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Welfare "Reform": Com'in' Up On the Rough Side of the Mountain

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Through the lens of an innovative community-university partnership in the Greater Boston region, the authors analyze how welfare reform organizing overtook a resident-driven empowerment project. Since a major goal of the Chelsea/Dudley Partnership in MA is to support residents in exerting greater power over the practices and policies of community agencies, projects have been initiated in the city of Chelsea and the Dudley neighborhood of Boston to organize, and to strengthen, low income women by training them as welfare advocates. This paper examines how the efforts evolved, and how the community and the university partners are playing a key role in making connections and developing skills. Urgency of now factors are discussed and the call is made for greater recognition of the strength of recipient organizing. Recommendations are offered for human service providers.

In addition to the traditional concept of true commitment that means you are willing to die for what you think is right, make equal space for the womanly concept of commitment that means you are willing to live for what you believe.

—June Jordan

Introduction and Context

We begin with words of possibility. How succinctly this contemporary U.S. poet/analyst captures the importance of taking a strong, principled stand against the abdication of federal responsibility for the poor! In these confused times of retrenchment, the authors take heart from June Jordan's words. They are words, too, from our grandmothers. In the struggle is the hope.

The world is increasingly polarized economically, both among and within countries. Official U.S. government statistics portray a rosy economic picture—a steady GNP, job growth, low inflation. Yet povertization is increasing within families and communities already in economic straits; and this increase is occurring as a seismic shift in U.S. social policies is implemented. The much touted “security net” has been legally dismantled by enactment of the punitive Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.

The war on poverty, announced in the 1960s and sparsely implemented for a brief period, has been transformed through a rancorous politicized debate into the war on poor people. There is a particular “open season” attack on welfare moms. Punitive requirements result at both the federal and state levels. The social welfare system, which had been evolving since the 1930s, is shattered. Where is the struggle, and where is the hope? Who is responding and how?

This article is refracted through the lens of a community-university partnership located in the Greater Boston region. The state of Massachusetts received a waiver from the Clinton Administration in 1995 and instituted a punitive system of temporary assistance. In the midst of harsh systemic changes, however, something refreshing springs forth: the increased visibility and influence of recipients stepping up to the plate to bat for their basic human rights.

We examine the recipient's hope and the human service provider's responses. We take an asset-approach at examining strengths. Who is in the struggle and how? Recipients/constituents are organizing and increasing numbers of providers and educators are working along side them as allies. We look at some of the “warts-and-all” of getting to where we are today as a

community-university partnership committed to learning with and from those who are the veterans of poverty. Thus we raise questions about the evolution of reform.

The Chelsea/Dudley Partnership for
Families & Neighborhoods (C/DP)

The authors of this joint-written article are affiliated with the C/DP. One is a graduate student, another a community resident, another the project manager of the C/DP, funded by a three-year grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. We are in the third year of what was conceived as a resident-driven power-redistribution project. The partnership is exploring an asset-based approach where community residents are at the forefront of altering the imbalance of professional/resident power already operating in two distressed communities: the Dudley neighborhood inside Boston, and the City of Chelsea, next-door to Boston, yet by patterns of interaction, far away. An overarching goal has been developing structures and processes that change the power relations between community members and human service providers.

Cultural Context

Among liberals and helping professionals, one finds a feeling of nostalgia about reform efforts often because of their association with the achievements of the African American-led freedom movement. There also is much denial of the significant inroads made by conservative ideology and rhetoric such as the coined words "quota" and "reverse discrimination," and the multi-layered infrastructure in which they are articulated. By the end of the 1960s, the freedom movement's forward progress was being blunted by the racialized reaction to integration.

To be sure, new social movements did emerge mid-20th century, articulating important political and cultural themes. The civil rights movement, and the social movements it spawned, were based upon a hope and belief that justice and harmonious pluralism could, and would, be a future reality. Leaders were able to mobilize people via oratory, metaphorical images of a better America. The non-violent demonstrations that were a feature of the freedom movement sparked the Chicano power movement,

Red Power, the original welfare rights movement, student power, the anti-Vietnam war movement, the women's movement, the anti-nuclear peace movement, gay and lesbian rights movement and more; as well as new collective identities, new modalities of expression, new conceptual space for ideas, new possibilities of reform, and new avenues of mobility.

