



News Release

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Lifeline, Inc. Honors Lake County Residents, Organizations at 2019 Annual Awards Dinner May 31, 2019

PAINESVILLE, Ohio— Lifeline, Inc., Lake County's Community Action Agency, is pleased to announce its 2019 award winners and to recognize agency volunteers and community partners for their commitment to Lake County's low-income citizens. The awards were presented at Lifeline's Annual Dinner held on May 30 at the Mooreland Mansion on the Lakeland Community College campus.

"We gave out five different awards to numerous recipients this year," said Carrie Dotson, Executive Director of Lifeline. "We are so excited to be able to recognize those who partner with and support Lifeline and its programs, and our community."

Mildred P. Wilson Award ~ Jeffrey Diver

The 15th Annual Mildred P. Wilson Award was presented to Jeffrey Diver, who has demonstrated outstanding service and dedication to Lifeline. The Mildred P. Wilson Award is named for the late Mildred Wilson, a dedicated Lifeline employee for many years. Mildred's commitment and service to both Lifeline and Lake County's low-income community were remarkable. This award was established in 2004 to honor an individual who goes above and beyond the call of duty in working to benefit Lifeline and the consumers we serve.

Previous recipients have included William Margalis, past Lifeline Board member; Barb Crabtree, fiscal consultant; Janet Gockel, Lifeline volunteer; Rita C. McMahon, Lifeline Board member; Donna Zabarsky, past Lifeline Board member and community partner; Bob Zaluski, past Lifeline Board member; Mark Alderman, Ohio Development Services Agency Field Representative; Gwen Corban, former Lifeline Executive Director; Cate Hearn, former Lifeline staff member; Jeremy & Vanessa Iosue, past Lifeline Board member and volunteers; Elaine Waytes, Lifeline volunteer; Joe Hughes & Ali Ali Adinaro, Lifeline volunteers/celebrity dancers; Frank Vaccariello, Lifeline volunteer; and Ed Zivkovich, former Lifeline Board Member.

Jeffrey Diver is the Executive Director of Supports to Encourage Low-Income Families (SELF), the Community Action Agency in Butler County, Ohio. He was the first employee of SELF in 1996. Throughout his career, Jeffrey has actively served on numerous committees and boards, especially those helping to meet human needs. He currently serves as president of the Board of Directors of Primary Health Solutions (the community health center network in Butler County), Vice President of the Transit Alliance of Butler County, past president of the Butler County Family and Children First Council, committee chair on the Hamilton Vision Commission, and past youth contest chair of the Hamilton Rotary Club.

Jeffrey is a member of the Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies' Board of Directors and a lifetime certified "Bridges Out of Poverty" trainer. He conducts trainings and strategic planning for other Community Action Agencies across Ohio as a part of the association's Internal Consultant Program.

Before coming back to the area where he was raised, he was the field director of the National SAFE KIDS Campaign, based in Washington, D.C. and chaired by the former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, M.D. Jeffrey and his wife Angela are the proud parents of four children, ages 12 years to 23 years old.

In his role as an Internal Consultant, Jeffrey has collaborated with Lifeline on a variety of projects such as staff and board training as well as writing our last three strategic plans.

"As a trainer, Jeffrey brings his experience as an Executive Director of a Community Action Agency, but also as a compassionate person. Because Jeffrey has worked with Lifeline for so many years, when he comes to the agency to conduct training, there is a great sense of familiarity and trust allowing for great communication among participants," said Lifeline staff member Michelle Mezaris. "Jeffrey engages participants with discussions and examples that are relevant to Lifeline's work and are easily adaptable to the Community Action movement in Lake County."

“Jeffrey is genuinely dedicated to helping those who live in poverty and through his staff training he commonly speaks about partnerships within the community and providing excellent customer service to our clients. He has shared many practical ways to implement good customer service while still ensuring that program rules and guidelines are adhered to,” said Mezaris. “As difficult situations arise, staff is able to reflect upon what he has taught them to embrace the “we are all in this together” mentality and strive to provide the best possible experience for the clients. Jeffrey’s inherent humanity and humility offer open and honest dialogue and empower the staff to be proud of their impact in their communities and not underestimate their ability to make a difference.”

