

Career Ladders, Community Service,
and Welfare-to-Work:
A Review of the Literature and Promising Programs
and
A Kit for Communities

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Background

It started with just one word, Imagine. Imagine what the city of Providence would be like if all her children had the opportunity to learn how to think clearly and creatively, to develop confidence by acquiring valuable and satisfying skills, and to understand and enjoy a wide range of friends drawn from a rich array of heritages. Imagine how this could advance and enliven Providence and all of Rhode Island.

For 18 months, a group of stakeholders in the Providence public schools worked together to take a good hard look at the system -- students, parents, teachers, school administrators, businesses, and community agencies working together. Together, they developed Imagine, an independent, community-wide assessment of the Providence public schools. The project was sponsored by the city's Public Education Fund. Data was collected in several key areas -- governance, budget and facilities, teachers and curriculum, students, parents and community via questionnaires, focus groups, school system data from Providence and cities comparable to Providence.

The report made 39 recommendations. The recommendations fell into the following broad categories:

- recognize the need for change and resolve to work cooperatively to bring it about;
- promote smaller units within large schools;
- provide students and teachers with more time "on task;"
- revamp the hiring and contract processes;
- develop new participatory processes for teachers, students, parents, and administrators;
- develop school goals focusing on achievement;
- provide a new system of professional development and evaluation;
- implement strategies to increase financial and professional resources;
- promote a "data-driven" school system;
- implement school-based management;
- recognize and support promising programs; and
- review and reform weak areas. (Providence Blueprint for Education, 1993).

Remember, all the stakeholders examined an educational system which had continues to have tremendous impact on the community and touches everyone in the state in some form. Those of us involved with the PROBE process began to look for ways to support, celebrate, and replicate the things that work well for kids and to reduce and/or eliminate the things that didn't.

One thing that research had been telling us over and over gain was that kids do better in school when parents are involved. Strong Families, Strong Schools written by Jennifer Ballen and Oliver Moles for the National Family Initiative of the U.S. Department of Education cites in the chapter

on School-Family Partnerships that schools must welcome parents and recognize their strengths. They go on to say that families and schools can also team up to overcome the barrier between them:

- Recognize parents' disconnection with public education.
- Train teachers to work with parents.
- Reduce cultural barriers and language barriers.
- Evaluate parents' needs.
- Accommodate families' work schedules.
- Use technology to link parents to classrooms.
- Make school visits easier.
- Establish a home-school coordinator.
- Promote family learning.
- Give parents a voice in school decisions.

So, how do we get parents in the schools? Parents whose own experience with the system has not been all that pleasant. Parents whose only contact with the system oftentimes is when their child is suspended or failing. Parents who may not truly understand that as members of the community they have a stake in what happens in the schools. How could we convey the idea that it doesn't take a college degree or other credentials to be of service and, more importantly, to be valued.

At this point, our interest in involving parents was informed by Heleen's previous work with the Institute for Responsive Education and, in particular, by their work with family centers in the Schools Reaching Out program (Davies, 1990; Heleen, 1990). Family centers are welcoming places within schools which can serve as focal points for a wide variety of family and community involvement programming. The Institute for Responsive Education has had a number of years of experience working with such family centers in low-income, urban communities. An important challenge in developing such centers has been how schools and school districts can keep them staffed as funding for new positions comes and goes.

In May 1995, six community partners, Volunteers in Providence Schools, South Providence Tutorial, the Urban League of Rhode Island, the International Institute of Rhode Island, Providence Public Schools, and the Providence Blueprint for Education (PROBE) submitted a proposal to the Rhode Island Commission for National and Community Service for a project called Parents Making a Difference. At the time, the authors represented several of these organizations -- Barnes, the Urban League, and Heleen, the Providence Public Schools and PROBE. That proposal was approved by the Rhode Island Commission and the Corporation for National Service and the project is now finishing its third year of operation.

Several key ideas provided the foundation for our proposal to establish Parents Making a Difference.

The first is that service can come *from* the community as well as being of benefit to it. John McKnight and others (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993) have written about the importance of viewing our communities from an asset instead of a deficit perspective. Too often, community service views the community in that compound word as the impassive half of the construction. We wanted to develop a project in which the community -- or more properly communities -- directed the project, what it does, who it employs, and how it works to improve its functioning.

Also, when we began the project, many of us saw some danger of community service becoming something only white, middle-class young people did -- folks who could take a year off from their "regular" lives for a *Wanderjahr*, a year of traveling in a foreign land. We wanted to develop a project in which community people could serve their own communities, a project in which service fits into people's regular lives.

We wanted to demonstrate that low-income parents -- largely mothers -- had something powerful to contribute in serving their own communities. We wanted to contribute to school reform in Providence and as part of a much larger, longer school reform agenda, we wanted to help build "new kinds of doors and windows" in schools and to get low-income people of color through those doors and to be able to see through those windows.

We wanted Parents Making a Difference to contribute to the achievement of Providence children. 78% of these children are from "minority" groups in a school system where little more than 14% of the teaching staff is from minority groups. We believed it critical to minority kids' achievement to have people who "looked like them" in responsible positions in the school system. We saw children's achievement as the bottom-line, something upon which the community, the teachers, and the school system can all agree.

Our goal was to construct a corps that was as diverse as the children to attend Providence schools. There was some initial surprise and criticism when we achieved that goal, putting together a corps that was 85% minority and mostly women, but we believe these individuals bring a great strength to the schools they serve

As we were reviewing the demographics on that first Parents Making A Difference corps we learned that a majority of the first group of 38 either came off welfare to join the project -- for a stipend that amounts to about \$5.00 an hour -- or had been receiving public assistance within a year of joining the project. That first corps was extremely successful and we believed we could work intentionally to support welfare recipients in their progress away from welfare and toward "full" employment.

The Providence school system each year hires approximately 275 new teacher aides and classroom assistants. These individuals fill a number of crucial roles in the schools -- working as assistant teachers, supervising cafeteria, playgrounds, and buses, providing one-on-one assistance to students, and helping to meet children's special needs. In general, the positions pay between

\$9.18 and \$10.72 an hour. They are unionized positions and carry a good benefit package. The school system has guaranteed employment to any graduate of Parents Making a Difference who put in a year of successful service. So far, they have been delighted to hire graduates of the program who have a year's experience in how to work with a variety of school staff, who are often bilingual, who know the community and how to work well with families, and who have become known and trusted in the school. The positions require a high school diploma, putting a premium on the program's ability to help members complete their GED. Of the first year's 30 graduates, 15 took positions in the school system. The Providence School Department's Title I program offers its aides and assistants courses toward their Associates degree at the Community College of Rhode Island and reimburses them for tuition upon completion of each course.

We then approached the Rhode Island Department of Human Services and asked them if they would be willing to allow participants in their Pathways to Independence program to become part of Parents Making A Difference and to continue to receive their "regular" package of public assistance benefits for a year in the program. After a year of successful service, these participants would have received a year of valuable training, an "offer" of a good job, free coursework toward their Associates degrees, and an AmeriCorps education award to use toward post-secondary education -- either another course should they choose to pursue one or a bachelors degree after their subsidized Associates. We are now in our third year of collaboration with Rhode Island DHS.

Parents Making a Difference's informal welfare-to-work model was working quite well and those of us involved in the project saw further development in this direction as a way to expand the "people resources" available to the project, to help it move toward its goal of establishing family centers in all of the system's 39 schools. In June 1997, the Corporation for National Service offered the possibility of National Service Fellowships and we applied, proposing to undertake a collaborative Fellowship project to begin a more rigorous examination of the concept of career ladders and their applications to the worlds of community and national service and welfare-to-work.

