

School of Social Work 100th Anniversary Speech



Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you, Aaron, and the School of Social Work for inviting me to speak. I asked Aaron if he invited me because I was the oldest currently practicing alumnae he knew. He did not directly answer the question so I'm still not sure. I can tell you that I came to MU exactly half a century ago as a 17-year-old college freshman so I'm celebrating an anniversary this year too.

When my twin sister, Judy, and I stepped onto campus in the fall of 1972, neither of us had a declared major. I was considering a career in library science or social work, but when I found myself weeping over the description of the plight of the urban poor in my Introduction to Social Welfare textbook, I made up my mind to pursue social work. My sister followed suit, and she has had a long career, primarily in hospice and bereavement work.

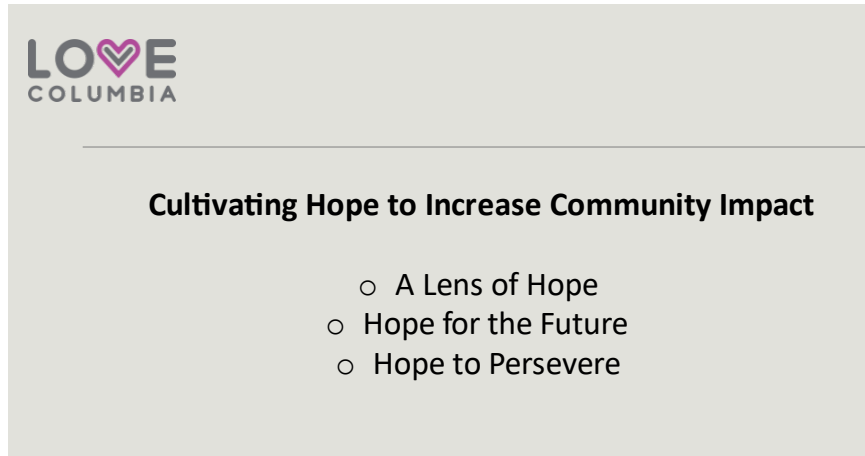
I have loved being a social worker and never regretted my choice to enter this field for one minute. I did manage to work library science into it though and you can check that out at the Love Columbia website under the Information Library tab. Here is the link and a link to the Career Next Steps microsite we are creating within the information library to serve as a community clearinghouse for career advancement opportunities.

Information Library:
www.lovecolumbia.org/informationlibrary

Career Next Steps:
www.lovecolumbia.org/careemnext-steps

I believe if you live long enough, most of the dots of your life somehow connect. My sister who considered a career in teaching before she entered social work, wrote a book of activities for children living with a terminally ill parent or relative.

Today, I am going to talk about cultivating hope and how it increases our community impact.



Karol Wojtyla was a Polish priest who persevered through the Nazi and Stalin regimes and went on to become Pope John Paul II. After his death, a reporter asked a close friend of his how he rose to such influence. The friend replied: The one who has the most hope has the most influence.

I believe the influence of social workers and our profession as a whole is related to this. We have hope and this gives us influence. Who has the most influence? The one who has the most hope. Whether this is for the individual with whom we are working or the systems and societal trends we are trying to change.

As social workers, we have hope. We keep trying, innovating, and persevering even through the most challenging times. We love to pilot practices, analyze them, and keep making improvements. We recognize some of these practices may fail, but we also believe you can fail forward. So, I want to talk with you about the power of hope by looking at these three points:

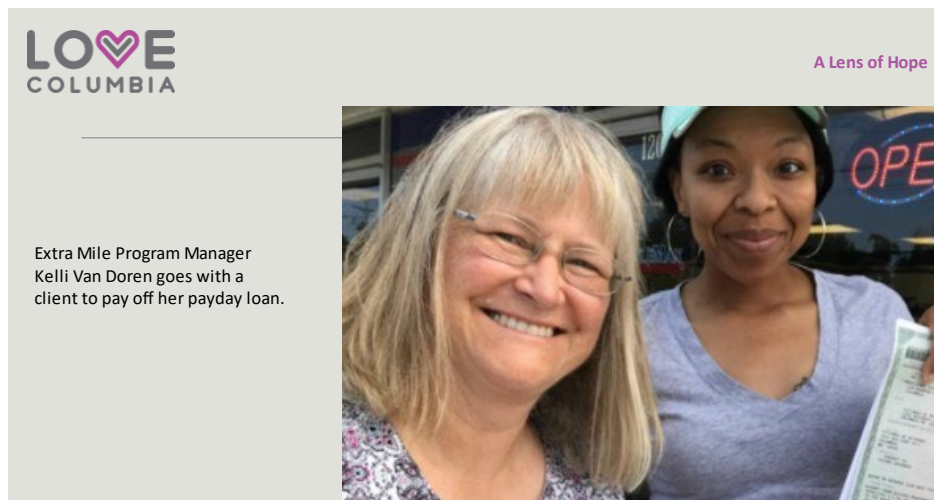
1. Having a lens of hope
2. Hope for a better future
3. Hope to persevere

A Lens of Hope

I love social work's emphasis on taking a strengths-based approach. This lens really does change everything. You always find more of what you are actively looking for. We look for strengths. This has carried over for me when I try to use SWOT analysis. I can always write pages on Strengths and Opportunities, but often need help identifying Weaknesses and Threats. This may be because I have come to recognize there may be benefits in what seems to be a lack of resources and limited capacity.

When we started Love Columbia, we had no money to hire anyone, so we used volunteers. This has turned out to be one of the best parts of our service model. We engage people who are not professional social workers in helping their neighbors. We have put a face on poverty for CEOs, bank presidents, the

“Haves” of Columbia who had never personally known a “Have Not.” We are stitching the community together one relationship at a time and bringing sectors into the equity conversation who had never been there before. We have a very successful payday loan relief program where we give no interest loans to pay off high interest debt. It started because the assistant to a local bank president told him they had to do something to help her financial coaching participant who could not balance her budget due to a 461% payday loan. He helped us gather six local bank presidents. and we walked away with \$12K that was matched by two local physicians. A few other donors have jumped in and now we have given over 50 loans with a 95% repayment rate.



I believe our limitations also help us answer the very important question: What is ours to do?

I love to say: Limitations are guard rails directing our steps and closed doors form hallways. I choose to see all the things I can't do now that I'm blind as friends helping me focus on what I really am supposed to do in this season of my life. I'm not being shut out. I'm being redirected to what is most important.

Our limitations also press us toward collaboration. Janet Thompson, former public defender, and current County Commissioner, loves to say: In Missouri, we know silos are only good for storing grain. Limitations break us out of our silos. They cause us to see more clearly how much we need each other.

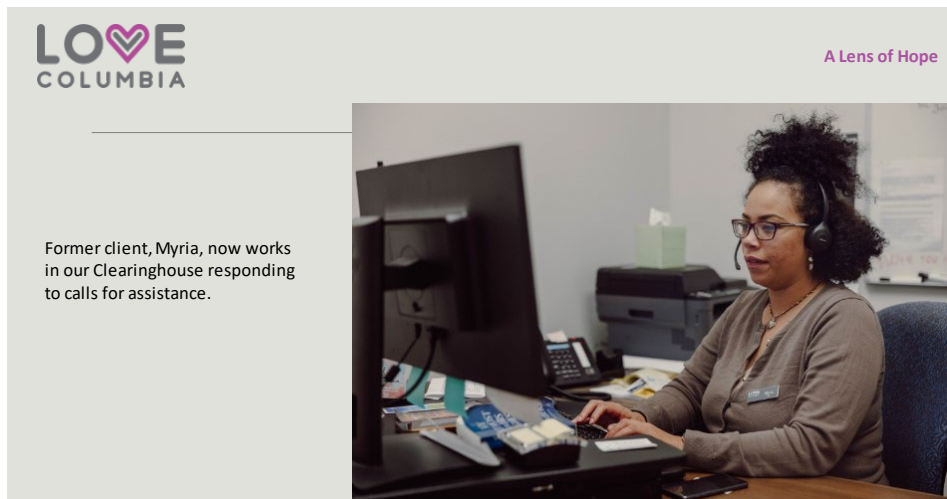
One of my greatest joys since losing my sight is that I can easily make everyone around me an expert. When he is with me, my three-year-old grandson becomes the expert on so many things - what is outside the window, where the next curb is. It brings him so much pleasure and caused me to see how much we deprive others when we try to do it all or know everything.

