

I am Joshua Stapf, Executive Director of Literacy Rochester in Rochester, NY. Literacy Rochester has been helping to improve the reading, math, English language, and digital literacy of adults in our area since 1964. Each year Literacy Rochester helps between 1,300 and 1,500 between our instructional program and digital literacy program. In our instructional program where we are working on reading, math, and English language we help between 250 and 300 students annually through state funding called Adult Literacy Education (ALE) and from private donations and foundations. Let me tell you about Lionel who has been working with us on improving their skills.

Lionel, who is 43, was born in Guyana and moved to Rochester nearly 17 years ago. He has been with Literacy Rochester for the last 8 of those years. Now a fluent English speaker, Lionel has set his aim on becoming a US citizen; a goal he and his tutor are working diligently towards. Lionel is not just a student, though. He is a dedicated father, a very talented cook, having worked in a restaurant in New York City for a number of years, and a caring and understanding person.

Reflecting on his journey with education, Lionel is very clear about one thing: he wants to be a good role model for his children. “I know what it’s like not having a father. I want to have an education to better myself. I [want to] show my kids how hard I push myself to make myself a better person for them.” Lionel’s motivation comes from his heart, and that’s evident in the relationships he’s built throughout his time with Literacy Rochester – he is still in touch with his first tutor from 8 years ago!

Lionel credits a lot of where he is today to Literacy Rochester: “If it wasn’t for [Literacy Rochester], I wouldn’t be driving, wouldn’t have come across good people in my life. They’re like family to me now. Whatever I am going through, paperwork, I can always take it to them.” Lionel also highlighted his positive approach to difficult tasks, which was clear when asked what he was most proud of: “That I’m getting help.” A simple and yet powerful sentiment. By the end of his time with LR, Lionel hopes to read with his children, a goal he will no doubt reach! In the meantime, Lionel will continue cooking, watching the Ghost Whisperer, and building relationships with those who have the pleasure of getting to know him.

ALE supports many of these students, but there are still many of our students and members of the community that do not qualify to be supported by ALE funding and there needs to be the funding and support for those people. People who are not working towards employment or and HSE are not qualified to receive services under ALE. These people include stay at home parents, retired members of the community, and those with disabilities. Even those these people are not trying to work or get an HSE, every New Yorker deserves access to adult education. Current state funding does not provide the flexibility to ensure this.

Currently NYS, through Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA Title II) and Adult Literacy Education (ALE), provides just shy of \$40 million annually to provide adult basic education, English as a second language, and literacy education to adults. This funding supports approximately 100,000 adult learners annually, reaching just 3% of those identified as potential beneficiaries of adult education and literacy services in New York State, a percentage that drops year after year as need grows. In addition, that \$40 million comes with restrictions that exclude people in need of services that could be provided

by organizations that receive these funds—for example, state funds cannot pay for childcare or transportation, the two biggest barriers to education for this cohort. Also, COVID has created additional barriers to teaching and learning that traditional funding sources are not able to address due to restrictions of the grant.

Low literacy levels have an impact on multiple aspects of a person's life and they not only affect the person lacking the skills, but also the people around them, especially their children and the communities that they live in. Here are some statistics that show the impact of low literacy levels and some benefits of improving literacy skills:

- 43% of adults with low literacy skills live in poverty
- Half of those that are chronically unemployed are functionally illiterate
- 76% of adults on public assistance are illiterate or unable to read more than simple text
- Children with parents with low literacy levels are 72% more likely to have low literacy skills
- 70% of incarcerated adults cannot read at a 4<sup>th</sup> grade level
- In the United States between \$106-\$238 billion in health care cost each year is linked to adults with low literacy skills
- Increased literacy skills correlates to an increase in the ability of adults to participate in civic engagement
- 100 hours of adult literacy instruction translates into \$10,000 in additional annual income

An investment in adult literacy pays off in reducing poverty, improving employability, reducing reliance on public assistance, improving children's literacy, reducing incarceration, reducing health care costs, increasing civic engagement, and improving earnings.

With all that has now been stated we ask for the support and creation of the \$34 million Community Literacy Fund. The Community Literacy Fund will be a new funding stream in the NYS budget to fund adult education and adult literacy services for New Yorkers with goals outside of the funding parameters of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA Title II) and Adult Literacy Education (ALE) funding streams. This funding will be directed to 501c3 adult literacy organizations that utilize volunteers in instruction; regional technical assistance partner(s) to support grant recipients with training, data reporting, operational assistance. The reason for a focus on volunteer driven organizations is that the people that this fund aims to support are not successful or fit into traditional adult education models and need the flexibility of service time and teaching speed that is able to be provided by volunteers.

The return on investment of the Community Literacy Fund is very high due to the combination of NYS funding and in-kind volunteer time. \$32M annually for adult literacy providers utilizing volunteers for instruction can support 32000 adult learners each year. The combination of \$1000 per student from the state and \$3000 in volunteer time (currently valued at approximately \$30 per hour and estimating 100 hours of instruction per year) provides \$4000 of resource annually. (Without the volunteer component, at a rate of \$4000 per student, the annual number served would be cut to 8000.)

All New Yorkers should have access to adult education and shouldn't be seen as less just because they are not looking to get an HSE or get into the work force. Stay at home parents have a huge impact on the future of children, retired members of the community still need to be able to navigate everyday life, being literate should be a universal item for everyone and should be supported by everyone. Please continue to support the Adult Literacy Education funding and please support the creation of the Community Literacy Fund.