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# The Dual Face of Empowerment: A Model for Cooperative Resource Building

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Homelessness among families with children has become a nationwide problem. Although homelessness is difficult to document, it is estimated that approximately 250,000 to 3,000,000 people in the United States are homeless. Families, which comprise approximately one third of the homeless population, is its fastest growing segment (Mihaly, 1991; National Coalition for the Homeless, 1989; Van Vliet, 1989). This may be a conservative figure. Some of these families often go uncounted because they are part of the "invisible" homeless. They avoid agency contact for fear of losing their children or live in motels, cars, or campgrounds and thereby are not counted among the homeless (Edelman & Mihaly, 1989).

Homeless families generally are plagued with multiple problems. For a family, homelessness represents the culmination of a myriad of stress related factors which have impinged on its ability to control its environment.

Hutchison et al. (1986) identify these factors as unemployment or under-employment, inadequate public assistance programs, deficient housing, exorbitant utility costs, meager health care, lack of transportation, and inadequate social support systems. Homeless families not only have little control over these valued resources but often must overcome major barriers to obtain them. Due to limited funding and heavy demand for services, agencies often are unable to provide homeless families with adequate resources to meet their basic survival needs.

In an attempt not to "blame" or "victimize" homeless families, a recent movement has utilized the "empowerment model"

to address their needs. Although the empowerment model can be an effective, positive, and productive approach in helping homeless families, efforts thus far have been marginally effective and have left homeless families feeling frustrated with the social systems assisting them. In addition, social service providers experience a sense of despair, helplessness, and frustration as they attempt to attack the plight of homeless families.

This paper will: 1) define and identify the assumptions of the empowerment model from a human ecological perspective; 2) explore why current attempts at applying the empowerment model have been unsuccessful and, which may prove to be damaging to homeless families; 3) demonstrate the results of a university initiated effort to empower both homeless families and those agencies serving them; resulting in greater benefits and satisfaction for both groups; and, 4) suggest further development and application of the empowerment model to broader social service areas and other client groups.

### DEFINING EMPOWERMENT

The concept of empowerment is an illusive one. It has been applied in varied professional settings, and yet is defined differently across disciplines. The idea that the term empowerment is complex and difficult to define is exemplified by Rappoport (1985) who writes "Empowerment is a little bit like obscenity; you have trouble defining it but you know it when you see it. It seems to be missing in people who feel helpless" (p. 17). In business management, empowerment is defined as "a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information" (Conger and Kanungo, 1988, p. 474). In the field of early childhood Dunst and Trivette (1987) defined and operationalized empowerment "to include the help seeker's: (a) access and control over needed resources, (b) decision-making and problem solving abilities, and (c) acquisition of instrumental behavior needed to interact effectively with others in order to procure resources" p. 445).

The Cornell Empowerment Group (1989) views empowerment as a process at the community-level rather than an outcome or set of outcomes. They define empowerment as "an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources" (p. 2).

Inherent in the Cornell Group's definition is the human ecological approach to working with individuals, families, groups, and organizations. The ecological approach as set forth by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) perceives persons as developing and adapting through transactions with all elements of their environments. The ecological model attempts to "improve the coping patterns of people and their environments so that a better match can be attained between an individual's needs and the characteristics of his/her environment" (Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman, 1990, p. 10).

This paper will utilize the definition of empowerment derived from the Cornell Empowerment Group. Empowerment, according to the Cornell Group (1989), has certain underlying programmatic assumptions: (a) individuals have strengths, (b) diversity is valued, (c) people interact with a variety of systems, (d) all people have choices in a democracy, (e) the deficit model works against empowerment, (f) cultural understanding is important, (g) women are particularly burdened with inequities, and (h) power and valued resources must be redistributed more equitably.

### HOMELESS PROGRAMS: WHAT'S MISSING?

Rappoport (1981) introduced the idea of the "dialectic" as it relates to empowerment. He defined dialectic to mean "the tendency to become focused on one side of a dialectical problem, that is to pay attention to one side of the truth so as to fail to take into account an equally compelling opposite" (p. 4).

Applying this use of the dialectic as it relates to the plight of the homeless implies that as attention is focused on empowering homeless individuals (microsystems level), at the same time it is

critical to empower the social service providers (microsystems level) . If programs focus solely on empowering the homeless and not service providers as well, the result will be a "one-sided" approach with the tendency to "blame" and "victimize" both homeless individuals and agencies for not improving the situation. Not only will the social service providers experience the role of victim, they will also experience negative effects such as frustration, anger, and burnout.

