hundreds of legal barriers to housing, education, and economic opportunity in Illinois. The network consists of about 50 individuals, businesses, human rights advocates, educators, community leaders and formerly incarcerated people who work to ban permanent punishments. The fruits of the Justice Network’s labor can be seen growing throughout Project NOW’s three-county region—from Kewanee to Rock Island. One example is David Staples’ re-entry into the Quad Cities community after a 29-year prison term. He was wrongly accused of murder at the age of 26, and with the help of the Innocence Project, a social justice non-profit, he was released last August. Staples is now a 55-year-old man starting over with the help of the Justice Network and Augustana College.

A star lined up for David when Augustana College professor, Sharon Varallo, invited him to attend one of Project NOW’s Justice Network’s luncheons. During the October 2022 meeting, the Heart of Hope Ministries announced its three-bedroom “re-entry house” in Rock Island had openings for returning citizens. David decided to apply for a spot. He interviewed and



David Staples is working toward a BA in Psychology at Augustana College, where he will graduate this Spring.

was chosen for the position of house manager and moved in three months ago. He later said that the opportunity “fell into his lap” at the Justice Network meeting. He now lives next door to the Heart of Hope Ministries where he volunteers packing food baskets, attends men’s bible studies, and helps with the clothing and food drives.

Heart of Hope’s Director of Programs, Troy Scott, calls David a blessing. “He has a strong spirit, a good head on his shoulders, and innate leadership skills. He has taught me more than I have taught him,” said Scott. As the house manager, David will develop the program for the re-entry home which includes the creation of a social enterprise/business that will help pay for additional re-entry home opportunities down the road.

Heart of Hope Founder, Lynda Sargent, said David’s talents fit into the mission of Heart of Hope Ministries. “David is truly an amazing gentleman, and we are so blessed to have him as our first resident of our first Giving Hope House,” she said. “He helps our food pantry and has become a part of our team.”

Staples has always been a big believer in education, and prior to prison he received two associate degrees and two certificates from local community



First steps into a new opportunity.

colleges. He also attended the University of Illinois in Champaign for a year and a half, and was in school at Kennedy-King College in Chicago when he was—in his words—“snatched from the streets.” His educational pursuits were put on hold until he was offered the chance to participate in the Augustana Prison Education Program while imprisoned at the East Moline Correctional Center. He studied psychology behind bars and today is on the campus in Rock Island working toward a May 2024 graduation. “I get to experience what I was robbed of. I am three times the age of the students on campus. It’s been a bit of a cultural shock, but it is absolutely nice,”

said Staples. His long-term goal is to earn his PhD and counsel adult men leaving prison to help create in them a mindset of bettering themselves.

Project NOW’s Executive Director, Dwight Ford, says returning citizens should be afforded the right of economic opportunity. “We have a moral responsibility to ensure these penalties are not permanent so we can move people out of poverty. We must ensure that re-entering citizens—once they’ve served their sentences—aren’t weighed down by the anchor of injustice for their entire lives, because their sentences weren’t for life,” said Ford. Sometimes this happens—sometimes the stars line up for justice. ❖

Evictions

Nationally, it is estimated that 900,000 renters in the U.S. will be removed from their home—evicted. The COVID-19 pandemic and its unprecedented disruption of school, work, and life as we knew it exacerbated Illinois’ housing crisis. Those who were hit the hardest were renters—who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic’s economic fallout.



Project NOW is available every Friday morning outside Eviction Court at the Rock Island County Courthouse. Kris Downey, Project NOW’s Associate Housing Director, coordinates resources on behalf of tenants.

In Rock Island County an unprecedented collaboration was formed early in the pandemic, and it helped hundreds of families stay housed as well as provided income to small businesses and landlords.

Project NOW partnered with the 14th Judicial Circuit in Rock Island County, the Rock Island County Bar Association, and Prairie State Legal Services, Inc., to develop an Eviction Diversion Program (EDP). The so-called

Eviction Diversion Coalition met at least monthly (and sometimes weekly) for more than a year to work out any bugs in the program as well as promote its existence to those who were facing the loss of their homes. The goal of the program was to cope with the projected high number of evictions once the state and federal moratoria were lifted.

