

# AAAC Newsletter

African American Advisory Council • Winter 2009

**“Keep the focus on  
protecting children...”**



**17th Annual  
African American  
Advisory Council  
Institute**

# From The Chairman

**O**n behalf of the AAAC I would like to thank everyone that attended our Seventeenth Annual Conference. Your support of and participation in this annual event is always greatly appreciated. We certainly want to thank all of the staff that helped to make the Cultural Presentation a huge success with your assistance in meeting expenses for the entertainment. As always, The Terisa Griffin show was dynamic.

**I**wish to acknowledge my appreciation to the Council for presenting me with an award. I still cannot believe how they pulled off such a huge surprise. We appreciate Director McEwen and his administration for their continued support especially with all of the challenges that the administration has undergone over the past year. I think we all see the value in attending the various Institutes so that we can network, talk about how we do the work, and return to our locations rejuvenated to do the work. You can read much more about the conference in this edition.

**S**peaking of doing the work, often times I find myself thinking about the real impact this severe economic downturn will have on child welfare professionals. It is not only affecting the work that we do with children and families, but what about the effect on our own families? Spouses may be losing their jobs, the same may be true for adult offspring and such conditions can bring about stressors that may very well have an influence on how we meet responsibilities as child welfare employees. We now have to realize that the stakes have been raised. People living at or below the poverty level are more than likely finding it more difficult to sustain and main-

tain their families, keeping their children in school and providing them with an outlet that provides them with hope to keep moving forward. However, while times may be more difficult than usual for these families, in many instances, hard times is not something that is a new experience. I tend to think that many of these families have a built in resiliency that has helped them to overcome bleak times before and can rely on that resiliency to get them through the situations they are facing today.



Michael Burns

**T**herein lies the opportunity for the child welfare professional to “keep the focus on protecting the children by strengthening and supporting families” by focusing in on that valuable intangible aspect called resiliency. In the process, the professional may need to look within for the resiliency they have stored inside. This may very well enable them to not only help the families that they are charged to assist, but also to help cope with any challenges they may be experiencing in their own families.

**W**e also have to be concerned about the new type of families that we may now encounter as a result of the economic situation. The type of families that have always been highly independent and very much able

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# 17th Annual African American Advisory Council Institute

The African American Advisory Council (AAAC) was pleased to hold its' 17th Annual Institute on April 23rd and 24th at the Pheasant Run Resort. For the first time ever, within two hours, registration filled up (maximum enrollment was reached) and a waiting list had to be opened. It was gratifying to know that so many staff was interested in participating in the conference. This is a testimonial to the work of the conference planning committee does; the planning committee looks forward and takes great pride in planning this yearly institute. The AAAC annual conferences/institutes are not only opportunities for staff to network with fellow co-workers from across the state, but they provide staff with forums to actually share and learn about innovative services available to families and youth in the child welfare system. (Illinois continues to be in the forefront of program development and implementation to address child welfare challenges such as the over-representation of African Americans in the child welfare system.)

The conference opened with a libation ceremony performed by council members, Amie Joof and Jimmie Whitelow. Pastor Walter Matthews, Pleasant Green Baptist Church followed with an

inspiring invocation. The introduction of



AAAC members gather at the conclusion of the Plenary Session at the 2009 AAAC Institute

Michael Burns to deliver his annual chairperson opening remarks, sparked spontaneous applaud from the audience. Denice Murray, Executive Deputy Director provided exhilarating opening remarks also; Director McEwen could not attend. Denice set the tone for this two-day institute with encouraging words often quoted by the Director: "keep the focus on protecting children by strengthening and supporting families."

After the opening remarks, The Council presented awards to staff who

were nominated by their colleagues for outstanding performance in working with DC FS family. This year, council members were elated to honor their beloved chairperson, Michael Burns, who was the victim of a violent crime in November 2008. Council members felt that as a result of his untiring commitment to staff, families, children, and the AAAC, over the years, he should be honored. To his astonishment, he was presented with a specially designed plague. (For those of you reading this article, please note that Michael Burns has attentively listened to your comments and requests for actions during AAAC meetings within

your regions. Your voices have been loud and Mike hears each one of you clearly. He listens and pushes The Council to do something about your concerns.)