Ann Hartman (1991) comments on the stress and strain of social agencies. she writes "the pressure is often on workers to do more with less or, eventually, to do less with less, to process the maximum number of people in the shortest possible time. Professional judgment concerning client need and appropriate responses to need are overridden by financial and bureaucratic requirements" (p. 195). Fabricant (1986) views social service agencies as operating from a defensive posture. He points out that social agencies are losing their funding sources as well as increasingly being asked to meet the needs of populations for which adequate services and funding do not exist. Out of this defensive posture certain agency outcomes develop. "Rigid intake criteria, excessive documentation demands, categorical definitions of service, cold, impersonal and, on occasion, hostile responses to expressions of need too often characterize the homeless's experience with highly bureaucratized forms of social services" (Fabricant, 1988, p. 51).

A widely held view exists that social service agencies are under funded, uncaring, and unable to provide adequate services for the homeless. Social service agencies are also perceived as being unable or unwilling to work collaboratively with other social service agencies. Consequently, there is a tendency to blame and, also, accentuate the weaknesses of social service agencies. Focusing on the deficits rather than the strengths of social service agencies only perpetuates an unempowered position.

As programs attempt to empower homeless individuals it is essential and critical that empowerment also take place on an agency and inter-agency level. The following is a description of a three-year ongoing program initiated by university involvement which created the opportunity on a community

level for agencies to cooperate. This ultimately resulted in an empowerment model that benefitted the agencies and clients simultaneously and was accomplished by facilitating client/staff discourse surrounding homeless issues. Agency and staff morale improves through the mutual interaction of shared ideas and concerns. As staff morale improves, staff become more open to client input. Subsequently, this results in direct client empowerment.

#### UNIVERSITY/COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT MODEL

The School of Social Work at The University of Nevada, Reno created a non-threatening forum for agencies to communicate and collaborate. By employing empowerment at the agency as well as the inter-agency level and utilizing the very empowerment techniques we employ with clients, a model for successful resource building can be implemented. An informal meeting without a lead agency was used to bring together key people with the common interest of serving homeless families. The University provided the impetus by expressing interest in researching demographics of homeless families who had been referred to a federally funded transitional housing program from shelters located in Washoe County, Nevada.

The transitional housing program was created under a 1988 Stewart B. McKinney demonstration grant. The recipient for this particular McKinney grant for transitional housing was the local Housing Authority. The actual physical facility, a converted motel, consists of 42 single or dual rooms with attached bathrooms. Twelve common kitchen and eating areas are available to residents at prescribed hours in the main building. The grant included a social service component which was included as in-kind contributions by local social service agencies.

Representatives of the University and the Housing Authority met to discuss and identify unmet transitional housing program needs. Two major needs were identified: the program lacked a means of tracking clients being referred from various shelter sites to transitional and on to permanent housing; and the in-kind social services had not been clearly delineated at the outset of the program.

In fact, inadequate coordination of service provision often resulted in duplication of services and waste of limited agency resources. For example, two community groups unknowingly duplicated efforts by providing a story hour for children. At the same time, a group attempting to provide services to adults was hindered by a lack of child care. By uniting the two children's groups and coordinating the time with the adult group, multiple needs were met without expending resources unnecessarily. Using mandatory tenant meetings as an arena to gain information from clients, limited services being offered were profiled. Examination of this profile illuminated the apparent service gaps thus enhancing program planning.

Once the program needs were identified, representatives from the Housing Authority explored the role of the University in improving client services. The Housing Authority suggested that the University assume a leadership role in facilitating inter-agency communication and coordination.

Subsequently, university faculty and graduate students organized a preliminary meeting of social service agencies to identify unmet program needs and develop a structure to improve services through inter-agency collaboration. Agency representatives agreed to meet regularly, as well as contact other agency representatives to join the group. The group comprised of key community agencies and university representatives formed The Alliance for Families in Transition (AFT). Agencies participating in AFT include State and County Welfare, several private non profits organizations, church affiliated groups, and various university departments. The organization focused on improving service delivery through agency networking and resource development. A mission statement was developed and adopted by all agencies. The mission of AFT is to "unite community agencies participating in a cooperative effort to assist families to achieve their full potential.

To address the program need for a tracking system to manage and analyze data, while at the same time assessing each family's unique characteristics and needs, a centralized, comprehensive needs assessment tool and accompanying data base were recommended. Utilizing client feedback from intake interviews, an assessment tool was developed and accepted by

the AFT group for use with transitional clients by the multiple agencies serving them. AFT agreed to encourage all shelters and organizations serving homeless families to use the centralized, comprehensive needs assessment form. Use of this form allowed for a data base system that would clearly define a sample of the community's homeless population and allow for appropriate regional planning. community planning is a delicate issue, as it requires the allocation of scarce resources and leads to ardent competition among agencies seeking to serve the same population. "Turfism" created by agency competition often hampers optimum service delivery to clients.

Three committees were created to address the second program need to improve service delivery to the homeless families by eliminating overlap and duplication of services. The subcommittees included: children's needs, adult services, assessment, and shelters. The committees meet independently and come together for a monthly AFT organizational meeting. By encouraging the committees to focus on client needs as opposed to agency needs, AFT members as a group found satisfaction in cooperation. This client-centered approach reduced the turfism so common among social service providers who are frequently competing for limited community resources.