At the same time, however, those who did not want to change the way power is distributed moved even more swiftly to block equal partnership from emerging. Well-intentioned helping professionals, while proud of their tolerance (note the judgment implied in this word) of diversity, often remained silent about the absence of redistribution of meaningful power and resources.

Implications of the Politicizing of Resentment

The world of work in general has changed significantly over the last 50 years. The loss of higher paying, stable manufacturing jobs has exacerbated decline in older cities, particularly in the northeast and midwest. So despite a brief period of advancement, the changing nature of the economy has worked against the empowerment of peoples of color, and increased poverty conditions, particularly among women and children.

This has implications for the practice of social work. Within the last three decades the moral fervor of the mid-twentieth century freedom movements has been eclipsed by those with narrow political views who intentionally frame social issues as the dysfunctional behavior of lazy people making bad choices. Rationally one can cite facts to the contrary such as falling wages, particularly among the non-college educated population, that have kept poverty rates historically high throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Between 1979 and 1995, poverty rates grew for both whites and Latinos and have fallen for African Americans. But why do we continue to think of this as a rational debate? It is a fight by some to retain power as is (Gans, 1995).¹

The Mood of Meanness

How did the mood of meanness come so to pervade the U.S.? Ideas, articulated within a conservative ideological framework,

began to surface. By the end of the 1960s, forward movement was blunted by the racialized white reaction. The political right took advantage of, and increased, public cynicism.

The social movements of the 60s did challenge existing power relations, but they failed to consolidate a new radical democratic politics. They failed to mobilize popular support for a fair economic system. Hence as wealth became even more concentrated in the 80's under Reaganomics and the working class and lower class lost ground, the political soil was fertile for a white backlash against people of color. This has ridden on a crest of racism (and sexism) and socio-cultural issues but it is driven by economic insecurities.

Ironically, what the social movements of the 60s did do was create the space where the right-wing could incubate an intentional strategy of making illegitimate the stated dreams and goals of people of color. Demagogic politicians have fanned the flames and right-wing academic ideologues have provided theoretical underpinning. The stereotypical welfare recipient—unwed, Black, drug using, lazy, uppity—has become a handy scapegoat.

The backlash appropriated and reinterpreted as invalid the earlier dreams for a pluralist power-sharing society. Code-words and symbols shaped, and continue to shape, the public discourse. For example, the cry of "reverse discrimination" appropriates the early demand for equal opportunity and rearticulates it in new conservative garb of individual merit. Another example: the new distinction between a "legal" or "illegal" immigrant created to amplify the sentiment among some that immigrants, along with the poor, are freeloaders not willing to pull their weight.²

In the past decade there have been attacks and cutbacks on basic human and civil rights in the U.S. This can be seen in the spate of racially-motivated violence by police, the white supremacist mainstream talk on radioshow, ³ the attacks on immigrants, the effective demonizing of welfare recipients. One must also note the effective use of the World Wide Web by hate groups such as the National Socialist Movement, whose "home page" carries the visage of Adolph Hitler and the 21-point demands. Available to anyone with a modem, then, are the arguments for the "end of

the parasitical welfare system," the elimination of "the lying Jew" control of the media, and for mandating racial separation.

This is occurring at the same time that immigration from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean is increasing. Long term residents have become more vocally hostile to these newer arrivals, particularly those with darker skin colors. 'We made it—why can't they?'

Right wing efforts offer simple scapegoats, and disciplined and simplified, step-by-step answers to complex issues. The intent is to block parity and power-sharing with Blacks, Latinos, white women, gays, and the like.

The politicizing of "welfare reform"

Racial hostility is in! One flashpoint is the greater visibility of larger numbers of people of color, and more diversity among them. This has generated anxiety over a sharing of resources. A politics of resentment emerged as some whites organized effective resistance to sharing power with a multipolar racial mix.

This can be seen in a variety of situations: California Proposition 209, constricting the rights of people of color to educational and economic opportunity. The misleadingly titled "California Civil Rights Initiative" has accelerated affirmative action being dismantled. We can see the tactic of referenda in California as a means to imposing one's ideology on a populace. In the late 1970s there were tax revolts. Then Proposition 187 passed (so far, implementation is blocked by the courts) which would deny schooling and public services to "illegal" immigrants.

