Life Skills Empowerment Program
Provided By Faith Communities

“Faith is the strength by which a shattered world shall emerge into the light.”  Helen Keller

The Beck Institute on Religion and Poverty
Fordham University
Graduate School of Social Service
Welcome to the Life Skills Empowerment Program for Faith Communities!

The Beck Institute on Religion and Poverty at Fordham University’s Graduate School of Social Services invites Westchester County congregations to explore the exciting opportunity to provide the Life Skills Empowerment Program (LSEP). Developed over 25 years ago by the New York Archdiocese of Catholic Charities and the Interfaith Assembly for Homelessness and Housing, the LSEP program model (an intense faith-based life skills program held at congregations one or two evenings a week for three to four months) provides a faith-in-action community experience tailored to meet the needs of isolated persons experiencing challenging life transitions. LSEP programs have been successfully implemented in New York City congregations with others in Westchester and beyond to serve men and women in need of housing, employment, and healthcare who may be Veterans, those who are returning to communities after incarceration, or survivors of domestic violence.

Connection, Community & Social Justice

The LSEP program works to restore social justice by fostering communal accountability and care of all persons. The LSEP program encourages congregational involvement by providing opportunities for education and awareness, community welcoming and celebration, and volunteer opportunities such as mentoring, meal preparation and community outreach. Each session begins with a group meal, followed by a session on life skills, the sharing of personal stories in the context of a supportive group process, and one-to-one mentoring. Mentors work with participants to establish and implement personal goals. Each program group is limited to approximately 12 participants per semester. Over the course of the semester a family-like community is formed through the creation of an environment based on safety, trust, compassion, and forgiveness.

The Beck Institute’s mission supports the historical faith community tradition to embrace and respect the poor, marginalized and oppressed members of society. The Beck Institute provides congregations with the necessary support services for a successful LSEP program including: mentor training, program facilitator development, program management support, social work interns, program resources, education, program evaluation, and participant outreach, selection and development.
“Whether it was telling my story, listening to others, reading prayers, or sharing a meal, I always felt loved and a sense of deep spiritual connection. Together as a community, we shared joy, tears, respect, and trust. This is my family. I have no family in New York—without them I would have nothing.”

-LSEP Participant

Implementing the LSEP Program

The Beck Institute on Religion and Poverty has conducted several years of LSEP program evaluation research involving faith communities of all sizes in the New York City area and beyond to ensure program quality and efficacy. From this research, an evidence-based replicable program model has been developed and refined. The LSEP model provides a clear roadmap for faith communities to follow when implementing the program and includes the following components:

- **Life Skills/Community Building Sessions**: Each session focuses on building participant life skills and community bonding led by one or two group facilitators. Sessions focus on important topics such as goal setting, network building, obtaining immediate needs such as housing, employment, health needs, and education, developing and restoring relationships, and building trust, self-esteem, and respect. Local experts are invited to speak at sessions to build community ties.

- **Goal Setting with Mentors**: Each participant works one-on-one with a trained mentor to develop short and long-term goals, to take action towards meeting those goals, and to address follow-up and next step plans.

- **Sharing Personal Stories**: Participants are guided to integrate their life experiences from past to present to future, through developing and telling their personal stories.

- **Support Services**: A social work intern from the Fordham University Graduate School of Social Service works with participants individually to provide guidance throughout the program process, as well as to connect participants to necessary local social service agencies.

- **Celebration**: Congregation members welcome participants by providing food and sharing in meals at the beginning of every LSEP session. Members also share in the graduation ceremony to be a witness to participant’s healing and inclusion.

- **Alumni Events**: Following graduation, gatherings are arranged through congregations and alumni to continue the journey of individual and communal healing and connection. Alumni are eager to give back and make a difference through participating in volunteer activities in congregations and mentoring new LSEP participants.

“The LSEP program has become my family and my place of peace. I have been through a lot, and have held on to my anger. Once I came to the program, I was able to let that anger go. For the first time in my life, I felt accepted and safe. Once you walk through these LSEP program doors—expect a change—no matter what!.”

-LSEP Participant
A Focus on Mentoring

Mentors are an integral core part of the LSEP program experience because for many of the participants important relationships in their lives have been few. Mentors provide encouragement and support to participants throughout the LSEP healing process.

LSEP mentors report experiencing a personal transformation as they share common life hopes and struggles with their mentees.

Mentors are expected to attend approximately seven mentor-specific sessions and dinners with their mentee throughout the program semester, as well as share in the graduation celebration. Prior to being strategically matched with a mentee, mentors are provided with training and educational materials, as well as ongoing support and guidance. Mentors work with participants one-on-one to set short and long-term life goals, and develop action steps towards meeting those goals.

“Tears were shed by participants and mentors alike. That is powerful. For mentors to embrace their brothers and sisters with unconditional love is deeply healing. This is what we have to offer, this is what you have to offer—they are not the same but equally valuable. A truly spiritual experience.”

-LSEP Participant

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