



# step forward

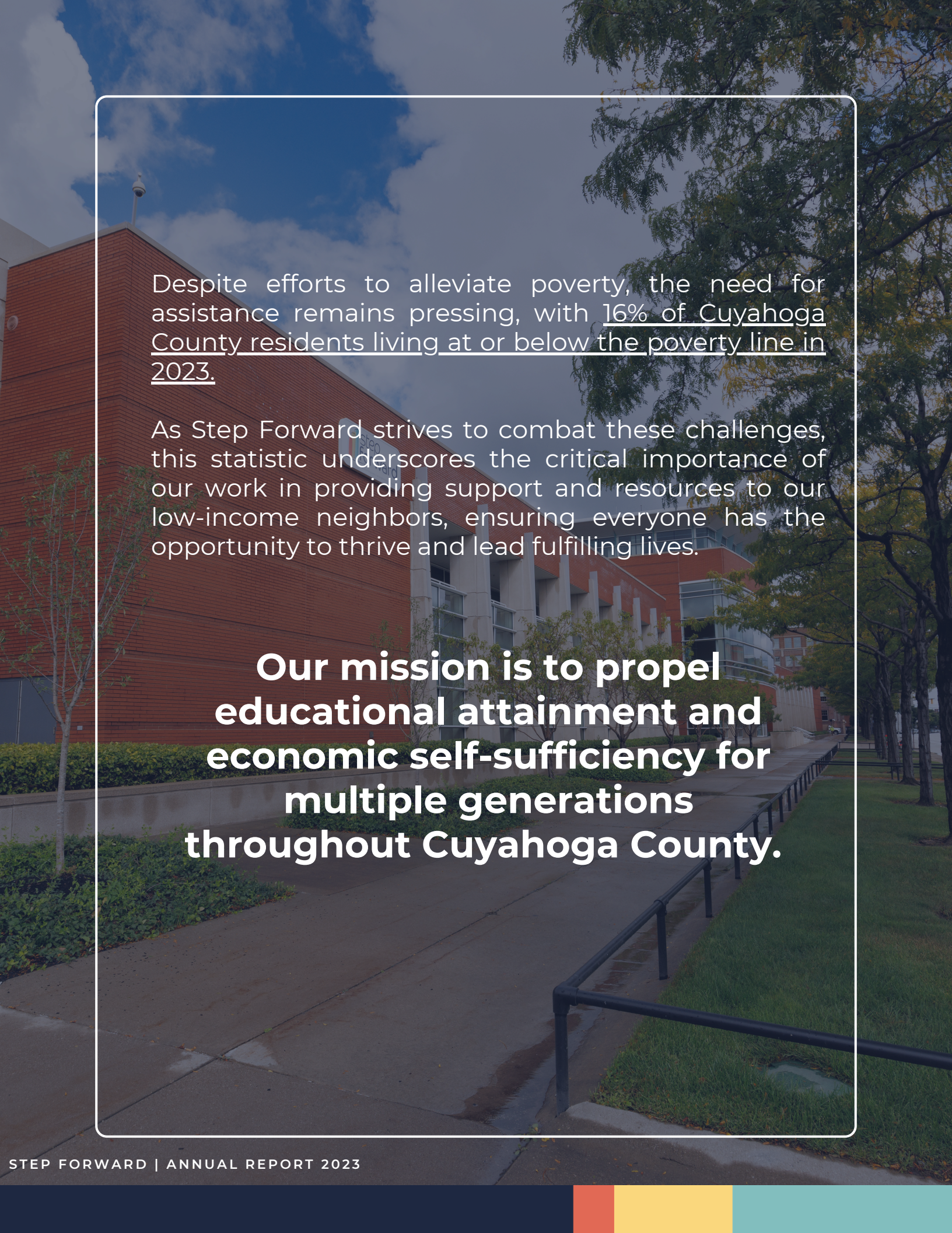
transforming lives + strengthening communities

20  
23



# Annual Report





Despite efforts to alleviate poverty, the need for assistance remains pressing, with 16% of Cuyahoga County residents living at or below the poverty line in 2023.

As Step Forward strives to combat these challenges, this statistic underscores the critical importance of our work in providing support and resources to our low-income neighbors, ensuring everyone has the opportunity to thrive and lead fulfilling lives.

