

VOL. 2 ISSUE 1 · JANUARY 2023

ROOTING OUT POVERTY

Official Newsletter of Project NOW



Ending permanent punishment, 'It's the right thing to do!'

A MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR DWIGHT FORD

The framers of the U.S. Constitution placed their hope for this new nation in the preamble beginning with this phrase: "We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice ... "If we are not careful, we will miss that, according to their understanding, the key to moving toward a more perfect union first begins with establishing justice – the act of ensuring fairness in the social order.

Currently, the treatment of those returning from incarceration is less than just. In fact, once a person returns they can be legally discriminated against in education, employment, housing, healthcare, and justice. How can we expect a person to come home and assume the responsibility of productive citizenry when they are denied constitutional rights. Full citizenship requires constitutional rights realized in their release, not as ex-cons but returning citizens.

Ensuring justice is the work of Project NOW's Justice Network. Every month approximately 50 social service providers, public elected officials, lawyers, advocates, activists, clergy, and system impacted individuals who are living with the negative stigma of a scarlet letter, known as a felony or criminal conviction.

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LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

Ending permanent punishment, 'It's the right thing to do!'

The network addresses Illinois' over 1,000 unique permanent punishment laws. The sanctions prevent employment, hinder housing, and restrict occupational licensing. The laws also ensure a person returning from prison will not only occupy a lower-economic status but according to data, will be locked in a caste system, restricting their upward mobility.

Our work is to lift people up and out of poverty, but these laws place undue burdens on our already heavy load. Monthly, we are strengthened as the Justice Network members work and report success stories to encourage the efforts of justice.

A recent success came in the City of Kewanee in November. After striking a provision prohibiting formerly convicted felons from applying for city employment, Kewanee hired its first employee who has a felony! This is a success for all.

Congratulations to the City of Kewanee, the new employee, and the greater Quad Cities region. Whether one enters this fight because it is a moral one or monetary one it makes sense, and we welcome your help.

I believe if we don't allow individuals with arrest records and convictions to contribute to the tax base as full citizens, we will carry the weight of them being part of the tax burden. Any way you look at it, in areas where there is no threat to public safety ending permanent punishments is the right thing to do.

Dwight L. Ford
Project NOW Executive Director





BLOCK PARTY-- A BLOCKBUSTER SUCCESS

Our second annual block party with The Greater Hispanic Chamber of Commerce was a busy and successful one! We love celebrating our partnership with the Hispanic Chamber during its Heritage month in September. Project NOW is committed to continuing the legacy of creating community and providing capacity for business to hire family and friends; therefore, creating wonderful neighborhoods-- like Floreciente-- where we held the street party is a key pillar to that strategy.



To further this year's emphasis on literacy, Project Now partnered with the Moline Library and the Bridging Literacy grant to provide free books for all. Head Start Director, Andrea Flannery, says the entire focus of the Bridging to Literacy grant for Project Now Head Start is to help immigrant and non-English speaking families gain the same access to books and educational experiences as other families in our communities.

On average, immigrant families have about ten or fewer books in their homes compared to English-speaking families, who on average have more than 50 books in their households. Flannery says building literacy skills in the early years of child development is critical to their future success. "By helping to equalize access to books and literacy activities we help bridge the education success gaps between these immigrant and non-English speaking families and English-speaking households. Literacy skills not gained at an early age can have a direct impact on future high school and college graduation rates," noted Flannery. The block party also included face painting, crafts, a bouncy house, snow cones, tacos, and dozens of vendors providing information and trinkets.

Moline's Mayor, Sangeetha Rayapati, used the event to proclaim September 15th to October 15th Hispanic Heritage Month. The Executive Director of the Hispanic Chamber, Janessa Calderon, was happy with large turnout. "We lost count after 250 people! It was an honor to accept the City of Moline's Proclamation of Hispanic Heritage Month at the event. We were happy to see so many friendly faces as we kicked off this month together." Project NOW's Executive Director, Dwight Ford, says "there is no beauty but in relationships; no strength but in the collective." Ford, who is happy to partner with the Chamber on a number of projects throughout the year, looks forward to another successful event to celebrate the relationship.

