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The Rockefeller Foundation

OVERVIEW OF THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION'S MINORITY FEMALE SINGLE PARENT PROGRAM

The Rockefeller Foundation initiated the Minority Female Single Parent (MFSP) Program in 1981 because the existing network of public programs did not appear to meet the employment and training needs of minority women who are single parents. Proposals were sought from community-based organizations around the country, and, beginning in 1982, training programs were implemented in six locations, with matching funds provided from local sources by each of the CBOs. The programs were to provide a comprehensive set of services to clients, including needs assessment, remedial education, skill training, job search/job placement assistance, counseling, and support services (such as child care and transportation) that may be necessary in order to allow single mothers to participate in an employment training program.

Policy Questions

The initiative was undertaken in order to address several important policy questions:

- Are community-based organizations a viable vehicle for providing employment training services to minority women who are single parents?
- What barriers do minority single mothers face in terms of participating in the labor market and gaining economic self-sufficiency? How do low levels of basic educational skills, the need for safe, reliable, and affordable child care, the availability of transportation, and the nature and location of jobs relative to their place of residence affect their ability to find and maintain jobs that facilitate their economic independence?
- Does the provision of program services improve the economic circumstances of the women who participate and their children, and to what extent?
- Does the provision of program services improve other important, noneconomic aspects of their lives, such as their educational attainment and that of their children, family formation and fertility, self-esteem and psychological well-being, and health?
- What are the resource costs of providing this range of services, and how do the costs compare with both measurable benefits and the benefits that are less amenable to accurate measurement?
- What elements of the program model appear to be responsible for its success (or lack of success), and which elements warrant broader replication?

Approaches to the Delivery of Basic Education and Skill Training

The four CBOs that continue to operate the MFSP Program in 1987 have developed diverse approaches to delivering basic education and training services, which reflect the style of each CBO and the circumstances of the local community. For example, Wider Opportunities for Women in Washington, D.C., offers a technical course in electro-mechanics and a more general course that incorporates improvement in basic education skills, orientation to the world of work, and limited work experience. Both courses are carefully sequenced and are of fixed duration, and admission to each requires specified levels of basic education skills.

Two other CBOs, the Atlanta Urban League (in Atlanta, Georgia) and OIC of Rhode Island (in Providence, Rhode Island), provide educational remediation and vocational skills training in a relatively broad range of occupations. Usually, the educational remediation is provided before vocational skills training begins and is intended to raise basic educational levels to a point at which the participant can benefit from the available vocational training courses. The vocational training courses are provided by the parent organization or by other training vendors in the area.

The Center for Employment Training (CET) in San Jose, California, represents a third approach to delivering the basic MFSP services. CET provides vocational skills training in a wide variety of occupations, using an open entry/open exit format in which participants enter the course with differing skill levels and proceed through the course at their own pace. In contrast to the other CBOs, CET does not use formal tests to determine whether educational skills are adequate for a given course of instruction. Educational remediation at CET is offered primarily, though not exclusively, in the context of vocational training classes.

All of the CBOs incorporate individual and group counseling, human development activities designed to promote self-esteem and self-sufficiency, and job-search assistance into their programs.

Research Design

Addressing the policy questions described earlier requires implementing not only programs to provide the services, but also an evaluation that will provide reliable and credible information about the programs and their impacts. Central to the research is a measurement strategy for observing both the experience of MFSP participants and what their experience would have been had they not participated in the program, so as to identify the true impacts of the program. In the MFSP evaluation, the eligible applicants are assigned randomly to either the participant group, which is offered the opportunity to participate, or the control group, which is not served by the CBO, for a period of two and a half years. The random selection process gives each individual an equal chance of being selected for program participation. Although random selection poses challenges for the program staff who must implement it, random selection represents a "fair" way of allocating opportunities to participate when the number of prospective participants exceeds the program's capacity to serve everyone. Furthermore, random selection provides the most credible and least expensive method for establishing a control group whose experiences serve as a "benchmark" for measuring the impacts of the program.

The evaluation also requires a variety of detailed information about the experience of both the participant and the control groups:

- Information on personal and household characteristics, and on preprogram labor market experience, is being collected through in-person interviews administered just prior to random assignment.
- Information on labor market experience, welfare receipt, education and job training, child-care arrangements, health status, fertility, self-esteem, and other outcomes is being collected through follow-up interviews administered 12 and 30 months after enrollment in the sample.
- Information on the nature and duration of specific program services received by individual sample members is being systematically recorded and reported by CBO staff.

In addition, detailed cost information is being collected from each of the CBOs for the cost-benefit analysis, as is detailed information on the organization and content of the actual services. Finally, ethnographic studies are being conducted at several sites in order to provide a more in-depth understanding of the experience and problems of a limited number of MFSP participants.

Enrollment of the research sample began in November 1984 and is expected to continue through the end of 1987. An interim report on the impacts of the program, based on the 12-month follow-up interview, is scheduled to be completed in the spring of 1989, and the final report on the program's impacts, based on the 12- and 30-month interview data, will be completed in the summer of 1991.

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