The Conference's keynote speaker, Dr. Jeremy Levitt, a renounced international legal and international relations scholar, took the audience on an intensive journey through some of his experiences while in the California child welfare system. He deliberately kept the audience in

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**The AAAC annual conferences/institutes ... provide staff with forums to actually share and learn about innovative services available to families and youth in the child welfare system.**

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# AAAC Salutes the Portman Family

**M**rs. Eular Portman and Mr. John Portman: How did you do it against all odds? Kudos to both of you, and your daughter Judge Jackie Portman, for raising two outstanding African American young men and two African American young women into exemplary young citizens. The African American Advisory Council wants to salute all of you by presenting the following testimonials from Dominique D, Walter J, and Jimmy D.

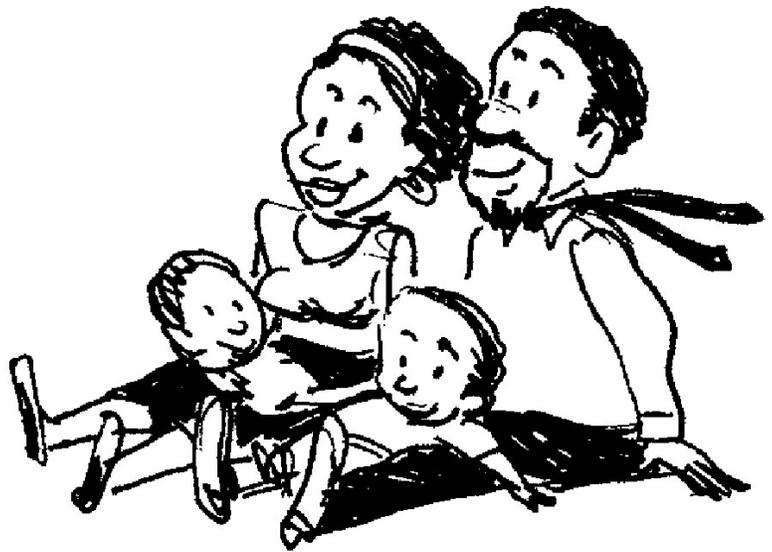
**Dominique D., wrote:**

F. Scott Fitzgerald, an American writer once stated, "Always willing to lend a helping hand to the one above him." My name is Dominique D. I am the second oldest of four siblings. I attend Northern Illinois University. My major is Nutrition and Dietetics with an emphasis in Pre-medicine and my minor is Public Health. Currently, I am prepping for the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT). My ultimate goal is to become a pediatrician.

My mother became ill and my grandparents and aunt became our caregivers. They have instilled many values within me. The most important of these values is to put God foremost in my life, trust in him and everything will be alright. They have always emphasized the value of education and kept me and my siblings focused on our educational goals. My grandfather graduated from Marquette University and my aunt is a Judge. I have always looked up to them as a role model. My grandparents' creed is "you must reach back and lend a hand to people because you never know the type of people you may encounter that you can assist or inspire." I do this by being involved in activities at my church and being an active member of my neighborhood block club.

Some people think that living in a certain neighborhood defines who you are. In reality, living in a certain neighborhood does not define who you are or what you will become. I have lived in Engle-

wood all of my life and I am accomplishing a lot with the help of my family. I am graciously thankful that DCFS let my family take care of me because



without them, I would not be who I am today.

**Walter J., wrote:**

My name is Walter J. I am 20 years old and I have been living with my grandparents from an early age. I have a younger brother and two older sisters. After graduating from Ralph J. Bunche Elementary School, I continued my education at John Hope College Preparatory High School. Likewise my brother did the same. I am currently a student at Kennedy King College. There I am seeking an Associate's Degree in criminal justice.