Opportunity

Kewanee Opening Doors of Opportunity

Removing punitive laws and sanctions that bar people with records from achieving opportunity and self-sufficiency is operating well in Kewanee.

Project NOW's Executive Director, Dwight Ford, says returning citizens should be afforded the right of economic opportunity so they do not remain in a caste system. "We have a moral responsibility to ensure these penalties are not permanent so we can move people out of poverty regardless of their past so they can begin to realize full citizenship rights. With full rights they will contribute to the tax base, take care of their families, and not be regulated to being a tax burden."

In November 2021, the City of Kewanee amended its adopted codes to remove a prohibition on the employment of people who had been convicted of a felony and had served their time. Moreover, Kewanee worked in partnership with the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) to employ a small group of workers who were incarcerated at the Kewanee Life Skills Center. Though their employment is seasonal and is scheduled to end next week, that is not the case for everyone.

Mario Crowder, a 34-year-old originally from Chicago, was released in October and now works in Kewanee's Public Works Department as a Truck Driver/Laborer. Upon his release, Crowder opted to relocate to Kewanee because he had developed an appreciation for the community during his seasonal employment with the city and knew there were advocates who would help him obtain a job, whether it was with the city or in the private sector.

Kewanee City Manager, Gary Bradley, says the city had used inmates in the past to complete small projects in the community -- from helping with city-wide cleanup events and maintaining stormwater detention basins to cleaning up parade routes or high traffic areas before and after big events. Still, something about the arrangement did not sit right with him. "We were sending the message that they were good enough to work for us for free, but they could not mow, fill potholes, or pick up trash and recycling as a paid employee. In government, we should be setting the example of giving people a chance to be successful, making sure they have meaningful employment at a competitive wage," said Bradley.

Bradley is a supporter of Fully Free -- a state-wide, multi-year effort to remove hundreds of legal barriers to housing, education, and economic opportunity in Illinois. The Fully Free Campaign was formed as a response to the Social IMPACT Research Center's first-of-a-kind study that revealed permanent punishments impact more than 3.3 million people in Illinois due to former criminal legal system involvement. The report highlighted the critical need to create a state-wide campaign to dismantle permanent punishments.



Kewanee
Felon
Friendly





A Re-Entry Home Gives Citizens a Second Chance

Thanks to a \$129,000 state grant, Project NOW is opening a re-entry home for citizens being released from prison. The home in Rock Island is being renovated to accommodate six adult males who are required to be enrolled in an educational institution—working toward GED or a degree program at the college level.

According to Project NOW's Community Services Director, Ron Lund, each year more than 100 people are released from the Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center and the East Moline Correction Center -- but there is no re-entry home in our three-county area. He says most of these parolees do not want to go back to where they lived before and the same situation they experienced, but with their criminal history they are often denied housing, employment & assistance programs. Lund says this house, and our newly designed program, will help our clients finish serving their sentences and become active, involved members of the community. "It has been shown that those who do not surround themselves with a support system are more likely to re-offend and cause harm to the community and themselves. This program aims to be that support system," noted Lund.



"Services provided in this program will move participants to self-sufficiency by empowering them with skills and resources needed to maintain safe, decent, and affordable housing." - Ron Lund



Lund also says Project NOW is partnering with Open Door Crisis Assistance to provide intensive case management services for the clients. Those services include weekly meetings with a caseworker, job coaching, referrals to community resources and education. Each client will be required to remain compliant with their parole officer and will be subject to all conditions of their parole. They will also meet weekly with a case worker and provide life skills training such as budgeting, parenting, conflict resolution, cooking, cleaning, relaxation, anger management and communication. Lund says there will be short- and long-term goal setting as well as monitored action steps to ensure the clients are successful.

"Services provided in this program will move participants to self-sufficiency by empowering them with skills and resources needed to maintain safe, decent, and affordable housing. Specifically, job coaching will provide the skills necessary to increase education, income, and employment which -- in turn -- will enable participants to be financially responsible for their expenses," added Lund. "Helping people help themselves and one another is our mission at Project NOW and we are excited to start this project."

The grants are of the R3 program, created as an element of the Cannabis Regulation and Tax Act signed by Governor Pritzker in 2019. The law requires using 25 percent of all cannabis tax revenue to support communities hurt by economic disinvestment, violence, and the severe and disproportionate damage caused by the war on drugs. These issues impact low-income Illinoisans and communities of color.