Outstanding Community Spirit Award ~ Dynamic Strategies / Fox Run & Parkway Apartments

The Outstanding Community Spirit Award was given to Dynamic Rental Strategies/Fox Run and Parkway Apartments in Willoughby for their commitment to Lifeline, Inc.’s mission and the clients that we serve, as well as their support of the community. The Community Spirit Award is bestowed upon a local business or organization who displays outstanding dedication and service to improving the quality of life for Lake County’s low-income families.

Lifeline has worked with Dynamic Strategies’ Fox Run and Parkway Apartment complexes for many years through a variety of our housing programs. They maintain clean and functioning units, communicate openly with their tenants and always go above and beyond when working with those who might be struggling financially. They are willing to accept rental assistance for their tenants from community resources such as Job & Family Services’ PRC Program or payments from local churches. They have even contacted Lifeline on behalf of current tenants to enquire about eligibility requirements for programs offered at Lifeline. The staff has demonstrated both a desire for families to live in stable and secure housing and treats them with compassion.

“The Community Spirit Award focuses on exceptional dedication and service by improving the quality of life for Lake County’s low-income families. That is exactly what Harry Friedman, his family, and staff has been able to accomplish for over a decade,” said Lifeline Program Coordinator Maribel Young. “Many of the people we serve are facing a homeless situation. By providing safe and affordable housing and supporting many of Lifeline’s fundraising events throughout the years, they are giving families a chance for a new beginning. Their willingness to work with the many different agencies in Lake County has made it possible to house many people who otherwise would find themselves displaced. It has truly been a privilege to work with them.”

Lifeline staff agrees that it is always a pleasure to work with Harry and Robert Friedman, Barb Benzi, and the entire staff at Dynamic Strategies.

“I really enjoy working with Barb (Property Manager of Fox Run and Parkway Apartments). Not only has she always been flexible with coordinating client needs such as scheduling Lifeline inspections and completing follow-up documentation for program enrollment, but she takes the time to meet with their tenants to address any concerns and try to problem solve when possible,” said Lifeline Program Coordinator Angela Wrana.

The Outstanding Community Partnership Award was presented to three different recipients for three very important partnerships, including Lakeland Community College’s Non-Profit and Public Service Center, the Adult Parole Authority, and the Perry Senior Center.

Outstanding Community Partnership Award ~ Lakeland Community College Non-Profit & Public Service Center

Established in 2005 with start-up funding from the Lake-Geauga Fund of The Cleveland Foundation, the Nonprofit and Public Service Center at Lakeland Community College seeks to enhance the capacity of nonprofit and public service organizations in Northeast Ohio. Building upon Lakeland’s historic relationships with nonprofits, public agencies and local governments, the center offers professional and organizational development opportunities by drawing upon expertise within the college and by partnering with other service providers. These collaborations enable the center to maximize its effectiveness and use of resources. In addition, it helps exemplify the spirit of mutual cooperation that Lakeland seeks to promote.

One of the unique programs that the Non-Profit Center provides is the Community Action Poverty Simulation, which Non-Profit Center Director Dione DeMistro facilitates countless times throughout the year. Developed by the Missouri Community Action Association, the simulation exists to promote poverty awareness, increase understanding of the causes and stresses associated with living in poverty and inspiring local change to decrease or eliminate poverty within your own community.

“Each time, Dione bravely shares her own personal experiences with poverty as she facilitates the simulation and debrief discussion,” said Lifeline Executive Director Carrie Dotson. “I’ve seen the poverty simulation presented hundreds of times by so many different facilitators and I’ve just never seen it done better than Dione does it because she really understands what living in poverty means and how hard it is to overcome.”

The poverty simulations have become an important program for really helping the broader community develop an understanding and sensitivity to what those living in poverty experience—we've seen teachers develop new ways to work with low-income students and parents, librarians look for ways to better serve low-income families and community members seek meaningful volunteer opportunities as a result of the simulations in Lake County. These all lead to better opportunities for those living in poverty. It's also given Lifeline an additional platform to advocate for the clients we serve and share our mission with more people.

