

leo illuminate.

WILSON SHEEHAN LAB FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

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Those closest

Keeping dignity at
the heart of our work

Original artwork by Marge Kelsey





My LEO Why



Holly Kuzmich,
Michael L. Smith managing director

When I first learned about the important work LEO is doing to address poverty across the country, I was struck by how naturally it fits within the mission of Notre Dame to be a force for good in the world. And now as I have taken on the role of stewarding LEO's work, I wanted to share my journey in getting here and why this work is so important.

You see, I grew up in the shadow of Notre Dame, just a few miles north of campus. I come from a Notre Dame family, but I'm just now returning to South Bend after spending several decades working at a national level on domestic policy issues.

My belief in LEO's mission comes from all the experiences in my life, which all led me here.

Through my own family history, I heard about the challenges of starting with very little from my grandparents, who immigrated to South Bend after World War I from a small Croatian village in Austria. They boarded a ship in Germany in their early twenties, leaving most of their family behind, not speaking English and with only a few dollars in their pocket. After working in a variety of service roles, they were able to save up enough money to open a small neighborhood grocery store, which

my dad and his siblings worked in every day. That store closed in the early 1960s, about the time that South Bend itself was going through economic turmoil with the closing of the Studebaker auto company which was headquartered here. My own history demonstrated to me in very real ways the promise of opportunity—but I also have thought a lot about how a significant bump in the road could have meant harder times for my family.

My interest in understanding the complexities of poverty and what stands in the way of opportunity also came from my experiences of regularly driving from South Bend through the South Side of Chicago where I saw the Robert Taylor Homes. This was an enormous hi-rise public housing project that sat to the east of the freeway that housed over 25,000 Chicagoans experiencing poverty at its peak. The freeway created a physical barrier that separated residents from the surrounding neighborhoods, and the housing authority did little to maintain the buildings. I became deeply interested in how that type of development had occurred and how to better address the needs and the dignity of people living there.

In my professional life, I've been driven by a desire to provide opportunity and lift up the lives of the underserved. In my time working in public policy, I saw how rigorous research and evidence on what works can lead to impact for millions of people. During my time working on federal education policy, we leveraged our nation's best research on literacy to design programs on effective reading instruction. And research on how to effectively disseminate anti-retroviral drugs to people living with AIDS led to the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which has saved 26 million lives around the world. But there's a big gap in translating research into policy, and that's a role that LEO is filling.

I've also been on the side of working with non-profits who are tackling some of our biggest challenges. Social service providers are doing challenging work, and they have a lot on their plate. Undertaking the type of rigorous research that LEO tackles takes leadership, capacity, good data, and a strong commitment. After working with CEOs of nonprofits



across the country to help them grow and scale their work and serving on the boards of these organizations, I have a deep appreciation and respect for the work they do every day and the vulnerability it takes to open yourselves up to finding out if your programs are doing what they are designed to do.

These experiences all drew me to LEO. The work we do is different from many others who are involved in rigorous research, in that we put providers and the people they serve front and center in the work. The fact that we do this work at no cost to our service provider partners is a real benefit.

And we are at an exciting point in our work. LEO has over 110 studies underway or completed. LEO's research is increasingly being put into action; we are replicating effective programs, we are actively growing our engagement with policymakers, and other nonprofits are learning from our results. All this is built off of innovative service providers who put the people they serve first and treat them with dignity and respect. In the pages that follow, you'll hear directly from those partners, who authored nearly all of the articles in this issue. It is an easy and important mission to get behind, and I'm honored to join this team and lead us to our next phase of impact.

Dignity in the design

Sarah Dickerson, City of Asheville Right at Home project manager

What makes someone at-risk of experiencing homelessness? Depending on what community you're in, the list of risk factors can vary widely. For Asheville's Right at Home team, that question sparked a much larger conversation.

Asheville is a small city in the mountains of Buncombe County, North Carolina. Known for a thriving tourism industry and beautiful vacation homes, Asheville's cost of living is a challenge for many of our year-round residents. In 2024, Hurricane Helene hit our region. The damage was found to be the costliest natural disaster in the community's history, leaving thousands of people struggling to find housing or repair what was left of their home.