The Need -- The Current Status of Welfare-to-Work

On August 22, 1996, President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 which made dramatic changes in many public assistance programs including Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), SSI, and food stamps. The legislation also significantly limited the eligibility of legal immigrants to participate in a variety of Federally-funded programs. The changes to immigrants' eligibility have since been changed by subsequent legislation and by action of many states.

The Federal welfare law repealed the AFDC program and replaced it with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. TANF is a block grant to the states. Generally, the Federal government no longer regulates states' cash assistance programs and states are free to set their own eligibility and other rules within the broader Federal parameters.

TANF is welfare-to-work legislation -- states must require recipients to be working within 24 months of receipt of cash assistance. The law allows the state to define "work."

In the state in which we work -- Rhode Island -- the state has, in general, defined its program more liberally than the Federal legislation (Katz, 1996).

The federal law also establishes participation rates that the states are required to meet and the number of hours/week that recipients must work in order to be counted in the participation rate. If the state fails to meet these targets, the Feds may cut the state's block grant. The participation rates for single-parent families are 25% in FY97, 30% in FY98, 35 in 99, 40% in 2000, 45% for 2001 and thereafter. In FY97 and FY98, the number of hours of work is 20 hours/week, in 1999 25 hours, and in 2000 and thereafter 30 hours/week.

In Rhode Island, DHS is required to develop an employment plan for all new recipient parents within 45 days of their receipt of benefits. Parents who had previously participated in Pathways to Independence were allowed to continue with their plans. The state is required to provide appropriate daycare for children under 12 before requiring a parent to participate in work or educational activity.

Rhode Island allows the following types of activities allowed in a plan include:

1. 20 hours/week of paid employment;
2. 20 hours/week of community work experience (unpaid);
3. Training or work readiness programs;
4. Rapid job placement;
5. Supervised individual job search;
6. For parents under age 20, high school or GED;
7. For older parents, participation in a program to secure basic literacy or English literacy skills;
8. Participation in vocational education or job training.

States differ quite dramatically in how they define work requirements, on eligibility, on time limits on benefits, and on the other aspects of the "social safety net." The Welfare Information Network maintains a very useful Web site that provides summaries of state TANF plans (www.welfareinfo.org). The Tufts University Center on Hunger and Poverty has provided a measure of the extent each state has used the opportunities presented by TANF to improve policies regarding family economic security (Center on Hunger and Poverty, 1998). Other reports from the Center outline innovative strategies with which career ladders might be combined (Venner, 1996 and 1997). These include strategies to promote financial asset development, such as the development of Individual Development and Family Investment Accounts.

The Rhode Island law is designed to ensure that parents who do not have basic work skills are afforded opportunities to obtain those skills before being required to enter the workforce. The state can use TANF funds to provide these services. The “catch” as Linda Katz’s policy analysis has pointed out, is that the Federal law does not count ESL, GED or literacy classes for purposes of the work participation rate, unless the participants is also engaged in 20 hours of paid or unpaid employment (Katz, 1996).

The policy challenge in this aspect of welfare-to-work program implementation is to develop ways in which these work readiness services can be integrated with work experiences in ways that do not depress the amount of a state’s block grant. This is a dilemma that points up a dichotomy between policymakers and experts who advocate a “human capital” approach to aiding welfare recipients exit from public assistance and those who advocate a “work first” approach.

Also available at the Welfare Information Network’s Web site is an issue paper by Marie Cohen outlining innovative state education and training strategies (Cohen, 1998). Another good resource in this area is the report “What’s Next After Work First?” by Mark Elliott, Don Spangler, and Kathy Yorkiewitz of Public/Private Ventures (1998). These authors write:

Moving people into the labor force quickly may indeed be the best first step in moving them out of poverty. By itself, in our view, rapid attachment is not likely to achieve the more important workforce development goals of enabling people to keep their jobs and leave poverty behind.

When TANF was passed, national debates raged -- will it throw millions into poverty or will it increase family self-sufficiency? (Sullivan, 1997). Although the national experience with TANF is more than a year old and states have submitted their plans for Federal review, we may not know which argument was right. For the time being, a growing national economy has public assistance recipients leaving the rolls in droves. Case loads in many states are the lowest they have been in a decade. Where are recipients going? Are they prepared for unsubsidized life if the economy stalls or dips? There is little national evidence.

As state welfare caseloads are reduced, this frees up funds to be invested elsewhere, perhaps in innovative workforce development strategies.

To date however, while many state plans include substantial investments in job readiness and basic instruction, few have worked with private industry or niches in the public sector to craft long-term, integrated work readiness/education programs. In large part, this is because the fiscal pressure is off with diminishing rolls. As participation targets ramp up and if the economy slows, the need for this kind of program will grow.

What Do We Mean By a Career Ladder?

The idea of career ladders is an old one come round again.

In the 1965 book, *New Careers for the Poor*, Pearl and Riessman called for:

- a sufficient number of jobs for all persons without work
- jobs defined and distributed so that placements exist for the unskilled and under-educated
- jobs that are permanent and provide an opportunity for life-long careers.

Coming from a perspective very different from the roots of present-day welfare reform, Pearl and Riessman saw “large numbers of people without jobs and a great many jobs without people” and called for the develop of career ladders to help the “ghetto poor” and to make a connection between worker needs and manpower requirements.

In an excellent study called Breaking the Class Ceiling: Paraeducator Pathways to Teaching, the organization Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. offers a thumbnail sketch of the several 1960s and 70s Federal programs that attempted to advance the idea of career ladders, among them the Education Professions Development Act (1967) and its New Careers program, Teacher Corps, and the Career Opportunities program (Haselkorn and Fideler, 1996).

In testimony before the Senate Education Committee in 1989, Pearl echoed many of the concerns we [Barnes and Heleen] had in beginning this study:

New Careers was uniquely different than most other program of that era in that it stressed *service from rather than service to* [emphasis added]. It was a program specifically designed to reduce economic dependency and it was based on the assumption that if given opportunity people could work their way out of poverty if the job they were in had upward mobility. Perhaps of even greater importance, New Careers brought much need services to under-served communities.

Breaking the Class Ceiling provides detailed portraits of 149 paraeducator-to-teacher programs now underway around the country.

These programs represent important potential partners for the development of ladders that “reach down” to welfare recipients.

A key preliminary finding of our work to date is that we will recommend the consideration of a *two-part* career ladder. The Breaking the Class Ceiling programs represent the upper half of the ladder; a necessary and so far scarce second half of the ladder is programs that help welfare recipients train for and access paraprofessional employment.

What we are advocating is something Tom Dewar and David Scheie in a book called Promoting Job Opportunities (1995) describe as a “sector strategy” aimed at converting human services into job opportunities. As they see it, the key guidelines for action in such strategies are:

- base policies and activities on the capacities, skills, and assets of low-income people and their neighborhoods.
- give hiring and training preference to local residents.

- be prepared to de-professionalize job qualifications.
- vest more governance and authority in locally-controlled organizations.

Besides the Parents Making a Difference/RIDHS collaboration we have found few programs to serve as models of the lower half of that ladder.

In a report to the Leon Lowenstein Foundation, David S. Seeley proposed a “Neighborhood Employment Initiative” aimed at increasing New York City’s paraprofessional staffing in the areas of home visiting, parent education, coordinating parent involvement activities, and assisting in the provision of other social services. New York City utilizes paraprofessionals extensively; Seeley proposal -- not funded -- was to expand this investment to benefit both families and welfare-to-work participants (Seeley, 1993).