"Many Lifeline staff has volunteered to help with the poverty simulations and have found the experience to really reflect some of the real-life situations our clients find themselves in," said Dotson. "Dione always graciously gives our staff time to plug our agency, particularly 2-1-1, and we've always appreciated that opportunity."

Outstanding Community Partnership Award ~ Adult Parole Authority

The Adult Parole Authority (APA) for Lake County has been a partner with Lifeline since 2009 when the development of the Lake County Citizen Circle was established. The Lake County Citizen Circle supports those previously incarcerated with information and referrals to improve successful reentry into the community. As a founding member of Citizen Circle, the APA has brought a unique perspective to the community group. Although their relationship with the Citizen Circle participants is different, it is also vital to the work Lifeline has done over the last decade with ex-offenders.

The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction developed Citizen Circles to engage former inmates with community supports and the APA representatives kept the Lake County apprised of new initiatives that were being developed at the State level. As parole officers, lowering recidivism is part of their agency goals and without their input Lake County would not have one of the most successful Citizen Circle and Reentry Coalitions in the State of Ohio.

The APA has worked together with the Lifeline Reentry Office and Coalition to develop the reentry strategic plan, which has opened up doors to new funding opportunities.

"I have worked closely with the APA for 10 years. The trends to link inmates to community resources upon release are showing to help those who struggle with barriers such as employment," says Michelle Mezaris, Director of Community Services at Lifeline. "As the Reentry Office for Lake County, a partnership between our entities can continue to have an impact on the rate of recidivism, improve self-sufficiency and increase public safety."

The APA holds key positions within the reentry efforts within Lake County and uses their energy to positively influence the lives of those who return to Lake County. The APA officers who represent the agency are prepared to actively connect ex-offenders to Lifeline through referrals and as a point of entry to opportunities. The APA is responsive to the efforts of Lifeline's Reentry Office and an ally as the reentry efforts evolve over time.

"I feel that Lake County has benefited from the partnership with the APA which is not the case in other areas of the State. I am confident that we can help those returning to our communities and help them achieve their goals," said Bri Moon, Reentry Coordinator at Lifeline.

Outstanding Community Partnership Award ~ Perry Senior Center

In 2017, Christine Znidarsic, Director of the Perry Senior Center, reached out to Lifeline with the request to bring the VITA/TCE program to their location for the 2017 tax season. In the past, AARP had offered this program at the Perry Senior Center, but they had left the location about 5 years previously and the center was looking to fill the void for their community members. AARP was not willing to return to the location and Christine was seeking an alternative.

"Christine initially asked if we would be willing to meet their clients at their Perry location so that they would not have to drive into Painesville for the service," said Lifeline Program Coordinator Heather DeMetro. "After meeting with Christine and touring their facility, I realized that this site could serve three eastern Lake County communities for our program, if they agreed to allow us to use the location for Painesville Township and Madison as well. They were open to the idea and offered to provide just about anything if we would utilize their site for VITA/TCE. We scheduled a few test dates for late in the 2017 tax season and they marketed the opportunity in their newsletter. The initial list of interested clients contained nearly 40 names and people were still signing up."

In previous years, Lifeline did not serve many Perry residents in the VITA Program. However, now due to this partnership Lifeline staff saw the potential to provide an important service to low-to-moderate income residents who were in need of filing their taxes throughout the eastern part of Lake County.

For the 2018 tax season, we expanded the VITA/TCE program to the Perry Senior Center as a second site. On

Wednesdays, during tax season we complete returns at the Perry Senior Center location and are seeing a consistent increase in interest at that site.

“It has become a beneficial partnership for both parties. Lifeline provides the knowledge, volunteers, oversight, and laptop computers and Perry Senior Center provides local marketing, sign-ups, printer, paper, and ink,” said DeMetro. “Together there is great potential for growth and more convenient access to the eastern part of the county. We were thrilled to be back in Perry for 2019.”