**Our mission is to propel educational attainment and economic self-sufficiency for multiple generations throughout Cuyahoga County.**

### **Watch Their Stories**

- ▶ Explore our YouTube channel to witness firsthand the impactful work we do in Cuyahoga County through engaging videos, which showcase our initiatives and programs.

### **See Our Impact**

- ▶ Explore the outcomes and impact highlights of our agency's programs and services in Cuyahoga County throughout 2023, and discover the positives changes we're making together!

### **Review Our Financials**

- ▶ Take a closer look at Step Forward's financial performance for 2023 to see how we're maximizing resources to drive positive change in Cuyahoga County.

### **Get Involved**

- ▶ Join us in making a difference in Cuyahoga County by donating to our agency and supporting our mission to uplift our community.

### **Acknowledge Our Community Partners**

- ▶ Join us in acknowledging and celebrating the invaluable contributions of our community partners, whose collaboration strengthens our impact and uplifts Cuyahoga County.



# MESSAGE FROM OUR BOARD CHAIR & PRESIDENT



Dear Friends,

As we reflect on the past year, we are thrilled to share with you some of the innovative moments that defined Step Forward's journey in 2023.

Innovation has been at the forefront of our efforts as we continue our mission to combat poverty and uplift our community, especially during challenging times post COVID-19. Innovation remains crucial in community service as it allows Community Action Agencies like ours to adapt to evolving needs and challenges effectively.

By fostering a culture of creative thinking and collaboration, we can develop new approaches, programs, and initiatives that address complex issues more efficiently and comprehensively. Through innovation, we are able to stay ahead of the curve, anticipate our community's future needs, and continuously improve services to better meet the diverse needs of Cuyahoga County.

There were several standout moments of innovation this year. In January, Step Forward's Head Start team provided unprecedented transportation for Head Start children after the Louis Stokes Early Learning Center flooded and was forced to shut down for nearly ten months. Despite the challenges, our team's quick and innovative response ensured that the children continued to receive the care and education they deserve.

In the spring, Step Forward hosted a first-of-its-kind opportunity for men to come together and ignite a passion for growth through education, motivation and celebration. The Men's Elevation Conference, another shining example of the innovative spirit that drives us forward, hosted more than 200 men from Northeast Ohio.

Step Forward's Personal and Professional Development teams collaborated to offer a tax preparer's certification program, which equipped clients with valuable skills but also addressed a crucial need for certified tax preparers in our community.

In the fall, Step Forward’s Head Start and Human Resources department worked together to relaunch the “People as Teachers in Training” program, showcasing our commitment to addressing the ongoing teacher shortage. Through the reimagined PATT program, Step Forward will train individuals passionate about early childhood education and provide them with hands-on experience within the Head Start program, while empowering them to pursue a meaningful career in an essential field.

Finally, yet importantly, after serving a record number of clients throughout 2023, the Home Energy Assistance Program partnered with the Cleveland Housing Network and the United Way of Greater Cleveland to offer a call center so that together, we can provide crucial utility assistance to a larger number of individuals and families facing energy-related challenges.

Innovative solutions like those mentioned often lead to a greater impact, as they can reach more people, achieve better outcomes, and inspire positive change on a larger scale.

As we set our sights on the future, we are steadfast in our commitment to fostering a culture of creativity within the agency. Your continued support, whether through financial contributions, advocacy for our programs and services, or volunteering your time and expertise, has been instrumental in our ability to make a meaningful impact in the lives of those we serve. We extend our deepest gratitude to each and every one of you for your dedication to our mission.

Together, we will continue to strive for positive change in Cuyahoga County. Thank you for being a vital part of our journey.



*LaRese Purnell*  
**LaRese Purnell**  
Board Chairperson



*Jacklyn A. Chisholm*  
**Dr. Jacklyn Chisholm**  
CEO & President



# BABY AND MOMMY SUPPORT

Step Forward's Baby and Mommy Support (BAMS) offers hope and guidance for expectant mothers embarking on the beautiful journey of motherhood. Through BAMS, mothers find a haven of support where they can learn, grow, and prepare for the arrival of their little one.

BAMS is more than just a program; it's a lifeline for mothers-to-be. Through a carefully crafted curriculum, expectant mothers gain the essential knowledge and skills to navigate the challenges of pregnancy and early motherhood. From coping mechanisms for stress to the intricacies of breastfeeding and the complexities of postpartum depression, BAMS equips women with the tools they need to face the joys and tribulations of motherhood with confidence.

