

# FROM THE DEAN THE DEA

The School of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University was on a roll in academic year 2023-2024. I am delighted to share a number of highlights with you!

Of particular note, we maintained our No. 28 national ranking in the latest U.S. News and World Report survey of the best schools of social work! Then, four faculty were featured on a fall panel discussion focused on VCU's Common Book, Seek You: A Journey Through America Loneliness. At the CSWE's Annual Public Meeting, where a number of faculty presented and participated in leadership and networking initiatives, we built community by reaching out with gifts for deans and directors of each exhibiting program, and drew in more than 350 participants for a raffle to win a stuffed Rodney the Ram mascot. We closed the semester with our first official December Commencement ceremony.

Spring came in – and went out – like a lion, with a full slate of events. Following the Society for Social Work and Research conference, where many of our faculty and doctoral students presented, we started a seven-part continuing education webinar series on Serious Mental Illnesses. Building



on our emphasis on mental health, we held four clinical skills labs for our M.S.W. students. Moreover, our international social work initiative took shape with faculty-led strategic planning meetings and goals for developing formal relationships with universities in a number of countries. Our Office of Student Success and B.S.W. and M.S.W. programs held multiple events to engage and celebrate our students, and our Cultural Awareness Day returned for the first time since 2019, led by our Association of Black Social Workers at VCU student group and featuring two alumni speakers.

Celebrating Social Work Month, our alumni were once again in the fore, leading discussions at our annual Social Work, Policy and Politics event, highlighting the social determinants of health; and on our panel Beyond the Micro: Myth, Realities and Opportunities in Macro Social Work. In May, I had the privilege to host many of our dedicated donors at our Dean's Circle event, and we wrapped up the year by recognizing nearly 370 graduates last May.

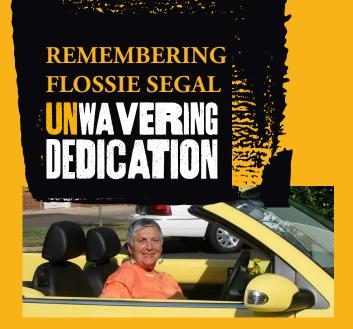
The cycle of academia – and life – continues to spin, of course. You'll read more about the passing of the legendary **Florence Z. "Flossie" Segal** at age 99 and the retirements of longtime faculty **Frank Baskind**, Ph.D., and **Elizabeth "Liz" Cramer**, Ph.D., and the introduction of five new faculty for the 2024-2025 academic year.

Our full report is available at annualreport.socialwork.vcu.edu, which includes a year-in-review video highlighting many of these moments.



Hary & Cubdelick

Gary S. Cuddeback, Ph.D., M.S.W., M.P.H. Dean and Professor VCU School of Social Work



# A light still shining

Florence Z. "Flossie" Segal brought color and light everywhere she went — often in her bright yellow Volkswagen Beetle convertible. Jazz and fresh flowers from her garden filled her home, where she and husband Jake hosted pool parties, holiday celebrations and even wedding receptions. She had a sharp sense of humor.

These are a few of the memories friends and colleagues shared about Flossie, who passed away in April at age 99. She was a former associate professor of social work and director of continuing education at the school, and the sister of former dean **Elaine Z. Rothenberg**. Flossie helped co-found VCU's Faculty Senate in 1970 and served as its second president, part of her tenure with the School of Social Work from 1968-1990.

She co-founded Gateway Homes in Richmond in 1983 to provide residential mental health treatment for adults and remained on the board the rest of her life – even attending a clinical meeting about a month before her passing.

"I love Flossie so much, and I say it in the present tense," says **Gayle Harris**, daughter of former social work dean **Grace E. Harris** and a close friend of Flossie's. "For me she's still here. She's a light that continues to shine."

# 5 NEW FACULTY UNRIVALED ADDITIONS

VCU is pleased to have the following faculty join the School of Social Work in the 2024-2025 academic year:

# Assistant professors



Daniel Baslock, Ph.D., earned his doctorate at New York University's Silver School of Social Work and researches organizational

factors and social policies that impact the implementation of integrated mental health and substance use treatment. "VCU's commitment to Virginia as a public university supports my desire to engage in research and scholarship for the public good."



