Winston-Salem City Council
Mayor: Allen Joines;
Vivian H. Burke, Mayor Pro Tempore, Northeast Ward;
Denise D. Adams, North Ward;
Dan Besse, Southwest Ward;
Robert C. Clark, West Ward;
John Larson, South Ward;
Jeff MacIntosh, Northwest Ward;
Annette Scippio, East Ward;
James Taylor, Jr., Southeast Ward;
City Manager: Lee D. Garrity

Human Relations Staff
Wanda Allen-Abraha, Director;
Karlun Duncan, Admin. Asst./Intake
Jayme Waldeck, Specialist/Outreach
Adolfo Briceño, Specialist/
Hispanic Outreach;
Jelani Biggs, Specialist

Tu Comunidad Liaison

If you have any suggestions for a featured service or program, please contact Adolfo Briceño, Human Relations Specialist, at 336.734.1225.

MLK Young Dreamers Awards

By Adolfo Briceno

On January 22, 2019, the Human Relations Department awarded the Martin Luther King Jr. Young Dreamers Awards to two very deserving individuals: Fulton McSwain, a forensic interviewer and project manager at Family Services Inc. and Aaron Jackson, manager of the Rams Know Healthcare On Wheels Mobile Unit operated by Winston-Salem State University (WSSU).

During the ceremony, that took place at City Hall in front of City Council Members, Wanda Allen-Abraha, director for the Human Relations Department, mentioned that the award is meant to honor those people that work in the trenches and make a big difference in their communities with direct and tangible impact.

“The criteria is making sure these individuals are working in the community who are often times ignored, overlooked, or disadvantaged in some way” remarked Allen-Abraha. She added that part of the impact the honorees expect to have is fostering race relations, vocalizing or acting against an injustice, leading inclusiveness amongst all individuals, embracing those who are perceived to be different and celebrating religious diversity, among others.

Fulton McSwain, the first awardee, as a forensic interviewer, works with children that may experience or have witnessed sexual abuse. In his acceptance speech, he explained how he copes with children who talk about their experiences of sexual abuse.

“My answer is these four individuals in the corner. My amazing wife, my daughter, my brother and my hero, my father. They are the ones who give me life and give me light, when I’m in those dark places.” McSwain also added that too many times, the narrative of abuse concentrates on the abuser and his or her motivations so the focus is away from the victims. “Too many times child victims are the forgotten ones. But I thank God for restoring me; for filling my tank and allowing me to keep on going for these children”.

The second award recipient, Aaron Jackson, is the manager of the Rams Know Healthcare on Wheels mobile unit operated by Winston-Salem State University.

According to Allen-Abraha, Jackson has been in this position for four years now and he helps patients who, for the most part are uninsured, underinsured, and or low income. She added that since WSSU is the only historically black college or university in the nation with a health mobile unit, that makes “Aaron the only individual in the nation coordinating mobile healthcare in the capacity in which he serves.”

After accepting his award, Jackson mentioned that “this type of award isn’t necessarily for the individual; this type of award is for the community in which we serve. I would like to share this with the community and all the residents of Winston-Salem Forsyth County; without you we can’t improve; I want everybody to know that improvement is possible; we can live in the light of Dr. King and continue to dream and move forward and play a greater path and role for us all.”

Local Public Transportation

By Adolfo Briceno

If you are a new-comer or recent arrival to Winston-Salem and are unfamiliar with the landscape of our beautiful city, taking the public transportation system can be an efficient and cheap way to your destination. The price of the fare is $1.00. You can travel to every major site operating within our limits.

For the purpose of introducing the public transportation system to those who are unfamiliar with it, Tu Comunidad talked to Tina Carson-Wilkins, Marketing Manager for the Winston-Salem Transit Authority (WSTA), to obtain some general guidance on how to use this service more efficiently.
Renting With A Criminal History

By Adolfo Briceno

The Fair Housing Project from Legal Aid of North Carolina recently issued an “information sheet” for people with a criminal history that wants to rent a house or an apartment. The document provides pointers to individuals with a criminal history as to how they can be aware of their Fair Housing rights even though they may have had arrests or convictions in the past.

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) issued guidance regarding criminal history and Fair Housing rights. In general, the document explains what HUD would consider discriminatory under the Fair Housing Act when it comes to rejections based on criminal history.