My journey would not have been possible without the support system around me. My grandparents stressed the importance of God, love, and education. I remember my grandmother spending countless hours helping me prepare for school. My grandparents treated me and my siblings like we

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# 17th Annual African American



# Advisory Council Institute



## Award Winners at the 2009



## AAAC Institute Day



# 'Queens' for a day

## *Mentoring day teaches young women empowerment*

On June 19, 2009, The Community of African American Mental Health Professionals (CAAMHP) in co-sponsorship with Metropolitan Family Services and Roseland Community Hospital convened a conference titled: "I AM A QUEEN", a day of mentoring and training for young girls and soon to be young women between the ages of 12 and 17 years old. This one-day conference, held at Olive-Harvey Community College, attracted over 350 young women from all corridors of the City of Chicago and surrounding suburbia. The girls came energized to participate in a series of workshops structured to empower them to take control of their lives, make good decisions and validate their individual worthiness in society (rather than follow trends), and accept themselves as chosen and cherished gifts that deserve to be acknowledged and treated with dignity and respect. Chicago area professional women, from diverse professional backgrounds (Social Workers, Psychologists, Academics, Educators, Medical personnel-Nurses and Doctors, and Attorneys) rallied to offer their services and participate as mentors for the day.

The impetus for the "I AM A QUEEN" conference came directly from the voices of African American girls and young women who participated in a focus group discussion held by CAAMHP. During the focus group discussion, the girls spoke eloquently about insurmountable concerns and challenges in transitioning to young adulthood in light of the peer and social pressures they encounter on a daily basis. They voiced out issues of exposure to violence, drugs, criminal and gang activities, and teenage pregnancy. The girls wanted answers to questions about how best to prepare themselves for the future, in order to achieve their hopes, goals and aspirations. The evolution of this discussion was the planning foundation for the

"I AM A QUEEN" conference.

The day started with the "Talking Drums," the melodic African drum beats that set the stage for communication. Dr. Valerie R. Roberson, President of Olive-Harvey College, gave a warm welcome to the girls. Denice Murray, Executive Deputy Director, DCFS, and Colleen Jones, Executive Vice President, Chief Operating Officer, Metropolitan Family Services offered words of wisdom to the girls. The theme of the conference which revolved around a message of hope and encourage-



ment that framed the day's activities was provided by Arewa. The participants had to attend two age appropriate (12-14 years or 15-17 years) workgroup sessions which entailed the following topics: "Close Encounters (dating violence), Work It Out (Conflict Resolution), Girlfriends (Relationships), Fabulosity (Appropriate Dress), The Emotional Rollercoaster, and One Life to Live (healthy lifestyles).

The luncheon sessions included an open discussion with a mentor convener. Girls had the opportunity to openly dialogue on any topic of their preference; and mentors had available discussion cues when there was a pause in open dialogue.

There was no indication from the conversations and body languages that neither the participants nor their mentors were in need of the cues. The interactions between the girls and the mentors clearly indicated that the girls were hungry to share their feelings and thoughts, to be heard for their contributions, to be acknowledged for their abilities, and to have very meaningful insight and stimulating conversations and relationships.

In the afternoon the girls were entertained by The People's Jazz Theater and the South Shore Women's Drill Team. The day's activities of inspirational thinking and stimulation concluded with Andrea Fain's "A Spoken Word".

In departing, each participant received a gift bag with a complimentary book, titled *Where is My Leading Man: A Black Woman's Guide to Man-Love and Self-Love* by author Beverly Hamilton Robinson and an "I AM A QUEEN" t-shirt, contributed by Roseland Community Hospital.

The Board of Directors and members of CAAMHP thank all of those who helped make this day a success. Event sponsors were Roseland Community Hospital, Healthcare Consortium of Illinois, Olive-Harvey College, Metropolitan Family Services, Verbie Jones Smith, IDCFS African American Advisory Council, Xi Nu Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporation's Monarch Awards Foundation, Adjoa D. Blalock, Barbara Shaw and Michael Koetting, Gilead Behavioral Health, Chicago Association of Black Social Workers, Dr. Dorothy Holley-Turner, Jackson State University Alumni Association, Beverly Hamilton Robinson, James Johnson, Brenda Hampton, Michael Burns, Emages, Inc., and Windy City Chapter, The Links, Inc.

