

WAGE Center

Annual Report 2018



The WAGE Center

The WAGE Center, housed at Albany Housing Authority's Steamboat Square at 200 Green Street in Albany, New York is a center that provides wrap around services and helps remove barriers to employment. Wrap around services include any services that will help remove barriers to employment. The clients of the WAGE Center are primarily Albany Housing Authority residents, Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8) recipients and members of the Albany community looking for employment or supportive services. All aspects of a participant's background, history and education are addressed by staff in a holistic approach to employment and job retention. The WAGE Center's focus is those who have the most significant barriers to employment and are unable to be served by other agencies in the community.



In 2018 The WAGE Center served 847 individuals. Of these individuals 98.5% were from the City of Albany.

Self Service

The WAGE Center offers the use of computers, fax machines and phones for employment related activities. Drop-in participants often conduct independent job searches, print resumes in preparation for interviews, submit timesheets via fax to employers for payroll, use phones for employer contact, work on utility and public assistance related management and other job readiness preparatory activities. The WAGE center maintains a



jobs board of local job openings so those who are working independently can have easy access to potential jobs.

Employment Services

Many participants come to the WAGE Center with multiple significant barriers. They come to the WAGE Center because they are able to obtain the intensive and specific help that is not available elsewhere. Agencies and individuals refer clients who have more intensive needs based on the WAGE Center's commitment to help those serious about obtaining employment, regardless of barriers.

In order to address the challenges of those who are unable to conduct an independent job search, WAGE Center staff and interns offer intense one-to-one



assistance. Whether a participant has low computer literacy, a prior conviction history, lack of work history, educational barriers, mental or physical health challenges, transportation and/or child care issues, the staff will work with them to remove barriers. This includes helping applicants develop long and short term plans to achieve their goals and limit or reduce barriers through goal setting and case management.

Unlike many other employment programs, clients who are not able to do an independent search can receive intensive individual attention during application clinics, which are offered three days per week during the academic year. All aspects of online job seeking are addressed and taught individually. These services might include creation and trouble-shooting of email accounts, resume creation/adaptation, the mechanics of finding and completing online applications, uploading and downloading files and, if necessary, help completing applications on a computer.

Clients can come in daily and often do not have any limit on the time they are able to spend job searching.

Staff is available to explore options for training, upgrading skills, and determining a career path that makes sense for an individual situation, taking into consideration family needs and barriers to certain types of employment situations.

Beyond the onsite services, the WAGE Center is committed to the success of long-term clients who have demonstrated a commitment to working and improving their situations. While there is not a budget for this type of support, clients who have the opportunity to work or who are training for work can be provided items that their situation does not afford. For example, tools to start at a construction site, clothing to start a job in hospitality, a bus pass to get to training, or books for college. The staff at the WAGE Center will not let the last barrier impede the success of long-term clients.

Advocacy in the form of intervention with and accompaniment to school and training programs, when necessary, job retention services, service and counseling referrals to other services in support of clients on the verge of employment or training are commonplace.

In 2018, 81 individuals gained employment through their work with the WAGE Center. These positions were both part and full time, ranging from employers like the Port of Albany, contractors working on the Clinton Avenue Apartment renovation project, and Ida Yarbrough construction site to careers in health care, hospitality and human services.

Internship Programs

Interns from Siena College's Bachelor of Social Work program and State University of New York at Albany's Masters of Social Work program serve for an academic year with field placement at the WAGE Center. Additional Siena students studying Re-entry issues intern at the WAGE Center for a semester. These partnerships were formed to meet the extensive needs of clients served at the WAGE Center when sufficient staff was lacking.

Not only do the interns gain experience working with a diverse population at the WAGE Center, but they also add to the available services offered with their focus on both social work practices and social justice related topics. In the last three years they have helped create the following programs and services:

- **Federal Bonding** for those job searching with a record of conviction
- **Women's Group** offered to WAGE Center participants and to Mercy House residents
- Updated listings of **local employers** who hire without regard to conviction
- More effective **linkages to other agencies** and programs which can help with client case management, training, education, clothing for interviews, emergency services, etc.
- Workshops including **Smartphone 101, Job Application Clinics, Uber and Lyft Driving, "Your Income and Expenses"** offered in conjunction with Citizens Bank and Albany Housing Authority, and others.