When Right at Home conducted a national search for 10 sites to be part of their homelessness prevention program, the Asheville-Buncombe Continuum of Care

(CoC) was a natural fit. Established in 2024 just months before Hurricane Helene, our CoC values the voice of people with lived experience. All CoC bodies — the Board, Committees, and Work Groups — must have an elected or appointed voting member with lived or living experience of homelessness. We facilitate the collaboration of service providers and promote a person-centered system to ensure we address the unique needs of each community member. We have a robust system of emergency rental assistance, but our homelessness prevention services have been limited to times of crisis. Nearly two years after Hurricane Helene, the data shows our community is still in



CoC member meeting

need. Asheville's Point in Time (PIT) Count for 2026 identified 824 people in shelters, transitional housing, or unsheltered, a 9.1% increase from the year prior. This data drives us to be part of Right at Home's mission to stop homelessness before it starts.

As Asheville's Right at Home Project Manager, I have worked with community members, provider agencies, and LEO staff to fine tune our research design. For us, the most important component in the research is the dignity of our clients. That's why defining the risk factors for entering homelessness in Asheville became so important.

Our randomized controlled trial tracks people's experience of homelessness after receiving the Right at Home intervention compared to the experiences of those who don't. Although most of our data will come from our Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), the research team will also be conducting surveys with clients. What we came to realize is each person has a different view of their own experience, and it is not for us to tell them what it was and assign the label to it; they can identify in

the manner that's truest for them. We need to use a consistent definition of homelessness across clients and even across sites in this replication study, yet acknowledge that experiences of housing insecurity are complex and deeply personal. And well-designed research can still recognize that and validate research participants' experiences.

Asheville-Buncombe's HMIS inflow data from 2025 showed that of those who were experiencing homelessness, 73% were disabled as determined by HUD's six categories: development, physical, mental, non-alcohol substance-related, or alcohol and substance related. The data also showed 66% last resided in non-permanent housing, which included staying with family and friends, a foster home, a halfway house, and other temporary locations. When our case workers administer these surveys, we want to ensure people can accurately identify their barriers to maintaining housing. The goal is to better understand lifetime interactions with homelessness prevention and homelessness interventions. In order to achieve this, we restructured the survey to give participants more ability to explain their experiences in their own wording.



"The people with lived experience involved in this work can share the stories of those who aren't already seen and whose stories aren't known, especially for those who can't share for themselves."

The flexibility in our survey reflects our goal to meet individuals where they are during a vulnerable time in their life. We want to take the burden of navigating systems away from clients by preparing our staff to break through barriers to housing. Sometimes, the hurdles are too big for someone to jump over alone. Government identification and drivers license applications are often flagged when there is no permanent address provided. Yet housing and job applications typically require a valid ID. Right at Home case managers will be ready to support individuals through each step on their journey to stable housing, whether that's working together on paperwork, providing referrals to legal support, or determining their level of need for flexible financial assistance.

In our CoC, we believe that in order to create systems, policies, and programs that recognize and validate unique experiences, we have to create equity for those with lived and living experience. That's why we hosted listening sessions and formed work groups with several provider agencies in our region. It's the "nothing about us without us" approach. That's why the work groups and committees taking on the detailed work of the CoC always include people

with lived and living experience; in our Right at Home design work group, four appointed members brought lived expertise to shape the initiative. One work group participant with lived experience says, "It's so important to have the voices of lived experience. There are many portrayals of homelessness, creating a narrative of us versus them. The people with lived experience involved in this work can share the stories of those who aren't already seen and whose stories aren't known, especially for those who can't share for themselves. We can also show where systems went wrong so they don't have to go wrong for the next person."

As we prepare to launch our program in a few months, we will continue to lean on our membership, work groups, and CoC board for insight. We want to continuously evaluate what works and what doesn't. With LEO's support, we will track and evaluate the progress of a program tailored to the unique needs of our community.

We are keeping dignity in the design. Dignity in our research. Dignity in our services. Dignity at the heart of our community.



A most abundant life:

Goodwill Michiana's experience
as the first Padua replication site

Vincenzo Torsiello De León, Padua Michiana case manager

Because implementation is a nuanced process, bringing Padua Michiana to life has offered a challenging, but rewarding opportunity for Goodwill Industries of Michiana to learn and systematically build our capabilities.