# Someone You Should Know...

## Frances Elbert



Frances Elbert

In July 2008, Frances Elbert was appointed to the position of acting associate deputy for the Office of Education and Transition Services. Prior to that, she served as the Statewide DOC liaison. While serving as the Statewide DOC liaison, she was able to maintain good communication with youth involved with the Department of Juvenile Justice and Department of Corrections; Frances made sure that no youth in DOC or IYC was forgotten. She visited them and ensured that staff took care of the needs of these youngsters. Frances also conducted regular visitation

with women's division at Cook County Jail and Dwight Correctional Center to develop a network for incarcerated mothers.

Frances worked her way up the ladder. Prior to being the DOC liaison, she served as the first Statewide Teen Parent Coordinator. She guided workers in their charge to serve and protect pregnant and parenting youth and their children. She assisted in the development of a training curriculum and conducted statewide trainings to DCFS and POS staff. Also, as the Teen Parent Coordinator, Frances served on the child Welfare League of America's (CWLA) national committee on Standards for Services to At-Risk Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents. In 2002, Ms. Elbert co-authored of Ansell Casey Life Skill Assessment Supplement for pregnant and parenting adolescents. These supplements are being used across the United States and other countries.

Frances started out as a Child Protection Specialist in 1980, working as a sex abuse investigator. In that capacity, she was instrumental in providing training to hospital staff on the use of anatomically correct dolls during victim sensitive investigations (VSI). She has worked as follow-up case manager and child development.

Frances received her B.S. from Florida A&M University and Masters of Education degree from the University of Florida. She is the vice chairperson of the African American Advisory Council (AAAC) and serves as the chair of the conference planning committee.



Attendees enjoy lunch at the 2009 AAAC Institute

# Someone You Should Know...

## Diane Cottrell

AAAC member Diane Cottrell is the Acting Associate Deputy Director for Administration Case Review (ACR). Ms. Cottrell has been with the Department for over 22 years and has held several positions within the agency. She has been a Child Welfare Specialist, Management Operations Analyst (ACR) and was serving as a Public Service Administrator (ACR) prior her appointment as Acting Associate Deputy Director.

Ms. Cottrell has been a long standing member of the AAAC where she has served in some very vital roles, for example, former chair of the conference planning committee. She continues to be a member of the conference planning committee. She is chair of the membership committee and always



Diane Cottrell

volunteers to take the lead on various ad hoc committees that are necessary for the Council's special projects.

Ms. Cottrell holds a Master of Social Work Degree from the University of Illinois Chicago with a concentration in Policy and Bachelors of Science Degree from Illinois State University with a concentration in Criminal Justice.

# From The Chairman

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to meet their family needs without any financial restraints. One or both parents may have lost their jobs, stock investments and the family may be losing their home.

I have read of instances where some families that fit this description are living in their cars and are trying desperately to keep their situation a secret from friends and their children's schools. Are we prepared to deal with this new dynamic? Are we prepared to deal with any anger that a parent may possess because of the condition they find themselves in and may turn to substance abuse which may lead to violence? The despair within these parents may give them a sense of hopelessness and any resiliency may not surface. I think we have to be very cognizant of the fact that such families may require the professional to be cautious, patient and alert to any situations that may put them in harm's way. Perhaps there should be some training provided to DCFS and private agency staff on how to help these families through these challenging times.

Dealing with the challenges being placed on our doorsteps really requires us all to constantly self assess to see if we are doing all that we can to support families. These challenges also require strong and compassionate leadership. The cliché "when the going gets tough, the tough gets going" epitomizes our Director, Erwin McEwen. Faced with a major budget dilemma, Director McEwen did not take the path of sitting and waiting to see what will happen. He chose to get in the mix and make things happen for the betterment of children, families and the staff that these families rely on for assistance during one of the most critical times in the history of our country.