Vermont’s Reach Up program aims at providing welfare recipients with encouragement, support, and access to education and training along with intensive case management. Vermont’s Agency of Human Services Reach Up Division works closely with the state’s AmeriCorps programs, providing a match through TANF funds for AmeriCorps placements that are filled by a Reach Up participant (Steven M. Gold, personal communication, 1997). Some of Vermont’s subsidized work placements have been in schools and other educational settings.

Another possible model is that of Porter-Leath Center for Children & Families in Memphis. Porter-Leath sponsors an AmeriCorps program following the HIPPI model providing peer-to-peer, parent-to-parent early intervention. Following the national HIPPI model, the project works in Memphis housing projects and members meet weekly with each family teaching parents activities they can do with their 3-5 year old children. All members of this program are current or former welfare recipients.

Several resources are available to provide advice to policymakers interested in how to integrate welfare reform efforts with national and community service. These include Furano and Jucovy (1997) and Schad (1997).

Other model programs to help families transition away from welfare dependency use the metaphor of the ladder in a different way. Project Match, an effort of the Erikson Institute in Chicago, has developed an “Incremental Ladder to Self-Sufficiency” to guide its work with low-income parents working in community and Head Start settings. Their ladder is a detailed continuum of specific activities, both structured and unstructured that allows for multiple routes out of welfare (Herr and Halpern with Wooley and Majeske, 1993).

Other programs including New Hope in Milwaukee and MEED in Minnesota create transitional community jobs when necessary and offer long-term support (Wallace-Benjamin and Lassen, 1997).

Some sources of information about how career ladders can reach down to welfare recipients are the program models featured in the American Public Welfare Association's sampling of *State Human Service Mentoring Programs* (1997) in which states are working with non-profit and other agencies to develop mentoring and other volunteer-based programs to help welfare recipients become employed.

The Arkansas Office of the Corporation for National Service has offered some guidance based on its experience helping welfare recipients participate in national service. As State Director Bob Torvestad writes:

When a welfare recipient enters national service, several things happen -- some of which are programmed and others of which are just a result of the placement. First, the vast majority of the organizations we work with provide both good quality supervision but more importantly a very supportive and somewhat nurturing environment. Our supervisors tend to spend time getting to know their national service participants, their skills, their training and development needs. It is usually a slow process at first, especially for someone who has little recent employment experience.

Participants/members are often slotted into positions which will utilize, immediately, the skills they bring to the worksite. They are made to feel a part of the group or organization and usually work with other national service participants as part of a team. Welfare recipients who are also national service members are not treated as a "client" or someone who is a "target" of this program or that one. This is an important factor.

Following this, all of our projects will provide relevant on-the-job training. Within six to eight months, the welfare recipient/member starts to realize that he/she has something significant to offer; likes working toward something; enjoys the work atmosphere; understands that he/she is pretty much like the other people he/she works with, etc. The most important thing that happens, however, is that the member starts getting confidence. It is this self-confidence which really makes the difference.

It takes a while for the confidence building to fully take hold. We will extend the placement for a variety of reasons including the quality of their work effort; their development potential; their need for additional time to reach the level of personal security needed to make it on their own ...

It also takes time for the welfare recipient/member to transition, in their own mind, from the category of dependent/client to someone who is seen as productive, a contributor, a resource. This transition can only occur through real-life/work experience.

Torvestad also notes that AmeriCorps*VISTA allows welfare benefits to continue while the member is in service and that this is an important feature contributing to the program's success.

VISTA and other AmeriCorps programs differ in this regard.

Our overall impression from our review of the literature and from the programs we have discovered to date is that:

- there is enough experience in the field to permit recommendations about how to craft programs that help welfare recipients move from public assistance to paraprofessional employment. Although our inquiries to date have been limited to the field of education, we believe there are also relevant programs in the health field.

- integration of the two “halves” of the ladder is important -- otherwise, we will leave participants stranded on the lower rungs of the ladder. Given current pay scales, paraprofessional employment needs to be viewed as a stepping stone. One cannot support a family as a single parent on an income of \$12,000 to \$15,000.
- the mentoring and support provided in a program is crucial to helping participants make steady progress toward success. As one survey respondent told us, several participants have told her: “You have to understand, getting a job has never been a problem for me. It’s holding onto a job that’s hard.” This support will become especially important if the economy’s growth slows and the “next job” is harder to find.

Based on our review of the literature and evidence we have gathered from programs, the following elements are important to the success of participants as they scale the first half of the ladder:

1. Identification of “who’s right” for a program. Several programs have told us that case workers are simply too busy with high caseloads to make a good match. Community-based recruitment seems to be an alternative for making a good match between program and welfare recipient.
2. Half-time versus full-time service. Most programs now in the field provide for half-time service. As TANF’s hour/week requirements go up over the years, more participants will need in to more intensive programs.
3. Participants tell us about the importance of mentoring and support from “people like us.”
4. Training targeted on available jobs. This is perhaps the most often missing element in these kind of programs. The Porter-Leath Center’s Diana Bedwell has written us about working to match home visitors with jobs in the corporate world, but we are afraid few such jobs exist.
5. Participants need help tackling the “logistical challenges” of their lives -- transportation, scheduling flexibility, child care, and the like.
6. Programmatic connections with their kids. Three-quarters of participants in Parents Making a Difference serve in their child’s school. Recently, we were sitting with a welfare-to-work participant talking about how the program worked for her. She told us about how her participation caused her middle-school age daughter to think differently about herself and her education. Her daughter is now thinking about going on to college. The importance of this connection is reinforced by the research (Zaslow and Emig, 1997).
7. Participants must perceive their service as “real work.”
8. Participants should not be treated differently from the rest of the corps.

For the second half of our career ladder, we are fortunate to have lots of program models, at least in the field of education. All around the country, school systems and higher education partners are working in “grow your own” teacher programs that have arisen largely in response to a persistent shortage of minority teachers. Nationally, only 13% of teachers are persons of color while nearly one-third of their students are. The discrepancy in urban areas is even more pronounced.

Over half a million paraprofessionals work in U.S. schools. They have job titles like teacher aide, teacher assistant, instructional aide, computer lab assistant, media aide, and the like. We have outlined how welfare-to-work programs can help public assistance recipients become such paraprofessionals.

Breaking the Class Ceiling: Paraeducator Pathways to Teaching provides in-depth information on 149 programs around the country at work to help paraprofessionals become teachers. The report is based on extensive survey and case studies of exemplary programs (Haselkorn and Fideler, 1996).

As the RNT report points out, there are many objectives for such programs. Predominant is expanding the pool of teachers of color, but ideas like empowering the community play through most. Many programs talk about better connecting schools with the communities they serve.

Edison O. Jackson, president of Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, provides a view of how community empowerment begins:

When we transform a paraprofessional, usually the head of household, who comes here not knowing what she can accomplish and goes on to become a teacher and maybe a principal, we empower not just that individual but her entire family. Her children, her relatives become excited by education. What's more, our teacher education faculty work actively with the school districts to strengthen the clinical component of teacher preparation and increase teacher retention. That's how the institution acts as an agent of social change.

p.27

Sponsorship of these programs varies. Most are led by a college or university, with school districts a close second. Several however are directed by broad-based consortia. The "granddaddy" of these programs is led by a partnership between New York City's United Federation of Teachers and the Board of Education. The program dates back to 1970 and includes tuition vouchers, pay incentives, release time, and career ladder opportunities for paras to attend any of the 16 community and senior colleges in the City University of New York system. Nearly 3,000 paraprofessionals a year participate in this program in some way.