When I sat down with Goodwill's president and CEO, Debie Coble, to ask her what it was like to first talk with LEO and Catholic Charities Fort Worth about bringing Padua to South Bend, she described the process as a courtship.

"It was fun. We were told that this was going to be almost like a dating process," Coble said. "We would have conversations, we're going steady. Is there commitment? Put a ring on it. We're walking down the aisle."

We chuckled when she said this, yet there was a true sincerity in what she was capturing. "What I really appreciated about it is the openness in the conversations."

It was more of a patient courtship than anything else. Over months of calls and site visits, the two organizations moved toward a shared commitment: Goodwill Industries of Michiana would become the inaugural mission site to replicate Padua outside its original home in Fort Worth, Texas.



For Coble, saying “yes” wasn’t a leap so much as a recognition of truth. Goodwill’s underlying mission is “to empower people to live their most abundant life,” and Padua, an evidence-based, holistic case management model built to help participants rise above generational poverty, does exactly that.

“It absolutely aligns with our core values,” Coble said. “We get to walk alongside [our clients]. We get to help them break barriers.”

Still, the decision carried real weight. Coble’s biggest hesitation wasn’t whether Padua worked, but one of long-term sustainability: could Goodwill raise and steward the funds needed to keep it running? She credits LEO and Catholic Charities Fort Worth for their support as her team worked through that question before committing.

The Groundwork

Once the “yes” was officially cemented, the real work began. Sara Brodzinski, Goodwill Michiana’s chief people officer, and Erin Stojic, senior director of mission impact, remember the months leading up to launch as a period of shared learning between Fort Worth and South Bend. Over several months, the two teams launched a new journey, and forged a bond together.

“Being the first site is obviously a growing experience for both sides, especially because we’re in a different part of the country,” Stojic shared. “It’s so exciting, yet it also has to be incredibly delicate and careful.”

What stuck with Brodzinski from those early meetings with LEO was the program’s emphasis on emotional resilience and inner dignity. Describing the belief Padua tries to nurture in participants, she said:

“If they don’t believe deep down that they can do it, and we have proof that they can do it, being able to encourage and walk with people as they go through those ups and downs...to me, that’s the most critical piece.”

Brodzinski knew her team would embrace Padua because it filled a gap in Goodwill’s services they were eager to address: the chance to stand by clients without a time limit.

“The people that stood by you when you were at your lowest, who were there for you consistently. You’re not going to forget that.”

As Coble put it, simply and plainly: “We hired the right people.”

The Welcome

Claire Coleman, Padua Michiana’s program manager, saw the internal excitement and hope building well before launch. Part of her job was forging the referral relationships the program would need to grow. But when she arrived, Goodwill staff already knew who she was.

“People were just randomly walking up to me, ‘Oh, you’re the Padua lady, we’ve been waiting for you,’” she said.

That anticipation turned quickly into action: Padua Michiana’s initial cohort of 18 participants all came through internal referrals, and community reception has been overwhelmingly warm.

“Everyone at Goodwill was very hospitable and happy to have this resource internally to provide additional support to the people they serve,” Coleman recalls.

Coleman also credits Padua’s proven model, existing structure, and program supports with softening the most harrowing aspect of any launch: figuring out what works. Padua arrived fully formed with proven impact.

Breanna Fitzhugh, one of Padua’s case managers, feels that same credibility from the other side of the table: sitting across from someone new. In past roles, she said, showing up meant asking a client to trust an approach with no track record. With Padua, she doesn’t have to ask for that leap of faith.

“Being able to come in with that research and say, ‘Hey, this is how it has already worked,’ is just so much more powerful.”



The Padua Michiana team: Breanna Fitzhugh, Guadalupe Pineda-Ramos, Claire Coleman, and Vincenzo Torsiello de Leon

The Response

Padua Michiana is far too early for outcome data. Yet, it’s how clients talk about the program and Goodwill that has struck staff most. The impact of the program is already clear through the stories clients share.

“They come to us with this sort of abundant excitement about Goodwill and what it has done for them,” Coble said. “Many of them say that they didn’t feel accepted anywhere else.” Several participants have told staff this is the first place they’ve ever been treated like a human being, rather than a problem to be managed.