New Project Now Food Truck Targeting Food Deserts in QC-area



One of Project NOW's newest fleet additions is literally a life saver. Project NOW's new refrigerated box truck began hitting the streets last fall to help those facing food insecurity. The truck, which is grant funded, is being used as a mobile food pantry—providing food to areas that have been defined as “food deserts.” Those areas include the west end of Rock Island, the Floreciente neighborhood, East Moline & Silvis.

According to our Community Services Director, Ron Lund, we have already provided 40 tons of food (80,000 pounds) in the community through pop ups, drive-throughs, and food giveaway days. And he says there is more we can do since the need is great. “For a variety of factors, there is an increased demand for food assistance across the Quad City region and we're glad we have the chance to step up to the plate with this exciting initiative,” said Lund.

Lund says Project NOW has partnered with River Bend Food Bank for more than 20 years and, because of the COVID 19 pandemic, the partnership has grown exponentially. Project NOW had a soup kitchen at our local women's shelter, but it was determined early in the pandemic that it would not be enough to handle the need in the community. Project NOW then opened a food pantry in its headquarter's building so anyone that came in seeking assistance for a basic need was also able to receive food. This has allowed us to serve this immediate need.



However, Lund says the food pantry works well for those who have transportation and are not walking or taking the bus to our location. Those individuals have to routinely turn down food as they physically have no way of transporting it to their homes. The refrigerated truck allows us to take the food pantry with us when we go into the community, and we no longer need to worry about how clients get the food to their residence.

“We are thankful to have a great hunger-relief partner in Project NOW,” says Nancy Renkes, President and CEO of River Bend Food Bank. “We know that people in areas without adequate, consistent access to healthy food – food deserts – benefit from pop-up pantries that bring resources right to the neighborhood. We're happy that Project NOW's work is making an impact and keeping people fed in our community.”



One of our food giveaways was held at the Esperanza Center in Moline in partnership with the Quad Cities Greater Hispanic Chamber. Its Executive Director Janessa Calderon called the event a success with hundred of food boxes given away to the community. “Food insecurity is an issue we have all around the world and in the Quad Cities. We hope our small part in the Floreciente neighborhood helped aid families over the weekend. It is important for organizations like ours to team up for the greater good. Together, we made a bigger impact,” she said.

Project NOW's Executive Director Dwight Ford says there are plans to do monthly pop-up mobile pantries in the upcoming year. He encourages organizations and individuals to reach out and ask for the truck to come to their neighborhoods. Please contact Mary at 309-553-0857.



Homeless Street Outreach

The plight of those who are homeless becomes more “front and center” during the winter months when the weather is horrendous for those living without a roof over their heads. But for Project NOW’s Street Outreach Worker, Lisa Lee, helping those living on the streets is a year-round effort.

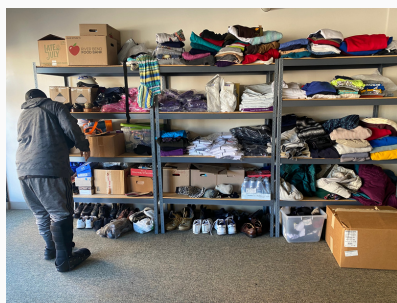
The Street Outreach team began in the fall of 2020. Monday through Friday Lee drives around (5 to 6 hours a day) with her partner from Christian Care, Di’Andre Robinson, looking for homeless people to help. Some days they offer blankets, handwarmers, winter clothing...other days snacks, coffee, and conversation. Some of the people they find under bridges or sleeping on park benches want help, others do not. Lee & Robinson both have servant hearts and love their jobs, and both say the street outreach job is the best job so far in their careers. Lee has been with Project NOW for 31 years with stints at Head Start and Sojourner’s Women Shelter. Robinson, who went to school for a bit to become a nurse, has worked for Christian Care for seven years.