- **2018 Albany Human Services Guide** posted on WAGE Center website for all Service Providers and consumers of services

High School Equivalency

High School Equivalency/TASC preparation services are available to individuals legally signed out of school as well as adults looking for assistance preparing for testing. Tutoring is also available on a case by case basis for those seeking college level assistance. In addition to tutoring, a self-study site has been designed and posted on the WAGE Center website as an additional support to students who wish to advance at a more rapid pace.

What makes the WAGE Center program different from other educational settings is the one-to-one tutoring and ability to learn at one's own pace, taking into account the student's specific educational needs. For example, a student who only needs to pass the math section of the High School Equivalency/TASC exam to get a diploma, may focus only on math rather than being confined to a class and schedule structure not designed specifically for the individual. There is also no timeline for preparation to take the test. A student may tutor for as long as necessary. Students often come to the HSE/TASC program with very limited skills and reading levels. It can take years for the student to be prepared to take the exam. However, the one on one tutoring and attention make success more attainable. For a success story please see the Appendix.



Currently there are 16 students enrolled in the program. In 2018 four passed the TASC and one has moved onto Hudson Valley Community College to continue her education.

Family Self-Sufficiency Program

Public Housing and Housing Choice Voucher holders are eligible to take part in the Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) Program. This is a five-year voluntary program designed to assist residents in achieving economic independence



FSS Participants are able to establish short- and long-term goals. As their income increases and their rent increases, that increase is placed into an escrow account. At the end of the five years, if they have achieved their goals and are working full time the balance in the account is turned over to the participant.

WAGE Center FSS participants, have purchased homes and vehicles, have earned degrees and achieved a variety of personal and professional goals, making them financially self-sufficient

In 2018 there were 201 participants in the FSS program. The average income increase from the time entering the program to the end of 2018 was \$8007 annually. Currently there is \$395,381.18 in the escrow accounts.

HUD Project Based Voucher Services

Tenants participate in semi-annual case management services as part of their lease agreement. They are able to establish goals focusing on work, education or other personal achievements with the possibility of achieving self-sufficiency. Case management services are available through a dedicated case manager and additional WAGE Center staff.

Currently, there are 91 families that are working with a case manager through the Project Based Voucher system.

Re-entry Services

Clients involved in re-entry services benefit from the research done by the WAGE Center's Siena and SUNY interns. The WAGE Center staff utilizes a list created by the interns to refer re-entry clients to employers who are friendly to their circumstances. For example, those with a history of conviction are encouraged and assisted with becoming bonded to increase the likelihood of being hired. This status can be added to an application package through electronic uploading or as a paper submission. Participants with significant histories of incarceration benefit from the availability of staff to provide solutions to individual barriers to employment, help with resume preparation, application completion and linkages to potential employers. Inmates on work release programs have worked with WAGE Center staff on becoming employed while incarcerated in order to prepare for a successful transition back into the community upon release.

Employer Partnership Programs

Working with employers, the WAGE Center can design training, work experience or employee retention programs with local employers. We have worked with behavioral health companies, hospitality and retail employers to design custom programs aimed at successful employment/training outcomes for both employers and employees.



Quarterly Workshops

Workshop topics focus on a range of self-sufficiency related themes including those such as “Money Smart: Your Income and Expenses” offered in conjunction with Albany Housing Authority and Citizens Bank, Smartphone 101, Uber/Lyft Driving, Introduction to Computers, and Credit Repair offered with Albany Housing Partnership.

The WAGE Center is now providing budgeting workshops for AHA residents who are struggling to keep up with rent. Through these workshops, residents will work to create a budget that will be sustainable and make it possible to stay on track and pay rent on time.

WAGE Center

Success Stories

CONGRATULATIONS TO FIVE NEW HOMEOWNERS



Homeownership is the ultimate dream of many participants of the Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) program. Valrie Alexander, Jarin Cruz, Kendra McCalmon, Luis Sotomayor, and Shaquoia Ruffin all achieved that dream in 2017.

Everyone's path to homeownership is different, but by earning escrow in the FSS program through increased wages, money can be set aside during the five year program to use as a down payment. While working with a case manager at the WAGE Center, goals are set surrounding credit repair, qualifying for mortgages and using other available grant and money matching vehicles if homeownership is a goal.

Shaquoia Ruffin says, "I started my home ownership process at Affordable Housing Partnership. This program really broke down the [ins] and outs of the entire home buying process. It helped with credit repair and budgeting and saving money. This program alone takes about a year to complete, depending on the things you have to work on. You also have to pay [for] and attend workshops in order to get your certificate. With this certificate, you are able to apply for grants offered in different counties. This certificate lets the bank know that you understand the home ownership process and what's expected of you as a homeowner. A lot of these city grants are exhausted and funds aren't readily available, so as soon as you know where it is you're looking to live, apply for a grant."



