

Among the nation's largest social service providers, Catholic Charities USA traces its roots back 275 years. Today, through innovative programs like Gateway to Financial Fitness, 1,700 Catholic Charities member agencies and institutions fulfill a mission of providing help and creating hope for more than 7.1 million people annually, regardless of religious, social or economic backgrounds. According to Rev. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, "these remarkable programs are successful because they create strong partnerships with vulnerable families and organizations in the neighborhoods where they live. Equally important, the programs work to increase the families' economic assets with education, jobs and savings."



GATEWAY TO FINANCIAL FITNESS

CATHOLIC CHARITIES OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF ST. LOUIS

Award-winning Program: Gateway to Financial Fitness

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CHILDREN DO WELL WHEN THEIR FAMILIES
DO WELL, AND FAMILIES DO BETTER WHEN
THEY LIVE IN SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

2005 FAMILY STRENGTHENING AWARDS

REACHING OUT TO FAMILIES

The Catholic Charities Housing Resource Center (CCHRC), a St. Louis housing counseling agency, knows that homeownership can be the key for economic stability for low-income families and the first step toward stronger futures for their children. However, for some families, pursuing these goals is extremely difficult.

“We established the Gateway to Financial Fitness program, because more and more families can’t take even that first step,” explains Karen Wallensak, CCHRC’s executive director. “It’s not just a lack of money or a bad credit history. It’s not having a bank account, having no credit history of any kind.”

The Gateway program begins with well-aimed outreach, taking financial literacy classes right to the families who need it—be it in the backroom of a neighborhood bar, a bicycle shop or a church basement. “We find the hub of their neighborhood,” says Wallensak. “And we go to them.”



A HUGE MOTIVATOR FOR PARENTS PARTICIPATING IN GATEWAY TO FINANCIAL FITNESS IS THAT THEY WANT TO BE ROLE MODELS FOR THEIR CHILDREN.

—Karen Wallensak, Executive Director, Catholic Charities Housing Resource Center

FINANCING DREAMS

CCHRC staff also have developed innovative strategies for making smart asset management an attainable goal for the families the Gateway program serves. The staff recruits a corps of skilled community volunteers—including bankers, lawyers and other financial professionals—to lead Gateway classes. Working with the University of Missouri Extension, they train these volunteers to present the program in the most engaging ways. Illustrations from volunteers' real life experiences add depth, games encourage parents to set financial goals, and a conversational style supplants traditional lectures. Its combination of outreach and access helped CCHRC redefine how neighborhood housing services can support family success.

Some results are immediate. Building or repairing a credit history has helped some parents compete for jobs in today's workforce, where a growing number of companies require a credit check as a condition of employment. Some results are more gradual as families learn to manage their assets.

The Gateway program changed the lives of more than 870 families in its first five years and has often involved every single member of the family. “We see families want to save money for a home,” says Wallensak, “and we encourage parents to make financial management a family affair. If every single family member saves, including the children, everyone learns and everyone shares equally in the family’s success.”

FAMILIES COUNT FAMILY STRENGTHENING AWARDS

Through a joint venture of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Catholic Charities USA, the FAMILIES COUNT Family Strengthening Awards recognize Catholic Charities with outstanding programs that work to give children what they need most—strong, capable and economically successful families. Responding to the varied needs of the families they serve, these organizations improve the economic prospects of working men and women and create the services and networks of support that all families need to realize their aspirations for themselves and their children.