

United Way of Cass-Clay Bold Goal: Reduce Hunger & Homelessness



FOCUS: HOUSING FIRST



Just last year, I was arrested for panhandling because I was homeless and standing on the corner in Fargo with a sign. I had nowhere to go, no food, vehicle, driver's license. I had recently lost custody of my son, too, who was just a few months old. I didn't have anything. I'd pretty much given up and didn't have a lot of hope.

Then I met Ashley. She is what is called a "Housing Navigator" here in our community. It is something new that United Way was able to help start with a bunch of other organizations that work to help people who are homeless, like I was. When I met Ashley, I was sleeping outside just about every night or bouncing between the homeless shelters in town, because a lot of times they were full. Most of the time I would sleep under the bridge near Petro downtown. But really, I spent most of my time in and out of detox or the emergency room, or jail. In addition to losing custody of

my son, I also lost my life partner – my son's mom, Sarah. She passed away while serving time in jail. I wasn't in a good place. During that time, every morning I would walk to Labor Masters by 5:30 a.m. to try to get work for the day – a lot of people think that homeless people don't work, but that's not the case.

One thing that people don't think about when they think about homeless people is, where do they put all of their stuff? If you don't have a home, you have to carry everything you own with you, and when you get to a job site or even go to the grocery store people judge you right away and label you – that was really tough for me. But, if you have an apartment at least, there is a place for you to put your stuff, get a good night's sleep and be ready for work in the morning.

Ashley was the one who helped me to think about housing FIRST and getting that home base as a step one, so that I could focus on all of the other things in my life, like getting sober and getting custody of my son. We set goals and figured out how to get there.

She went with me to find an apartment and put together a plan. Step by step she was there with me – I knew I wouldn't be able to rent an apartment because of my background, but she was able to get me into an apartment, and then take steps to work toward getting my license back, saving for and getting a vehicle, and putting things in place so I could be at a point to regain custody of my son.

It all started from having a home – a home base. That was a barrier for me in the past. Having an apartment is what has made the difference for me to actually make progress on my goals, and be able to show that I could provide a good life for my son, which was a battle in the beginning.

Just a few months ago, I got custody of my son back and we're living in that same apartment that Ashley helped me get into. She even helped me by getting some donated things for David like a crib, sheets, and some toys. We're getting into a routine and it was so fun to be able to take him to the park to play this fall and then come home to the apartment. We're on the right track.

- Benjamin, West Fargo



BOLD COMMUNITY GOALS

1 REDUCE HUNGER & HOMELESSNESS

2 PREPARE CHILDREN TO SUCCEED

3 HELP PEOPLE BE INDEPENDENT

4 LIFT PEOPLE OUT OF POVERTY

United Way of Cass-Clay Bold Goal: Prepare Children to Succeed



FOCUS: SCHOOL READINESS



I love being a dad. My son David just turned 6 this fall. I lost custody of him when he was a baby, because I became incarcerated, but now that I have regained custody, I want to do everything I can to be a good dad and make sure he has what he needs, even though money is tight.

Before David was born, I was homeless. Now, with the help of a Housing Navigator, we live in a small apartment over in Fargo. Getting housing was one of the reasons I was able to get custody back. It was a big milestone for me, but we have a long way to go, too.

My son lost his mother when he was just a few months old, so it is up to me to give him the things he needs to grow up to be successful. Sometimes that is a lot of pressure!

So many things to worry about, buy and plan for. I don't want him to live a hard life like I have lived. I want him to go to school and do well and grow up to be successful, and I know that going into first grade is a big deal. I need to make sure he has the things he needs for school, but school supplies aren't always at the top of the list when we're budgeting for rent, utilities, food, etc.

I was really stressed out this summer trying to figure out how I was going to plan for his first day of school. I wanted to make sure he had new shoes and new clothes to wear, and also a backpack and new supplies - it broke my heart to think that he might get made fun of if he came to school without glue, crayons, and all of the rest of the stuff that they other kids have.

That is why I was so excited when I heard about this United Way event where you can go to the FARGODOME a few weeks before school starts and get a backpack filled with pencils, notebooks and the things kids need for school. David and I went last year and everyone was so nice. The volunteers even helped him find a red backpack, which is his favorite color.