With the help of Habitat for Humanity and the New York Attorney General Eric T. Schneiderman's Land Bank Revitalization Initiative, Family Self Sufficiency participant Luis Sotomayor and wife Saretha also became homeowners in 2017. In a March press conference including Eric Schneiderman, Albany County Executive, Dan McCoy, Albany Mayor, Kathy Sheehan and a host of local legislators, Saretha spoke for the family saying, "Our family of seven is looking forward to moving from a cramped apartment where we converted the dining room into a bedroom." The family has since moved into a beautifully renovated townhome on Clinton Avenue.

FSS Participants did great things in 2017. With many others currently escrowing, homeownership and the dream of self sufficiency is just around the corner for families who are goal setting and earning increased income.

GENE'VE MAKING DREAMS A REALITY



How can the Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) program at the WAGE Center help Albany Housing Authority Residents and Housing Choice Voucher recipients meet their goals? Ask Gene'Ve Parson who has completed a Bachelor's Degree with honors, bought a new SUV and landed a full-time salaried job with benefits.

Two years ago Gene'Ve was pregnant, did not have a car or a job and depended on assistance to make ends meet. But she received a letter about FSS and says she used it as a "drive for me to do more work towards becoming self-sufficient." She first met with Bill Paben who was temporarily managing the program. Gene'Ve says, "Bill was so great because he told me he could see me graduating and even going further than that. He helped me realize that even if goals took time, if I wrote them down it would help make them more attainable."

Fast forward two years and Gene'Ve has "set goals several times (including 5 year goals) and [has] reached them and started on a new set." She has now completed several goals and is ready to achieve more, saying, "Who would have thought that my next goal would be finding a house, signing up for a Master's program, accepting a new job offer?" Because she has earned a Bachelor's Degree, she says she has the opportunity to accept a "job offer making more than I ever could have imagined – actually enough to pay my bills and take care of my kids on my own!"

But, the self-improvement doesn't stop with the end of the FSS program for Gene'Ve. She aims to "keep getting better and showing my three daughters that with set goals and help, you can achieve anything." She plans to complete a real estate program to supplement her income, which she says will "prevent me from needing help again."

Gene'Ve has accepted a position at Unity House as a Human Resources Administrator, where she will have the opportunity to work in an agency that changes lives. She is the perfect role model not only for her daughters, but also for people who may feel that they don't know where to turn. Her advice to FSS participants and anyone seeking goals is, "Believe in yourself." She further explains that people should not only accept the help that is available, but also to use it to get support and inspiration. She says it helped to have Bill's encouragement, because she always "got the best grades so Bill wouldn't see me fail."

Now, Gene'Ve will be keeping in touch with the WAGE Center to recruit for open positions at Unity House and for other professional networking opportunities. After a diligent two years of work on her Bachelor's degree with the support of the FSS program, she is ready to contribute to the human services community in significant ways, while also providing inspiration to her daughters to persevere and keep setting goals.



GISELLE MAKING A CAREER MOVE AT THE PORT



When Albany Housing Authority resident Giselle needed a career change, she came to the WAGE Center to begin looking for stable employment. After demonstrating a commitment to working and consistently job searching using WAGE Center computers on a regular basis, an opportunity came up with the Port of Albany.

With a recommendation from WAGE Center staff, Giselle was interviewed and hired at the Port on a full-time basis with benefits. The retirement program even connected to a previous New York State job Giselle had, so that her vesting in the retirement program would pick up where she left off with the state system.

According to Port of Albany General Manager Richard Hendrick, “Giselle is a great addition to our team and exhibits a wonderful work ethic. She has impressed so many people at the Port of Albany with her work performance. And we are happy to have her as part of our team .”

Giselle feels similarly about her port employment. She says, “The people are cool. It’s a laid back environment. As long as the work gets done, everybody’s happy.”

Giselle also recently joined the Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) program just as she was transitioning between a less predictable income and her current Port of Albany income. About her current situation, she says, “It’s been a financial relief being paid every week rather than every two weeks.” In that way, the job made an immediate difference.

However, she will also reap the benefits of escrowing money in the long term. She will eventually be able to decide, with the help of her FSS Case Manager, what goals she would like to put that money toward, as long as she continues work full-time and escrow wage increases as part of her five year savings plan through the program.

