

## Moving Students Onward and Upward

Sarah Vetter, LSW, Director of Pregnancy, Parenting and Adoption

Onward and Upward started as a dream to help single parents obtain a college education, find employment in the healthcare field, and earn a living wage for the first time in their lives. The motivation behind starting this program was to break the cycle of generational poverty and improve the lives of the children in each family. We knew that by assisting single mothers to obtain a degree in healthcare, we would be supporting them in stepping out of poverty and becoming financially stable and self sufficient.

Catholic Charities of Southern Minnesota launched the Onward and Upward program in the fall of 2016 as a pilot program with Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC) nursing program. We started with a small group of single mothers who were pursuing nursing degrees. These strong, independent women were going to school, working, and raising children on their own.

As one of the social workers meeting regularly with the students, I was immediately “blown away” by their perseverance and adaptability. Our program offers regular mentoring, and we meet students where they are at. For some students, our visits include problem-solving and finding community resources. With other mothers, we teach time management and assess individual learning and communication styles. For other students, we create self care plans and discuss parenting or family situations. We celebrate with these students when their grades increase, when they overcome a personal barrier, and we celebrate their success when they walk across the stage at graduation! Every family enrolled in Onward and Upward receives financial literacy education, a monthly scholarship, and a personal mentor who walks with them through their college education and beyond.

In addition to receiving a monthly scholarship and mentoring, each Onward and Upward participant can apply for emergency financial assistance when a problem arises. We have become a safety net for the unexpected expenses that could otherwise cause a student to get off track in their education. Without this emergency assistance, students often have to make the difficult choice to drop out of school and pick up additional hours at work if money gets too

tight. Due to the generous donations from many in our community, emergency assistance funds have enabled students to stay in school through the hard times. With these funds we have replaced a furnace during January's polar vortex, repaired vehicles that stopped running when students needed to get to class, and paid utility bills that climbed too high during a cold winter. Students have communicated that this emergency assistance fund provides peace of mind to know that they won't have to pick up additional hours at work when they are already short on time. It allows their focus to be on their children and their education.

"The Onward and Upward program has been a great help and I am so glad there are organizations out there to help someone like me reach my goals for myself and my children. I know I am not doing this alone. Although I don't have family in the Rochester area, I have received a lot of health and support from many people like [my social worker] and the Onward and Upward program." – Christina

Onward and Upward has grown to support single parent students at RCTC in a variety of health care fields. We accept students studying to become Cardiovascular Invasive Specialists, Clinical Neurophysiology Technologists, Dental Assistants, Dental Hygienists, Histology Technicians, Nurses, Practical Nursing, and Emergency Medicine Paramedics. Applications are accepted each semester and we work with students after graduation and into their first job in the healthcare field as well. We have seen families grow stronger, enter the work force, and reach goals that their families had only dreamed about previously. These families truly are moving onward and upward!

"My experience with Onward and Upward has been such a blessing. College is hard, nursing school is even harder. It's important to have as much support as one can have – that's what I felt here! I thank all who have donated to this scholarship program.... I have and will continue to recommend this scholarship program to others." – Abra