The use of the referendum to register discontent, anger, and alienation is troubling. Masked in the media-dominated discourse is a fiction of immigrants as a fiscal burden. Success in California galvanizes the movement across the country. Yet as Derrick Bell writes in *Faces At the Bottom of the Well* (1995):

Because of an irrational but easily roused fear that any social reform will unjustly benefit blacks, whites fail to support the programs this country desperately needs to address: the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, both black and white (p.4).

The Right has been able to use racism to divide and conquer and keep the focus on socio-cultural issues rather than on the

economic assault on the poor, the working class, and even the middle class. Popular culture focuses on murders, drugs, family breakdown, and petty political scandals, further diverting attention from a robbery in process by the rich. Meanwhile, insecure whites lash out at people of color. Their insecurity is justified—the targets, however, are wrong. But it is important to recognize the validity of the insecurity.

The movement of African Americans for freedom generated questioning among some whites of their own competencies. Few acknowledge white set-asides in jobs, positions, privileges. Affirmative action was crafted to generate opportunities to recover the initiative and talents stifled and crushed by white male set-asides. The myth of reverse discrimination emerged in the 1970s just as affirmative action was beginning to work. In fact, we posit that success as the reason why the myth emerged. Some whites feared seeing persons of color, in particular, and women, moving into the decision-making circles.

Most whites, including women, themselves a beneficiary of affirmative action, are in denial about the depths of racism in the U.S. National poll after poll (Gallop, 1996; Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 1997, etc.) show that whites tend to believe there is more equality in the workplace and general society than ever before, despite the statistics. Most whites have learned to tolerate working with Blacks, but have not necessarily accepted that Blacks are fully capable of functioning in that workplace, and, certainly, not as their equal. Difference, historically and culturally defined by human beings with power, does make a difference. Despite its lofty image, the United States is built upon conquest, and upon difference being labeled as dangerous.

Whites in the U.S. tend to live separately from people of color: different neighborhoods, different schools, different churches. Whites in particular know very little about the social realities for people of color, and tend to have insufficient knowledge of cultural nuances in a Latino, Cambodian, Pakistani or Samoan culture. Climbing out of poverty is particularly difficult for persons of color. Yet they are projected in the media as parasites or criminals. Lucy Williams, Northeastern Law School, insightfully charts how the wide-Right has gone about building these images into public discourse (Williams, 1996).

Massachusetts and Welfare/Temporary Assistance

In April 1997, there were 78,022 families in the state receiving some form of cash, food stamp or Medicaid assistance. The average monthly grant is \$481. Seventy-one percent of all recipients are children. Ninety-four percent of the heads of household receiving AFDC were women. The Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) states that its case load is as follows: 48% white; 28% Hispanic; 18% Black; 5% Asian or Other.

This New England state has a reputation for innovative policies. In the 1980s under Governor Michael Dukakis, the MA Employment Training (ET) Choices program was considered a national model for ways to transition recipients to the labor force. (California's GAIN program was similarly lauded.) Indeed, Dukakis made this program a centerpiece in his successful attempt to capture the Democratic Party's nomination for President. In reality, participants in the program experienced little employment and/or financial gain. The national Family Support Act of 1988 created grants to states which were to be matched by state funds. There was little progress here, too. Now the state has instituted Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Multiple forms of temporary assistance are now operating using differing names, such as WAGES in Florida: Work and Gain Economic Self-Sufficiency (Robinson, 1997).

Massachusetts, like the majority of other states, obtained a federal waiver allowing it to accept some, and adjust other components of the proposed welfare reform: block grants, work requirements, time limits. Supporters saw the state as gaining greater control via the block grant system. They succeeded, for example, in adding a family cap eliminating increased benefits when another child is born to a family on welfare. Most MA Recipients can receive only 2 years of assistance within a 5-year period, but they won't face the federal 5-year lifetime limit. The work requirement in the state for all able-bodied recipients with school-age children is that they find jobs or perform community service within 60 days at 20 hours per week, even though the federal law would increase this to 30 hours by the year 2000. Teenage recipients must live with adult relatives or in structured group homes.