The Eviction Diversion Program was the brainchild of 14th Circuit Court Judge Carol Pentuic. The program

provided tenants and landlords with the opportunity to resolve eviction cases without the need for a trial before a judge. Pentuic created a new local court rule mandating mediation for all evictions. Under the order, any landlord who files an eviction has to be notified of the EDP and participate in a mediation session (within 14 days) between the tenant and locally trained mediators.

The free mediation sessions were held right at the courthouse on the initial court date, but they could be held remotely. Once an agreement was reached, Project NOW and the Salvation Army provided state and federal dollars for the back (and sometimes future) rent. The money kept people in their homes while also providing money for the smaller business owner and landlords.

Pentuic says hundreds of cases were resolved through this alternate dispute resolution—the only such program outside of Chicago. “With the courts expecting a tsunami of evictions, this mediation program (which used not-for-profit dollars) was a win-win for all involved.” According to the Rock Island Circuit Clerk’s office, 74% of the

DID YOU KNOW?

- 900,000 evictions occur each year in the U.S.*
- Eight out of every 100 renter households receive eviction notices*
- Nonpayment of rent is the primary reason for eviction*
- 21.7% of Rock Island residents live at or below the national poverty rate (The federal poverty level is \$13,590 for an individual; \$27,750 for a family of four)
- 38% are children under the age of six. 38% are over the age of 60

Scott County, Iowa, reported these 2022 eviction facts:

- People with disabilities are 8.2 % of the county, yet are 37% of those facing eviction
- Women account for 50.6% of the county, yet make up 74% of those facing eviction
- People of color are 21.4% of the county, yet are 54% of those facing eviction

*Data courtesy of Eviction Lab at Princeton University

Generations of Small Business Dreams

eviction cases were resolved in either settlement through mediation or dismissal. That means seven out of every 10 evictions are being settled or dismissed, on average, with the implementation of the EDP and the collaboration created locally.

Michelle Fitzsimmons, 14th Judicial Circuit Associate Judge, says evictions negatively impact education, employment, health care, etc., for the entire household. And she says a nonpayment of rent can result in the landlord facing foreclosure, which has a detrimental and destabilizing effect on the entire community. Fitzsimmons says the results of the Eviction Diversion Program have been nothing short of spectacular.

“Fewer trials are being scheduled, at times reaching below pre-pandemic levels. This collaborative effort of attorneys, Project NOW, and mediators has led to more settlements, payments to landlords, and dismissal of cases—results that benefit both parties, their households, and our community. I am proud of the tremendous accomplishments this team has achieved and look forward to its ongoing success.”

Project NOW’s Executive Director, Dwight Ford, says his agency was able to provide \$1.3 million dollars in rental assistance from July 2020–February 2023. “As a collective, we were able to help nearly one-thousand households make rent. The program did what it was designed to do—keep people in their homes while also paying landlords”.

An additional bonus of this collaboration is that the coalition members continue to meet to share updates and make changes as needed to ensure those who need help are getting it. And every Friday morning you will find Prairie State Legal Services and Project NOW sitting outside the eviction courtroom offering their services. ❖

Creating private-sector pathways to economic success for minority-owned businesses in the Quad Cities has been a key tool in Project NOW’s economic development tool chest over the past 55 years.

And in the case of Crystal Castro, that modest act of assistance was a spark for larger connections and community contributions. Crystal, daughter of Virginia and Alfredo Castro, is now a current Head Start parent and Project NOW board member as she transitions to take over the business end of the El Mariachi Restaurant.

Small business development loans were offered for several years and ended

in 2009. Offered through the Illinois Department of Economic Opportunity and administered by Project NOW, eight small business loans were awarded to entrepreneurs including Landeros & Sons, Pizano Trucking, P & J Tender Care, Ramos Body Shop, Frutos Tires, Korina Mexican, and A+ Plumbing.

