

Letter from our President/CEO

Dear Friends,

At LifeWise STL, our mission does not change when times grow harder. It becomes clearer. As we begin this year, we do so with a deep awareness that our work is needed now more than ever. Immigrant families in our community are facing heightened fear, uncertainty, and disruption. We remain steadfast in our commitment to walk alongside these hard-working families—which make up 45% of our adult participants—with dignity, compassion, and a belief in their inherent worth.

While our mission remains constant, we are quick to respond as needs evolve. One example is our ongoing tornado recovery work. In this issue, you'll learn how our newly expanded team—one of only four agencies selected by the City of St. Louis—is helping senior homeowners recover through in-depth, individualized case management. This work restores safety and livability to homes while protecting dignity, independence, and hope.

At the same time, many individuals and families are experiencing ongoing financial strain. Through our Economic Wellness programs families build credit, reduce debt, and strengthen their financial footing, often for the first time. These tools create real momentum and open doors to long-term stability.

In moments like these, LifeWise STL remains grounded in what has guided us for 124 years: showing up, building relationships, and responding to real needs with education, resolve, and a path forward. Hope is not passive. It is something Team LifeWise practices every day—through advocacy, service, and standing with our neighbors when it matters most.

Thank you for being part of this work, which impacts individuals and strengthens communities. Together, we will continue offering hope—and a path forward—even in difficult times. With Gratitude,



Scott E. Walker
President/CEO



Team
LifeWise



5 Ways to Grow the Team!

We're grateful for everyone who makes up Team LifeWise! We couldn't do it without you. We'd love your help in recruiting others to the team. Here are a few ideas you could use to help get the word out:

- **Host a neighborhood socks and underwear drive**
- **Invite Scott to speak at your business, church or bookclub**
- **Bring a group to volunteer and take a tour**
- **Ask for donations in lieu of birthday gifts**
- **Fill a table of new friends at Spring Bling**

LifeWise STL



Spring
BLING

FOSTERING WOMEN'S GROWTH
BRUNCH & AUCTION
NEW VENUE! THE PALLADIUM

Join us on Saturday, April 11 at 9:30am for delicious brunch and a live and silent auction featuring unique experiences, beautiful accessories and more! This celebratory and uplifting event brings our community together to champion women's growth.

Don't miss out - register today!



Early Childhood Center: Growing Strong Beginnings

LifeWise StL's Early Childhood Center (ECC) provides a strong foundation for our youngest learners, serving 94 children ages 6 weeks to 5 years old. Fully licensed and accredited, the ECC is staffed by professional educators who bring both deep expertise and big hearts to their work with children and families. (Be sure to read more about two of our teachers who recently earned their Master's degrees in Early Childhood Leadership and Management!)

One family that reflects the impact of the ECC is Ms. LaKeisha Walker and her daughter, Ladella. Ladella has been part of LifeWise for the past three years and will proudly graduate this summer before heading to kindergarten. Full of energy and joy, Ladella loves her teachers and friends and thrives in an environment where she feels safe, supported, and encouraged to be herself.

Ms. Walker is especially grateful for the patience and care shown by the ECC staff—not only teaching letters and numbers, but helping children build practical life skills and healthy relationships. It's this whole-child approach that helps prepare children like Ladella for success in school and beyond.

At LifeWise, early learning focuses on building confidence, curiosity, and a strong foundation for lifelong learning from the very start.



Celebrating our Educators

We are proud to celebrate **Britney Gayden** and **Markietta (Kita) Jordan Sledge**, two Early Childhood Center teachers who recently earned their Master's degrees in Early Childhood Management and Leadership. Over the past 18 months, they balanced full-time work with online coursework, major projects, community leader interviews, and outstanding academic performance. Their dedication strengthens our programs and reflects our continued investment in the children—and educators—of our community.

Volunteer Spotlight: René Vences

LifeWise is incredibly fortunate to partner with community leaders who bring their time, expertise, and heart to our Financial Education classes, offered twice a week in both English and Spanish. One of those long-standing partners is René Vences of Carrollton Bank, who has been a consistent supporter of LifeWise for more than 15 years.

René brings passion, knowledge, and deep commitment to every class he teaches. As one participant shared, *"René is a great presenter, he is funny, charismatic, and humble with a true passion for teaching that makes every session engaging and inspiring. He has a way of connecting everyone in the room."*

Beyond the classroom, René goes above and beyond to support our staff and participants. He is always a quick call away to help navigate complex financial situations, and he has led specialized training for our staff to strengthen their ability to coach participants pursuing homeownership. His support directly helps our team walk alongside participants as they work toward goals related to home purchase, entrepreneurship, and long-term economic mobility. René has also provided opportunities for our staff to pause, connect and celebrate together outside of the office.