Christina Huerta, Ph.D., was previously a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and

researches Latinx mental health, discrimination and immigration stress and racial and ethnic disparities in mental health.



Yifan Lou, Ph.D., was previously a postdoctoral associate at the Yale University School of Medicine and researches end-of-

life care, with a particular focus on racial/ethnic disparities in access and use of quality end-of-life care. "VCU has a global and interdisciplinary platform for aging and health research, which is a perfect place for me to land my research career."

# Assistant professors in teaching



Erica Jackson (M.S.W.'14), LCSW, was a clinical social worker at VCU Health for 10 years and also previously served

as a community-embedded faculty for nine years.



Klara Prachar (M.S.W.'10), LCSW, previously worked as a psychotherapist, OCD specialist and mental health crisis clinician.

and also served as a communityembedded faculty for nine years.

# STUDENT-CENTERED INITIATIVES

# **UNLIMITED OPPORTUNITIES, UNCOMINATION IMPACT**

# Mental health, international social work projects have high interest – and growth potential

Two student-centered initiatives at the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Social Work are not only leveraging faculty expertise to respond to student interest but also helping to fill professional pipelines and creating growth opportunities for the school.

The initiatives are focused on mental health and international social work, two areas that Dean **Gary Cuddeback**, Ph.D., identified as strengths that could be formalized across social work and interdisciplinary research and professional education, including teaching, study abroad programs and continuing education for alumni and the community.

"Mental health is a local, national and global issue that impacts millions at great interpersonal and societal costs," Cuddeback says. "As a profession, social work contributes significantly to the mental health workforce, and we need to equip our students to work locally and globally. These initiatives fit well with the expertise of our faculty, meet the demands of our students and are well aligned with VCU's strategic priorities in a number of different ways."

Cassie DeSena-Jacobs, D.S.W., LCSW, an assistant professor in teaching and practitioner with more than 18 years of clinical mental health experience, is director of the mental health initiative; Denise Burnette, Ph.D, the school's Wurtzel Endowed Faculty Chair in Social Work and a three-time recipient of Fulbright appointments, is leading the international initiative.

"There's been a strong need here at VCU and nationally for mental health," DeSena-Jacobs says. "Dr. Cuddeback recognized the VCU School of Social Work is primed to meet that need. And then at the same time, we have students who are saying very loudly, 'We want to be clinicians. We want to work in mental health. What can the School of Social Work do to meet this need?'

"And so it really was this 'perfect storm' of a leader with extensive

research in mental health – Dr. Cuddeback has been a published researcher for 20 years in mental health – and then students were saying, 'Hey, I need this.' And then, fortunately, my areas of expertise are mental health and trauma. So it just kind of came together."

Burnette sees a similar interest and need for international-focused initiatives, as well as the potential for an intersection with mental health as both programs mature. "Absolutely," she says. "Health and mental health, social services, community well-being, all of these affect people here in the U.S. and abroad. Mental health and substance use disorders are the leading cause of disability

M.S.W. students

76.5%

interest in migration and immigration

74.5%

interest in global mental health

**B.S.W.** students

77.3%

interest in migration and immigration

63.6%

interest in global mental health

Student survey, Spring 2024

'Health and mental health, social services, community well-being, all of these affect people here in the U.S. and abroad. Mental health and substance use disorders are the leading cause of disability world-wide."

# - Denise Burnette, Ph.D., the school's Wurtzel Endowed Faculty Chair in Social Work

world-wide, and there is an urgent need for evidence-based interventions to reduce the burden of these disorders. Another area of overlap is immigration and work with immigrants and refugees in Richmond and its surrounding areas. Owing largely to globalization, international social work is inextricable from local concerns."

To inform curriculum planning, faculty surveyed M.S.W. and B.S.W. students about their interest in international social work and migration and work with immigrants. About three-quarters of M.S.W. students indicated interest in migration and immigration (76.5%) and global mental health (74.5%) while B.S.W. students selected migration and immigration (77.3%) and global mental health (63.6%) as their second- and third-most areas of interests.

### 'Need for mental health isn't going anywhere'



Mental health initiatives in the 2023-24 academic year included a seven-part webinar on serious mental illness for students, faculty, community-embedded faculty and staff and as a continuing education opportunity for alumni and other professionals in the community. A second, more advanced series will take place in Spring 2025, featuring VCU faculty in the areas of psychiatry, psychopharmacology and at the intersection of bipolar disorder and pregnancy.