Governor William Weld received official acceptance from the Clinton Administration for the overhaul which was initiated and implemented 18 months before the federal legislation ending welfare entitlement was passed.

Clim'in' Up On the Rough Side of the Mountain

The hymn by this name from the African American church tradition tells it straight: one cannot climb up the smooth side of a mountain. We live life in the face of difficulties. The rough side provides the necessary footholds to grasp and stand upon as one moves along the path.

The welfare "reform" that has been instituted does not support increasing recipients' levels of educational attainment, a known predictor of economic advancement. Similarly, with mandatory workfare, the amount of time mothers can spend with their children decreases. Quality of life and living become more elusive.

Yet at the same time, organized resistance is building to the punitive approaches. While some human services workers and academics have long been engaged in public policy legislative battles, and some recipient and low-income people's groups have ebbed and flowed over the years, increasingly in Massachusetts one finds broader social movements led by recipients. This leadership within alliances is refreshing.

In Massachusetts, recipients are meeting together to gain accurate information, and in the process are moving beyond personal pain to public purpose. They are designing protest literature, guerrilla theater, educational and advocacy venues. In February 1997, recipients and their allies staged two days of lobbying and demonstrations at the State Capital in Boston. The second day demonstrated the unity and mounting political strength of immigrants and refugees and their 60+ collaborating organizations.⁴ Hundreds converged, including busloads of elderly and disabled persons of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Massachusetts' larger immigrant communities of Lowell, Lynn, Springfield, Fall River, and Chelsea were well represented. The major forum in the State House Auditorium was translated into six languages. For some participants who had fled persecution in Cambodia, Vietnam, the former Soviet Union, and Central

America, this was their first experience with legislative action. They advocated a five-part Compact To Protect Massachusetts Immigrants calling upon the state to provide a basic level of support to legal immigrants and refugees.

Something revolutionary has sprouted out of the abandonment of the most vulnerable amongst us: constituents as assets. The question arises, then: how best might human service workers tap these valuable resources to continue the fight for economic and social development in distressed communities?

An asset-based approach, as delineated by Kretzman and McKnight (1993), involves community members as meaningful participants in the decision and planning stages of community or agency work. In Massachusetts, we have seen recipients formulate committees, small working groups and task forces to examine the nuances of impact of the new system and practices. The constituents themselves have taken the lead in constructing, or challenging to reconstruct, the agendas for those working for what was earlier called welfare rights.

Has this been a smooth evolution? No.

A Case in Point: The Campaign for Real Welfare Reform —→ Don't Panic Campaign —→ "What's Going On: Conference on The Effects of Welfare Reform in Boston & Strategies for the Future " (WGO)

The Campaign for Real Welfare Reform: Promoting Programs that Value Families began in 1992 with much promise. It was conceived as a way to get ahead of the rising public sentiment for punishment of those on welfare. The initiative would be proactive, advocating proposals that would improve in meaningful ways the quality of life for low-income families. At its base were clearly articulated principles. To assist all parents to secure the means to provide for their children and themselves, all families need:

- access to a floor of adequate income and other supports based solely on need.
- access to affordable training and education to prepare both parents for jobs that will provide adequate wages, benefits and working conditions.

- public supports when jobs do not yield enough income and benefits to meet family needs.
- jobs that provide wages adequate to cover basic living costs, including child care and decent health care benefits, and with working conditions flexible enough for parents to care for their children.

The campaign won some skirmishes and lost the war.

Individuals within the Chelsea/Dudley Partnership were involved, at first wearing "other hats." The Agency Collaborative in Dudley, one partner, was invited to actively participate. With its stated aims of nurturing and maintaining a resident-driven community policy, the AC seemed a natural starting point for organizing the CFRWR. That was not the case initially, and the Collaborative lost an important opportunity for hosting community debate for what was on everyone's mind.

Some individuals and organizations within the AC and C/DP did organize however. In the Roxbury-Dorchester area of Boston, we cite two attempts to activate the recipient community and service providers. One of these was Project Hope, a local homeless women's shelter program. The other was the Moreland Apartments Family Self Sufficiency Program. Both fed into the People of Color Welfare Task Force, a joint initiative. Both have participated actively in the struggle to define more accurately the meaning of real community-based organizing. The focus on principles, however, became diluted as reaching service providers and organizations within the communities likely to be affected by the so-called reform became the operating goal.