One of our Economic Wellness staff members shared this reflection: *"What stands out most about René is his undeniable, contagious passion. He is a clear and engaging presenter who truly cares about making financial education accessible to everyone. It's a gift to sit around a table with him in a nonjudgmental space where participants are encouraged to reflect on their own habits, ask questions, and apply what they're learning to their daily lives. Outside of LifeWise, René is also a pillar in the community—constantly volunteering and giving back. He makes people feel welcome and inspired to pursue their own definition of financial and overall well-being."*

We are deeply grateful for partners like René, whose commitment strengthens not only our programs, but our staff, our participants, and the broader community. Thank you, René, for all that you do!



Still Under Blue Tarps: St. Louis Seniors Endure Long Road to Tornado Recovery



Tornado damaged home



Mr. Jones and a hole in his ceiling



Recovery from the May 16 tornado has been a long 9-month road for many north St. Louisans - but especially for those aged 60 and older. Too many seniors have lived all winter long with shredded blue tarped roofs, ceiling holes, broken windows, missing awnings and non-potable water. They continue living in their generational homes, awaiting FEMA funds and contractor work to begin.

In partnership with the City of St. Louis and the United Way, LifeWise StL has taken on Disaster Case Management for older adults in the tornado impacted area. This has allowed LifeWise StL to hire 2 full-time case managers and 1 case management supervisor who are receiving hundreds of requests for assistance.

"This tornado hit an area that has been historically disinvested for decades," said Samantha Ferguson-Knight, Director of Senior Programming at LifeWise StL. "With folks who were uninsured or underinsured, people have had no choice but to stay where they are while navigating the recovery process. These folks are resilient, but the ongoing trauma of living in these conditions is real, and it weighs on the community. We [LifeWise] are grateful to support folks who have continued to survive through this process."

Our case managers are taking calls, visiting homes to assess unmet disaster needs, developing recovery plans, and helping our seniors apply for resources like FEMA aid and legal assistance.

One of LifeWise StL's clients is Mr. Jones, a 92 year old, two-war veteran who has lived in the same house for more than sixty years. A retired public servant and widower, he keeps his tools in order and his routines intact. He sees his children often, and keeps a quiet pride about his grandson who serves in the Air Force.

When the tornado approached, Mr. Jones noticed the sky shift and heard the wind pick up. He stepped outside only to move his car into the garage. But before he made it halfway up the driveway, the storm hit. The roof tore off the house in a single violent motion, and a large section slammed onto his windshield. He and the neighbor who had run over to shelter with him stayed in the car until the worst of it passed. They walked away without a scratch, even though the house had taken the full impact.

The aftermath has been its own ordeal. With our support, Mr. Jones spent the summer filing FEMA appeals and seeking bids from multiple contractors, but only received a small award that barely dented the damage.

"These folks are resilient, but the ongoing trauma of living in these conditions is real, and it weighs on the community."

Engineers and architects have since documented deep structural failures —problems no ordinary repair crew could solve. This winter his furnace failed and he continues to have no viable roof, causing his water pipes to burst and damaging interior walls even more.

At 92, he's still fighting through the paperwork and repairs, determined to keep the home he's lived in for most of his life. He's doing it with the same steady, unembellished resolve he's carried for decades.

While the road to recovery is long for Mr. Jones and other seniors our case management team serves, LifeWise remains committed to restoring tornado survivors with dignity and care. Everyone deserves a safe and reliable place to live.

The Power of Program Stacking:

Working Together to Achieve Financial Goals



When Valentina* arrived in St. Louis, she enrolled in LifeWise StL's *Grupo en Desarrollo* to begin building financial stability. Through a combination of 10 financial education classes, 10 financial coaching sessions, and credit-building tools, Valentina saved more than \$3,900 and built her credit from no score to 733 in just 12 months.

She worked hard – taking on a second full-time job, working more than 70 hours a week, and applying for

an Immigrant Empowerment Loan. Today she participates in her second LifeWise Lending Circle and continues saving to strengthen her finances so that she can purchase a vehicle with a lower-interest car loan.

Valentina's story demonstrates the power of holistic, coordinated LifeWise Economic Wellness programs working together to support participants like Valentina, one step at a time.

**Name changed to protect privacy.*

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LifeWise StL
1321 South 11th Street
St. Louis, MO 63104
lifewisestl.org
314.421.0400