"I don't think we would be able to have a second series if we didn't have as many interested students, and continued student

interest is really what's driving the series," DeSena-Jacobs says.

Four clinical skills labs were held in Spring 2024 and four more in Fall 2024, including two accessible virtually for students in the growing online M.S.W. Program format.

"One of the things that I have guaranteed in this role is that there will be at least one clinical skills lab every semester with a serious mental illness or mental health focus," DeSena-Jacobs says. "When you do clinical work, you work in mental health."

A 12-credit graduate certificate in mental health is in process, having passed through school governance in Fall 2024. The certificate, which will also be available for non-degree-seeking students, will include two new electives — Neurobiology of Mental Health and Mental Health & Practice — beginning in Spring 2025. Currently, only one school of social work in the country has a graduate certificate in mental health.

"We have these opportunities," DeSena-Jacobs says. "A mental health certificate program can increase our ability to bring in students. If we can create field placements that are mental health-driven, then that can generate interest from students. If we can create potentially post- grad programming with different jobs, there's all this incredible potential ahead. The need for mental health isn't going anywhere. This is really like a starting point for what's ahead."

### 'Malawi or Laos ... let's talk'

The School of Social Work has signed memoranda of understanding with Mongolia National University of Medical Sciences (MNUMS) School of Public Health and Rajagiri (cont.)

"There's been a strong need here at VCU and nationally for mental health. ... The need for mental health isn't going anywhere. This is really like a starting point for what's ahead."

- Cassie DeSena-Jacobs, D.S.W., assistant professor in teaching

THE REAL PROPERTY.

University's College of Social Sciences (RCSS).

Associate Professor **Matthew Bogenschutz**, Ph.D., is collaborating with MNUMS faculty to develop and implement a program to improve services for people with disabilities in Mongolia. Based on principles of Virginia Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND), which Bogentschutz directs, the investigators will survey parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities who live in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar and outlying rural areas.

"It will be exciting and impactful work once it gets going, as disability awareness and supports in Mongolia are in their infancy, and much needs to be done," Bogenschutz says.

Burnette and B.S.W. Program Director **Stephanie Odera**, Ed.D., will lead an undergraduate study abroad program to RCSS in Kerala, India, during winter break. Students will also join in the International Consortium for Social Development Conference, co-sponsored by the college. The India program extends the school's recent study abroad opportunities – South Africa (spring break, Associate Professor **Maurice Gatti**s, Ph.D.) and Ghana (summer, Associate Professor **Nicole Corley**, Ph.D.) – to a new locale and time frame.

"In developing research partnerships in other parts of the world, I have only worked in low- and middle-income countries. If somebody wants to work in Italy or France, I'm probably not your

person," Burnette says with a laugh. "If somebody wants to go to Malawi or Laos, then we can talk."

Burnette is also working with faculty colleagues to develop additional educational opportunities such as a graduate certificate and undergraduate minor in international social work and, in the future, international practicum assignments. Finally, she is keen to build a core of bi-lateral student and faculty exchanges to aid in the development of robust research partnerships and opportunities for domestic and international students at VCU to acquire and exchange transferable knowledge and skills.

# 'Really powerful ... a huge thing'

Both DeSena-Jacobs and Burnette see open horizons for their initiatives – figuratively and literally.

"I think that we are standing on the edge of something really powerful if we're intentional with the way that we do it," DeSena-Jacobs says. "I've said it a million times, and I'll say it one more time: The interest from the consumer is so high that it's just driving the excitement that I have."

Burnette says, "I am often reminded of the words of the naturalist John Muir: When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe. It is difficult to imagine more timely or more pressing issues for our profession than those that connect us all."

# SSW'S INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS



**South Africa:** Spring study abroad; led by Associate Professor **Maurice N. Gattis**, Ph.D.



**Ghana:** Summer study abroad; led by Associate Professor **Nicole Corley**, Ph.D.



India: Partnership with Rajagiri University, College of Social Sciences, including winter study abroad; led by Professor Denise Burnette, Ph.D., and Stephanie G. Odera, Ed.D.





