

Minority Female Single Parent Program
Advisory Committee
Summary of Special Meeting, July 10, 1984

A special meeting of the Advisory Committee was called to discuss the content and implications of Professor Robinson Hollister's report *Keel* on the mid-course assessment of the MFSP Research and Evaluation Plan. Committee members present were Dr. Phyllis A. Wallace, Chair; Professor Patricia Gurin, Dr. Lloyd Rogler, and Dr. James Teele. Other participants included Dr. Michael Borus and Dr. Robinson Hollister. Foundation representatives included Dr. Richard Lyman, Dr. Laurence Stifel, Dr. Phoebe Cottingham, Dr. Bruce Williams, and Dr. Bernard Anderson.

During introductory remarks, Dr. Lyman assured Committee members that their recommendations were welcome, especially on changes that might be made to improve what can be learned from the MFSP Program, even if we cannot learn all we expected to learn at the beginning of the program. He said if we make changes at this point, we hope to do so effectively. Further, the Advisory Committee, as a non-decision making body, should not feel constrained by budget or other considerations to express fully its views on all matters under discussion.

In his introductory remarks, Dr. Anderson reviewed the discussions between Foundation officers and Dr. Dorothy Height and her staff concerning the termination of support for the NCNW project. (A separate memo on this issue was distributed to Advisory Committee members in June.) In order to ease the transition from funding for the Council's MFSP project, the Foundation offered to consider reduced support for alternative activities for a limited period of time, but thus far, Dr. Height has not formally responded to the offer.

Dr. Anderson then traced the circumstances leading to the request for Dr. Hollister to conduct the mid-course assessment of the research and evaluation plan. Among the main factors suggesting the need for an assessment were difficulties faced by the CBOs in achieving and maintaining a satisfactory number of enrollees, inadequate performance

by Abt Associates in conducting the comparison group surveys and other research tasks, and conflicting data reported under the MIS system. Such difficulties seemed to worsen during the early months on 1984, necessitating a careful review of the original assumptions and operating procedures for the research and evaluation plan.

After the introductory remarks, Dr. Wallace began the discussion by inquiring about why Dr. Hollister had not consulted with any Advisory Committee members during his review. Dr. Hollister explained that he was required to complete his report in a very short time (30 days) during which he had to visit several CBO sites, and conduct extensive review of voluminous research reports. He concentrated mainly on reports and other materials on file within the Foundation, and interviewed Foundation officers, AAI staff, and selected CBO representatives. The time constraint made it very difficult to consult all who might have contributed to his report.

Hollister further indicated that the constraints of his terms of reference, together with his preliminary assessment of critical issues in the research report, led him to focus primarily on the impact analysis. In attempting to ferret out the key assumptions bearing upon the utility of the research plan for achieving Foundation objectives, he settled on two issues: (a) what size of the treatment effect on program participants is expected, and (b) what is the smallest size effect likely to be observed and found statistically significant? These two issues have importance for the development of an appropriate research design for the impact analysis.

Advisory Committee members then made a number of comments in response to the analysis and recommendations in Hollister's report:

1. On the New Haven Comparison Group Sample: not a good source of comparison for Providence; the structure of employment opportunities differs; areas around Providence should be used for comparison.
2. Sample design recommendations: random assignment should be introduced to eliminate selection bias, but if random assignment is not put into effect, some sampling from baseline interviews should be conducted to better handle selection bias. It is necessary

to get more information between application and enrollment to deal with selection bias. In addition, AAI should be urged to be precise on how to model selection bias. Hollister doubts that AAI can do this, but perhaps can identify variables related to the selection process although not related to outcomes.