Tu Comunidad: What are the fundamentals for new arrivals when it comes to riding the WSTA bus?

Carson-Wilkins: Make sure you are boarding the right bus. The electronic signs on the front and side of the vehicle shows route numbers with several destinations the buses travel.

Tu Comunidad: What would be the problem if some buses share the same destination like Hanes Mall, for instance?

Carson-Wilkins: We have five routes that go to Hanes Mall, but if you want to travel to a destination along the route, the other buses may not go there at all. If you are not sure of your destination ask the bus operator; they are familiar with the routes. Be sure to ask for assistance. Most WSTA buses have voice systems working on the bus, which speak English and Spanish. Pay attention to the voice system on the bus. It will mention the stops as the bus is traveling; you can also download our NextBus app to get bus alerts. So, if there is a problem with the route, it will alert passengers on their cell phone through this app.

Tu Comunidad: Is there another suggestion?

Carson-Wilkins: When boarding the bus make sure you have the correct change because the bus operators will not provide it. If a passenger does not have a dollar bill, they should put coins in the farebox up to a dollar; the farebox does not recognize bill denominations. So, if you put a five, 10- or 20-dollar bill in the farebox, you will not get any change returned to you right away. If you put the wrong amount of money in the farebox, let our customer service representatives know by calling 336.727.2000.

Tu Comunidad: Are there any security suggestions?

Carson-Wilkins: Never get off the bus with someone you don’t know, especially in an area you are not familiar with. If you are interested in a particular stop, ask the bus operator, not another passenger you have never met. Also, push the yellow strip inside the bus to alert the operator when you want to get off.

If you feel unsafe or are lost, all of our vehicles are part of the Safe Place Program. If you need to be in a safe place, the operator will allow you to board and bring you to the Transportation Center (TC) in Downtown Winston-Salem. If the bus does not travel downtown, the operator will call a supervisor who will pick up the passenger from the bus and transport them to the TC. Typically, the supervisor will then call the police and will try to make sure the passenger is okay. This works with lost children who somehow got separated from their parents or with victims of domestic violence.

To expand upon this document, The Fair Housing Project from Legal Aid of North Carolina gave easy-to-understand examples of what could be a red flag and potentially a discriminatory rejection under the Fair Housing Act when it comes to criminal background checks. They are listed below:

1. - A leasing agent requires certain applicants (as opposed to everybody) to undergo a criminal background check.

2. - A leasing agent tells you that they make decisions about applicants based on arrest records (as opposed to convictions).

3. - You have a criminal record related to your disability, and request a reasonable accommodation to a criminal record screening but are denied.

4. - You are discouraged from submitting an application because of a conviction on your record.

5. - A housing provider’s policy rejects all applicants with any criminal history.

6. - A property manager says you must move (or won’t rent to you) because you’ve been arrested for domestic violence, even though you were the victim in the incident.

To try to ensure that the applicant’s Fair Housing rights are preserved, this information sheet goes on to mention the following recommendations after the rejection over criminal background check has been issued:

1. - Document every interaction you have with the housing provider. Include information about the property, addresses, dates, times, names of the people you spoke with, and the nature of the interaction.

2. - Save any applications, brochures, emails, texts, and any other documents related to the interaction.

3. - If you are denied because of your criminal history, ask for a copy of the background check they conducted. You are legally entitled to it.

In an interview, Jeff Dillman, Co-Director for the Legal Aid Fair Housing Project, said that HUD’s guidance states that when analyzing criminal records, housing providers have to consider the nature and severity of the charges against the person, and how long it has been since the last incident in assessing the individual’s application.

He also added that HUD stated that since minorities and people of color suffer disproportionate rates of arrest and incarceration, a blanket policy that flatly denies them access to housing based on any criminal incident in their past could be considered discriminatory. Dillman noted that housing providers can still deny renters based on their criminal past if they pose a danger to other people or to property, but that providers should evaluate applicants individually based on the criteria listed above.

Dillman also stressed that an applicant whose criminal conviction is related to a disability can ask for a reasonable accommodation to have the incident not be the basis for a denial if he or she can show that his or her situation has changed and he or she no longer is likely to commit another offense or otherwise be a danger. If the request was denied, then he or she could have a basis for a Fair Housing complaint.