**South Korea:** Exploring study abroad and opportunities for research collaborations and faculty exchanges; led by Associate Professor **Kyeongmo Kim**, Ph.D., and Professor **Youngmi Kim**, Ph.D.

Mongolia: Research partnership with Mongolia National University of Medical Sciences; led by Associate Professor Matthew Bogenschutz, Ph.D.



# **ALUMNI AND DONOR**



# 'Empowered to grow'

Being recognized by his alma mater in 2024 with the Ph.D. Program's Making a Difference

Alumni Award was "the feeling you may have by seeing a parent smile at you with pride," says alum David McLeod (Ph.D.'13). He serves as the interim director of social work at the University of Oklahoma.

As he transitioned from law enforcement to academia, VCU "empowered me to grow from a place that was truly mine." He continues to focus his work on reducing violence, building on his career as a detective, SWAT operator, criminologist and forensic social worker. "My time at VCU was one of the most important periods of growth in my life."

# **VCU Giving Day**

Thank you to the school's many supporters who helped generate a record \$16,960 for the Pay It Forward Fund.



## 'Expert troublemaker'

Alum Kim Young (M.S.W.'13) is a self-proclaimed "expert troublemaker," making a career out of creating "good trouble" like the late U.S. Congressman John Lewis. In 2023, VCU named her one of its 10 Under 10 alumni award recipients.

Young is director of programs at Richmond's Hive youth organization and founder of the Dope Black Social Worker, where she leads workshops and speaks to groups about social work, mental health and youth development. "As a social worker, you can sit with somebody when they're in the depths of their pain and stay with them until they get to the other side of it," she says. "There's nothing like that."







# Top of their field

Two alumni were honored as VCU's Office of Field Education handed out its annual Community Partner Awards in the spring. Chaniqua Jones (M.S.W.'19) of Richmond Behavioral Health was named Outstanding New Field Instructor, and Ray Spicer (M.S.W.'82) of Hopewell Department of Social Services won the Amy Rosenblum Field Instructor Award.

Two other alumni spoke as their employer, the disAbility Law Center of Virginia, was named Outstanding Community Partner: Taylor Easley (B.S.W.'19; M.S.W.'22) and Nicole Durose

(B.S.W.'09; M.S.W.'13). "What really, really makes a good social worker is having that foundation in field," Easley says.



### A gift with a water view

Alum Keita Franklin (Ph.D.'10) has turned her Lake Anna, Va., vacation home into a unique gift, loaning it for a weekend to the school's third- and fourth-year doctoral students for an annual writing retreat. Students balance working on qualifying papers and dissertations with a catered dinner and a boat ride.

"To bring people together during that time might serve as a way to increase peer support and give you some time with like-minded folks who are also in the same boat as you," Franklin says, blending the figurative and literal.

# STUDENT EXCELLENCE UNIVATCHED POTENTIAL



### Award wizardry

B.S.W. senior **Austin Ezzard** (top left) followed an award-winning junior year by being named one of two student winners of the Tristen Sloane Presidential Award for Community Multicultural Enrichment. The award is part of VCU's Presidential Awards for Community Multicultural Enrichment (PACME).

"The work that I have been able to do is because people listen, and they have care and compassion for the student voice," says Ezzard, who graduated in May. During his career, he worked in the Office of the President, served as the president of Pi Lambda Phi's VA Omega Rho Chapter at VCU and was a VCU representative to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.



# 'Fighting to end homelessness'

**Jae Lange** says they were a social worker long before a job or degree could make it official. "I was born one, and I

will die one," says Jae, a B.S.W. student and direct service specialist for a grantfunded project administered by the school.

Their work with Marsha and Marian's Neighbors was recognized by the Virginia Housing Alliance, which in 2024 named Jae an Emerging Leader. The youth shared-housing program in Richmond is for young adults ages 18-24 who are pregnant, parenting and/or identify as LGBTQ+ and are experiencing homelessness. "I am so proud to be fighting alongside my team and my community, fighting to end homelessness," says Jae, who experienced homelessness and unstable housing from ages 19 to 22.