From this experience, Lifeline is now seeking to mirror this process at a location on the western side of the county. In doing so, we are able to reach out to more residents who need our programs. We fully expect that the Perry Senior Center partnership will continue to grow and strengthen our county. We are now looking into how some of our other programs might benefit from the expansion to this site as well.

The Outstanding Achievement Award was given to two Lifeline program participants, Franchesca Grant and Sophia Cicconetti, to recognize their significant progress in achieving self-sufficiency.

Outstanding Achievement Award ~ Franchesca Grant

As a mother of two young children, Franchesca understood the need of balance with work, school and family. Franchesca chose personal goals that reflected her desire to be a role model for her children including healthier eating, spirituality and creating moments of quality time with her children.

Franchesca demonstrated her character and strength as she continued to excel in school and focusing on the rewarding feeling to help someone in need. She successfully graduated with her LPN license in January of 2019 and subsequently graduated from the Supportive Housing Program.

“I was very impressed with Franchesca’s dedication and motivation,” said Angela Wrana, Franchesca’s Lifeline case manager. “She was always able to successfully balance raising her family and working while maintaining A’s and B’s in her accelerated nursing program.”

“Without Lifeline’s help, I would not have been able to go back to school or provide for my family,” said Franchesca.

During her enrollment in the Supportive Housing Program, Franchesca discussed her long term goal of becoming a registered nurse and eventually a nurse practitioner, and obtaining a Bachelor’s Degree. Her Lifeline case manager, Angela, presented her with an opportunity to pursue this goal sooner than she had planned through enrollment in Lifeline’s IDA Asset Building Program. After learning about the Lifeline IDA Program, Franchesca decided that now was the perfect time to take the next step and was accepted into the IDA Program to save for her educational goals.

“Franchesca is currently participating in the IDA program. This program is a high-level step to self-sufficiency. As a participant, she is required to save funds that will be matched by Lifeline at an 8:1 dollar match. Franchesca chose to utilize this program to move forward in her education journey. Along with the savings plan, the program also requires her to attend our financial empowerment program and specific asset education,” said Lifeline Program Coordinator Tiffany Menosky. “Franchesca is determined and focused on achieving her goals to become completely self-sufficient for her and her family. She has been a strong participant in the IDA program and I expect her to complete this program by fall. She has been pleasant to work with and is a very astute learner. I believe that she will continue to be successful in her endeavors.”

During her participation in the Supportive Housing Program, the determination and drive that Franchesca demonstrated is likely just the beginning of her success as she continues her role as a mother, student, and nurse. Franchesca is expected to be one of Lifeline’s first graduates from our IDA Program later this summer.

Outstanding Achievement Award ~ Sophia Cicconetti

In the summer of 2017, Sophia Cicconetti was 21 years old and a single mother to her two week old daughter. She was employed at Dunkin Donuts while also enrolled full-time at Lakeland Community College and was struggling to get back on her feet and be able to provide for her daughter. She had learned about Lifeline’s Supportive Housing Program at Lifeline from a friend who was also a single mother and working hard to make ends meet.

“My friend told me how helpful the program had been to her and she knew that I truly wanted to be successful for my newborn daughter and myself,” said Sophia.

With the financial assistance and case management support of the program, Sophia was able to rent a two bedroom apartment and provide a safe home for her and her baby. She was able to focus on school and began to establish a career for herself.

"Prior to the program, I felt totally lost and so behind that I wasn't sure how I was ever going to get ahead. I always had a vision of myself being an amazing mother to my daughter and creating a good successful life for us. I was so motivated but I did not know how that was going to unfold since I could barely pay my bills," said Sophia.

Sophia worked closely with her case manager, Angela, to set goal plans and problem solve.

"Having the regular meetings with Angela are very important to me because we go over my goals and come up with solutions to any problems that I may be facing. We also complete budget worksheets for each month so that I can visually see my income and expenses so that I am aware of my spending habits," said Sophia.

In the past year, Sophia has made great strides both academically and professionally. Sophia has decided to change her major from Radiology to Business and HR Management. She is also employed full time and is being trained for a management position with American Family Insurance. Her daughter is also thriving and has just learned how to walk!

