

Testimony of Bill McGahan Chairman and Founder Georgia Works!

Three years ago on the way to a ballgame in downtown Atlanta, my then 14-year old son and I stepped over a homeless man lying on the street. The man was wrapped in a blanket on the cold December day. My son was visibly shaken by seeing the homeless man, as no one was paying attention to him, or caring for him in any way.

After coming home and giving the issue some thought, I decided to do something about homelessness.

Atlanta lacked a program that would take chronically homeless individuals - who are mostly men - and comprehensively change their habits and help them with their problems so that they could become working, productive citizens. So that's why I started Georgia Works in October of 2013.

Today, Georgia Works! has "graduated" 88 men from homelessness to having a job, an apartment, and transportation. Of these 88 men, 75 of them - or 85% - are still employed, housed and drug free. There are another 100 men currently in the program, and we are graduating six to eight men each month to self-sufficiency.

When a homeless man walks into Georgia Works! he must agree to four things: 1) to be alcohol and drug free throughout the program (and we test at entry and every 48 to 72 hours throughout the program), 2) to not take handouts from the government or from anyone else, 3) to get along with other participants in the program, and 4) to work. And while these four things are hard things to do, the most difficult thing that Georgia Works! asks each man to do is to make a decision to change.

Beyond a lack of housing, the men served by Georgia Works! face barriers that seem, at least to them, daunting to overcome. Virtually all program participants have extensive criminal records, and many have multiple felony convictions. Some enrollees have as many as 100 arrests. A majority of the Georgia Works! trainees are dealing with historical substance abuse issues, mostly crack, marijuana and alcohol. Most of the enrollees owe unpaid fines and overdue child support. Suspended drivers licenses are common due to unpaid fines and court costs, non payment of parole fees, and/or the non payment of child support. They lack any state issued IDs, bank accounts, email addresses, formal educations, work habits, and are usually cut off from their families.

Unlike other programs that focus on singular issues faced by homeless individuals, the Georgia Works! methodology is comprehensive. The idea is to not only help eliminate the barriers to "escaping" homelessness, but also to change the person so that homelessness does not re-occur.

How we do all this is through two methods: intensive case management and by emphasizing the importance of work.

Each program participant is assigned to a case manager when they walk through the door. The job of each case manager is to put together a plan - and to do whatever it takes - to get a man to self-sufficiency. Over the course of a year, Georgia Works! case managers help trainees obtain driver's licenses, attend substance abuse classes, pay past due fines, establish an email account, a mailing address and a bank account, address past due child support, and reconcile with families and children. As the men approach graduation, case managers facilitate the job search and placement process, and assist in securing permanent housing. Most importantly, the Georgia Works! case managers serve as advocates and mentors for the participants, providing them with the one-on-one coaching, guidance, and support they need to change their lives.

Transitional Work

The hallmark of Georgia Works! is full-time, transitional employment. After a trial period, men are assigned to a "Street Team." Dressed in Georgia Works! uniforms, the men clean the streets and sidewalks in and around downtown Atlanta. For their efforts on the "Street Team" a trainee is paid minimum wage by Georgia Works!, which amounts to approximately \$222 per week. The participants pay Georgia Works! \$100 for their weekly rent and meals, and they are required to set aside \$50 per week for savings; the remaining \$72 is their spending money (or for them to add to their savings, which many men do).

After approximately 90 days in the program participants are eligible for a contract job opportunity with one of Georgia Works!' corporate partners – currently, approximately 30 Atlanta companies use Georgia Works! as a staffing company for their labor needs. Companies that contract with Georgia Works for labor are in the construction industry, property management business, warehouses, recycling, hospitality, Community Improvement Districts, manufacturing, and other industries, just to name a few. Job opportunities range from maintenance work to skilled trades, depending upon the enrollee's skill set and interests. Participants continue to receive a stipend of \$7.40 per hour, paid to them via Georgia Works!, while they continue to pay for weekly room and board and participate in the savings plan.

The staffing business in Georgia Works! is important to our success. Georgia Works! provides employers with clean, on time labor. Georgia Works! pays for the employee insurance costs in order to make the price point attractive to employers. Georgia Works! is extremely responsive to our customers, providing "swing labor" and assistance with transportation to get our men to the workplace. Importantly, many participants work for private employers for the first time in their lives, experiencing what it feels like to be part of a team, and seeing that their labor and efforts are valued. Lastly, over half of our graduates have been hired permanently by our staffing customers, resulting in jobs that they would otherwise never been able to get their foot in the door.

Support Services

Georgia Works!' comprehensive support services focus on critical areas of need, including:

- Addiction recovery and health care
- Educational services (GED classes)
- Vocational training/workforce development
- Conflict resolution and decision making
- Financial management and independent living

Since the program's inception:

88 men have graduated to self-sufficiency, obtaining permanent employment and housing.