In effect, service providers took their roles literally, limiting themselves in the community to passing along up-to-date information rather than, for example, promoting grassroots discussion on the merits, or lack thereof, of welfare recipients performing community service when unable to find employment. The chance for the low-income community to advocate alternatives was minimized as the next campaign message narrowed the focus: "Don't Panic."

The need for current information was real. The Governor's workfare-centered package was moving swiftly through channels. *The Boston Globe* chose to sensationalize the story of one multi-generation welfare family. "Media attention to the case . . . was key . The public furor lent conservatives the steam to push

forward previously stalemated reforms." writes Ryan (1996, p. 30) The legislature came up with an even more punitive plan. The "Don't Panic" initiative attempted to meet the increasing outrage and the requests for facts. It was a time of massive confusion. Informational packets were developed by agencies at the same time that people on the welfare rolls began to "disappear", moving along somewhere before the reform impacted their households. Thus, "Don't Panic" was an attempt to bring some focus for the uphill battle against the dismantling of the security blanket.

While testimony by providers and advocates continued in an attempt to head off the workfare-centered reform, the momentum for real welfare reform in MA as defined by grassroots people had degenerated. In fact, some of the advocacy work with legislators and the media played into anti-welfare sentiment.⁵ Tensions between recipients and allies became more visible in the Campaign which by then had grown from a handful of organizations to 500+ in 1995. A controversial flyer led with the headline: "The Welfare System Stinks!" There was grumbling within the ranks of advocates over this tactical approach but not open debate. Similar discontent festered over confrontational vs. "white-glove" politeness in tactics. The campaign suffered. Withorn (1997) describes one unsuccessful effort to block imposition of stringent "community service" requirements for recipients:

The Campaign called upon its . . . member organizations to refuse to take any workfare placements. The effort was well organized but not successful in stopping the program, which was small enough that many organizations were never asked to participate, but many had signed on as potential sites when asked to do so by the Department of Public Welfare. Indeed, some were convinced that the Campaign's failure to stop even some of its members from agreeing to take the first wave of workfare recipients may well have convinced administrators that a full workfare plan could be carried out in Massachusetts (p. 11).

Confusions abounded over how and for what to fight. Should a strategy be shaping the implementation in a "kinder, gentler" manner? Agency staff were torn as recipients came asking for a community-based placement with them as an alternative to placement in a massive bureaucracy doing menial labor. Withorn writes:

It seemed less and less possible to refuse to take people in community service roles, yet agency staff didn't want to go back on commitments to oppose workfare, and even on the written pledges they had made a year earlier not to participate . . . [I]t was hard for providers to share resistance strategies (p.14).

The forces on the side of slashing a major piece of the working people's safety net had, in fact, won.

The "What's Going On" conference, held in the fall of 1996, attempted to reverse this sad state of affairs. Withorn, C/DP Steering Committee member and a leader of the Academic Working Group on Poverty, invited several from C/DP (including one of the authors) into the late stages co-planning with a large bureaucratic remnant of the anti-poverty days of community organizing.

The planned format at that point was fairly standard for service provider conferences produced in Boston. It was put together at the administrative levels of that sector with the help of consultant specialists, in this case, the academic wing of the human-social service wing. The original plan was to bring in recipients who would make statements confirming the academic/service provider statements preceding them. The recipient would talk only about how welfare reform would affect her ability to attain economic and/or personal stability.

This was unacceptable to grassroots activists who insisted that the format be opened up for fresh approaches by the constituency most affected. This allowed those pursuing a more proactive community-based strategy to be involved in shaping the conference. Work on real resident-driven organizing began to take place at this late stage.

One of the first struggles was over the purpose of the conference. Was it simply an airing place for hardluck stories, or was it to be an opportunity for holding community discussions analyzing the motivation behind welfare reform and the strategies countering the worst aspects of the welfare overhaul? The role of recipients could not be simply "oh, woe is me."