Overall, these career ladder programs recruit highly motivated paraprofessionals already familiar with the world of the school and the classroom and provide them with tuition assistance, intensive and personalized academic advisement (often by someone who has "been there"), and others supports required to succeed in college. Often, the school system in which the paraprofessional works makes flexible schedules or reduced work loads available to career ladder participants. School systems do not however usually give participants a leave from their classroom duties because a goal of these programs is to integrate college instruction with practical experience.

Many paraeducator programs also illustrate "best practices" from the world of teacher development as they integrate college education and training with classroom experience, model

and support reflective teaching practice, build in team teaching, and incorporate performance-based assessment including teaching portfolios.

Several aspects of paraprofessional to professional career ladders match up well with the “ethos” community service introduces to the first half of the ladder. These career ladder programs accept where the participant is when he or she begins, taking a “value-added” approach to student development. Like community service programs they “bet on participants’ capacity for both individual growth and greater societal contribution, a true ‘win-win’ proposition.” (RNT, p. 5) They develop cohorts of participants who provide one another with important support and encouragement as they move together through the program, in much the same way as corps work in national service efforts.

Also, like service, these programs are built on the efforts and “heart” of the participants as a wellspring of energy. The Recruiting New Teachers report quotes George Kaplan writing about the 1970s Career Opportunities Program (COP):

The transcendent force and the dominant fact about COP was the paraprofessional participant.... [the programs] seek to use paraprofessionals’ wealth of classroom experience as “working capital” toward a new model of teacher preparation.

p.34

Most of our work on career ladders has focused on education where, for many reasons, the first half of the ladder matches up very well with the second. Although other fields, notably health care, have a pressing need for paraprofessionals with diverse backgrounds, the second half of the ladder is less clear, at least in part because of the diverse career paths involved with moving from paraprofessional to professional in these arenas. We believe that the second half of the ladder so well illustrated by the Recruiting New Teachers report can be connected with efforts to move welfare-to-work participants to paraprofessional employment to great benefit to both participants and their communities. Ascending the first half of the ladder and then the second will be a climb that takes a number of years, but we believe it is the kind of effort required to make welfare-to-work truly work.

Helping Communities Develop Their Own Welfare-to-Work Career Ladders

The two-part, “folding” career ladder we have sketched out in this report is not exactly an “elegant” policy intervention, but it isn’t exactly a Rube Goldberg device either.

The central problem in developing such a system is to bring two disparate “policy worlds” together with a focus on the needs of real people.

Reflecting on this requirement led us to look at the literature on community collaboration for a guide to processes for bringing all of the relevant actors together to assemble a program that is right for any given community. Many authors (National Commission on Children, 1991;

Dryfoos, 1990 for example) agree; collaborative community efforts are constructive responses to creating caring communities and expanding the safety net for children, youth and families. Bringing individuals and members of communities, agencies and organizations together in an atmosphere of support to systematically solve existing and emerging problems that could not be solved by one group alone is the goal of community collaboration. Easy to say; hard to do. Philip Schlechty likens it to "teaching dinosaurs to do ballet."

What's involved in these ballet lessons?

Gibson, Kingsley and McNeely identify seven key themes of the new community building and outline how it differs from narrower neighborhood-based programs of the past. Today's community building is focused around specific improvements in a way that reinforces values and builds connections and capacity; is community-driven with broad resident involvement; is comprehensive, strategic and entrepreneurial; asset-based; tailored to neighborhood scale and conditions; linked to the broader society; and consciously challenges institutional barriers and racism.

There are other reasons why building a community collaborative is hard. Besides the problems of "teaching dinosaurs to dance" and different orientations for today's community building, the partners we need seem to live in different "policy worlds."

The Literature on Collaboration

Several handbooks provide excellent guides on how to bring broad-based, multilateral community coalitions together. Perhaps the most useful of these guides is Together We Can: A Guide for Crafting a Profamily System of Education and Human Services (Melaville and Blank, 1993).

A practical model to examine for evidence of collaboratives working to benefit welfare recipients is the 26 partnerships among local and state government and the McKnight Foundation in Minnesota (Demko, 1997). In this program, the foundation has provided \$20 million to 26 partnerships that have developed creative solutions to barriers to employment.

Another useful view on this issue of collaboration is a recent report by Charles Bruner and Larry Parachini, Building Community: Exploring Relationships Across Service Systems Reform, Community Organizing, and Economic Development (1997). The authors note that "one of the ways to develop relationships [across these sectors] is to work together on specific tasks and projects."

One of Bruner and Parachini's recommendations for "cross-sector" work is the "conscious construction of career ladders for community residents within the public sector and within intermediary organizations."

They note:

There are many dedicated administrators and directors of public institutions, community-based organizations, and intermediary groups who have made conscious decisions to work within disinvested communities, often foregoing more lucrative career paths. These individuals may serve as effective translators of the voices of consumers and residents to the worlds in which they operate and, by so doing, secure valuable supports to those communities. At the same time, however, they often do not transfer their knowledge and connections with these other worlds to those who reside in the communities they serve. There need to be more efforts to provide the tools, supports, and opportunities necessary to convert community-based organizations into community-owned and operated ones. This starts with a more explicit construction of career ladders for community residents to move up within those institutions that hold themselves out to be agents of community change.

So, it may be that work on career ladders can help bring different policy worlds together to the benefit of communities. We believe this is the case and in other reports commissioned for this Fellowship project, we will outline how this is possible.

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Career Ladders, Community Service, and Welfare-to-Work: A Kit for Communities

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This kit was designed for use by communities interested in how they can bring together career ladder programs to help community residents move from welfare to work. It is made up of six short “working papers”:

- 1) The Concept of “Career Ladders”
- 2) The “First Half” of the Ladder:
Community Service to Paraprofessional Employment
- 3) The “Second Half” of the Ladder:
Paraprofessional to Professional Career Ladder Programs
- 4) Pulling It All Together:
Building a Community Collaborative
- 5) Building from the Ground Up:
Listening to and Involving Welfare-to-Work Participants
in Career Ladder Programs
- 6) Policy Opportunities for Career Ladder Programs

Career Ladders, Community Service, and Welfare-to-Work: A Kit for Communities

Working Paper #1

The Concept of Career Ladders

What Do We Mean By a Career Ladder?

The idea of career ladders is an old one come round again. In their 1965 book, New Careers for the Poor, Arthur Pearl and Frank Riessman called for:

- a sufficient number of jobs for all persons without work
- jobs defined and distributed so that placements exist for the unskilled and under-educated
- jobs that are permanent and provide an opportunity for life-long careers.

Coming from their Great Society perspective, an angle of approach very different from the roots of today's welfare reform, Pearl and Riessman saw "large numbers of people without jobs and a great many jobs without people" and called for the develop of career ladders to help the "ghetto poor" and to make a connection between worker needs and manpower requirements.

The idea bore fruit in a number of 1960s and 1970s projects. In an excellent study called Breaking the Class Ceiling: Paraeducator Pathways to Teaching, the organization Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. offers a thumbnail sketch of the several 1960s and 70s Federal programs that attempted to advance the idea of career ladders, among them the Education Professions Development Act (1967) and its New Careers program, Teacher Corps, and the Career Opportunities program.

In testimony before the Senate Education Committee in 1989, Pearl summarized many of the aspects of career ladders we find attractive today:

New Careers was uniquely different than most other program of that era in that it stressed *service from rather than service to* [emphasis added]. It was a program specifically designed to reduce economic dependency and it was based on the assumption that if given opportunity people could work their way out of poverty if the job they

were in had upward mobility. Perhaps of even greater importance, New Careers brought much need services to under-served communities.