"I am truly impressed with all of the progress that Sophia has made in this program," said Angela. "She has achieved not only the educational goals that she had set for herself, but also her personal goals. She should be proud of her amazing accomplishments."

Sophia graduated from the Supportive Housing Program in December. She plans to continue to excel at her current place of employment and utilize the financial and educational skills that she has learned from Lifeline.

"Since participating in the program, I feel that I am a lot more organized as an individual in both my work and personal life, more responsible with my spending and saving, and have more confidence in myself to provide a successful life for my daughter and I," said Sophia. "The employees at Lifeline have been so caring, understanding and helpful to me."

This year Lifeline's Annual Dinner and Awards Presentation were held in conjunction with National Community Action Awareness Month and featured keynote remarks by Congressman David Joyce, OH-14. The awards were presented by Lifeline Board Officers, President John Shepard, Treasurer Christine Shoop and Secretary Paula Gordos. The event also marked Lifeline's 46th Anniversary of serving Lake County's most vulnerable residents.

Staff of the Year Award ~ Marina Rivera

The final award of the evening was the Staff of the Year Award. Voted on by the entire Lifeline staff, this award is given to one Lifeline staff member each year who goes above and beyond the call of duty, both in serving the customers of the agency and in being a team player—a staff member who really lives Lifeline's mission. This year's recipient was HEAP Program Manager Marina Rivera.

Marina Rivera has worked in Lifeline's HEAP Department since 2009. Our HEAP Coordinator for many years, Marina was promoted to a new position of HEAP Program Manager earlier this year. In her roles as HEAP Coordinator and HEAP Program Manager, Marina is responsible for all aspects of the HEAP programs, including supervising HEAP staff, auditing client files for accuracy and adherence to program guidelines, and fiscal batching and reporting. We are regularly told by the Ohio Development Services Agency that we run one of the best HEAP programs in the state—much of this can be attributed to Marina's efforts.

Marina is well liked and respected by her co-workers.

"Marina has been part of our Lifeline family for over a decade and during that time I have seen her grow and become one of the greatest assets to this organization," said Lifeline Program Coordinator Maribel Young. "Even in the most difficult of situations she goes above and beyond for our clients and handles herself with grace. She is one of the strongest and most caring people I know and I am very fortunate to not only be her co-worker but also her friend. Her dedication to her work and our agency is truly inspirational."

"One of the most important qualities of a great leader is one that listens. Marina's leadership is the driving force of Lifeline's HEAP program as she listens, takes everyone's thoughts and ideas into consideration, delegates and follow through to ensure that we address and meet the needs our clients," said Lifeline HEAP Coordinator Erika Taylor. "Many years of HEAP success can be attributed to Marina's strong leadership."

Dotson says that because Lifeline, Inc. is such a locally-focused organization, they work to recognize those who have made an impact locally with these awards.

"As a Community Action Agency, we are obviously a very community-based organization. Last year we served nearly 2,500 households from nearly every community in Lake County with our community services programs and answered over 36,000

calls for information and referrals through 2-1-1,” said Dotson. “We’ve strived to continue that effort by recognizing local individuals, organizations and program participants who have been successful in the past year.”

Lifeline for the Empowerment and Development of Consumers was founded in 1973 with the mission of helping Lake County residents by providing them assistance and life skills programming that is designed to increase self-sufficiency. In 1980 Lifeline became a participating agency of the United Way of Lake County, UWLC, and in 1987 was designated a community action agency by the Ohio Development Services Agency, ODSA. In 2008, Lifeline was designated as a mental health agency by the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

Today Lifeline continues with the same mission of helping Lake County’s low-income residents break the cycle of poverty and make the transition from agency-dependency to self-sufficiency. Lifeline’s current programming includes services in the healthcare, housing & energy assistance, information & referral services and consumer education & job training areas. Our motto is ‘helping people, changing lives.’ Lifeline is currently funded by the UWLC and by grants through the ODSA, the Lake County Board of Commissioners, the Lake County ADAMHS Board, Lake County Department of Job & Family Services, the City of Mentor, the Western Reserve Junior Service League, the Lake County Board of Developmental Disabilities, Lake Health and through private donors.