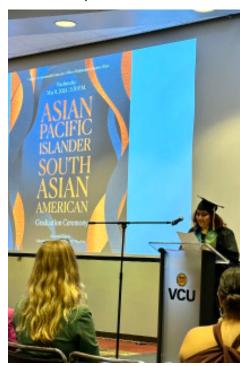
# Multicultural + social work vibes

VCU M.S.W. graduates – and one prominent alum – were seemingly everywhere in May at the VCU Office of Multicultural Student Affairs' six Cultural Achievement Ceremonies for graduates:

• Aimee Layo (speaker), Amala Thomas (closing speaker) and Reebha Aggarwal (reader) participated in the Asian Pacific Islander South Asian American Graduation Ceremony

- Ramiel Martinez was the student speaker at the Lavender Graduation Ceremony.
- Alum and author Ronnie Sidney II
   (M.S.'14) was the keynote speaker at the Accessibility Achievement

   Ceremony.
- Beck Oh of the OMSA staff
  planned the Lavender ceremony and
  the Native, Tribal and Indigenous
  Ceremony.



# Now presenting

Seven social work students presented at VCU's spring Graduate Research Symposium and Poster Symposium for Undergraduate Research:

 Ph.D. student Kade Goldin, M.S.W., M.Ed., presented on Exploring Factors of Social Well-Being for Non-Binary People.

- Ph.D. student Rose E. Miola, M.S.W., M.T.S., LCSW, presented on Exploring the Role of Critical Consciousness on Complex Trauma among Adopted Adults.
- Ph.D. student Samuel Ochinang, M.S.W., LCSW presented on Predictors of Suicidality in First-Year College Students: Examining a Five-Factor Impulsivity Model within an Ideation-to-Action Framework.
- M.S.W. students Lindsay
   Cunningham and Lilly Hettrick presented on Assessing the Impact of Race, Ethnicity and English-Speaking Status on Traffic Stop Outcomes in Virginia.
- B.S.W. student Paloma Rodriguez Saucedo presented on Does Ethnic Racial Discrimination and Alcohol Use Predict Anxiety Symptoms in Females.
- B.S.W student **Doryan Slack**, presented on Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act: A Black Mother's Nightmare.

"My next step is wanting to get my (M.S.W.) ... and eventually a Ph.D. I definitely want to pursue research in the future," Rodriguez Saucedo says.



# Ph.D. distinctions & destinations

### Graduates



**Aaron Kemmerer** was one of two students nationally to receive the LGBTQ Caucus

of Faculty & Students in Social Work 2024 SSWR Scholarship. Previously honored by the Grand Challenges for Social Work for his doctoral dissertation, Kemmerer graduated in May 2024 and is an assistant professor of social work at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.



Sunny Kim received the Korean American Social Work Educators Association's Outstanding

Dissertation Proposal Award for contributions to aging research, policy and practice. The May 2024 graduate is now a postdoctoral research fellow, Drexel University Urban Health Collaborative.



Angela Matijczak, a May 2024 graduate, is now an assistant professor in the Helen Bader School of Social

Welfare at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.



Hilary Stim, a May 2024 graduate, is now an assistant professor of social work at Nazareth University.



Britney Pitts, a
December 2023 graduate, is now an assistant teaching professor at Syracuse University.



Mauricio Yabar, a May 2024 graduate, is now an assistant professor of social work at Slippery Rock University.

### Current students



As a second-year Ph.D. student, **Katie Kim** was named a doctoral fellow in the Council on Social Work Education's

Minority Fellowship Program. Her research focuses on the impacts of adverse childhood experiences. "Honestly, when I heard the news, it took my breath away for a moment," she says. "I felt a strong, quiet thankfulness wash over me."



As a first-year Ph.D. student, **Sam Ochinang** was recognized at the annual U.S. Army Medical Center of

Excellence Graduate School Research and Education Symposium, where his presentation on impulsivity and suicide among first-year college students won the Best Research Abstract award. He also serves as an active duty Army major in the Medical Service Corps. "I see my research as a tribute or an ode to the individual struggling with suicide."

# FACULTY & STAFF EXCELLENCE UNSURPASSED EXPERTISE



# A 60-year legacy

Dean Emeritus Frank Baskind, Ph.D., and Professor Elizabeth "Liz" Cramer, Ph.D., retired after the 2023-2024 year.