Today's career ladders are likely to be different from those of the 1960s and 1970s in several important ways.

- the idea was first proposed in a very different environment. An outgrowth of Great Society thinking, career ladders were proposed as a way to revolutionize the way educational services and low-income communities related to one another. Today, our expectations are perhaps more modest. We believe that career ladders are an important piece of a solution to changing the way we help people move from welfare to work. Today, career ladders in education will probably remain small programs in scattered communities across the country. This does not make them less important. The relative size of the strategy is related to two factors: a changed understanding of how to bring about social change -- many small steps instead of few big ones -- and the fact that the Federal government in the 1990s and 2000s will not provide large-scale funding as was proposed in decades past.
- career ladders today are less defined and more fluid. Career ladders are often discussed in the literature on how to promote career advancement in large, for-profit companies. The 1970s versions of the career ladder idea were designed to work in school systems in which one advanced in more or less a predictable way "up the ladder." With such factors as merit-based promotion, school-based hiring, and fluctuating enrollments, school systems today are much less "predictable" places as far as employment and advancement goes.
- career ladders today must be "multi-organizational" if they are to be successful. In decades past, an activist Federal government was the catalyst for action. We are proposing that community coalitions get things started in cities around the country (see Working Paper #4). These coalitions need to include representatives of community agencies, adult basic education providers, state welfare agencies, agencies charged with workforce development, school districts, individual schools, higher education agencies including community colleges, program staff, participants themselves, teacher and paraprofessional unions, and funders. These community coalitions need to be "vision-driven," instead of being directed by funding or government mandate.

In sum, we believe the idea of career ladders -- like many good ideas -- is one worth reviving. It can help communities meet the challenges of moving welfare participants to employment that can support families and strengthen our communities.

For additional reading:

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Career Ladders, Community Service, and Welfare-to-Work: A Kit for Communities

Working Paper #2

The First Half of the Ladder: From Welfare to Paraprofessional Employment

The Two-Part Ladder

As we have examined the idea of career ladders and its connections to community service and welfare-to-work programs, it has become clear that what we're really talking about is a *two-part* career ladder. The first half of the ladder helps people move from unemployment to entry-level or paraprofessional employment. The second half helps people to move from paraprofessional to "full" professional employment. The rungs of these ladders are made up of education, training, mentoring, and other supports.

We stress the importance of communities developing both halves of the ladder. While paraprofessional employment is a major improvement over unemployment and public assistance, these jobs do not afford a family a solid enough base upon which to build a future. We have some concern that with the current focus on "ending welfare as we know it," attention will be paid to the first half of the ladder without concurrent development of the second. With a growing demand for skilled, multicultural professional in the fields of education and health in urban areas, we believe that both communities and families can benefit by the development of focused career ladders.

The First Half of the Ladder

This kind of career ladder program is one that helps unemployed or under-employed individuals move to semi-skilled or paraprofessional employment. They are structured programs in which education, training, and mentoring are "embedded" in real work or valued community service. Community service programs such as AmeriCorps and VISTA have the potential to play an important role in the development of these programs around the country.

This "first half" of the career ladder also provides critical exposure to the workings of a particular field, moving participants from outsider to insider. Education and training are closely connected

to day-to-day work. This recognizes that conventional training and education often does not work well for many of the unemployed, who have had a poor educational experience.

As an example of this kind of career ladder program, let us look at an AmeriCorps program with which we have worked, Parents Making a Difference in Providence, Rhode Island. The development of this project's work as a career ladder effort was not originally in the design for the project. As we were reviewing the demographics on that first Parents Making a Difference corps, we learned that a majority of the first group of 38 either came off welfare to join the project -- for a stipend that amounts to about \$5.00 an hour -- or had been receiving public assistance within a year of joining the project. That first corps was extremely successful and we believed we could work intentionally to support welfare recipients in their progress away from welfare and toward "full" employment.

The Providence school system each year hires approximately 275 new teacher aides and classroom assistants. These individuals fill a number of crucial roles in the schools -- working as assistant teachers, supervising cafeteria, playgrounds, and buses, providing one-on-one assistance to students, and helping to meet children's special needs. In general, the positions, pay between \$9.18 and \$10.72 an hour. They are unionized positions and carry a good benefit package. The school system has guaranteed employment to any graduate of Parents Making a Difference who put in a year of successful service. So far, they have been delighted to hire graduates of the program who have a year's experience in how to work with a variety of school staff, who are bilingual, who know the community and how to work well with families, and who have become known and trusted in the school. The positions require a high school diploma, putting a premium on the program's ability to help members complete their GED.

The Providence School Department's Title I program offers its aides and assistants courses toward their Associates degree at the Community College of Rhode Island and reimburses them for tuition upon completion of each course. With the AmeriCorps education award (a scholarship that can be used for higher education) "in their pocket," graduates of the program can advance many rungs up the career ladder.

We then approached the Rhode Island Department of Human Services and asked them if they would be willing to allow participants in their Pathways to Independence program to become part of Parents Making a Difference and to continue to receive their "regular" package of public assistance benefits for a year in the program. After a year of successful service, these participants would have received a year of valuable training, an offer of a good job, free coursework toward their Associates, and an AmeriCorps education award to use toward post-secondary education -- either another course should they choose to pursue one or a bachelors degree after their subsidized Associates.

Rhode Island DHS has been an important partner in the project. At their encouragement, we recently reviewed Parents Making a Difference's first 18 months of experience as a welfare-to-

work demonstration and found that 57% of those who enter the program and stay for more than 30 days go on to paid employment -- a good record working with an unemployed population.

Other national service programs have had solid experience in helping people transition away from welfare. Virginia has seven programs that focus on helping welfare recipients transition to self-sufficiency. Michigan has a program in which welfare recipients gain experience by working on an immunization campaign for children.

Especially interesting is another program that shares our metaphor of a ladder. Project Match, an effort of the Erikson Institute in Chicago, has developed an "Incremental Ladder to Self-Sufficiency" to guide its work with low-income parents working in community and Head Start settings. Their ladder is a detailed continuum of specific activities, both structured and unstructured that allows for multiple routes out of welfare.

What Makes These Programs Work?

Successful "first half" career ladder programs share three features:

1. the programs are targeted on a defined set of employment opportunities. There are "real jobs" at the end of the ladder.
2. training is very closely related to the work or service performed. Indeed, sometimes the training is almost indistinguishable from the service.
3. they are human-focused and flexible, recognizing the developmental nature of working with many folks who are unemployed.

This last attribute becomes clear in notes Bob Torvestad, Director of the Arkansas Office of the Corporation for National Service, sent us:

When a welfare recipient enters national service, several things happen -- some of which are programmed and others of which are just a result of the placement. First, the vast majority of the organizations we work with provide both good quality supervision but more importantly a very supportive and somewhat nurturing environment. Our supervisors tend to spend time getting to know their national service participants, their skills, their training and development needs. It is usually a slow process at first, especially for someone who has little recent employment experience.

Participants/members are often slotted into positions which will utilize, immediately, the skills they bring to the worksite. They are made to feel a part of the group or organization and usually work with other national service participants as part of a team. Welfare recipients who are also national service members are not treated as a "client" or someone who is a "target" of this program or that one. This is an important factor.

Following this, all of our projects will provide relevant on-the-job training. Within six to eight months, the welfare recipient/member starts to realize that he/she has something significant to offer; likes working toward something; enjoys the work atmosphere; understands that he/she is pretty much like the other people he/she works with, etc. The most important thing that happens, however, is that the member starts getting confidence. It is this self-confidence which really makes the difference.