Project NOW's homeless outreach team is always looking for:

- Blankets
- Coats
- Hats & Gloves
- Undergarments
- Travel Toiletries

Items may be dropped off at
418 19th St, Rock Island 61201

Monetary donations can be mailed
or made online at
www.projectnow.org



A recent success story for the team involved a homeless man living in a tent at a campground; they were able to get him housed within a month. Lee says they received a tip about him from a local convenience store worker and they went to the campground to search. They found him—without a phone, a car, or any family to help. He told the team he wanted an apartment but had no clue how to go about getting one. The team helped him get his birth certificate, an identification card, and an application for a handicapped apartment all within weeks. He moved into the apartment last October and is thankful for Lee and Robinson’s assistance. Lee says often times people do not know what services are available to them, so much of their time is spent educating people on where they can go for help. Lee also helped the man get some furniture and household items from a local thrift shop. Robinson says he builds relationships with those he helps so much so they become friends. “I help them, but then they end up helping me by becoming friend who ensure I am being the person I need to be so I can continue to help others,” said Lee.

Project NOW is proud of our active street outreach team that helps move people up and out of poverty—fulfilling our mission!



Book Club

Project NOW's first-ever book club is now "in the books" and plans are being formalized for 2023.

Last year we partnered with the Moline Public Library to create the "Rooting Out Poverty Book Club" which met for six months, delving into various books and exploring the many facets of poverty. Each discussion was lively and led by experts in the field. This year, the Project NOW book club plans to add a little more variety to the mix; discussing the selected book one month, then showing a video or hosting a speaker or a panel discussion about the broader topic explored in the reading in the following month. These meetings will be held at the library on the fourth Wednesday of the month at 6:30 pm. Project NOW's Executive Director, Dwight Ford, says "transforming lives through lifelong learning isn't just a phrase sitting on a bookshelf. Project NOW is putting this goal into action. Please joins us as we delve into both fiction and non-fiction books focused on housing, economics, education, healthcare, and justice."

Discussion of
our first pick of
2023 will take
place on January
25th at 6:30 pm
at the Moline
Public Library.



Lora Wegener, the Adult Services Librarian who will be coordinating with Project NOW, says the first pick for the book club this year-- The New Jim Crow : Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander is a highly acclaimed and influential study of the United States justice system, race, and civil rights. This book has been called "one of the most influential books of the last 20 years."

Wegener says anyone can attend the monthly meetings whether you read the book or not. "I hope you will join us in reading and discussing this important work. Overall, this year we're hoping to branch out from poverty and work together to explore different topics in our social sphere, to draw from different facets and voices of our community, to learn from and with each other. The topics we select may not always be easy or comfortable, but I think everyone in the group is hoping to use this book club as a way to grow and learn and have open and honest discussion in a safe environment."

Wegener says the next book selection in the spring will examine LGBTQ issues that some of the group are hoping to better understand. She would also like to tackle one of the groundbreaking works by Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Isabel Wilkerson. Discussion of our first pick of 2023 will take place on January 25th at 6:30 pm at the Moline Public Library. You can sign up here to participate.

<https://molinelibrary.librarymarket.com/event/rooting-out-poverty-book-club>

Hope to see you there! Happy Reading!