Baskind spent 32 years at VCU – dean for 17 years, university ombudsman for four years and dean emeritus for 11 years. "I am most

proud of the scholarly, instructional contributions and community contributions of our faculty members and the successful careers of our graduates," says Baskind, who capped his career as school Commencement speaker in May.

Cramer served the school for 28 years. "I've learned from every student I've ever taught, and I hope that they took away something from our time together that will help them," says Cramer, who earned her third Social Justice Award from the SSW in May. "It was a nice way to wrap up my time at VCU."



# SMI with an anti-racist lens

Assistant Professor in Teaching **Cassie DeSena-Jacobs**, D.S.W., has developed a trauma-

informed and evidence-based course on serious mental illness. Treatment of SMI (Serious Mental Illness) Through a Trauma-Informed and Evidence-Based Perspective launched in Fall 2023 and remains an in-demand elective.

"The entire class is taught through an anti-racist lens," DeSena-Jacobs says. "Students fill out their own anti-racist self-evaluation forms in an early module and repeat the forms in a later module; the hope is that the material in the class will shift students' perspectives on how to implement anti-racist material into their work with clients."



# The writing doctor is in (demand)

**Rebecca Johnson**, Ph.D., says she's a "jack of all trades" as student success writing advisor

for B.S.W. and M.S.W. students. "You have to be able to help with any kind of writing assignment and at any stage of the writing process."

She holds a weekly writing accountability group and workshops around topics like time management strategies to help graduate students balance heavy writing workloads. "I'm here to help students wherever they are in their college careers. I like seeing students when they have that 'aha!' moment about writing."











# **CONGRATULATIONS!**

- Kimberly King, administrative coordinator for the Office of Field Education, received the school's Outstanding Staff Award.
- Dr. Jacobs presented at the Social Work Distance Education 2024 Virtual Conference.
- Naomi Reddish, M.S.W., and Amanda Long, M.S.W., of the school's Community Engaged Child and Family Well-Being Initiatives, presented at the National IV-E Roundtable for Child Welfare Training and Education.
- Stephanie G. Odera, Ed.D., and Allison Ryals, M.S.W., the B.S.W. Program leadership, presented at the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors conference.

# RESEARCH & SERVICE EXCELLENCE

# UNCOVERING A DIEPIR UNDERSTANDING

# RESEARCH BY THE NUMBERS 2023-24



### **Publications**

- Published, in press or accepted: **66**
- Revisions and resubmissions: 13
- Manuscripts submitted for peer review: 47



### Presentations

- At national conferences: **73**
- Invited presentations/local engagements: 19



## **Projects**

- Active: **39**
- Proposals submitted: 29
- Internal and external funded projects:
  - ~ \$6 million



# Student-engaged participatory research

Associate Professor **Hyojin Im**, (second from right) Ph.D., led a Society for Social Work and Research symposium on refugee health and mental health, featuring five VCU social work grad students.

"Guiding them through research design, data collection, analysis and writing is about nurturing critical thinking, scholarly inquiry and ethical practices," Im says. "This includes working with students as co-researchers and collaborators, regardless of academic stage."

Sessions emphasized the role of Community-Based Participatory Research. "CBPR is a collaborative ethos involving direct engagement with refugee communities as active research partners."

## **Ending youth homelessness**

Associate Professor **Alex Wagaman** (far right), Ph.D., was named a U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness special advisor on youth homelessness in May 2024. "I feel really, really

honored and excited – and a little overwhelmed. It's a lot. It's a big lift," she says.

honor from the Association for Gerontology Education in Social Work when she received its Career Achievement Award in 2023. Paired with an AGESW Faculty Achievement Award in 1999, she is the only person ever to receive both awards.

One for the AGESW

Professor Denise

Ph.D., earned an unprecedented

Burnette.



"It is such a rewarding experience to come full circle," she says. Colleague **Kyeongmo Kim**, Ph.D., social work associate professor, says, "The award acknowledges Denise's exceptional leadership in scholarship, teaching and mentorship in the fields of social work and aging. Denise has devoted her life to advancing social work education in gerontology and guiding both faculty and students."



In this role, Wagaman is integrating youth with lived experience as partners and future policy-makers while developing a plan to prevent and end youth homelessness. "We would love to see pipelines for young adults with lived experience to eventually be in staff positions to run what we build out. That's ultimately the goal."