It takes a while for the confidence building to fully take hold. We will extend the placement for a variety of reasons including the quality of their work effort; their development potential; their need for additional time to reach the level of personal security needed to make it on their own ...

It also takes time for the welfare recipient/member to transition, in their own mind, from the category of dependent/client to someone who is seen as productive, a contributor, a resource.....

It is important to emphasize again that we see constructing career ladders for welfare-to-work participants as a two-part job. This working paper talks about the first half of the ladder, moving people to paraprofessional employment. We need to emphasize the importance of building a matching second half of the ladder to help people build toward “full” professional employment. More and more in this country, we see a gap developing between the earning potential of “unskilled” and “semi-skilled” and professional, knowledge-based labor. Although we lament this widening gap, we believe it is crucial to help people move to jobs in which they can support their families. Although many teachers have to hold down second jobs to make ends meet, earning levels for teachers represent a base on which a single parent can build a solid life for his or her family. This is the goal career ladder programs should aspire to.

Building the second half of the ladder is the focus of Working Paper #3.

For additional reading:

Furano, Kathryn and Linda Jucovy. (1997) “Expanding Resources for Service: Strategies from State Commissions.” Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

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Career Ladders, Community Service, and Welfare-to-Work: A Kit for Communities

Working Paper #3

The Second Half of the Ladder: From Paraprofessional to Professional

For the second half of our career ladder, we are fortunate to have lots of program models, at least in the field of education.

All around the country, school systems and higher education partners are working in “grow your own” teacher programs that have arisen largely in response to a persistent shortage of minority teachers. Nationally, only 13% of teachers are persons of color while nearly one-third of their students are. The discrepancy in urban areas is even more pronounced.

Over half a million paraprofessionals work in U.S. schools. They have job titles like teacher aide, teacher assistant, instructional aide, computer lab assistant, media aide, and the like. In Working Paper #2, we have outlined how welfare-to-work programs can help public assistance recipients become such paraprofessionals.

As we have emphasized, one of our core interests is that community-based program be developed to ensure that low-income participants’ progress not stop at the paraprofessional level.

An exemplary resource is a recent report from the organization Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. The 1996 book [Breaking the Class Ceiling: Paraeducator Pathways to Teaching](#) provides in-depth information on 149 programs around the country at work to help paraprofessionals become teachers. The report is based on extensive survey and case studies of exemplary programs.

As the RNT report points out, there are many objectives for such programs. Predominant is expanding the pool of teachers of color, but ideas like empowering the community play through most. Many programs talk about better connecting schools with the communities they serve.

Edison O. Jackson, president of Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, provides a view of how community empowerment begins:

When we transform a paraprofessional, usually the head of household, who comes here not knowing what she can accomplish and goes on to become a teacher and maybe a principal, we empower not just that individual but her entire family. Her children, her relatives become excited by education. What's more, our teacher education faculty work actively with the school districts to strengthen the clinical component of teacher preparation and increase teacher retention. That's how the institution acts as an agent of social change.

p.27

Sponsorship of these programs varies. Most are led by a college or university, with school districts a close second. Several however are directed by broad-based consortia. The "granddaddy" of these programs is led by a partnership between New York City's United Federation of Teachers and the Board of Education. The program dates back to 1970 and includes tuition vouchers, pay incentives, release time, and career ladder opportunities for paras to attend any of the 16 community and senior colleges in the City University of New York system. Nearly 3,000 paraprofessionals a year participate in this program in some way.

Overall, these career ladder programs recruit highly motivated paraprofessionals already familiar with the world of the school and the classroom and provide them with tuition assistance, intensive and personalized academic advisement (often by someone who has "been there"), and others supports required to succeed in college. Often, the school system in which the paraprofessional works makes flexible schedules or reduced work loads available to career ladder participants. School systems do not however usually give participants a leave from their classroom duties because a goal of these programs is to integrate college instruction with practical experience.

Many paraeducator programs also illustrate "best practices" from the world of teacher development as they integrate college education and training with classroom experience, model and support reflective teaching practice, build in team teaching, and incorporate performance-based assessment including teaching portfolios.

Several aspects of paraprofessional to professional career ladders match up well with the "ethos" community service introduces to the first half of the ladder discussed in Working Paper #2. These career ladder programs accept where the participant is when he or she begins, taking a "value-added" approach to student development. Like community service programs they "bet on participants' capacity for both individual growth and greater societal contribution, a true 'win-win' proposition." (RNT, p. 5) They develop cohorts of participants who provide one another with important support and encouragement as they move together through the program, in much the same way as corps work in national service efforts.

Also, like service, these programs are built on the efforts and "heart" of the participants as a wellspring of energy. The Recruiting New Teachers report quotes George Kaplan writing about the 1970s Career Opportunities Program (COP):

The transcendent force and the dominant fact about COP was the paraprofessional participant.... [the programs] seek to use paraprofessionals' wealth of classroom experience as "working capital" toward a new model of teacher preparation.

p.34

Most of our work on career ladders has focused on education where, for many reasons, the first half of the ladder matches up very well with the second. Although other fields, notably health care, have a pressing need for paraprofessionals with diverse backgrounds, the second half of the ladder is less clear, at least in part because of the diverse career paths involved with moving from paraprofessional to professional in these arenas. We believe that the second half of the ladder so well illustrated by the Recruiting New Teachers report can be connected with efforts to move welfare-to-work participants to paraprofessional employment to great benefit to both participants and their communities. Ascending the first half of the ladder and then the second will be a climb that takes a number of years, but we believe it is the kind of effort required to make welfare-to-work truly work.

For additional reading:

Haselkorn, David and Elizabeth Fideler. (1996) Breaking the Class Ceiling: Paraeducator Pathways to Teaching. Belmont, MA: Recruiting New Teachers, Inc.

Career Ladders, Community Service, and Welfare-to-Work: A Kit for Communities

Working Paper #4

Pulling It All Together: Building a Community Collaborative

There's an old African proverb that says when spiders work together they can spin a web to tie up a lion.

The two-part, "folding" career ladder we have sketched out in Working Papers 2 and 3 is not exactly an "elegant" policy intervention, but it isn't exactly a Rube Goldberg device either.

The central problem in developing such a system is to bring two disparate "policy worlds" together with a focus on the needs of real people.

Reflecting on this requirement led us to look at the literature on community collaboration for a guide to processes for bringing all of the relevant actors together to assemble a program that is right for any given community. Many authors (National Commission on Children, 1991; Dryfoos, 1990 and Meszaros, 1993) agree; collaborative community efforts are constructive responses to creating caring communities and expanding the safety net for children, youth and families. Bringing individuals and members of communities, agencies and organizations together in an atmosphere of support to systematically solve existing and emerging problems that could not be solved by one group alone is the goal of community collaboration. Easy to say; hard to do. Philip Schlechty likens it to "teaching dinosaurs to do ballet."

What's involved in these ballet lessons?

Gibson, Kingsley and McNeely identify seven key themes of the new community building and outline how it differs from narrower neighborhood-based programs of the past. Today's community building is focused around specific improvements in a way that reinforces values and builds connections and capacity; is community-driven with broad resident involvement; is comprehensive, strategic and entrepreneurial; asset-based; tailored to neighborhood scale and conditions; linked to the broader society; and consciously challenges institutional barriers and racism.

There are other reasons why building a community collaborative is hard. Besides the problems of “teaching dinosaurs to dance” and different orientations for today’s community building, the partners we need seem to live in different “policy worlds.”