When we got home, he dumped out the backpack on our living room floor so we could see what was inside. I have never seen him get so excited over such a small pile of things like pencils and crayons. I know I wouldn't be able to afford these school supplies on my own without this program, so I am glad they offer the chance for us to get them before that first day of school.

I know it is going to make a big difference for David when he is older and he'll grow up to be smart and successful and make his dad proud. That's what I'm hoping for.

- Benjamin, West Fargo



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United Way of Cass-Clay Bold Goal: Help People Be Independent



FOCUS: STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH



My name is David. I am a 12 year old and I go to school in West Fargo. I am in the 6th grade. I live over by the high school in West Fargo with my dad. My mom died when I was just a baby, so it has just been my dad and I growing up.

My dad told me that when I was a baby, he and my mom struggled with addiction. Both of them had quit drinking, but on Thanksgiving when I was just a few months old, they had a relapse and child services came to our house and they both went to jail. My mom died while she was in jail. So it is just my dad and I.

Sometimes I feel sad and get angry at school. For a while, I was getting kicked out of class because I would get so angry that I couldn't control it around all the other kids. I tried to hide it, but one of the counselors at the school talked to my dad during parent teacher conferences and said that I needed to have therapy.

I didn't tell my dad that I needed therapy because I knew that we wouldn't be able to afford it and that he wouldn't be able to take me to appointments since he has to be at work all day and can't leave work. He was pretty stressed out when he came home from conferences that time. He said he didn't know where he was going to get the money for therapy and who was going to drive me there since he can't leave work.

Then my counselor told my dad and me about Lindsay. She is the SWF at our school. SWF stands for Student Wellness Facilitator. Now I go to talk to Lindsay every Thursday at 9 a.m. I have been going for about 3 months now. Her office is right by the library. I don't have to leave school and my dad doesn't have to leave work. We talk about my dad, why I feel so angry sometimes, and all sorts of other stuff.

Ever since I have been talking to Lindsay, I haven't gotten angry in class or gotten kicked out. My dad is happy, too, because last time he came to parent teacher conferences they told him I was one of the best kids in the class. We were both pretty happy about that.

- David, West Fargo



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United Way of Cass-Clay Bold Goal: Lift People out of Poverty



FOCUS: GENERATIONAL POVERTY



I don't think about myself as being in poverty, but I guess that I am. Ever since I got my own apartment, month to month is pretty tough when it comes to finances. Even though I work full time, I'm still struggling to make ends meet. I want to do everything I can to make sure that when my son David is my age, he's not in the same spot.

It isn't his fault that I went through a tough time in my life when I was homeless and now trying to get back on track today. When he was just a few months old, his mom died while she was serving time in jail. At the same time, I was homeless and became incarcerated and lost custody of him, but was able to get custody back now that my life is on the right track. I'm working full time and am focusing on budgeting for my apartment rent, utilities, food and the things I need for David because I want him to have a better life than I did.

It's no surprise that poverty is a cycle. I've seen it happen. And the statistics back it up, too. But I want it to stop with David. I don't want him to grow up and have the same life like I had and get arrested for panhandling like I did and bounce from homeless shelter to homeless shelter.

Helping people in poverty isn't about getting them into programs, or giving people a handout. It's about looking at that cycle of poverty and finding the way to stop it so that kids who are born into poverty aren't growing up to be in that same spot. I have big goals for me and David, but it took help from a lot of different angles to get the help I needed and the support to actually put a plan in place for reaching those goals that I put out there for myself. And I had to work for it. It wasn't just handed to me – I had to put in the work to get where we're at now. Without the support of United Way programs, I wouldn't have been able to move from being homeless to having my own apartment, get my license back, keeping a full time job, and putting things in place so I get custody of my son back.

I think about David's future a lot. When he is my age, I want him to have a good job, a good life, and be able to provide for his family and kids, and just be a good citizen and part of a community. I want him to be able to break that cycle and do well in life from the beginning. My hope is that by the time he is my age, he'll be the one that is giving back to the nonprofits and charities that helped us early on in his life. That would be awesome.

- Benjamin, West Fargo



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