The African American Advisory Council commends the Director for his resiliency and outstanding leadership during these difficult times. As a result of his actions, it has been made clear throughout the state by Governor's Quinn's statement "the people of Illinois need us now more than ever." It is up to each one of us to push forward in providing that need.

Enjoy your summer,  
**Michael D. Burns**



Members of the dance group "Havoc" astonished the audience with their magical footwork.

## AAAC Salutes the Portman Family

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were their kids. Not only did we have wonderful grandparents that stepped in to raise us, we were also blessed with a loving aunt, Jackie Portman, who was and is always there to step in and help in all areas. The main factor behind our success came from being raised in a loving and caring household. Our household is filled with spiritual guidance and love. I will also like to give an acknowledgment to the Department of Children and Family Services for all of its support and help.

**Jimmy D., wrote:**

My name is Jimmy D. and I am 19 years old. I am currently a sophomore at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the College of Business with a concentration in Accounting. I am the youngest of four siblings and we were all raised by our loving grandparents. My oldest sister, Ebony Jackson-Cotner, currently resides in Indianapolis. She is happily married and has a daughter. Ebony attended 2 the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga for 2 years before graduating from Indiana Business College with an Associate's Degree in Applied Science. She is now working as a Billing Specialist for Community North Hospital in Indianapolis.

My grandparents and aunt could not have done a better job raising me and my siblings. Their care and support has shaped me into the per-

son I am today. From a young age they instilled in me the importance of education, religion, and good ethics. I can truly say I am blessed to have such compassionate grandparents who decided to take care of me and my siblings. My grandmother quit her job to ensure all of our needs were met. If my grandparents Eular and John Portman did not take us in most likely we would have been separated. I will forever cherish the memories I have shared with my grandparents, siblings, aunt, and other family members. My grandparents embraced us with open arms and I never felt any differently from any other family. My family situation never limited any opportunities for success and strengthened my appreciation for family.

Although I am sometimes saddened that my parents were unable to be a part of my upbringing, I do not regret anything. I have been with my grandparents since birth, and they have helped me to grow spiritually, and equipped me with the necessary tools to succeed in life. I am grateful that God allowed our family to stay together because many families are not that fortunate. I will always have gratitude for my grandparents who nurtured me, the Department of Children and Family Services for their support with helping to keep my family together, and the few caseworkers that I have had the pleasure of meeting.

# 17th Annual African American Advisory Council Institute

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suspense until the very end of his moving speech, to reveal that the story he was telling was his. By the end of his story, the conference participants were in tears. Dr. Levitt is a testament that youth in the child welfare system, are resilient despite their myriad placements and encounters with multiple caretaker personalities. His experience served as a reminder that child welfare professionals must continue to engage each youth on numerous levels in hopes that each youth will perform at his or her maximum capability in life.

Each year The Council seeks to develop workshops around a theme that will not only be interactive but will provide relevant information for the conference participants. This year, "Shifting the Paradigm: Strengthening Families to Enhance a Voluntary Family System" was chosen as the theme. The Council hoped to provide the participants (DCFS and Purchase of Service (POS) direct service workers) with trainings to help them deal with the many conflicts, challenges, and dilemmas that they encounter in servicing their cases. As a result, the following workshop, that aimed at promoting "out of the box" thinking in delivering child welfare services were developed:

- How to Communicate with Families During the Assessment and Case Management Process So They Will Volunteer to Participate in Services
- Coping with Workplace Transition: Managing Change While Managing Cases
- Assessing for Commercial Exploitation of Children
- Family-Based Treatment: Assessing and Addressing the Needs of Pregnant and Parenting Women and Their Children
- Assessment and Case Management with Youth Involved in Gangs
- Love Is Not Enough Taking Care of Yourself