In a new report called “Building Community: Exploring New Relationships Across Service Systems Reform, Community Organizing, and Community Development,” Charles Bruner and Larry Parachini discuss how collaboratives can be built across these three different arenas necessary to produce change within neighborhoods. “While these arenas share some common philosophical underpinnings and often exist within the same community,” they write, “they generally operate independently from one another.” In making suggestions about how these areas can find common ground, the authors suggest a number of activities that are before us if we’re interested in building career ladder programs in our communities. They include

- joint planning action;
- joint projects that pair professional and experiential expertise;
- conscious construction of career ladders for community residents within the public sector and within intermediary organizations.

So, it may be that work on career ladders can help bring different policy worlds together to the benefit of communities.

Why is all this important?

We all see things differently through our lens of experience. And those experiences are not right or wrong they just are. Take a glass of water, for instance. Some people see it as half empty; some see it as half full. Others, I’m sure, will be thinking it’s a pretty glass and wondering where they can get a full set.

Phrased another way -- a way that brings the power dimension to the fore. A minister we know is fond of opening his speeches by asking the audience what they think of when he mentions the phrase, “The early bird catches the worm.” He gets a number of different responses and then points out the key difference in perspective -- it matters a great deal if you are the bird or the worm.

It is important that in the development of career ladders that everyone bring their lens to the table and focus -- legislators and policy makers from all levels of government; service providers both public and private; public officials; businesses; schools both public and private, secondary and post secondary; employment entities; and of course the adults who will be climbing out of poverty using the two-part ladder.

It is important that all voices are heard because no one voice regardless of its stature can devise a solution that can and will be embraced by the many if they have not been involved in its creation and development.

For additional reading:

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Career Ladders, Community Service, and Welfare-to-Work: A Kit for Communities

Working Paper #5

Building from the Ground Up: Listening to and Involving Welfare-to-Work Participants in Career Ladder Programs

**"We ask not that others
bear our burden, but that
they not obstruct our
pathway, and we will
throw off our burdens as
we run." -- Reverdy Ransom**

In working on this project, we have learned a number of lessons. The most important is how important it is for projects to construct ways to “listen” to project participants. Those of us who design projects often think they are one thing, when they’re really something similar, but crucially different. We urge all career ladder projects to create ways to listen to participants. There are many ways to do this: develop advisory boards of participants, assemble governing boards on which participants have 50% of the seats, conduct regular focus groups with participants, or, more informally, share a regular and informal meal with participants regularly and talk about what’s working for them and what isn’t.

A word of caution: if a program includes both welfare participants and those not on welfare, approach questions related to public assistance carefully. Not everyone will want to share their experiences with public assistance.

We’ve held focus groups with welfare-to-work participants in an AmeriCorps program called Parents Making a Difference in Providence, Rhode Island, and, by way of example, want to share what we have learned.

In Parents Making a Difference, we wanted to demonstrate that low-income parents -- largely mothers -- had something powerful to contribute in serving their own communities. We wanted

Parents Making a Difference to contribute to the achievement of Providence children. 78% of these children are from "minority" groups in a school system where little more than 14% of the teaching staff is minority. Our goal was to construct a corps that was as diverse as the children who attend Providence schools. There was some surprise and criticism when we achieved that goal, putting together a corps that was 85% minority mostly women and poor to boot. We believe these individuals bring great strength to the schools and the communities in which they live.

In focus groups with these women, we learned a number of things. The majority of women who are involved in the project expressed a desire to become involved because they saw it as a vehicle to a better life for their children and themselves. When asked why she signed on to Parents Making a Difference, one member said, "I wasn't a PTA/PTO kind of person, but if [the school] needs something I would volunteer." Their expectations for the project are high; one member responded "I want to take something from [the] training and put it into a job setting. I want the program to give me an advantage [in the job market]." Projects need to be carefully planned to meet these expectations.

The career ladder aspect of Parents Making a Difference was designed to help people climb out of poverty by developing the necessary skills needed to do so while at the same time giving back to the community. We have been reminded that even poor people need options and career choices. Although policy design concerns tell us that career ladders should be targeted, real people have a wide variety of career aspirations. We asked people to comment on why they signed on with the Parents Making a Difference project. The responses were varied. "I want to be a child psychologist," said one woman. "I want to be a medical assistant until I get the education necessary to become a registered nurse," responded another. Still another member responded "I want to be a lawyer." Someone else wanted to be a party and wedding consultant. Only two of 15 said they wanted to be a teacher. None said she wanted to be a teacher's assistant.

The two-tiered ladder is a valuable concept in dealing with this diversity of career goals. One tier helps participants move off welfare. The second tier must be built in such a way as to help participants build a foundation to move toward their occupational area of choice. Systems of community-based mentoring, referrals, and other supports can help participants advance their choices. Along with building an economically stronger community, participants with experience in well-designed, well-run community service programs will continue to live this ethic and pass it along to their families.

We have learned that participants often know more than we do about program development. It's very difficult to get urban parents to come to the school, but some of the best ways to do so have been designed by Parents Making a Difference participants.

We've learned that welfare-to-work programs need to rise above the often inept communications models that are usually ingrained into programs targeted at people on public assistance. Welfare-

to-work programs needs to model clear lines of communications and planning skills, to help program participants reach their goals without creating undue stresses or barriers caused solely by the program. For example, it is very important to clearly define and communicate the positive and adverse impact of participation in the program. How will program participation impact healthcare benefits for the children? What's the impact on participation on TANF awards, Medicaid, food stamps, Section 8 housing vouchers, and WIC? What's the availability of childcare? What's the relationship between the childcare provider, the work site and public transportation? How will participants travel to the job or service site and back home? When will information be communicated to the program members and in what manner? How will the program help members maintain the necessary balance between meeting program needs and the demands of being a parent, most times a single head of household? Will information about a member's performance in the program be communicated to the public assistance program?

Change can be simultaneously exciting and scary. How will the program support members during the transition from welfare to work? What are the requirements for the kind of career participants envision for themselves? How will the program help meet these requirements?

These are just a few questions that need to be asked and answered during program design. Members will be looking toward the program operators for support with real-life dilemmas in all of these areas. There isn't always a good answer to some of these questions. Program designers will sometimes find themselves becoming advocates for change in the systems that affect their participant-colleagues.

The common rhetorical theme espoused by the media and those with political aspirations is that people on welfare don't have any ambition and are content to sit at home and receive a check. Spending time with these members who also happen to be receiving public assistance was crucial and put the rhetoric to rest. They signed on to the AmeriCorps/Parents Making a Difference project because they saw it as an opportunity to help children and other parents in the while also helping themselves. Their expectations of the project are high and they are very serious about holding the project to the promises that it has made or implied. Their own personal expectations for growth were guarded, after all they have seen programs that claim to be in their best interest come and they have seen them go. In the end, they see Parents Making a Difference as a project that isn't perfect, that is challenging, that is helping them to reach their personal development goals and climb up out of poverty.

Career Ladders, Community Service, and Welfare-to-Work: A Kit for Communities

Working Paper #6

Policy Opportunities Related to Career Ladder Programs

Our work considering how communities can develop career ladder programs has uncovered some policy areas from which community programs might derive support and has suggested some policy areas that might need to be re-examined if they are to provide support for such programs.