Regarding her future financial goals, Giselle states that she wants “to begin saving money as well as investing, to make sure when I finish the FSS program, I’ll be comfortable financially.” Empowering working families to be able to save toward a down payment on a home, or other goals that will allow them to be totally financially independent is the true goal of the Family Self Sufficiency program. Participants like Giselle have the opportunity to make significant life changes with the help of FSS.



“Positive Action Creates Self-Esteem”...and Success



In just a few short months, Albany Housing Authority resident, Vernell Wilson has made enormous strides toward a self-sufficient future. It began when she visited the WAGE Center to inquire about tutoring services. But, a degree, a full-time job and an escrow account later, she is “hungry for more.”

Enrolled in an A.A.S. degree program at Hudson Valley Community College, Vernell had already dropped the Math 120 Statistics course twice before. Without passing the class, she wouldn’t be able to complete her degree. She says she was desperate when she asked Bill Paben about tutoring for the math course. What she encountered at the WAGE Center surprised her. She said, “[Bill] was interested in my making it...it was weird to me...I’m usually the one helping. But, he took the time...he pushed me.” She says, “I never thought that I could do it.” But, with Bill’s “reassuring and understanding” approach she passed the

course and got her degree in June, 2017.

“I was an early mother at 16. I dropped out of school. I had five kids.” She states that, “I was on drugs and alcohol...got my GED in jail.” It was at this point that she says she “started dreaming for my kids.” 30 years later she says, “I got back to school.” Now, she has a new full-time job in a human services setting working with adults in a community residence. Her pay will increase based on her newly acquired degree and training. Looking forward, she is considering a return to school to obtain her Credentialed Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Counselor (CASAC) Certification, for which she only requires an internship to complete.

In addition to her full-time job, Vernell has two part-time jobs as a Home Health Aide - a job she has done for 30 years. She says, “I consider myself a people person. It’s rewarding.” Because she is an Albany Housing Authority resident, she qualifies for, and has recently taken advantage of, the Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) Program. It allows her to save money, based on increases in income, toward a five year goal plan.

She says, “One of my dreams is to own my own home, because I’ve been homeless.” She aspires to building credit and a healthy escrow fund to put toward “a family home for [her] children and grandchildren.” Making productive use of the many services available at the WAGE Center, Vernell says, “I don’t understand why more people don’t take advantage” of the opportunities available.

Vernell’s drive to succeed has been based on her feeling that “every accomplishment has built my self-esteem.” In the last couple of months, she has reached several significant goals and plans to continue to work toward the longer term goal of self-sufficiency for herself and for the long term security of her family. Vernell is a shining example of how effective use of resources can lead to measurable success.

Turning Tragedy Into Opportunity



There are moments in everyone's life when they have no idea where to turn. Isheonna Faulkner found herself in a situation that might have made another person hopeless. Instead, she wrote an inspiring story for herself and her children. When she started on the FSS program she says, "I was going through a rough period in my life. My children's father had committed a horrible crime and left me to be a single first time parent" of a two year old and a two month old. "I tried so hard to cry in silence, but couldn't control the pain that I was feeling inside – the pain of raising fatherless children and not being able to support them working a full time job as an aide. I knew I had to do something very quickly."

Isheonna explains, "I came across a flyer from the FSS Program and thought: I will give it a try." The next morning, "I woke up and headed out to Green Street to see what the program was about. I knew it was my calling and what I prayed for the nights prior to my appointment."

As many FSS participants do, Isheonna set goals surrounding education and buying a home. She says, "As soon as I wrote my goals down for the FSS Program, I immediately got to them as if I was running up against time. I signed up for school one week later."

With less than a year left in the FSS Program, Isheonna is "currently a college graduate and working as a tech at Albany Memorial Hospital." In the next five years, she's looking to become a Registered Nurse and be an established homeowner.

For those thinking of joining the FSS Program, she offers the following advice: "Just be like Nike and do it. Procrastination is a disease and will have you still stuck and thinking about it five years later. Sometimes you have to keep the faith and believe." She also says that FSS staff "helps you achieve your goals by being there for you every step of the way. If you run into a problem on your journey to success, they will help out with resources."

Isheonna is enrolled in the homeownership program with the AHP Homeownership Center and looking forward to "buying a home for [her] children." One of the major things she learned through FSS is to set both short and long term goals. She says, "My future goals are to continue to set aside five year plans. If I could accomplish two to three things out of them, I will always feel like I'm winning."