Our limitations also make us so much more relatable to others.

One day, shortly after I lost my sight, I was standing with my white stick, near the front entrance to our building and a woman came in, pointed to me, and said, "I want to talk with her. She looks like she has been through some stuff." So, lots of things, including some of our weaknesses, can be identified as strengths.

Perhaps the most often repeated comment I have heard from our clients through the years is: "You believed in me until I could believe in myself." As social workers, we believe in people. We speak about strengths, both to individuals, groups, and communities.

Two of them lived in our transitional homes to reset after becoming homeless. They are now beautifully helping others with wisdom and strength gained from their own lived experience. Every time I am with them, I marvel at their courage and hope.



This is Myria whom I met when she was 12. She was living in what I considered the most unsafe neighborhood in Columbia. Her mother was struggling with drug addiction and her father was in prison. Yet she believed she could have a better life. She graduated from every program we offered, and this year obtained her bachelor's degree. She takes incoming requests for assistance and does an incredible job. Her next goal: to get her master's in social work.

This leads to my second point.

Hope for A Better Future

Having hope that we are moving toward a better future gives us influence. It is powerful to believe and share the belief that better days are ahead. It allows us to reframe current difficult circumstances in a way that makes them bearable and gives energy.

I thought it was brilliant when I heard Veterans United sent all their employees' home at the pandemic shut down with stress balls shaped like lemons. They were clearly sending the message; we are going to make lemonade.

I happen to believe that the universe is friendly. For me that means that God is good and that His plans, though beyond my figuring out, are also good.

This is why I have the words, "Stay Fascinated", in my signature block. The amazing story we are caught up in is still unfolding. I want my posture to be sitting on the edge of my chair in fascination.

I have a print on the wall in my office of 13th Century mystic, Julian of Norwich's most famous statement: "All will be well. All will be well. All manner of things will be well."

Julian heard this as she listened in prayer.

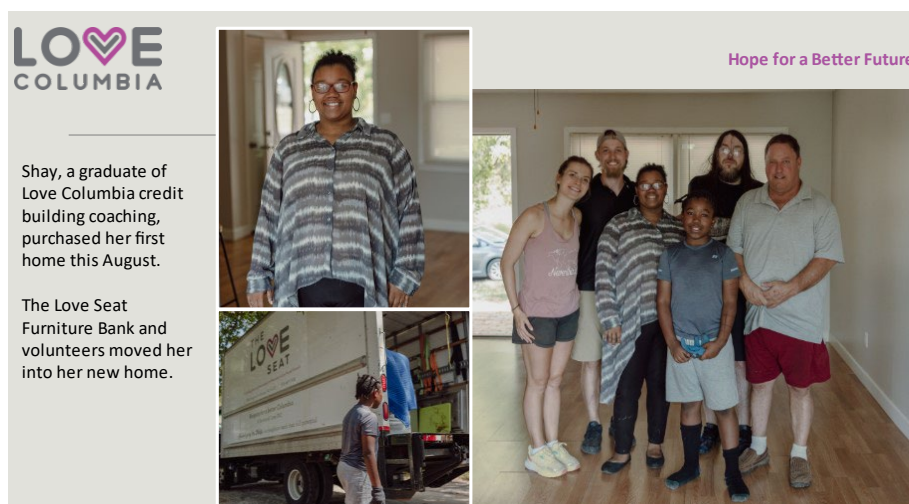
I have heard some similar things as I have listened in prayer that have caused me to have hope for a better future. The night before what turned out to be my last failed eye surgery, I sat pondering the

future. I said out loud: I feel like I am running toward the edge of a cliff. Immediately, the words came into my mind: Oh, no, you are just speeding up to fly. A few weeks later, when it was clear I would not see again, I told God I didn't think I could do this. A gentle voice in my head whispered: Just see this season as Me walking you blindfolded to a big surprise party.