Step Forward's dedicated Family Development Specialists provide invaluable one-on-one consultations, offering personalized guidance on nutrition, health insurance navigation, hospital selection, and finding the right doctor.

Through BAMS, Step Forward is not just providing a service; it's creating a community of empowered mothers ready to embrace motherhood with an open heart and informed mind.

In 2023, **157** expectant mothers received life skills coaching from Step Forward's Family Development Specialists



## Impact Highlight *Veda's Story*

As she awaited the arrival of her fourth child, a little girl due on Christmas, Veda Bradley found herself in a challenging situation: she had been homeless for nearly seven months. It was a difficult time, but when one of the employees at a nearby hospital referred Veda to Step Forward's BAMS program, that's where her story took a turn for the better.

"Delores, my case worker, was very supportive," Veda recalled. "She was very vocal. We would have conversations. She was a great listener."

Despite Veda's tendency to keep to herself, the warm environment at BAMS encouraged her to open up and engage with other participants. It was a refreshing change, and Veda said that she felt supported in ways that she hadn't before.

As a grandmother and a parent of older children, ages 21, 18, and 10, Veda was especially looking forward to seeing the interaction between her oldest and youngest children.

"Pregnancy has been a long, exhausting ride," she said. "I probably would have lost it had it not been for the other people to engage with and socialize with in the BAMS program."



# EARLY HEAD START

Step Forward's Early Head Start program is the first gentle step into a world of learning and growth for the youngest members of our community. From the moment a baby is born, Step Forward is there ready to offer a nurturing hand and a wealth of opportunities for early childhood education.

Designed to cater to the needs of infants as young as six weeks old, Early Head Start centers are vibrant hubs of activity and discovery. Each center boasts colorful and inviting classrooms where little ones can explore, learn, and thrive under the guidance of caring and compassionate educators.

In Step Forward's safe and stimulating environment, each child is encouraged to play and learn with age-appropriate toys, equipment, and learning materials carefully selected to stimulate their senses and foster their development. From the soft textures of tactile toys to the engaging sights and sounds of educational playthings, each child's journey of discovery is nurtured with thoughtful care.

Step Forward understands the challenges that come with parenting, which is why at each Early Head Start location, the agency provides essential items like diapers and formula, easing the financial burden on parents and ensuring that every child's needs are met.

Early Head Start is accessible to all, as Step Forward offers this invaluable service free of charge to income eligible families.



At the end of the 2023 school year, an average of **85%** of early head Start students met or exceeded the expected skill level when demonstrating fine motor strength and coordination

At the end of the 2023 school year, an average of **91%** of early Head Start students met or exceeded the expected skill level when using number concepts and operations



## Impact Highlight *Ashley's Story*

Ashley Mosby's Head Start story began in 2015 when she was looking for a high-quality preschool program. Since then, she has enrolled three additional children into the program.

In 2023, Ashley's son finished up Step Forward's Early Head Start, intended for babies and young children up to three years old, and prepared to transition to the agency's Head Start program, designed for older children ages three to five.

"He is thriving," she said. "The program helped me identify his expressive speech delay and helped me with a referral to get him speech services on-site. Since starting those services, he is speaking more every day. I cannot say enough about the program and what it has done for my children's education. I am honored to be able to say that Head Start truly gave my boys the head start that they needed."



Funded  
enrollment  
**113**  
Children

Medical  
**84**  
Children received  
physicals

Dental  
**47**  
Children received  
dental checkups

Immunizations  
**76**  
Children caught up  
on immunizations

# HEAD START

Step Forward's Head Start program is where young minds blossom into eager learners, ready to take on the adventure of kindergarten and beyond. When children reach the age of three, they step into a world of discovery and growth, guided by the nurturing hands of passionate teachers.

In Head Start, learning is not confined to the walls of a classroom; it's an immersive experience that combines structured instruction with the joy of play. Through carefully crafted activities and interactive play, children develop the foundational skills they need to succeed in school and beyond. Every day is a new opportunity for exploration and learning, as each child is encouraged to embrace their natural curiosity and creativity.

Head Start is a holistic support system for children and their families. Each child receives individualized attention and care, with teachers providing personalized observations to ensure that every child's unique needs are met. Beyond academics, Head Start also prioritizes the health and wellbeing of its students, offering comprehensive support including access to health, dental, and nutritional services.

Head Start is offered at Step Forward's centers and extends its impact county-wide through partnerships with school districts and childcare centers.