The children's subcommittee developed programs to empower parents and children through quality early childhood programs. The programs for young children and school aged children were designed to reduce educational barriers. The subcommittee assisted The University of Nevada, Reno, Cooperative Extension and the Child and Family Resource Center in obtaining funding and developing on-site and off-site programs. A program titled "Story Time" was conducted by the Nevada Cooperative Extension. This program introduced young children to new words, ideas, and concepts. It modeled appropriate techniques for parents to guide and support their young children in pre-reading skills and social development.

The Child and Family Resource Center provided programs for infants through age 12, four nights a week, while parents attended literacy classes. Staff and volunteers provided an environment which supported the needs of the child whether they be physical, such as nutritious snacks, bathing the child,



cleaning the child's clothes, or individual time for reading a book or just being held. Activities and toys were designed for all ages.

The adult services subcommittee identified and focused on the various needs of homeless adults. Needs identified by this subcommittee were: legal assistance, homemaker services, financial budgeting skills, dental and health care, mental health, job training, eye care, and housing. The committee decided to invite homeless individuals to meetings to get their perspective on issues concerning the homeless. The subcommittee realized that what was a resource today was gone tomorrow. Therefore, a major goal for the subcommittee is to keep current on available resources.

The assessment and shelter subcommittee established a pilot, on-site field unit project at the transitional facility. Graduate and undergraduate social work students from the University of Nevada, Reno School of Social Work provided case management services for client assessments and direct work with homeless shelters. Students scheduled activities and coordinated interagency services for the homeless families. Social Work students also were assigned to either AFT's children's needs or adult services committee. The students' involvement with both agencies and clients, as a learning experience, served as an excellent role model for clients to observe that professionals as well as clients require training for growth. Clients benefitted dramatically from the direct, intensive contact with students and expressed positive regard for the relationship.

During the first two years, the AFT organization has successfully identified needs and facilitated agency collaboration and action. Developing trust and open communication between agency participants has empowered the system of services to homeless families. Major accomplishments that have been identified thus far by the Alliance of Families in Transition are:

1. A centralized assessment form which has resulted in less confusion for homeless families and the agencies that work with them.
2. A preliminary profile and analysis of homeless families through information obtained from the centralized assessment form.

3. Creation of student internships which provide experiences beneficial both to students and vulnerable families.
4. An understanding of the large number of people who truly care and are willing to help when the barriers are removed.
5. A system to manage and resolve conflicts in an open forum.
6. Establishment of a cooperative and empowered system between social service agencies, the university, the community, and homeless families.

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem of the homeless is a critical contemporary social problem and has become a costly national issue. Programs were created through the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 to address the varied and complex social needs of the homeless population. Since 1987, however, the numbers of homeless individuals have continued to increase with families being the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. Crisis management has been the point of policy development.

Efforts to empower the homeless population has been met with marginal success. From a human ecological perspective, working with the homeless from an individual-based approach rather than a multilevel problem approach is limited in scope. Empowerment must be broadened beyond clients (microsystems level) to social service agencies (mesosystems level). Individuals who work within such agencies must experience a sense of empowerment if they are to be effective agents in working with homeless clients.

The model presented in this paper outlines an attempt to broaden empowerment beyond the microsystems level. The university, acting from a neutral position, provided the impetus for agency collaboration, which resulted in cooperative efforts to address and resolve issues and problems affecting homeless families as well as those affecting the agencies themselves. Because empowerment is an "ongoing" and evolving process the university has taken steps to broaden the application of the current model.

Faculty and graduates from The University of Nevada, Reno have become involved at the exosystem and macrosystems levels. On the exosystem level contacts with city council representatives, county commissioners, and state representatives have proven to be successful. The university has been instrumental in collaborating with politicians in initiating new programs and policy on behalf of the homeless. On the macrosystems level, interviews by newspapers and local television networks have helped to sensitize and inform the general public on the issues of homelessness.

The problems of homelessness will continue to be a critical national issue throughout the remainder of this decade. If the condition of the homeless is to change, then new procedures must occur at multilevels in order to facilitate individual and combined empowerment of the homeless population. First, it should be acknowledged that input from the homeless regarding policy development and decision making can have far reaching ramifications for resolving individual and social problems. Second, agencies must continue to communicate openly and avoid the entanglement of turfism and competition. Third, professionals from allied social service professions must initiate and work closely with politicians on the local, state, and national levels to develop social policy which encourages empowerment and ultimately will create the means for the homeless to become secure and productive citizens. Fourth, all of those who work with the homeless must encourage the development of multilevel efforts to change attitudes about homelessness and the devastating effects it has on individuals and families. Lastly, institute further academic-community shared involvement towards creating innovative and lasting solutions to the problems of homelessness.

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