A few weeks ago, it occurred to me that what I can see is darkness trembling. It doesn't have to be just gray dots that are constantly moving. Why can't I see it as light arising that is causing darkness to tremble? Why can't I believe that I'm continually being reminded that there is a better future?

Some would say that right now may not be the best time for Love Columbia to focus our attention on becoming HUD Housing Counseling certified so we can teach homeownership classes and qualify people for first time homeowner's benefits. Both house prices and interest rates have gone up.

But you know, I've gotten really angry over a few things lately. One is low-income people being priced out of the rental market. Another is that I learned that only 3% of homeowners in Boone County are black. I have a photo I want to show you that I hope brings you hope for a better future.



Shay, a graduate of Love Columbia credit building coaching, purchased her first home this August.

The Love Seat Furniture Bank and volunteers moved her into her new home.

This is Shay who graduated from our credit score building program and moved from homeless (doubled up with family or staying in hotels for the past year) to moving into her new home she purchased last week.

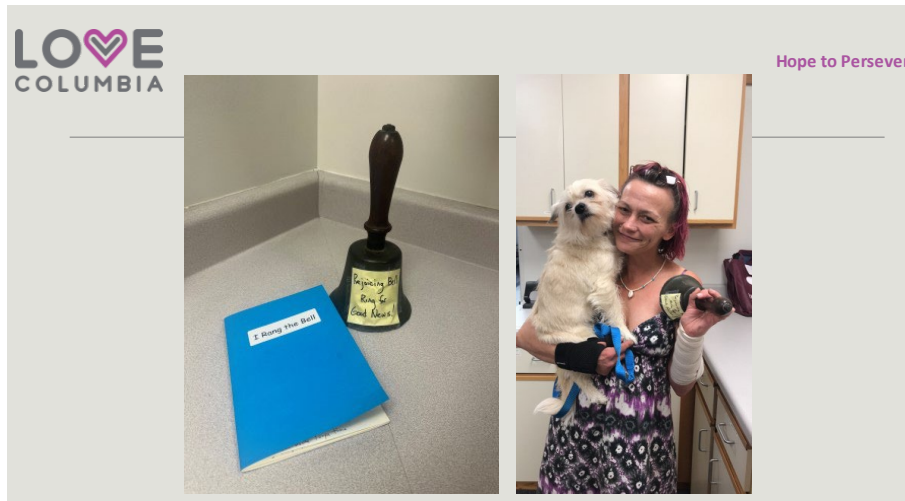
I'm telling you, when a social worker gets stirred up, the darkness starts to tremble. There is hope for a better future.

Hope to Persevere

For us at Love Columbia, the post pandemic housing crisis and inflation have been more discouraging than the initial pandemic complications. The first week of the shutdown, we found ourselves with 23 families catapulted into homelessness and needing emergency hotel stays. Emergency hotel stays were something we had only done very occasionally up to this time. Fairly quickly, we secured government and private pandemic relief funds which paid for the hotel stays and provided deposits and first month rent assistance. We were able to get most people quickly housed as finding available, affordable housing

was not a significant barrier. By mid-2021, the situation had completely changed. Not only had the cost of hotel stays gone up, but affordable housing seemed to have disappeared. Rent had risen on average 20%, and many landlords stopped accepting housing choice vouchers. We ramped up efforts to help people apply for SAFHR, and I'm pleased to say we brought \$2 million in rent directly to Columbia landlords. This prevented some evictions, but many were unable to re-sign at the end of their lease period due to rent increases. We found ourselves consistently housing around 25 families in hotels, with dwindling pandemic relief funding and no place for people to go.

That's when we brought out the joy bell.