When I asked one Padua participant what they would say about their experience so far, they stated: “What you’re all doing, the way you’re here for me and the way I can count on you...it’s not something I’ve gotten...consistently in my life. I’m grateful to Goodwill for being the only place that welcomed me like this,” the participant said, opening his arms wide. “I’m just grateful to know that you’re not going to give up on me even if I sometimes give up on myself.”



The Future

When Coble brought Padua to Goodwill’s board, she told them something that could have been a hard sell: Padua would mean serving fewer people than some of Goodwill’s other programs. But the board’s response wasn’t hesitation, rather: they knew that helping break cycles of poverty holistically mattered more than raw volume.

“We know that for every person in this community that we get to help lift up, it’s a stronger community as a whole,” Coble said.

And, as the pioneering mission site, Goodwill Michiana will now be sharing lessons learned with the next wave of replication sites.

“We aren’t just building this for Michiana,” Stojic said. “By working through the early growth lessons here, we get to help smooth the path for every site that comes after us.”

But finally, and perhaps most impactfully, Brodzinski stated that for many participants, a Padua case manager might be the first person who has ever offered them consistency.

“They might be the first person to come along and offer grace. That’s something impossibly special.”

Only time will tell the scope of this exciting new future, but we feel nothing but raw optimism here at Padua Michiana. And I could not be more thrilled to be a part of it.

Removing the barrier, not the person

Laura Fehr, The Excel Center, Indiana program evaluation & analysis manager

For many people, a criminal record is an indication of past behavior. Yet long after a sentence has been served, probation completed, and life rebuilt, that record often continues to determine the future. Even if they are doing the hard work and creating stability in their life.

Every job application. Every housing application. Every background check becomes another reminder that while they may have moved forward, society often has not.

The Excel Center is a free public high school for adults, offering individuals who have left high school the opportunity to earn their diploma while preparing for a career or college — earning dual credit or an industry recognized certification. Students receive personalized support, flexible scheduling, and career-focused education designed to help them build a better future. Those who work at The Excel Center hold the core belief that people are not defined by the worst decision they have ever made.

For students with justice involvement, their future often comes with additional obstacles. A criminal record can continue to create barriers long after someone has accepted responsibility and turned their life around. Through the Justice Involved Coaching Model (JICM), The Excel Center works alongside students to identify and remove the barriers that stand between them and the lives they are working so hard to create.



That's why we partnered with LEO to study the impact of career and reintegration coaching for justice-involved students. Specifically, the LEO researchers are keen to measure its effect on students' likelihood of recidivating, educational persistence, and employment.

The Excel Center's Justice Involved Coaching Model (JICM) doesn't define students by their records. Instead, we begin by asking a different question: What is standing in the way of your goals?

The answer to that question is different for each individual. It could be transportation, housing, community resources, employment, or help navigating the legal system. The JICM steps in to support each student with each individual challenge.

The work is individualized because every student is an individual.

One of those students was Charley Johnson, a 36-year-old mother of two, determined to build a better future for herself and her family.

Ten years earlier, Charley had made mistakes that resulted in a criminal record. Although those mistakes were well behind her, they remained a barrier every time she tried to move forward. She wanted a career in healthcare and was committed to earning her Pharmacy Technician (Pharm Tech) certification—one of the career pathways students can pursue while attending The Excel Center. But her record threatened to keep that goal out of reach.

Graduating from The Excel Center requires more than earning a high school diploma. Every student also completes an industry-recognized certification or earns dual college credits, ensuring they leave prepared for meaningful employment or continued education. For Charley, becoming a Pharm Tech represented more than a certification. It represented stability, purpose, and an opportunity to provide for her family.

Working with the JICM, Charley was able to pursue an expungement of her record. Removing that legal barrier opened the door to the healthcare career she had been working toward for years.

"I did not initially believe I could get over this hurdle in my life and felt I would always be stuck," Charley says. "But getting my Pharmacy Tech license and walking into an interview with my head held high was life-changing."

The expungement did not erase the work she had done to change her life—it recognized it. For the first time in years, Charley was no longer defined by a mistake from her past, but by the future she had worked so hard to build.

Stories like Charley's remind us that rehabilitation is not simply about serving time. It is about creating opportunities for people to fully rejoin their communities. When barriers remain long after accountability has been accepted, they can prevent individuals from contributing their talents, supporting their families and their communities, and reaching their potential.