El Mariachi Restaurant, which just celebrated its 20th anniversary of serving authentic Mexican food six days a week to thousands of loyal customers, also received one of the loans. Virginia Castro, along with her husband Alfredo, wanted to buy a building to open their first-ever restaurant. But, like any small

Economics, continued >



Alfredo and Virginia Castro, owners of El Mariachi Restaurant, are proud of their younger generation’s desire to get involved in the business. Crystal is preparing to become the restaurant’s manager.



Alfredo Castro enjoys working in the kitchen of his and Virginia's restaurant.



El Mariachi Mexican Restaurant recently celebrated 20 years of serving quality Mexican cuisine in the Quad Cities!



Crystal Castro is learning the ropes so that she can one day take over the management.

< **Economics**, from page 9

business dream, there were unforeseen challenges as they prepared to launch their El Mariachi Restaurant (1317-15th Street in Moline). "We knew we had the passion to launch a restaurant, but we were suddenly facing significant

costs associated with modernizing the restaurant to make it up to city codes," said Castro. "We had never been in debt before but had to temporarily take a loan (through Project NOW) that financed necessary upgrades to the restaurant.

The loan helped out with some unexpected expenses, such as

restaurant, now prepares meals for up to 750 people—at one time. "We do weekly catering to major businesses, including John Deere and Arconic and also several events for Group O during the year," said Crystal Castro, Virginia's daughter who is training to become the new restaurant manager.

And Virginia's 11-year-old granddaughter, Annaliah, has been bitten by the entrepreneurial bug. She will make homemade "slime" to sell to kids at the weekly Mercado events in Moline. "They will take us into the future," Virginia said of her daughter and granddaughter. "They are the next generations of business leaders from our family, which is very exciting for us."

"When you support a small business, or an entrepreneur with an idea, you support a dream," said Project NOW Executive Director Dwight Ford. "And dreams achieved, like the Castro family's example of hard work in pursuit of a new restaurant, help build strong communities and economic prosperity."

Ford noted that successful communities are laser-focused on helping entrepreneurs get a leg up as they aspire to start their first businesses. "At Project NOW, we take that mission seriously because we believe that pathways to prosperity start with the dreams of small business entrepreneurs," said Ford. ❖



updating electricity and building new handicapped accessible bathrooms," she said.

Twenty years later, El Mariachi is a thriving restaurant known for authentic Mexican cuisine that includes a popular Sunday buffet, a food truck, and a growing catering business. This small business, that began as a food trailer and concession stand and turned into a



Project NOW

OUR BOARD

We have 14 board members representing the three counties we serve—Rock Island, Mercer, and Henry Counties. Our board is tri-partite representing:

- The low-income community we serve (C)
- Private sector (Pvt)
- Elected officials (P)

Cathy Bizarri, Chair (C)
Gary Bradley, Vice Chair (P)
Barrett Essman, Treasurer (Pvt)
Suzanne Eagle, Secretary (P)
Sr. Roberta Bussan (C)
Crystal Castro (C)
Emily Cummings (C)
Ngone Diop (C)
Rick Gosney (Pvt)
Gabiella Hurtado (Pvt)
Carla McElrath (C)
Michael Manternach (Pvt)
Stacy Schmit (Pvt)
Moses Robinson (P)

OUR LEADERSHIP

Dwight L. Ford, Executive Director
Jeni Biskie, Chief Financial Officer
Ron Lund, Community Services Director
Kris Downey, Associate Community Services Director
Michelle Dyer, Senior Services Director
Katie Resig, Special Projects Director
La Ronda Birch, Human Resources Director
Andrea Flannery, Head Start Director

PICTURED ON THE COVER

Project NOW employees Peter Baltos, Josefina Almanza, Tamara Perkins, and Jennifer Castillo-Perez prepare food boxes in our on-site pantry.

Community Action Promise:

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.



NOW Magazine

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