3. One way to circumvent the effects of selection bias on research outcomes might be to sample more heavily in the comparison group. Another technique might be to reallocate impact samples from Brooklyn to other sites because the sample numbers are weakened there. All the documents from AAI on site researchers (who are an important source of information) concur that Brooklyn is the weakest project. Also, cognitive assessment tests might be included in the baseline survey because serious basic education inadequacies of participants are observed in all sites.
4. Social security numbers now collected only for participants should be collected also for comparison groups. This might permit tracking of employment and earnings from social security records.
5. Follow-up telephone tracking should be used in preference to the present post card system.
6. Barriers to employment faced by MFSP participants should be studied. Variations in outcomes might be due to program design, lack of basic education, transportation, or child care problems.
7. Cost benefit analysis would be helpful. This should be reviewed at all sites.
8. A consultant with experience with contract research firms should be hired by the Foundation to work with AAI. Dr. Wallace underscored the need for RF to hire a consultant to manage the technical issues related to the program. She observed that Hollister listed three types of audiences the Foundation might address with the information gathered from the program (descriptive, technical, highly technical). Thus far the intended audience has been unclear, but it seems that the Foundation has aimed more at the technical policy making group rather than academicians.

Other issues discussed by the Advisory Committee included further details facing the Foundation. Professor Gurin indicated that in adjusting to selection bias, it would be good to do a measurement on applicants who did not enroll. She added, however, that funds should not be put into cognitive tests. Further, she indicated that on the reallocation of resources, funds should be moved either to programs combining education and skills training, or perhaps non-traditional skills training. Preliminary evidence seems to suggest an impact in combining skills training and education. Dr. Hollister reported, however, that the OSRs say AAI is not prepared to evaluate a combined service program.

Dr. Rogler observed that the CBOs experienced turbulence at different times during the project. All except CET experienced it in the first year; CET experienced it in the second year. This experience raises questions about what service model is being tested in the impact analysis.

Dr. Teele cautioned against Foundation intervention in the determination of CBO operations, thinking that to do so would jeopardize the integrity of the demonstration. He also commented on the loss of thirty percent of the sample in the first year follow-up, and offered to share with AAI the benefit of his experience in other projects in which such sample attrition was greatly reduced.

In summing up the key issues raised in the Hollister report, and discussed during the meeting, a question was raised as to whether the MFSP Program should be discontinued at this point. Admittedly, some lessons have been learned during the past two years. The question is whether additional knowledge might justify the continued expense of project operations and research.

Dr. Hollister replied that he thinks the program would have to get much worse before its termination would be justified. The evaluation will yield something of interest. One alternative would be to evaluate the two strongest CBOs, but he reiterated the need for random assignment and believes that AUL and CET could do it.

Additional views were expressed about the consistency of MIS data across sites, strengthening the AAI research team, and ways to gain maximum benefit from the rich project operating data being

collected by the on site researchers.

After three hours of discussion on these issues, the meeting concluded with Dr. Lyman's expression of appreciation to the Advisory Committee members for their comments on possible next steps in the continuing development of the program. He indicated that decisions concerning the future of the program would certainly be substantially informed by the discussion at the meeting.

Major Developments Since the Last Advisory Committee Meeting

1. Four CBOs, CET, AUL, WOW, and OIC have agreed to modify their intake procedures to adopt random assignment during the third subsequent years of the program. Details are now being developed by AAI with a November target date for implementation.
2. Impact evaluation procedures have been discontinued at the Congress for Neighborhood Women. An alternative evaluation plan will be developed for that project to capture its uniqueness and value to participants.
3. A reorganized research team has been assigned by AAI to the MFSP program. Key staff are Larry Orr, labor economist; Joe Frees, project manager; Lauri Bassi, economist and Robert Sharrick, MIS. The new team has worked closely with Foundation staff through the summer to design and put in place the strengthened evaluation plan.
4. Dr. Rebecca Maynard has been hired by the Foundation as a half-time technical advisor with principal responsibilities to monitor the evaluation plan. She will also be involved in data analysis at a later stage in the program.
5. The CBOs have submitted their third year workplans which reflect, in several cases, significant efforts to strengthen their service mix. Increased attention has been given to modifications in basic remediation instruction, enhanced skills training, and strengthened job development. Child care services have also received attention in third year plan modifications.