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The Justice Involved program exists because second chances require more than encouragement. They require action. Every student's path is different, and there is no checklist that solves every challenge. Some students need help navigating the legal system. Others need connections to employers willing to look beyond a background check. Others need support accessing housing, transportation, or community resources that make it possible to stay in school and remain focused on their goals.

Betsy Delago, senior vice president & chief mission and education officer at Excel Center, says, "At Excel Center, we believe transformation happens when people are given opportunity, support, and someone who believes in their potential. The Justice Involved Coaching Model reflects that belief by helping students overcome barriers that have followed them for years and empowering them to build meaningful careers, strengthen their families, and create brighter futures."

The Excel Center's role is to help remove the barriers that keep that future just out of reach. Because everyone deserves to be seen for who they are becoming — not just what they once did.

The dignity of choice: Putting participants at the center of Elevating Families

Jennifer Hill, Catholic Charities of Northern Nevada chief development officer

Elevating Families is an evidence-based economic mobility program where trained professionals, known as Mobility Mentors, partner with parents and caregivers to identify, set, and achieve goals that lead to greater stability for themselves and their families.

At its simplest, the program exists to help families move toward economic sustainability. But for those who participate, sustainability means much more than earning a higher income or checking a box on a list of accomplishments. It means creating a life where they have the freedom, confidence, and stability to make choices for themselves and their children.

This philosophy is what makes Elevating Families different. The program is built on the nationally recognized Mobility Mentoring® model developed by Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath), a research-backed approach grounded in the belief that every



person is the expert in their own life. Rather than prescribing solutions or defining success on someone else's behalf, Mobility Mentors walk alongside participants as partners. They ask questions, help break large goals into achievable steps, celebrate progress, and provide encouragement when setbacks inevitably occur. The participant, not the mentor, is always in the driver's seat.

That same philosophy extends to our ongoing research partnership with LEO. While research studies often focus on statistics, outcomes, and data points, our team never loses sight of what matters most:

every data point represents a real person with unique experiences, hopes, and challenges.

The purpose of our study is not simply to prove that the program works. It is to better understand how families experience economic mobility so that we can serve parents more effectively in the future. Our participants are not subjects of research; they are partners in helping shape a stronger, more compassionate approach to supporting families.

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary, and throughout the process we strive to ensure that each parent feels respected, heard, and valued. Trust, autonomy, and dignity are the core principles that guide both our mentoring relationships and our research practices. We recognize that every family defines success differently, and we intentionally create space for participants to determine what progress means for them.

For some, success may be earning a certificate or securing a higher-paying job. For others, it begins with something much smaller, but no less significant.

One participant's journey illustrates this beautifully. When Suzie earned her driver's license at the age of thirty, some people might have viewed it as simply accomplishing something long overdue. But to Suzie, it represented a profound turning point. For years, a lack of reliable transportation had been one of the barriers keeping her trapped in an abusive relationship. Without the ability to drive, leaving safely felt impossible. Obtaining her driver's license gave her much more than the ability to operate a vehicle. It gave her freedom, confidence, and independence. Most importantly, it opened the door to creating a safer life for herself and her children.

That goal may not appear extraordinary on paper. Yet for Suzie, it was the foundation upon which every future goal could be built.

Stories like hers remind us that transformation rarely happens in one dramatic moment. It happens through hundreds of small victories that, over time, reshape a person's confidence and belief in what is possible. This



is why Elevating Families never measures participants against a universal definition of success. A driver's license, a completed GED, stable housing, opening a savings account, finding meaningful employment, or simply learning to believe in one's own ability to overcome obstacles—each achievement represents an important step forward because it was chosen by the participants themselves.

Our role is not to determine which goals matter most. Our role is to honor the goals that matter most to the individual.

That commitment to participant autonomy is at the heart of everything we do. Mobility Mentors use evidence-based coaching techniques, including motivational interviewing and the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency®, to help participants identify priorities across five areas of life: family stability, well-being, financial management, education and training, and employment and career. Together, the mentor and participant develop realistic, meaningful goals that reflect each family's unique circumstances and aspirations.

Along the way, mentors provide encouragement, accountability, and practical support, but they never take ownership of the participant's journey. Success belongs entirely to the individual who has done the difficult work of changing their life.

