

Watts Labor Community Action Committee: A Community's Hope

Watts is a two square-mile neighborhood in South Los Angeles that is home to four of Los Angeles County's largest public housing projects and nineteen Black and Latino gangs. The neighborhood is in the Eastside South Central area which has the second highest cost of incarceration and number of arrests in the county.

Watts' racial make-up has evolved in the 20th century. According to Richard Rothstein, a distinguished fellow at the Economic Policy Institute and author of *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How our Government Segregated America*, Watts once was an integrated neighborhood with equal numbers Whites and Blacks before the Second World War. During the war, the government moved two housing projects to Watts to accommodate the more than 10,000 Black families that migrated to Los Angeles for jobs in military production. This was an intervention after White residents objected to Black residents living nearby in West Los Angeles. By 1958, Watts became 95% Black.



Resurrection of Watts – SPARC mural by Ras Ammar Nsoroma

Today, Watts is a predominantly Latino (62%) and Black (37%) neighborhood with the County's highest unemployment rate, and the state's lowest life expectancy rate. Facing these grim statistics, Watts has bred visionary leaders like Ted Watkins who founded the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) in 1965 at the dawn of the Watts Riots with the mission to improve the quality of life for Watts and South LA residents. Since its founding, WLCAC has operated and administered various programs in housing, employment, senior services, and youth and families to serve more than 30,000 individuals annually.

By becoming a provider for ODR's Reentry Intensive Case Management Services (RICMS), WLCAC has been able to expand its services to meet the needs of residents of Watts and South LA returning to their communities from jail and prison. WLCAC is currently the largest of 25 RICMS providers across LA County. Since the agency started RICMS in September 2018, WLCAC's RICMS program has grown to 10 Community Health Workers, case management staff with previous justice involvement who provide care coordination, service navigation and linkage, motivation and support to help people get back on their feet after incarceration. WLCAC is currently serving 300 active RICMS clients.

In addition to the guidance and encouragement they receive from their CHW, RICMS clients benefit from the myriad of services provided by WLCAC, including trauma-informed individual counseling offered by the Southern California Health Center; housing through Homeless Access Center and Shelter Plus Care; free vocational trainings offered at the Maxine Waters Employment Preparation Center; job search and placement through resume and interview help; parent counseling and family reunification through Project Fatherhood; one-time cash assistance for rental deposits; low-cost furniture; free tax services; free tattoo removal; free court-mandated anger management classes ; and fresh produce through the agency's farmer's market that distributes 22,000 pounds of free food every other week in partnership with Food Forward. The agency also refers to Augustus F. Hawkins Mental Health Center and Kedren Community Health Center for substance use treatment services.

In addition to striving to ensure RICMS clients find stabilization and healing through meeting their comprehensive needs, the agency is using RICMS funds to renovate a building dedicated to serving RICMS clients that includes a reentry reception center, a computer work station for clients to use for job search and other needs, a vibrant work space for CHWs, and a backyard that features a community garden and fountain to provide a relaxing outdoor space for Watts' justice-involved residents. The ribbon cutting ceremony for this reentry building is slated for early September 2019.

In addition to the services provided to RICMS clients, WLCAC provides trauma-informed youth counseling for children of clients who need support in mental health and substance use. The agency also provides college preparation, education support, and financial assistance for high school prom expenses for children of RICMS clients who would have missed out on this rite of passage because their parents couldn't afford it. Supporting both parents and their children ensures that the agency is uplifting the next generation of Watts residents who grow up in one of the most underserved neighborhoods of LA County. While agencies like WLCAC are proof that communities have within them transformative abilities to lift up justice-involved individuals in a comprehensive and positive way, funding sources such as Proposition 47 further empowers them by providing the resources they need to rehabilitate and heal individuals impacted by the justice system.