In spinning out what we mean by career ladder programs for welfare-to-work participants what we have envisioned is a multi-year effort in which a community-based coalition will support the career advancement of participants well beyond the first job. Some may argue that this represents special treatment for welfare recipients; that everyone else pursues career growth on their own, without much support. We would argue in reply that to not invest in the strategies that help former welfare recipients develop stable careers is short-sighted in two ways. First, although we are fortunate today to benefit from a booming economy, at some point, the economy will slow down. In a downturn, the danger is that the rule of “last hired, first fired” would apply. Without consciously applied “value-added” strategies that make participants more capable, better skilled, and more experienced, the danger is that we will all be back where we started from - or worse. Without such ladders of support, low-income families may become jobless and find that the social safety net is much less supportive than before and, in some places, doesn’t exist at all.

Second, we believe career ladder programs are a rational, wise investment in the health of our communities. For us, some of the most powerful evidence about the efficacy of career ladder programs comes from participants themselves. One participant in a Providence, Rhode Island program told us that the most important impact of the program was its effect on her daughter. Seeing her mother working in a valued role in the middle school she attended and back on track pursuing her own education, caused the daughter to think about where she was going and to set her sights on college. The multigenerational feature multiplies the benefit of career ladders many times over.

Possible Sources of Support

* AmeriCorps Education Award Only Program

As we have discussed in Working Paper #2, community service can play an important role in the first rungs of career ladder programs that help participants move from welfare to paraprofessional employment.

AmeriCorps, a program of the Corporation for National Service, provides support to community service program sponsors that will enable them to provide AmeriCorps education awards to participants. These awards -- \$4,725 for full-time service positions and \$2,362.50 for part-time - - can be used to pay student loans or pursue higher education. The award amount can be prorated to fit. Local non-profit organizations and state and local governmental units must apply through the State Commission that oversees AmeriCorps programs in their state. In 1998, the Corporation will make 10,000 such awards available nationally.

* U.S. Department of Labor Welfare-to-Work Program

On May 27, 1998, the U.S. Department of Labor announced the recipients of its first round of Welfare-to-Work grants, awarding \$186 million to 49 efforts to move welfare recipients into lasting jobs. Other rounds of grants will follow as DOL makes \$1.5 billion available in FY1998 and \$1.5 billion in FY 1999. This funding will be in two forms: formula grants to the states and competitive grants to local communities. The formula portion of the program is 75 percent of this allotment. In the formula grants program, states are required to pass 85 percent of the money through to Private Industry Councils (PICs), making them potentially important players in a community collaborative. The 25 percent not allotted by formula will be made available in the form of competitive grants to local governments, PICs, and non-profit groups which apply in conjunction with a PIC or local government. Again, the connection to governmental agencies or quasi-governmental groups like PICs will be crucial to successfully obtaining support for career ladder programs. From the PICs' and local governments' perspectives, what would be necessary would be a willingness to allow the develop of career ladders of one "strand" of a local response.

It is worth noting that community service is specifically mentioned as an allowable use of funds in the DOL program.

As programs like DOL Welfare-to-Work are combined with AmeriCorps, however, one runs into AmeriCorps' prohibition against using Federal funds as matching funds in the category of member support costs.

* State Workforce Development Planning

Some states have undertaken comprehensive workforce development planning efforts, many of them in preparation for welfare-to-work. A good example is New York State's planning for a "Workforce Development System." Planning differs from state to state. In New York, the state Education Department and Department of Labor worked together to outline a program in which "local workforce development partnerships" will develop a three-year strategic plan for workforce development. A key ingredient in career ladder programs making a connection with

local workforce development efforts will be a clear view of the “demand side” -- real jobs that career ladder participants are being prepared for.

* State Agencies Contracting for Welfare Services

Those seeking to develop career ladder programs should also be aware of developments in many states that are changing the way welfare and related training services are contracted for. New approaches such as outcome-oriented contracts and partnerships with private, for-profit service providers do not necessarily preclude the development of the kind of community coalition we describe in Working Paper #4, but the merging of welfare-to-work, school-to-work, and other state-funded employment programs seems likely to attract bigger service providers. As with several of the policy developments described above, a key may be to have the larger contractor view the career ladder program as one strand among the many services it delivers. Also, as many states are moving to performance-based payments systems a crucial step in career ladder programs that involve community service will be to have entry into community service be a “payment point” in the contract. The Welfare Information Network has developed a series of brief case studies that look at states’ 1997 experience with contracting for welfare services.

* Neighborhood or Community Development Strategies

Efforts to develop the human resources of a particular community or neighborhood may also be friendly ground for the development of career ladder programs. Good examples are Charleston, West Virginia’s job training efforts driven by the city’s Community Development Block Grant and Section 3 Public Housing contracts. Although the Charleston program did not involve higher education-connected career ladders in its efforts, community or neighborhood-focused efforts seem to be a good place for career ladder programs to start. A community focus might also help in developing ways to do outreach to public assistance recipients (see Working Paper #2) without relying on the public assistance agency.

As those developing career ladder programs think about funding sources, an important consideration will be the need for multi-year support for the coalition itself. Collaboration doesn’t just arise out of good intentions, it needs to be supported. Community collaboratives would also do well to build in some sort of development or fundraising capacity. The nature of the kind of career ladder program we are discussing is that there is always “the next thing” to do - these next things will require funding, too.

National Service Programs

Existing community and national service programs offer many opportunities for career ladder programs. At the same time, some national service can be problematic for programs of the sort we have proposed.

We believe the initial premise that we began this project with still holds: community and national service have an important contribution to make to career ladders for welfare-to-work participants. In a number of cases, state Commission and AmeriCorps have been flexible and accommodating regarding the constraints of a welfare-to-work environment. However, a number of AmeriCorps policies should be examined with eye to making them more “friendly” to welfare-to-work efforts.

AmeriCorps might consider the possibility of increased flexibility in the requirement that only 20% of members’ time be spent in training. Because it is important in programs that involve both welfare-to-work and other participants to treat both in the same way, this requirement may limit the ability of AmeriCorps career ladder programs to work with welfare-to-work participants with pronounced educational needs.

Two other AmeriCorps features make it difficult for welfare-to-work participants to begin as education award only participants and then to move to stipended AmeriCorps participation in a second year. The first of these is how AmeriCorps member stipends are treated as earned income for tax purposes. (VISTA living allowances are not.) Although many states have developed systems of “income disregards” that make it more financially attractive to be working than to be on welfare, taxing the small stipends they earn tends to wipe out this advantage. In a like manner, the AmeriCorps policy of providing health insurance for full-time members only and not for their families acts as a damper on members continuing for a second year on a stipended basis. While eligible for TANF, most families are also receive Medicare coverage for all family members. Access to health care is a major and legitimate reason for welfare’s “holding power.” AmeriCorps health insurance does little for most welfare-to-work members.

We have noted the AmeriCorps “education award only” as a uniquely important element in the development of the “first half” of career ladder programs. The education award provides critical fuel to help participants advance up the educational ladder. 1998’s newly-revised definition of the service required for reduced part-time terms -- “substantial service averaging at least 15 hours per week for a total of at least 300 hours during a single academic year” -- helps in incorporating welfare-to-work participants. One recommendation is that the education award program might develop more flexible ways to support “service years” of different lengths, recognizing the multiple requirements already placed on education and training for welfare-to-work participants (the work first orientation means that training must be embedded in work or service; escalating weekly work requirements for participants in many states).

This and other AmeriCorps programs might also consider introducing a competitive preference for programs involving welfare-to-work participants.

For more information:

The Welfare Information Network maintains an extremely helpful Web site at www.welfareinfo.org.

Information on the U.S. Department of Labor’s Welfare-to-Work program can be accessed at www.doleta.gov.

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