Perhaps the greatest lesson our team has learned through Elevating Families is that dignity is not something we give to participants. Dignity already belongs to them.





Rethinking jail: Building a culture where change is possible

Kristina Luera, Lubbock County Detention Center rehabilitation coordinator

When I first accepted the position at Lubbock County Detention Center (LCDC) as the rehabilitation coordinator, I had no idea that coordinating the Step Up program would be one of the most fulfilling experiences in my career. This experience, working with an incarcerated male population, has given me a new perspective as an experienced mental health professional. This is all thanks to LEO and their research showing positive outcomes.

The results have shown a decrease in behavioral incidents and a decrease in aggressive and/or volatile behaviors from the inmates that participate in the program. So, what makes the program successful? From a non-research perspective, and from my own clinical opinion based on my observations of the program, here's how I would answer that question.

It is important to understand that therapy alone does not change an individual's behavior, other people cannot force someone to change, and a shift in behavior does not guarantee permanent change. Developmental growth consists of change in core beliefs and values of oneself and the world, life experiences, knowledge, awareness, and the ability to exercise choice.



Step Up has taught me that it is imperative that we change the culture and environment of jail.

Society has created the belief that jail should be a cold, dark, isolating, and harsh environment with a staff versus inmate dynamic. Think "The Shawshank Redemption" or "The Alabama Solution". Step Up has taught us differently: officers and inmates work together to create respect, clear communication, and defined boundaries.

Creating a safe place where individuals can be vulnerable and express themselves helps them find their own motivation for change. Even in confinement, they can build autonomy, open-mindedness, peer support, accountability, integrity, and healthy socialization skills.

One Step Up participant, a frequent flyer at the jail, began the program in his 60s as he prepared for prison. He said his biggest fear was failure and the relapse it could cause before reentry.

He recently wrote a letter from prison about his experience in the program:

"Even though I'm still locked up it's like I'm this different guy and it's not just on the outside... The shame is gone and I live for the future now instead of in the past. My dreams have come back and I know that I'm capable of having a good life!...I know that I'm the one that put in the work. I'm very proud of that but I also know that you and that program changed my life."

Another participant, placed in the same prison unit as his brother, shared how he used what he learned in Step Up:

"Prison sure ain't what it used to be...I shared with my brother what I have learned and how I manage with my anxiety from the Step Up program. I'm very grateful you allowed me to attend and be able to graduate."

He continued to mentor others and reported that prison was easier this time. He adjusted in a healthy way, avoided focusing on gang affiliations, and became a positive influence by modeling accountability, healthy coping strategies, and constructive behavior.

Starting Step Up during the pre-sentencing stage can lay the foundation for a safer correctional culture for inmates and staff and a better future for those reentering society.

When I introduced games such as inflatable bowling, karaoke, and silicone darts, the idea was questioned. I argued that incentives are part of behavior modification, but the result was deeper: participants learned to have fun without substances, built healthy friendships, experienced play they may have missed in childhood, and developed humility and self-awareness that helped them become positive role models and mentors.

As much as we would like for this program to be the cure to prevent relapses of negative behaviors, it does not guarantee prevention. Relapses do

happen and it is part of the stages of change. Some participants move through all stages during the 21-week program; others remain in precontemplation for the first 12 weeks.

Each participant's timeline is different, and many move between contemplation—thinking about change—and action—taking steps to change.