At the end of the 2023 school year, an average of **74%** of head Start students met or exceeded the expected skill level for regulating their own emotions and behaviors

At the end of the 2023 school year, an average of **87%** of head Start students met or exceeded the expected skill level when using appropriate conversational and communication skills



## Impact Highlight *Sharika's Story*

As a Head Start parent and employee, Shamika Brown has had the unique perspective of experiencing Head Start from both sides. In 2023, she was celebrating her daughter's recent transition from Head Start to kindergarten, had three children enrolled with Step Forward, and was expecting another baby.

Her son's journey, in particular, was memorable. Shamika said he hadn't spoken much initially, but that throughout his time at Head Start, she had watched him develop an understanding for new words and phrases.

"My son didn't talk much before, but now, I can't get him to be quiet!" she laughed. "Now, we have conversations like we're both adults."

Head Start's impact on Shamika has extended beyond academics. She noted that Head Start has taught her children valuable life skills, such as following directions, maintaining a daily routine, and the importance of socialization with their peers and other adults.

"Head Start is essential for children's learning and development," she insisted. "It gives them the necessary tools and socialization to excel in school and beyond. I have seen it firsthand as a parent, and now as a Head Start Education Aide."

Funded enrollment  
**1256**  
Children

Medical  
**1052**  
Children received  
physicals

Dental  
**741**  
Children received  
dental checkups

Immunizations  
**1084**  
Children caught up  
on immunizations

# HOME ENERGY ASSISTANCE

Step Forward's Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) stands as a vital lifeline for individuals and families facing the daunting challenge of maintaining essential utilities in the face of rising economic pressures. With six distinct program under the HEAP umbrella, including the Low-Income Water Assistance Program, the Summer Cooling Program, the Winter Crisis Program, and the Percentage of Income Payment Plan, HEAP offers a comprehensive suite of support to ensure that no one has to face the burden of utility costs alone.

In 2023, HEAP witnessed an unprecedented surge in demand, receiving a record number of applications and serving a record number of clients. This surge in demand reflects the harsh economic realities many are facing, with the rising prices of essentials, including utilities, placing an increasing strain on households across the community. Many who had never before found themselves in need of assistance were suddenly grappling with financial hardships, highlighting the widespread impact of these economic challenges.

Amidst the challenging landscape, Step Forward's Home Energy Assistance Program helps alleviate the financial burden on thousands of families, ensuring that they continue to access essential services without sacrificing other basic needs.



In 2023, HEAP  
received **37,598**  
inquires and phone  
calls from people  
asking for utility  
assistance

In 2023, HEAP  
received **23,930**  
applications from  
people interested  
in utility programs

In 2023, Step Forward's  
Home Energy  
Assistance Program  
distributed more than  
**\$2.9 Million** in utility  
assistance to residents

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Step Forward's Professional Development program is a gateway to a world of opportunities, where individuals of all ages can unlock their potential and embark on a fulfilling career path. Whether you're starting fresh or seeking a new direction, Step Forward is committed to helping individuals find their passion and chart a course towards success.

At the heart of Step Forward's Professional Development program are Family Development Specialists and licensed social workers, who serve as mentors and guides. They work closely with clients to identify their interests, assess their skills, and develop a personalized plan to achieve their career goals. Through a series of tailored programs and services, the agency helps each individual overcome the barriers to success and equips them with the tools needed to thrive.

Programs cover a wide range of areas, including Customer Service Training, Job Readiness and Placement, Adult Basic Literacy Skills, Microsoft Office Suite Training, and more. These programs are designed to provide each person with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in today's job market. From updating their resume to honing interview skills, Step Forward ensures that each client is well prepared to make a positive impression on potential employers.

Step Forward goes the extra mile by connecting clients with hiring agencies and providing opportunities to attend free training, workshops and job fairs. We believe in empowering the community with not just the knowledge but real-world opportunities to put that knowledge into action.