Our average starting wage has been \$10.50 per hour.

Men typically save about \$2,000 from work in the program.

95% of the trainees have opened checking accounts.

95% of the participants are in touch with their children.

Every participant without a high school diploma (approximately 30 men) is currently working toward a GED.

Thousands of drug and alcohol tests have been passed, and there have been less than two dozen failed tests since the program's inception.

The Georgia Works! model has proven to be highly cost-effective; on average, the organization incurs a net cost of less than \$9,000 for every trainee who completes the program. Compare this to the cost of incarcerating a person in the state of Georgia - which is about \$18,000 per year.

In summary, what makes Georgia Works! different? A **combination** of all of the following:

1. Our participants commitment to being alcohol and drug free
2. Our participants decision to change
3. On site housing (with food, and security, and air conditioning, etc..)
4. Comprehensive Case Management by One Person
5. On site group programs and training - AA/NA, GED, Job Training, etc..
6. Individual Help - Drivers Licences, Child Support, Wage Garnishments, etc.
7. Paid Work with Private Employers
8. Assistance with Finding an Apartment
9. Advocating and References for Full Time Employment
10. After program support and case management

Other programs provide some of the above services, but Georgia Works! does all of the above.

My goal is to end chronic homelessness in Atlanta. There will always be poor people who run into financial problems in their lives, and there will always be people who don't want to live their lives the right way, primarily because of drug addiction. But I believe

that the vast majority of the non-mentally ill chronically homeless can benefit by a work-based program like Georgia Works!.

GEORGIA WORKS! SAMPLE STORIES

Dion Smith

Dion Smith came to Georgia Works shortly after getting out of prison. He had been locked up for armed robbery since the age of 19, and served 14 ½ years of a 15 year sentence. Now in his mid 30s, Dion freely admits it was a horrible mistake to commit his crime. He had been looking for work with minor success, and was searching for a new start, especially as the father of a teenage girl. Dion entered Georgia Works!, and invested himself completely to the program. When asked how he dealt with negative thoughts and negative people to get through the program, he responded “this too shall pass!” Upon graduation, Dion had acquired a full time job, where he now is a trusted supervisor at a property management company (with his own set of keys to the company!). Dion has acquired a new apartment, is engaged, and has a new baby boy.

Adolphus Chandler

Adolphus Chandler has multiple felonies and has spent most of his adult life in and out of prison. Adolphus acknowledges that he had multiple addictions, and has wasted a lot of his time. Mr. Chandler came to Georgia Works! in search of personal restoration, and submerged himself into the culture of the program. He claims it was easy to do because he “didn’t have anything else left.” As a graduate of Georgia Works!, Adolphus reacquired his driver’s license and a new apartment. Adolphus is also the first Georgia Works! participant that was hired directly by the program to be a site supervisor, and he has helped many homeless men reclaim their lives.

Charmarcus Ivey

Charmarcus spent the bulk of his life as a self-described “hustler,” ultimately accumulating multiple drug charges and arrests that lead to his homelessness. Charmarcus ultimately became alienated and a loner, not knowing who to trust or take advice from. Charmarcus heard about Georgia Works! and decided to join the program. He decided that what he had been doing wasn’t working, so he made a decision to change himself. He “worked” on his work ethic and focus. Ultimately, Charmarcus was offered numerous full time jobs as he got near the end of the Georgia Works! program. But if you ask Charmarcus he will tell you that his greatest accomplishment is becoming a parent who no longer occasionally visits his daughter, but who now has his daughter living with him.

Allen Dumas

Allen Dumas arrived at Georgia Works!, as many of the clients do, as a referral from a local homeless shelter. He had been without shelter for a while, and was unable to acquire sufficient employment on his own. He soon found out that the structure and advice that he needed to overcome his personal barriers was finally available for him inside of the program. Within seven months, Allen has advanced and completed work on his G.E.D., paid fines and reacquired his driving privileges, saved \$1200+ towards his moving expenses, and has gotten full time permanent employment.

Daniel Billings

Daniel Billings was extremely quiet when he first walked into Georgia Works. As an only child, Daniel suffered through a very difficult family divorce. Daniel was deeply affected by the divorce, and his parents largely cast him off as soon as he turned 19. As a young man, Daniel had been homeless for numerous years, and had been through multiple shelter programs. He could get a job, but he would lose it just as fast as he would get hired. Daniel came to Georgia Works! in search of stability in multiple areas. Daniel worked on understanding his family, and spent many hours talking with our in-house counselor. Upon graduation from the program, Daniel has found a full time job in the hospitality industry. He has also moved into an apartment with the money he saved working through the Georgia Works! program.