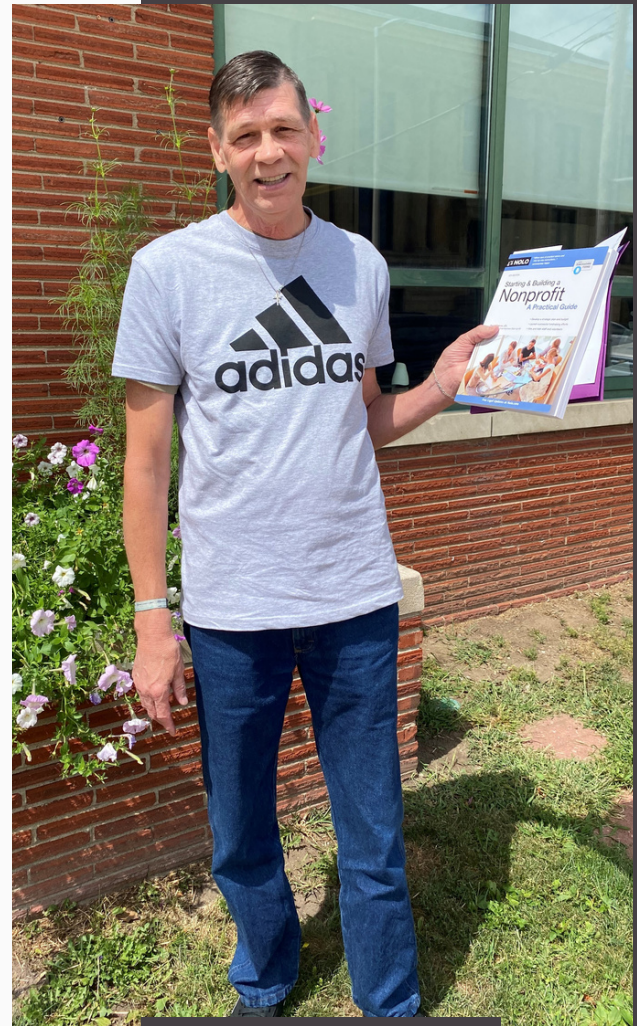
CARE FOR OTHERS

From Foster Care to Caring for Others

Project NOW's \$5,000 scholarship winner this year, Jerry Jett, is using the scholarship money to earn his master's degree in Social Work. If you had known Jerry a few years ago this scenario would seem unbelievable.

Jerry, who grew up in Rock Island with an abusive father, was in and out of foster care for years. He was an alcoholic at age 18; he served time in prison, went through rehab, and experienced homelessness many, many times. He jokes about it now saying, "I have the great skill of survival."

The 58-year-old says he hit rock bottom one chilly night in the Fall of 2016 when he passed out and nearly froze to death; he lost 8 toes and was in a nursing rehabilitation home for 19 months relearning how to walk. It was at Asperion with the spiritual guidance of Rudy and Jackie Ramos that he decided to turn his life around. Project NOW was there to help him get services and counseling; it was his second chance. He now lives independently in his own apartment, juggles classes at Western Illinois University, and has a new car—the first one since he was 24. Besides going to school, he is a mentor to those learning English as a second language; he is involved in a church and loves to write.



Jerry Jett

He is just as amazed as others are about his transformation: "It is phenomenal, and I am flabbergasted that someone like me -- with all my childhood trauma -- can be successful and stable. I want for nothing," he said.

Jerry credits Project NOW with being a friend over the past 20 years, stepping in to provide a hand up when needed. Kris Downey, Community Service Associate Director for Project NOW, is both proud of the man Jerry has become and happy to play a part in his success. "Jerry is living proof it can be done. We at Project NOW love working with people like Jerry, helping to change lives and move people up and out of poverty," said Downey.

Jerry interned with Project NOW last fall, serving as an advisor to our homeless continuum. He is excited to help others someday as a social worker. "I have a passion for helping people in crisis. I want to help people avoid going through what I went through," he added. Jett says you cannot forget where you came from, offering this advice: "reflect back but don't go back."

NEW CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

“She has a head for numbers and a heart for people”....that is how Project Now’s Executive Director, Dwight Ford, describes our new Chief Financial Officer, Jeni Biskie. No stranger to Project NOW, she worked at Project NOW about ten years ago in various financial roles — payroll & benefits accountant, grants account and assistant finance director.

A self-proclaimed “numbers person,” Jeni is excited to be back at Project NOW because she loves our mission and how our programs impact the community. Her favorite part of the new job is the budgeting process. “To me it is like a big puzzle, and I enjoy making everything fit ...from individual grants to donors...to state and federal funding,” she said. Jeni spent some time in the corporate world but prefers working in the not-for-profit arena. As she put it, “The corporate world is all about making money and not necessarily caring for people and that did not sit well with me.” Jeni would have become a social worker — following a bit in her mother’s footsteps as a mental health counselor -- but her love for numbers turned her toward accounting.

At Project NOW, Jeni oversees a staff of five, and even though she has been gone from Project NOW for a decade, she is surprised she sees so many familiar faces still here working to move people up and out poverty. Jeni, who received her master’s degree in Business Administration from Western Illinois University, lives in Bettendorf with her husband and three teenagers. In her free time she likes to read and crochet. Welcome Back Jeni!!

**Sharp with numbers for
big-hearted work**

“To me it is like a big puzzle, and I enjoy making everything fit ...from individual grants to donors...to state and federal funding”

JENI BISKIE



Jeni Biskie
Project NOW Chief Financial Officer