Partner Café

- Stakeholders United Phase II
- Strengthening Families through Advocacy Centers
- Taking the OUCH Out of DCFS: Accessing and Referring for Services to Meet the Needs of Children and Families
- Keeping It Real: A Culturally Responsive Approach to Dropout Prevention

Each workshop was well attended and the dialogue was great. The Council appreciates the feedback provided via the evaluation process and look forward to next year's conference. If you have a workshop suggestion, please feel free to email your comments to Frances.Elbert@illinois.gov

As usual, the first day of the conference ended with a cultural celebration. Music is a significant part of the African American heritage; fortunately, Ms Terisa Griffin and her band captivated the audience in her encore presentation. As usual, her performance left the audience with a desire for more. The other performances this year were two youth groups. The first was a dance group of young men called, "Havoc". They really astonished the audience with their magical foot works that most of us can only dream of being able to do. And the second was an awesome choir from New Learning Center. This group of exciting youth really "rocked" the house with their spirited singing as well as the soulful directing by a DCFS youth.

The second day, opened with a symposium entitled "Strengthening and Empowering Families" moderated by Dr. George Smith. The dialogue between the panelists and conference participants was enlightening. The conference luncheon speaker, Stephanie E. Wilson- Coleman closed the conference by giving and leaving conference participants with many thoughts to ponder.

## Lifeline Connections

by Judy Hendricks  
Executive Director,  
Lifeline Family Services

**L**ifeline Connections Advocacy Center's (LCAC), located at 3616 N. Sheridan Rd. in Peoria, is a faith-based family service agency whose mission is based upon the premise that "all families have strengths". Lifeline encircles families, connecting them to a "lifeline" of support through a comprehensive social services network which is designed to preserve, restore and reunify at-risk families. LCAC's mission also includes effective advocacy for families.

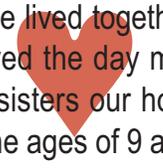
Services include Professional Advocacy and Outreach, Recovery Coaching for families with substance use issues, Focus on Fathers and a Comprehensive Information, and Referral Network to link individuals to effective resources in the community.

Through innovative support groups "Removing the Obstacles, One Brick at a Time" and "Fathers Overcoming Challenges, One Challenge at a Time," parents are empowered through the dynamics of group process, mobilization of mentoring relationships, and enhancement of natural support systems. Families are surrounded by caring staff. Families benefit from on-going community based support, bridging the gap in the continuum of services to include their lifecycle beyond the doors of our agency.

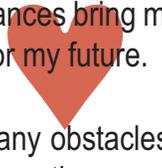
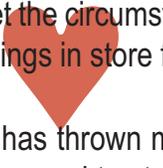
# I Changed The Hand I Was Dealt



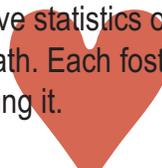
Who says you have to play the hand you are dealt? I didn't. Growing up, I had many difficulties with my identity and understanding where I belonged. I never lived with my biological parents, but I had a family-my aunt's. My aunt cared for me and seven of my siblings as well as two of her own children and three grandchildren.



Although we didn't have much money we lived together happily. Unfortunately, that happiness was destroyed the day my case worker came in and removed me and my two sisters our home, my aunt's home; I was nine at the time. Between the ages of 9 and 18, I lived in six different foster homes. Each change was different and difficult, but I refused to let the circumstances bring me down. I believed that there were great things in store for my future.



Although life has thrown many obstacles my way I would not be defeated. I persevered to stay on the course towards success. I graduated from Morgan Park High School in 2004. Today, I'm a junior at Howard University, where I will graduate from in the fall of 2010 with a major in human development and a minor in psychology. I plan on pursuing a master's degree in either public health or education.



My goal in life is to help others, especially those who have had to endure some of the hardships that I had to go through. I will encourage them to be audacious in life and strive to change any wrong hand dealt to them in their quest to stay ahead in the game of life. I Lillian Brown has done just that. I will not be one of the negative statistics of America's child welfare system. I'm paving my own path. Each foster child should have that goal and work ahead at achieving it.

**Lillian Brown**