

## Chicago Housing Authority program teaches: 'You can'

### SELF-SUFFICIENCY | Family goes from living on vouchers to home ownership -- and beyond

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BY [MAUDLYNE IHEJIRIKA](#) Staff Reporter

Rebecca Rodriguez, her husband and four children were sharing a tiny, three-bedroom apartment rented with a Chicago Housing Authority voucher when she heard of its Family Self-Sufficiency program.

The authority's 13-year-old FSS program helps participants change their lives and maybe no longer need voucher help.

For Rodriguez, 43, that was five years ago. Last week, she and her husband and others graduated from the program at a ceremony highlighting the agency's successes with its teach-a-man-to-fish-rather-than-give-him-fish philosophy.

"Sometimes we don't feel like we can do something. We don't have the self-confidence or the information how," said Rodriguez. "They gave me that and an opportunity of making a better life for my family."

Part of CHA's ballyhooed "Plan for Transformation," the voluntary program establishes a five-year contract with voucher holders identifying life goals and an action plan.

In all, 643 people have achieved education and career advancement, employment and homeownership via FSS since 1997, accessing life coaches and financial incentives.

Rodriguez and husband Jose had used vouchers since 2002. When they signed up for FSS, they were living off Jose's Social Security.

"I dreamed of having my own house," said Rodriguez. So her FSS advocate helped her set that goal and others.

First, she joined the AmeriCorps program and was placed as a teacher's assistant with the Center for Literacy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, helping teach English as Second Language classes.

"As I was helping the teachers, they were teaching me," she said.

Rodriguez next got her G.E.D. and took classes on how to budget, start a savings account and repair their credit. Later, she took computer training and child development courses, while Jose learned automotive repair.

She eventually was hired full time at UIC, and the couple achieved their American dream. They now own a home in Ashburn.

Rodriguez doesn't plan to stop there, however. She has set her sights on entrepreneurship, recently getting licensed to run a day-care center from her home.

"Every time we completed one of our goals, we felt proud of ourselves, but now we're always looking for a next opportunity to improve ourselves," she said. "I'd tell anyone, whatever dream you have, do it. We had so many obstacles, and many times felt we wouldn't make it, but learned that by staying focused and not giving up, you can."

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Rebecca and Jose Rodriguez attend the Family Self-Sufficiency program graduation ceremony last week. (Scott Stewart/Sun-Times)

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