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From Welfare to Work:

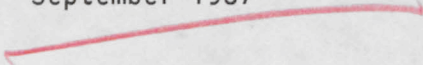
Minority Female Single Parent Program

"It really meant something to me to start my own life and
not have to depend on somebody else. To me, that was
very, very important."

--Program participant

The Rockefeller Foundation

September 1987



About This Report

In 1981, the same year Congress passed a bill encouraging states to experiment with ways to help welfare recipients find jobs, the Rockefeller Foundation began planning a job-training and placement program for minority mothers receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

The resulting six-year effort, known as the Minority Female Single Parent Program (MFSP), involves 5,000 women and includes an extensive third-party evaluation. Answers to the key questions in the evaluation--whether the participating women will find and keep jobs paying 30 percent more than the minimum wage, and how their families will be affected--will have to await completion of the program and study, beginning in 1989.

What can be reported now, however, are some of the factors that cause serious problems and even failure in this type of program. The Foundation is publishing these interim observations here in the hope that policymakers and others responsible for such programs in the future can build on the lessons of the past.

The Minority Female Single Parent Program

Until the last five or six years, few agencies, public or private, have had much success preparing single mothers for the work force. Still fewer have been able to place mothers in jobs that would compensate for their loss of income and of health care and other benefits provided by welfare.

When the MFSP was implemented in 1982, the Rockefeller Foundation enabled six community-based organizations to develop job-training and placement programs that emphasized "employability development." Four of these were subsequently selected to continue in the four-year evaluation phase that began in 1984:

- Atlanta Urban League, Atlanta, Georgia;
- Center for Employment and Training, San Jose, California;
- Opportunities Industrialization Center, Providence, Rhode Island; and
- Wider Opportunities for Women, Washington, D.C.

Most women in the program are trained in office skills (typing, filing, word processing, and data entry). Some sites are also training in nontraditional areas, such as electronics, and some in child care and health care.

When the program is completed, approximately 2,500 women will have enrolled, with an average stay of six to seven months. A group of slightly fewer applicants who were not enrolled in training, but who are similar in other respects, constitute the randomly selected control group for the MFSP evaluation being conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., Princeton, New Jersey.

Observations after Five Years

There are similarities between some state-run programs and the projects funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. But in applying the following observations to public policy, two caveats must be noted. First, unlike many state programs and those proposed in Congress, the MFSP is voluntary, and therefore deals with more motivated individuals among the population of low-income single mothers. Second, the Foundation's program operates through private community-based organizations, and not public-sector agencies.

1. Motherhood comes first

The low-income, single mothers who are interested in being trained for a job see themselves, first and foremost, as mothers. They enroll in the program because they want to provide for their children. As one participant said, "It's not just me that's important but it's my family, my children. What we become in life--we influence our children more than we even think we do."

Child-care arrangements are therefore crucial. The mothers will not successfully participate in a training or work program if their children do not have adequate care. Special consideration must be given to the care of infants and children when they are sick, and home pick-up may be necessary. In addition, the child-care schedule must match the mother's training or work schedule.

"I think the part that helped me the most was the child care," one woman said. "I was able to concentrate on the training more because I know the kids are being well taken care of. And that gave me an opportunity to show the people that I work with that I can be trusted, I am a good person, I can come in on time. That I'm dependable."

Many mothers on welfare are unaccustomed to having strangers care for their children. Therefore, to create the necessary trust in day-care arrangements, a training program should begin with an orientation effort designed to make sure the mothers understand what to expect from day care and feel comfortable with the concept as well as the arrangements.

2. Functional illiteracy is a problem

Lack of basic reading and language skills is prevalent among mothers on welfare. However, because most of these young women have not succeeded in school, putting them back in a classroom is not the solution to this problem. To be effective, literacy training must be presented so that its relevance to job and income are readily apparent to the participant. A program that emulates the school setting tends to reinforce the negative experiences so many participants had in school.

3. "Job focus" is essential

Although child care and other support services are essential to running a successful job program, the organizing focus for everything must be job training and placement.

"The end of the rainbow, you know, is not training and a diploma," said the San Jose project director. "The end of the rainbow is placement in a job and work."

