



September 15, 2014

### **The Life Guides Program: A Multi-Generation Strategy**

The goal of this publication is to inform our advocacy efforts, encourage networking and promote the sharing of strategies by profiling innovative, equity-focused efforts of one or more of Michigan's communities. This issue highlights the **Life Guides Program operated by the Goodwill Industries of Southwestern Michigan**. The Life Guides Program works with families in Allegan and Kalamazoo Counties, making a twenty year commitment to their efforts to move towards economic self-sufficiency and build educational and life success for themselves and their children.

#### **Why Multi-Generation Strategies Matter**

The research is clear on the critical tie between the well-being of parents and their children's social-emotional, physical, and economic well-being and educational and life success. Multi-generation strategies are essential to help children thrive while their parents move ahead, and are essential to the future economic prosperity of our state.

Multi-generation strategies take into account the needs of children and their parents to ensure that families can thrive. They must have three critical components that are intentional and linked:

- 1) Education and/or job training that leads to a credential and family-supporting employment that helps parents get ahead in life to better support their families.
- 2) High quality education – typically early childhood education – where children's learning and development is nurtured to lay the groundwork for future success in school and life.
- 3) Comprehensive wraparound services like family support, access to basic needs, health and mental health services for children, adolescents and their parents, and developmental screening and other assessments in child care, early education, and K-12 settings that appropriately engage parents more effectively in their children's learning and development.

#### **The Life Guides Program**

Life Guides is the only support program in Allegan and Kalamazoo Counties that makes a long-term commitment to assist low-income families as they move towards self-sufficiency and independence, and away from reliance on state, local and other assistance programs. Life Guides views families as naturally creative, and resourceful; understanding that people possess the strengths to meet their own goals through a combination of guidance, coaching, community resources, networking and a strong mentoring relationship with a Life Guides Coach.

The Life Guides Program is modeled, in part, after the Harlem Children's Zone, which is also a long-term commitment to break the generational cycle of poverty that offers targeted services to parents, high quality education from cradle to college completion for their children, and appropriate wraparound services needed by the whole family. Goodwill Industries of Southwestern Michigan retained important aspects of this model while making changes to fit their own community. Specifically, Life Guides is a

long-term, twenty-year initiative working with the same families to support their efforts to move towards economic self-sufficiency and build educational and life success for themselves and their children. Life Guides is built on the belief that serving individual families over a 20-year period will result in improvements in family income and socio-economic capital that also results in increased community engagement and positive outcomes for the broader community.

Life Guides integrates its programming with already existing community-based providers. Families are nominated for participation in the program by a community agency – whether it be a housing resource agency, Michigan Works! agency, Head Start or Early Head Start, or other social service agency. Eligible families must have at least one child under the age of three and be living at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL), though all but two of the current families in the program live below 100% FPL. All are struggling with serious issues such as homelessness, domestic violence, and other significant challenges. After the nomination process, individual families go through a lengthy interview and intake process to assure their commitment and readiness to be a part of this 20-year program.

Life Guides uses individualized coaching and access to a comprehensive array of services to set and meet specific self-sufficiency goals. Families are required to: attend monthly meetings and other planned activities, have weekly contact with their Life Guides Coach, and identify and obtain individual goals like enrolling children in Head Start and moving toward obtaining education certifications. The Life Guides Coaches also help build group cohesion among participating families to form a support network.

Community partners provide identified services needed by the families enrolled in the Life Guides Program such as housing assistance, food assistance, adult education, etc. A vital partner in this program is the Kalamazoo Literacy Council (KLC), which assists in the development and implementation of comprehensive family literacy activities for parents and their children. The instructional approach for family literacy includes leading literacy and learning activities with the parents and helping them demonstrate and master these skills with their children. Parents who need additional literacy instruction are provided tutors and other adult education supports to improve their literacy skills with the aim of increasing the parents' confidence and ability to serve as the "First Teachers" to their children.