NOTHING STANDS IN THE WAY OF BEING A DAD



Long-time WAGE Center participant, Everett Rice, has more determination in his little finger than most people you'll meet. One of the most striking things that is immediately evident about Everett is his commitment to being there for his kids.

When his youngest daughter was an infant he came job searching with her in a stroller at the WAGE Center, although he already had a job. He has always been a motivated worker, often holding more than one job to support his kids. He lights up when talking about them saying, "I love my babies—nothing in the world comes before my babies."

Even when he had a probation violation in March of 2017, he made sure his kids were in good hands. He wound up in Albany County Jail until November, 2017, when he immediately went back to business. He came to the WAGE Center and Department of Labor constantly looking for work. He admits, "It was difficult finding work with a felony." So, he went to get a Certificate of Relief from Disabilities, which was granted in February of 2018. He says it "helped me restore my rights back in order to gain employment."

After several interviews, he finally landed employment with Manpower at Wineshipping in Colonie. He reports loving the job, even to the point of giving up 19 years of cooking to work at a warehouse where he has been asked about coming on permanently because of his evident work ethic.

With overtime available in his future, Everett can again build the savings that allowed him to maintain his nice apartment even through his incarceration. He is with his kids every day, enjoying his two girls and two boys all six years old or less. His oldest son is playing Little League baseball and the infant who once came to the WAGE Center with Dad is now running around with the others.

Everett's story is one of determination and hard work. When the going was tough, and it really was for several months, he didn't let it get him down. He continued to search and do the things that he knew would ultimately make him successful. With more and more people coming in with records, it's important to see that drive and determination really do pay off. Facing obstacles head on, Everett has achieved success in finding a job and in being the engaged father that he wants to be for his kids.

BIG GOALS & BIG SUCCESS



Shaquoia Ruffin is a Licensed Practical Nurse, a homeowner and a recent graduate of the WAGE Center and Albany Housing Authority's Family Self Sufficiency Program (FSS). She is the perfect example of what can be done with perseverance and good use of available resources.

"Before passing my nursing boards last year," Shaquoia says, "I was working as a Medication Technician doing OK, but I still needed the help of social services to get by. After passing my boards, I was able to financially stand on my own two feet and support myself and my family without any assistance." Of being a nurse, she relates that work can be difficult, "but at the end of the day it's about helping a person when they are the most vulnerable. It can be exciting, sad, happy, frustrating, confusing and busy. But I go home every day knowing that I have helped and made a difference in peoples' lives, and that is why I am a nurse".

Like many FSS participants, Shaquoia set both shorter and longer term goals. During the course of the five year program, she set and achieved two major goals: Becoming an LPN and a homeowner. Of becoming a homeowner, she shares that it is "something I have been working on in the past two years with rebuilding my credit and becoming mentally and financially prepared for this journey." Regarding her final FSS escrow account disbursement, she explains, "Let me first say that this money is a blessing, and I am very lucky to receive it at this time when I'm making this transition into a homeowner. I will use this money towards minor repairs in my home, as well as saving some for a rainy day because if something breaks, I can't call maintenance. I'm maintenance."

This success story, like most, has a long road leading up to it. Shaquoia says, "I started my home ownership process at Affordable Housing Partnership. This program really broke down the [ins] and outs of the entire home buying process. It helped with credit repair and budgeting and saving money. This program alone takes about a year to complete, depending on the things you have to work on. You also have to pay [for] and attend workshops in order to get your certificate. With this certificate, you are able to apply for grants offered in different counties. This certificate lets the bank know that you understand the home ownership process and what's expected of you as a home owner. A lot of these city grants are exhausted and funds aren't readily available, so as soon as you know where it is you're looking to live, apply for a grant." She further explains that there are money matching programs and down payment reductions that help a candidate qualify for a mortgage.

But just because Shaquoia is gainfully employed and enjoying her new home, doesn't mean she has stopped setting goals. She is "enrolled and ready to start nursing school for my RN this coming January. And in the next 5 years, I see myself at least with my Bachelor's in Nursing, and being a successful homeowner and single mother of two."

Her advice "to families coming into the program, I would say to take it seriously. This is an opportunity to better your life and circumstances with an added incentive at the end. Don't just write down minor goals to accomplish, really think about what it is you want to do or where you want to be in 5 years. Passing my nursing boards, becoming financially independent and owning a home were my goals. Figure out your goals, come up with a plan to achieve them, and make it reality! I feel that I was successful because I had a plan, and I was focused!"