Job training and basic skills should be taught simultaneously or the participants will lose interest in learning the basics. Moreover, basic skills should be taught in ways that make them obviously relevant to the job that is the participant's goal.

The students are not ordinary students, and the teachers cannot be ordinary either. The best teachers often have work experience outside the classroom. Combining the functions of teacher and counselor also works well.

Most of the program participants are depressed and have little confidence in themselves when they begin the MFSP program. They must be constantly reassured. Their education and training should not reinforce negative views about their lives or their cultural environments. It should instead put value on their community experiences and build their self-esteem by recognizing the talents and skills they already have.

A California woman put it this way: "The project director is really good because he tells you, 'Hey, you're somebody. You're not nobody. Just because you have three, four kids and you're on welfare and this and that, you can be somebody.' And it's true. And this time I know I'm going to be somebody."

Program advisory boards have proved valuable when they reflect the "job focus" by including community employers who may be in positions to offer employment to the participating women.

4. Respect individual needs

Program participants have a number of problems that can impede their efforts to take part in the job-training activities. They require support services beyond child care, including transportation, medical care, and a variety of services to help them deal with the housing and legal problems that are commonplace among the poor.

A staff member at one of the sites said, "Personal counseling is one of the services we provide. Sometimes it's just a matter of having someone listen to all of the effort it takes to get to school: to get up at five in the morning, prepare yourself and an infant, and get on two buses to get here."

The organizations that participated in the Rockefeller Foundation program have found that if a participant's day-to-day concerns were not addressed, sooner or later, she will drop out.

The training programs also must be flexible enough to meet a participant's schedule and her changing circumstances. The most promising method has been to structure training programs for "open entry/open exit," enabling the participant to move through the program at her own pace. This approach allows the participant's educational and personal circumstances to dictate when she enters or leaves the program, and has the added advantage of putting distance between the program and the traditional classroom approach to education and training.

5. Consolidate services

Fragmented services simply won't work. Low-income mothers, most of whom are also poorly educated and many of whom are functionally illiterate, cannot be expected to find their way among a confusing array of programs, much less have time to go from one agency to another trying to piece together an adequate mix of services.

"You have babysitting problems, transportation problems sometimes," one woman said. "And sometimes you don't have any money to even get here."

MFSP sites have involved representatives of many agencies and organizations to offer easier access to services beyond the core job training, counseling, and placement. These include child care, parent education, basic and adult education, family planning, housing assistance, legal services, AFDC, food stamps, and Medicaid.

Concluding Observations

What we have observed so far about the success of the MFSP program is encouraging. Most striking is the range of services the MFSP women were able to tap compared with the control group, even though the latter group comprised women who were actively seeking ways to get off welfare and who were similar in all other ways to the MFSP participants. Only 20 to 30 percent of the control group to date have been able to find programs in job training, education, job placement, transportation, or child care. They most frequently obtained help in job training; but while 50 percent of the MFSP women received child-care assistance through the job program, only 24 percent of the control group did.

As the reports from the MFSP evaluation are completed, they will deal with a number of issues that cannot be addressed now, including:

- Will women who participated in the program be better off economically than women who were not enrolled? Here the issues of long-term child care and health coverage become paramount. Unless a mother can earn a wage that will enable her to provide for her family, she may not have improved her well-being by going through the program.

- From the perspective of the participant and that of society, what will be the costs of the training program relative to the benefits derived from it?

- What will be the nature of the program's impact, positive or negative, on young children and on family structure and formation? Asked how the program had affected them and their families, some women said they felt better about themselves and more at ease with their children. "I can talk to them now," one woman said. "And they are proud of me."

An earlier social experiment, the National Supported Work Demonstration, offered work experience and some services to long-term female AFDC recipients, ex-addicts, ex-offenders, and young school dropouts. The experiment, done by

Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, found gains in employment and earnings for AFDC women. Such results are encouraging as we await the final results of the more comprehensive MFSP evaluation.

We now know, however, that any new effort at welfare reform that involves encouraging minority female single parents to seek careers outside their homes will certainly fail unless it includes adequately funded provisions addressing the participant's desire to be both mother and wage earner, and enables her to gain the support and skills to do both.

For More Information

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