The Village of Niles like most suburban municipalities is charged with responding to issues and challenges faced by residents with creativity, innovation and sustainability. In 2013, with the installation of a new Mayor, new Village Leadership Team and new Director of Family Services new ideas and possibilities began to emerge to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of how Human Services were provided. Historically, “Human Services” has been impacted by the stigma of “asking for help” which often prevents residents from utilizing services sooner and waiting for the “crisis” to emerge. In addition, the preconceived ideas of the role of Social Workers and helping professionals often keep potential from receiving the services they need.

**Intention**: Created in 1967, Niles Family Services has been the hub of all Human Service activity in the Village with services and outreach provided to elementary/middle and high schools, healthcare providers, community providers and residents of all ages. With the arrival of a new Director of Family Services in August of 2013, Tony Hollenback, and the leadership of Mayor Andrew Przybylo an intentional shift was made to focus on “wellness” approach through prevention and early intervention. One of the many programs impacted by this shift was the Financial Assistance program. In the past, this program has provided limited assistance to residents in need of support. However, the trend/pattern indicated a growing dependency on the support provided by the Village and a need to transform this program through creativity, innovation, transformation and sustainability.

**Implementation**: Using a multi-tiered approach to Wellness, Niles Family Services put a variety of supports in place to empower, motivate and mobilize residents impacted by financial hardships. This was accomplished in various ways.

1. A review of the residents underlying causes were studied to determine more effective ways to support them and successfully address related to their hardship (i.e. addiction, mental health, unemployment). Since implementation began of this new approach, Niles Family Services has evaluated over 225 residents.
2. Through the support of the NFS Team and Director, Tony Hollenback, a life skills workbook was created called, “Create Your Path, Build Your Future”, using very easy, understandable language translated into Polish, Urdu, Hindi, Spanish and Arabic to meet the diverse needs of our community. All residents were expected to attend the workshop as a condition of receiving financial support
3. All residents were also required to attend a face to face evaluation with a staff member to verify their income, financial obligations and create a “care plan” that also addressed other needs as identified in the assessment.
4. Once the workshop was completed, NFS created a “financial package” including funds from the Village, local churches, the Salvation Army and other community partners to assist residents with their needs. The amount of financial support provided from the Village of Niles, Salvation Army and local churches totals $45,925.
5. After the assistance is provided, all residents receive follow up by a member of NFS for up to 5 times in the next 12 months following their initial contact. The role/goal of this is to provide more intensive support to identify residents who might have financial setbacks before the crisis emerges and re-engage them in services from the department.

**Partnerships**: This new approach has been supported by the local St. Vincent DePaul partnerships in the community, other local human service providers including the Center of Concern, Maine Township and East Maine School District 63 to provide a systemic approach financial assistance. In addition, Niles Family Services has engaged a team member, Ron Molick, LCSW, who is also on staff at BMO Harris Bank and Dennis Lingenfelter, Branch Manager of First Merit Bank in Niles to provide additional financial coaching and support to motivate residents that change is possible for anyone. Our partnerships have been key to our success.

**Holistic Perspective**: This integrated approach also allows residents to see the services/programs at Family Services as a constant source of support including access to the Food Pantry, personal hygiene supplies, clothing and counseling to deal with the underlying issues that precipitated the financial hardship.

**Costs**: The cost for the program was minimal including the cost of printing for the workbook, staff time and the use of Social Work Interns and volunteers to assist with facilitating the class, tracking the data/trends and following up with residents to ensure they are receiving a comprehensive menu of services to assist them.

Overall, it has been exciting to see the impact of this program including a decrease in utilization of funds in “crisis”, residents reaching out for support before the hardship and an increase in residents becoming more connected to outside resources (i.e. employment, public benefits, healthcare resources) to improve their quality of life and self-sufficiency.