Life Guides program costs are estimated at \$6,500 per family per year. This covers the costs associated with the Life Guides Coaches, program expenditures such as gas cards and bus tokens, and other supportive services needed that cannot be met by already existing community resources. For example, if a family has an issue with an overdue utility bill, needs a new tire for their car so they can continue to get to and from work, or needs furniture because they have successfully secured stable housing; their Life Guides Coach will assist them in finding resources in the community to cover those needs. However, if those resources are not available in the community, whether through social service agencies, the faith based community, or other community resources, then Life Guides will help cover costs to ensure that family's basic needs can be met without adding significant financial hardship to families.

Intergenerational efforts through Life Guides will help children reach their potential as learners, provide life management skills for parents, and help parents become full partners in the education and the future of their children.

Through Life Guides, parents:

- Learn how to be their child's first and best primary teacher and support their children's learning and education at home and as they move into the public education system.
- Understand and support positive expectations for their children as it relates to cognitive/academic awareness, social-emotional development, and physical well-being.
- Gain learning skills – whether it be a high school diploma or GED, post-secondary education, job training, basic literacy, or financial literacy – that leads to economic self-sufficiency.
- Achieve goals related to family stability such as obtaining a full-time job, maintaining stable housing, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, etc.

As a result of participation in Life Guides, children will:

- Successfully complete a quality pre-Kindergarten experience,
- Successfully complete Kindergarten,
- Be reading at or above grade level at the end of third grade, and
- Complete a high school diploma that leads to career training, further post-secondary education, and/or employment.

### **Policy Implications**

The Life Guides Program will give us the opportunity to look at the long-term impact of poverty reducing strategies on children, families and communities. Because of the complexity of situations faced by the most challenged families around the state, efforts must be made to ensure that services for children, youth and families are targeted, available, accessible and integrated to ensure family success. An intentional multi-generation program would look similar to the Life Guides program in that it would couple education and employment supports for parents with high quality early developmental or educational programming for their children. These programs would also connect families to needed services – whether it be connections to food assistance, housing needs, mental health or substance abuse services, or needs for their children like access to a pediatric medical home, special education services, etc. Policymakers can ensure that public funds are appropriately connecting and integrating services targeted to Michigan's most challenged children, youth and families. At the same time, the public services that aren't integrated can, at a minimum, better take into account the needs of the entire family.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Ensure that all public policies are made utilizing a multi-generation lens to ensure that policies focused on children and youth take into account the needs of their parents, and that policies impacting adults will take into account the needs of their children. For example, high quality early childhood programming must accommodate the needs of working parents, and adult education programs must take into account the child care needs of the parents they serve. Furthermore, policy changes to human service programs must take into account the whole family. For example cash assistance policies such as time limits, work-related sanctions, and other penalties must take into account the impact it will have on the children in families receiving this type of assistance.

Support opportunities for parents to build literacy skills, complete high school and move into post-secondary and family-supporting employment. Integrated adult education or workforce development

programs must be paired with high quality child care so that parents can effectively utilize those programs to get ahead in life while their children’s developmental and educational needs are being met. At the same time, connect parents to programs that help them better support their children’s learning and development through evidence-based home visiting services like Early Head Start.

Ensure access to programs that address specific needs of Michigan’s lowest-income families – whether it be programs targeting homelessness, domestic violence, mental health or substance use issues, etc. When parents are struggling, their children are negatively impacted. Appropriately supporting adult through particularly challenging circumstances will ensure that their children will also have better opportunities to thrive.

*For more information about The Life Guides Program, contact Goodwill Industries of Southwestern Michigan’s Director of Education, Life Guides & Grants Linda Snyder at (269) 382-0490 ext. 212 or [lsnyder@goodwillswmi.org](mailto:lsnyder@goodwillswmi.org).*

*If you would like to find out how your community can be profiled for your innovative work in any arena of child, youth and family services, contact Michigan’s Children VP for Programs, Michele Corey at 517-485-3500 or [michele@michiganschildren.org](mailto:michele@michiganschildren.org).*