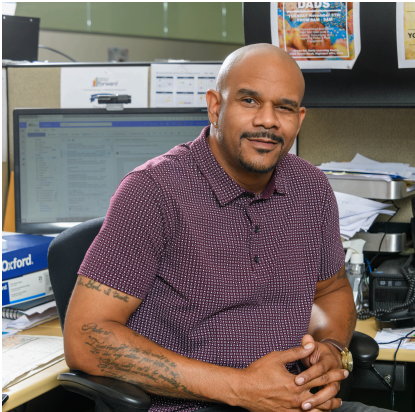


in 2023 **100%** of the clients who demonstrated improved job readiness skills were referred to employment services and went on to secure employment

In 2023 **97%** of the clients who improved their job preparedness skills also achieved all program goals for their designated professional development services training program



In 2023 **75%** of the Professional Development clients who completed programs with Step Forward reported that he or she secured employment and obtained employment at or above minimum wage



In 2023, Step Forward's job fairs connected **427** job seekers with actively hiring agencies



## Impact Highlight *Camille's Story*

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Camille enrolled in Step Forward's Adult Basic Literacy Workshop with the goal of receiving a refurbished laptop upon program completion. To her surprise, she discovered that Step Forward - and the workshop - provided far more than she expected!

"I enhanced my basic math skills, touched on basic computer skills, and I got back in touch with my typing skills," she said.

One of the skills she improved on, financial literacy, proved to be particularly advantageous.

"The course showed me the basic pros and cons of the errors I was making and that my saving strategies were not only out of date, but out of order," she explained.

Camille put her newly developed financial literacy skills to the test as she worked to save for a specific goal: taking her son to Cedar Point for his 5th birthday. For her, working towards a short-term financial goal was a helpful way to show herself and her workshop facilitators that the resources she gained were effective when applied accordingly.

Camille is currently enrolled in college classes with the aim of becoming a patient services representative. Reflecting on her experience with Step Forward, she identifies the most valuable lesson:

"I discovered within myself that determination is key, and I'm the only one holding myself back," Camille said. "I'm smart, educated, and I have a lot going for myself, and all I had to do was get rid of the dead weight, negativity, and toxicity in my life."



# PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Step Forward's Personal Development program offers a range of resources designed to empower individuals and families on their journey towards personal and financial wellbeing. From individual and family counseling to specialized workshops like parenting classes, anger management, and domestic violence programs, Step Forward provides a nurturing environment where individuals can grow and thrive.

Recognizing the interconnectedness of personal and economic challenges, Step Forward's Personal Development program is designed to address the holistic needs of its clients. The agency recognizes that economic stress can often take a toll on an individual's mental health, impacting their mindset and overall wellbeing. By providing support through counseling and workshops, Step Forward aims to help individuals build resilience and develop the skills needed to navigate life's challenges with confidence.

In addition to its personal development offerings, Step Forward extends a helping hand to those facing immediate financial hardships through its emergency assistance programs. Thanks to federal funding and grants, Step Forward provides vital support to individuals and families in need, offering assistance with essential expenses such as rental, utility and internet payments. This assistance not only alleviates immediate financial burdens but also helps create a stable foundation from which individuals can focus on their personal and professional growth.



In 2023, Step Forward provided personal income tax preparation at no cost to **188** Cuyahoga County residents

In 2023, **48** Cuyahoga County residents prioritized their mental health and enrolled for Step Forward's counseling services



In 2023, Step Forward distributed **\$10,656,996** to Cuyahoga County residents who qualified for rental assistance

## Impact Highlight *Kalika's Story*

In June 2023, Kalika Pascol's life took an unexpected turn. She lost her job, leaving her in a precarious financial situation.

With rent due soon, her family found themselves in a state of anxiety and uncertainty. Kalika, who had worked in property management and helped dozens of other people receive rental assistance, now found herself struggling to pay the bills. She was in tears when she finally met with one of Step Forward's Family Development Specialists.

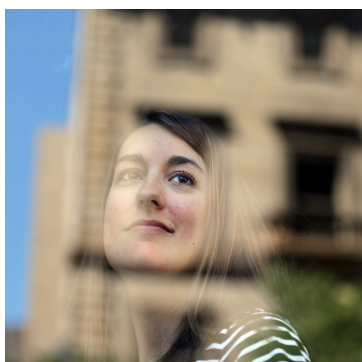
"She reassured me that event though I had hit a rough patch, this was only temporary and that I would get through it," Kalika recalled.

Shortly after applying for rental assistance, Step Forward informed Kalika that the agency would be able to provide her enough aid to cover the rent she owed from prior months and through October.

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Kalika, who is married with two children, said the financial assistance allowed her family to use what little money they did have toward food and other bills.

“It also allowed us to not be so stressed to where it was impacting our health,” she acknowledged. “This stopped us from being on the street. Overall, our lives have improved because of this help.”





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