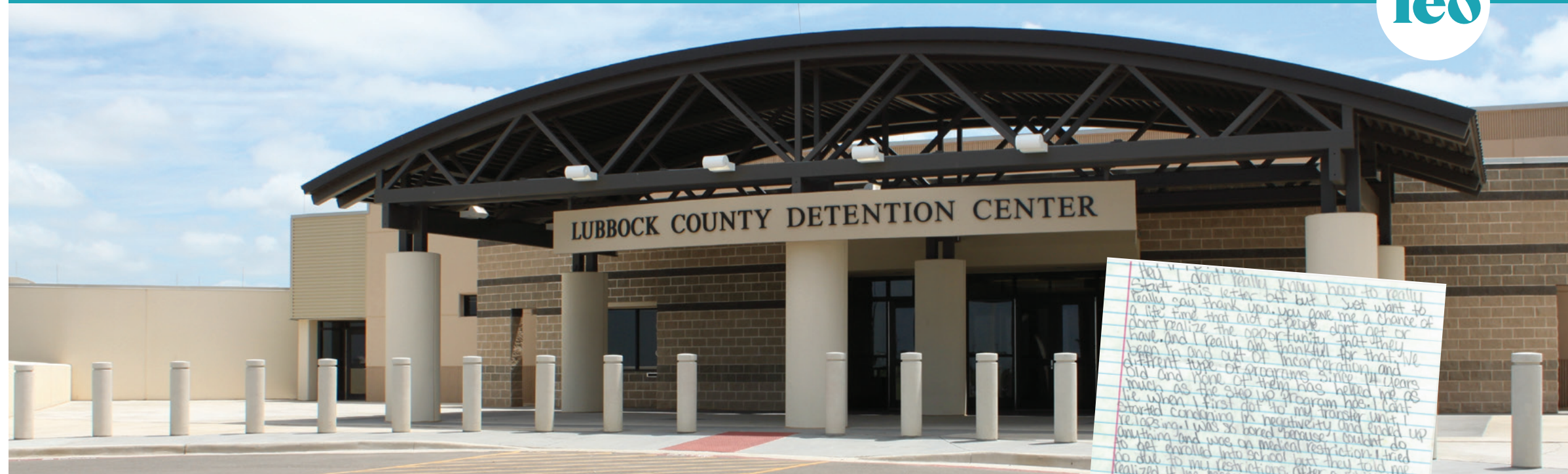
The final letter comes from one of our youngest participants, who became a Step Up mentor before transitioning to prison. While there, he experienced a relapse:

"You gave me the chance of a lifetime that a lot of people don't get or don't realize the opportunity that they have. And I really am thankful for that. I've been in and out of incarceration and different types of programs since 14 years old and none of them has helped me as much as the Step Up program has. I can't lie when I first got to my transfer unit, I started condoning in negativity and ended up relapsing... After awhile I really realized if I'm messing up in here how am I gonna really change...I am currently going to college now to get my associates degree...I take

a lot of classes called ITP classes. They're kind of like the ones in Step Up...I know the program is hard due to the cost and inmates but you can't let other people affect your life and your future. I highly recommend this program if you're willing to give it a try."

Every participant's journey and outcomes are different. Step Up succeeds because it is not a cut-and-paste program focused on one thing for every participant. Collaboration, psychoeducation, and a willingness to adapt to a correctional facility's unique culture are essential.

Looking ahead, I hope to build on these lessons by scaling and replicating the program's most effective practices to improve jail culture and outcomes for incarcerated individuals and correctional staff nationwide.



that I don't really know how to really start this letter but I just want to really say thank you you gave me a chance of a life time that a lot of people don't realize the opportunity that they have and I really am thankful for that I've been in and out of incarceration and different type of programs since 14 years old and none of them has helped me as much as the Step Up program has. I can't lie when I first got to my transfer unit I started condoning in negativity and ended up relapsing. I was so bored because I couldn't do anything and was on medical restriction I tried to get enrolled into school but they told me no due to my restrictions after a while I realized if I'm messing up in here how am I gonna really change to make it when I am home and how am I going to make it when I am out after 30 days that hurt my family this unit I instantly got enrolled in school and going to college now to get my associates degree and I also no longer read any other books unless it's going to read any other it's Islam or something I take a lot of it called ITP classes. They're kind of like the ones in Step Up. I also take courses all about them so I know other people told you on them except I won't really say to much this one class called PCA that I had really started. It's a really class that I had really



look around you what do you see? Ask your self do you really wanna do this for the rest of your life? I know the program is hard due to the cos and inmates but you can't let other people affect your life and your future. I highly recommend this program if your willing to give it a try. This is all I got to say. Please don't say

Slowing down for the sake of connection

Rowan Miller, poverty research fellow



My three-hour shift manning the LEO office's front desk was a refreshing slice of calm in my day. Far from the cacophony of chatting voices echoing through Duncan Student Center and the winding lines of South Dining Hall, the "LEO Pod" was peaceful, with researchers filtering in for their morning coffee or a meeting. For three hours, everything slowed down, a break from that go-go-go, "efficiency-is-everything" feeling that can pervade campus.