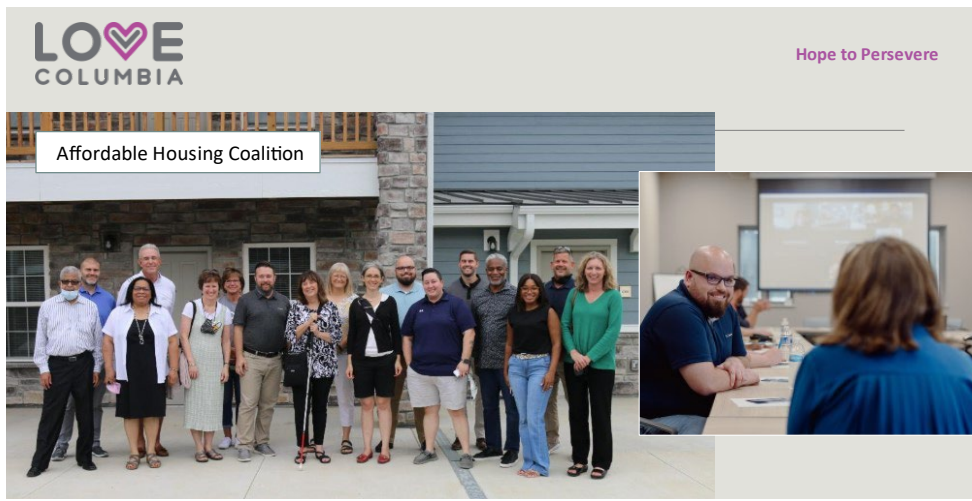


It's an old school bell a staff member brought in for staff or clients to ring when something good happens. We have a notebook beside the bell to record a simple message. "I got my credit score up to 720." The 37th landlord I called said he would rent to me." "I got a job today." "I got an apartment after two years of homelessness."

The joy bell has helped us see that all is not lost. We kept going and counted at the year's halfway mark that we had transitioned 123 individuals/families from homelessness to permanently housed.

Still, this season of inflated prices and tightened housing market was like nothing we had seen before and there seemed to be no end in sight. We opened our doors in 2008, just before the economy tanked, so we knew about societal pressures, but this felt apocalyptic.

We recognized we needed to draw together as many partners as possible. We took a bus trip to KCK to visit a new, affordable housing complex. We started an affordable housing coalition to get concerned citizens, social services, church, government and business people in the same room.



I don't mind being corny or even whimsical, so we started a campaign called "22 Ways to Step into the Housing Crisis in 2022".



It gives options that range from taking an emergency basket to a displaced family to constructing affordable housing.

Ringling bells, gathering people in groups, giving everyone something to do has helped us have hope to persevere through these difficult times. We are also making plans to add nine units of transitional housing to our existing four units. PHOTO We are also adding a support program for people who get housed to help them maintain their housing.

We are closing our office for the first week of October to give time for staff to catch their breath, reflect on what we have learned over the past couple of years and work together to strengthen our processes and relationships. We are stoking the embers of hope every way we can think of.

I find that I am looking more often than ever before to friends, co-workers, and colleagues to find strength and hope.

As I start to close, I want to acknowledge some of the MU School of Social Work faculty and graduates who have particularly cultivated hope in me. A few of the faculty members first:

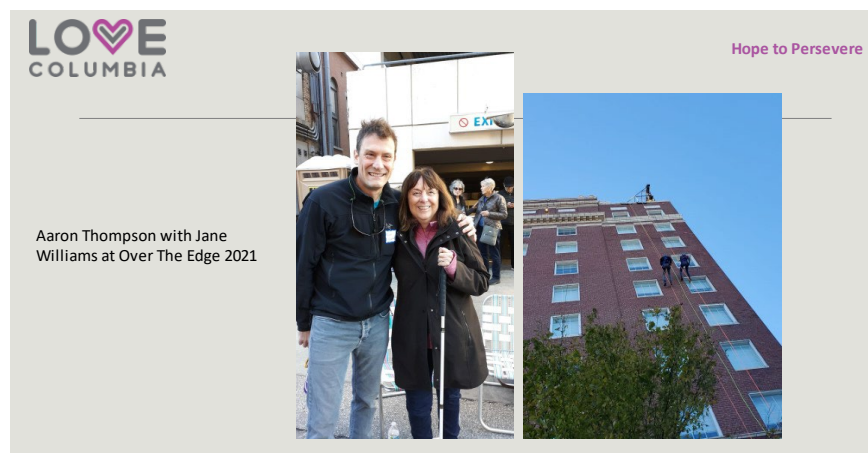
Virginia Southwood, my advisor, stood with me when I had eye surgery during my senior year and had to delay my BSW practicum to the summer. She gave me confidence that I could finish.

