

'The light bill people'

Community Action Agency provides much more to area residents

By [Cleveland Tinker](#)

Special to the Guardian

Published: Wednesday, December 4, 2013 at 2:07 p.m.

Ciera Watson and Ajaita Wilson will be able to get decent-paying jobs with skills they are acquiring as clients in the Family Self-Sufficiency Program at the Central Florida Community Action Agency.



CLEVELAND TINKER/Special to the Guardian

Ciera Watson, a client in the Family Self-Sufficiency Program, studies at Santa Fe College.

Both sought help from the agency with their utility bills, but they are now enrolled in medical-related associate of science degree programs at Santa Fe College.

The Community Action Agency is a private, nonprofit, community-based organization whose purpose is to reduce poverty and help low-income individuals and families become self-sufficient. It serves residents in Alachua, Levy and Marion counties.

To be eligible for the programs, residents must meet U.S. poverty guidelines. During the last fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30, the agency assisted about 5,000 individuals and families, with about 40 percent of them being residents of Alachua County.

Watson, 25, is studying to be a respiratory care therapist, and Wilson, 30, is studying to be a surgical technician. According to the Santa Fe College website, respiratory therapists in Gainesville can earn between \$38,000 to \$55,000 annually, with surgical techs here earning starting salaries of at least \$28,000 annually. The 18-month respiratory care program at SF College trains students to care for patients who have trouble breathing and the one-year surgical tech program trains students to set up operating rooms for surgical procedures.

"It is truly a blessing to be able to get support from the Community Action Agency and to receive assistance from them," said Watson, a

2007 graduate of Hawthorne High School, adding that the agency has paid for her textbooks and given her more than \$1,200 to get her 2005 Ford Focus repaired.

Clients in the Self-Sufficiency program are assigned a case worker and are required to honor a one- or two-year contract that consists of guidelines to follow toward self-sufficiency.

Charles Harris, who replaced Robert Wilford as CEO of the agency in early November, said many people refer to the agency as "the light bill people," but he added the agency offers other services. In addition to the Self-Sufficiency program, the agency has three other major programs, including the Emergency Assistance Program, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, and the Weatherization Assistance Program.

The Emergency Assistance program is for residents who need one-time help in emergency situations, such as paying their utility bill and rent or getting help with transportation and temporary shelter. The Home Energy program helps residents with one-time utility bill payments, too, in addition to assistance for residents whose lights are about to get disconnected or are already disconnected and help with disaster relief assistance, which could include utility bill payments, heaters, fans and blankets.

The Weatherization program is designed to reduce energy costs for low-income families, particularly the disabled and the elderly, by providing attic and floor insulation, caulking, installation of solar screens, replacement of inefficient cooling and heating systems and doors and windows, weather stripping and minor wall, floor and ceiling repairs.

Harris said all of the agency programs are good because they help people get out of jams, but he emphasized the Self-Sufficiency program is at the core of the mission of the agency.

"The FSSP is one of the programs we are most proud of because it is designed to help take people off the poverty rolls by assisting them with job training, child care and whatever they need in order to be successful," said Harris, who retired in October as director of the Knight Division for Scholarships, Career Services & Multicultural Affairs in the College of Journalism at the University of Florida.

"We have helped a lot of people go to Santa Fe to get AA and AS degrees. We help them get the job skills they need that will enable them to get jobs that will allow them to take care of their families."

Last fiscal year, the agency had a budget of nearly \$4 million, but the budget for this fiscal year, which runs from Oct. 1 to Sept. 30, 2014, has not been finalized because of the federal sequester and ongoing federal budget discussions. Harris said the agency's major source of funding comes from the Community Service Block Grant program, which provides federal funding for agencies and other programs that seek to address poverty at the community level.

In order to receive help, residents must provide proper documentation, which includes a valid photo ID, Social Security cards for all household members, SNAP/food stamp verification letters and other documents.

Prospective clients of the Self-Sufficiency program must have a total annual household income of no more than 125 percent of the poverty level, or no more than \$34,575 for a family of four.

Prospective clients of the LIHEAP program must have a total annual household income of no more than 150 percent of the poverty level, or no more than \$35,325 for a family of four.

Prospective clients of the Weatherization program must have a total annual household income of no more than 200 percent of the poverty level, or no more than \$47,100 for a family of four.

Wilson, who enrolled in the surgical tech program in August at SF College, said she is very appreciative of the help she is receiving from the agency.

"They helped me get scrub attire for school, they will be paying my rent for the next two months and they purchased one of my textbooks," said Wilson, adding that she probably would not be in the program without the help of the agency. "It would definitely be more of a struggle without their help."

Copyright © 2016 Gainesville.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.