That front desk offered me a front-row seat to LEO's mission as I absorbed glimpses of projects through coffee refills and conversations. Since I study Economics and Political Science, I started connecting the research jargon in the LEO Pod with my problem sets and papers, and felt pulled to learn more.

The Poverty Research Fellows program provided a chance to swap my chair in the LEO Pod for a seat beside Arik Zintel, one of LEO's research design managers. He manages LEO's work with the Right at Home (RAH) initiative, an effort to replicate Santa Clara County's homelessness prevention program in 10 diverse sites across the country. From Atlanta to Alaska, Right at Home provides fast, flexible financial assistance and supportive services to households at

imminent risk of losing housing. LEO works with sites to develop a rigorous evaluation method and develop targeted screening to direct limited resources to where they'll have the greatest impact.

When I began my summer as Arik's intern, his work ethic and attention to detail were immediately apparent. Each of the 10 sites has its own unique stakeholders and contexts. I found myself frequently toggling to our master RAH spreadsheet in meetings to keep track of site-specific agenda items—but Arik has internalized them all, mentally switching from site to site within seconds. I began to see a critical challenge of his work: each program must maintain fidelity to core components of Santa Clara's model, while also being adapted to the needs of that given community.



That adaptation piece, or adjusting targeted prevention to a local context, takes up the bulk of research design conversations. In weekly research design calls for each site, Arik, LEO researchers, and local providers wrestle with a central question: what systems can we build to ensure RAH dollars reach the folks most likely to become homeless?

Over the first few weeks of my internship, these tough, hour-long conversations sometimes felt grueling, even inefficient. I wondered how Arik stayed so energized, driving each site's discussion towards the next problem to solve. Were these calls, logistics, and adjustments really worth it, and how did Arik stay motivated through them all? Why was the site-specific adaptation component that important?

As the summer began, I decided to read Pope Leo XIV's hot-off-the-press encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*. Its second chapter addresses and reframes key pillars of Catholic Social Teaching in this technology-driven age, and as I read, I reevaluated

my attitude towards that day's Zoom calls. The principle of subsidiarity asserts that social tasks should be completed by the most local level capable of providing them. Pope Leo writes that such "processes [must] not be imposed from above in an opaque and unilateral manner, but instead be directed toward the common good with transparency, accountability and meaningful forms of participation" (*Magnifica Humanitas*, no. 71).

I diagnosed my initial impatience as a subconscious byproduct of our optimization-obsessed culture. It would certainly be faster to bypass weekly research-design conversations, but homelessness prevention is not one-size-fits-all. What initially appeared inefficient was actually deliberate. For me, I began to see the benefits of LEO's comprehensive attention to local context as twofold.

First, it strengthens a program's potential impact. For example, in the case of Right at Home, one of its core components is targeted prevention, or the

use of a data-driven assessment tool in determining client eligibility. If certain characteristics indicate a greater risk of housing loss in a particular community, the tool can prioritize those households, making it more likely that limited financial support reaches people who would otherwise become homeless. The development of such a tool takes time and analysis, and, by nature, looks different from site to site.

Perhaps more importantly, taking time with each RAH site's team builds relationships and affirms dignity—not just for the folks being served, but also for the providers that serve them. Time spent with sites implicitly reasserts LEO's mission: there isn't a tradeoff between research and social work; instead, they are intimately codependent. Quantitative analysis needs qualitative understanding. As Pope Leo's encyclical reminds us, true human connection must not be lost amidst exponential technological advancement.

As students, we often assume that effectiveness decreases as the time required increases. The faster, the better. Let's get our lunches on the move, "Grab-N'-Go" style; maintain jam-packed Google Calendar schedules, and multitask to the max. But perhaps true innovation lies in reclaiming a measure of inefficiency for the sake of authentic connection.

While I've moved from administrative assistance to research support, for me, LEO has remained an oasis from the relentless speed of our culture. This summer, I witnessed how each extra minute on Zoom strengthened the researcher-provider relationships on which effective social programs depend.

That is what sets LEO apart: a stubborn dedication to human dignity, no matter how much time it takes.



Rowan and the poverty research fellows volunteering at Green Bridge Growers.



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"We are keeping dignity in the design. Dignity in our research. Dignity in our services. Dignity at the heart of our community."

— **Dignity in the design, page 4**