Jane Piester has been a support to me for years, going back to the days when we job shared at Boone Hospital, and she never got upset by my rushing around like a whirlwind and wearing her name tag by mistake.

Joanne Mermelstein was there when we started Love Columbia. She told me what we were doing was important and encouraged her church to support us.

Christine Woods found ways to honor me as a community leader before I believed it was true myself.

Aaron Thompson gave us guidance in our early days of developing measurable outcomes for our work and, last year, rappelled The Tiger Hotel for our "Over the Edge" fundraiser. He really is a wild man!

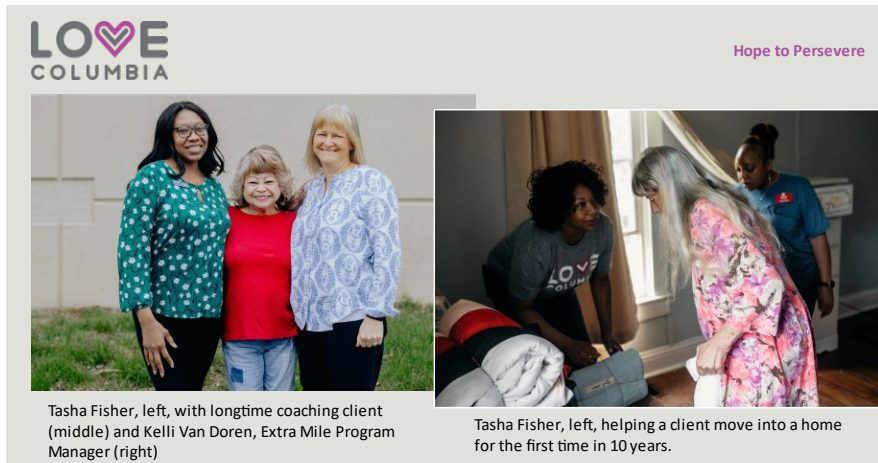


Dan Hanneken takes time to meet with me nearly every week, prays for me and encourages me deeply. He is a fellow visionary and nonprofit founder, so we share our hopes and dreams together and stand together in challenging times. He is the first person I heard say: It's all good in the end and, if it is not good, it is not the end.

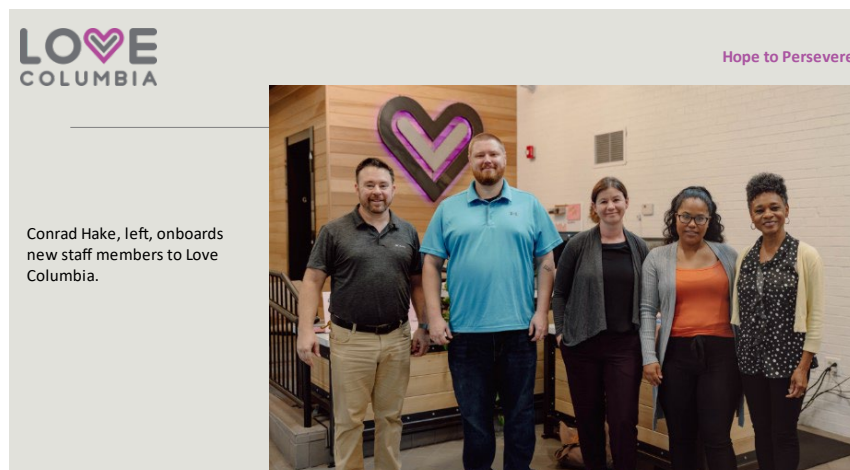
I wish I had time to list all the students who have breathed hope into my soul. I'll just mention four who came to work for us. Kelly Hill, now Director of CASA, developed our highly successful Extra Mile money management program that matches 100 participants with trained, volunteer coaches each year.

Hannah Mitchell, now a policy analysis supervisor with MHDC, transitioned us from a homemade Access client database to a highly effective, customized cloud-based system.

Tasha Fisher is one of our program managers and daily brings the best of social work values to our agency.



Conrad Hake, another program manager, and current grad student, is brilliantly keeping us connected to the latest research and practices.



Finally, I want to mention two women who graduated in my day and volunteer with Love Columbia. Sherryl Laws who has supported many of our clients at no charge through the years and Kitty Spencer who does client follow up surveys and keeps me going by telling me she hears we are doing a good job.

Social workers have influenced me greatly by having hope for my life and work. And now I want to encourage you to have a lens of hope, hope for a better future, and maintain a hope that fuels perseverance.

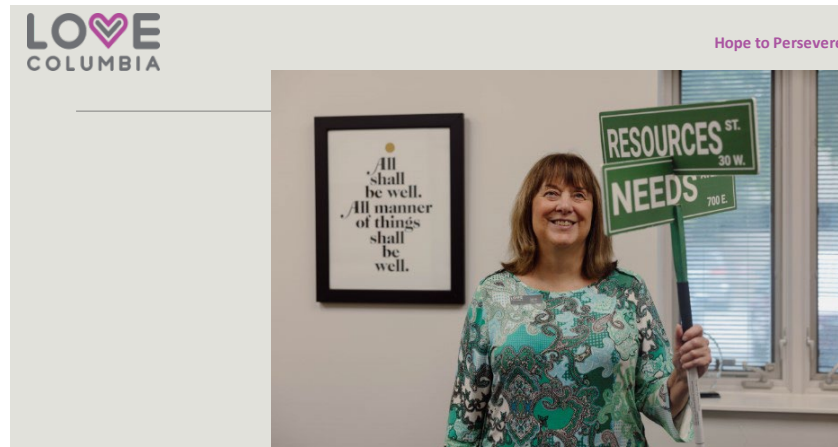
I'm going to close with the words of two black pastors who have also given me hope. Their words have provided my marching orders over the past two years:

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of "the fierce urgency of now" in his 1963 "I Have A Dream" speech. Dr. Lester Woods, Jr. (husband of our dear Christine): said words at a 2019 local financial stability conference that have rung in my head ever since: "What does it take to turn a moment into a movement? It takes sacrifice."

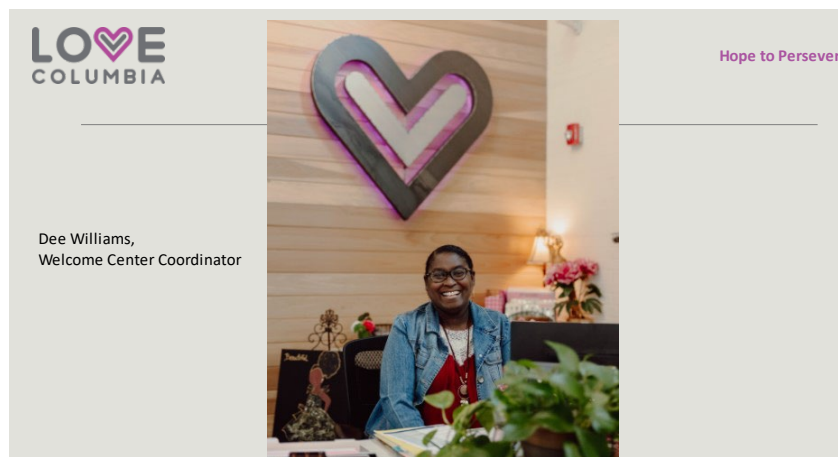
For the sake of our 100th year history and all those who have gone before us. Let's step into our day with renewed urgency and effort. We have hope. We have influence, and Our time is now!

And don't forget, it is okay, perhaps even helpful, if you are a little corny or whimsical.

Here I am with a homemade street sign stuck to my stick. We like to say we are a welcome center at the intersection of needs and resources.



And here is a photo of Dee Williams, our welcome coordinator, in all her pink splendor.



We believe everyone needs to have the hope that there is someone who is glad to see them. Thank you for listening to me today. I'm so honored we could be together to share this significant time.