In the conference planning meetings, much time was spent establishing that community residents really were interested in the debate. The initial organizing plan, like the work leading up to the "Don't Panic" campaign, tended to ignore what was

already taking place in the communities. The C/DP participants did succeed in moving the conference away from limited and prescribed involvement by the veterans of poverty.

The conference drew 300-plus participants on a fall Saturday. The vibrancy of the people's fight back was manifest. Political theater and poetry accompanied various points of view as to the why's behind the overhaul of welfare. Issues of race, class, and gender were touched upon through panels, multi-sector working groups, audience response. Class Acts, from Share The Wealth/United For a Fair Economy, an organization against corporate greed, involved the participants in an insightful theatre piece examining who is guilty: the poor, the middle class, or the rich. Residents of traditionally marginalized communities were well represented on the scheduled program and beyond. Suezanne Bruce Williams, a C/DP Community Fellow, addressed the plenary on ways service providers could re-think their roles in community struggles. The Moreland Street Players Acting Out, a group composed of welfare recipients and activists, presented a satiric look at welfare called "The Newt Gingrich Fashion Show." The WGO conference was a success as a multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Working groups formed from WGO are key movers attempting to blunt the worst aspects of the new system. They strongly, yet unsuccessfully, advocate permitting welfare recipients to count schooling towards their community service requirement. Coalitional efforts, too, advocate waivers for those who are victimized by family violence. The coalition struggles on with a monthly *What's Next Newsletter* offering "News You Can Use" on the effects of welfare reform in the state.

The good and the bad

Its an up-hill battle, particularly as the media newly distinguishes the good and the bad among those affected by the change in entitlements. The media continues its traditional portrayal of the welfare recipient as Black, uneducated, five-time mother. Alongside this, we now have portraits of the noble immigrant trying to survive by doing the work real Americans refuse to do. Those who descend from turn-of-the-century immigrant families appear able to identify more with the immigrant who flees his or her country for social, economic, and political justice reasons

than with the descendants of chattel slaves. Elderly immigrants are portrayed as particularly vulnerable. Because of positive media portrayal here, the general public is reconsidering the ominous fate awaiting them—with the "them" defined as the worthy immigrant, not the native born woman with young children. This nation still has not dealt with its hate-filled history, nor acknowledged the contributions of Africans and those of African descent.

On the one hand, new energy has been brought to the struggles for change. Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Alliance (MIRA), a long standing advocacy group, has mobilized its constituencies around welfare reform. Their entry is leading to greater attention to diversity and equity.

[T]he presence of people who had spent years trying to develop ways to organize that were culturally sensitive to newcomers groups helped to open up new styles of approaching change. As one member of the Immigrant Leadership group at UMass Boston said, 'Just having to speak slowly and carefully enough to be translated changes the tone of a meeting.' (Withorn, 1997, p. 16)

On the other hand, dynamic tensions swirl as one group effected by the new implementation is separated off as more deserving than another. Some believe that the immigrant fight is more winnable, and thus must have priority. Others feel that the impact on immigrants must be handled simultaneously with the devastating impact on all who are affected. One needy population is not more deserving of resources and voice than another.

Multi-stake Organizing

In various area organizations, multiple stakeholders are designing welfare strategies and making the decisions on how to move up the rough side of the mountain. Too often, as demonstrated, a subtly prejudiced assumption underestimates the capacity of poor people to participate in the debate on alternatives.

There are exceptions. For example, the Women's State-Wide Legislative Network, once rather staid, now acknowledges the voice of welfare constituencies, realizing that there is no better way for America to come to understand today's realities than through the voices of those experiencing poverty first hand.

Popular education modes are being used to initiate deeper discussions about the welfare overhaul. The Moreland Street Players, for example, have developed skits to point to the flawed, deficit approaches. They have received rave reviews, not because of their acting capabilities (which are excellent) but because of their ability to name the contradictions in language comprehensive to all. They showcase the exemplary work constituents are capable of doing if only given the opportunity.

What's Needed

More academic and agency support for constituent-led organizing, and an asset approach in general, is needed in Massachusetts and throughout the United States. Women of different cultures, religions, socioeconomic and age groups are working together and demanding a different form of involvement for the professionals as allies. As Sen Rinku writes concerning women of color (1995):

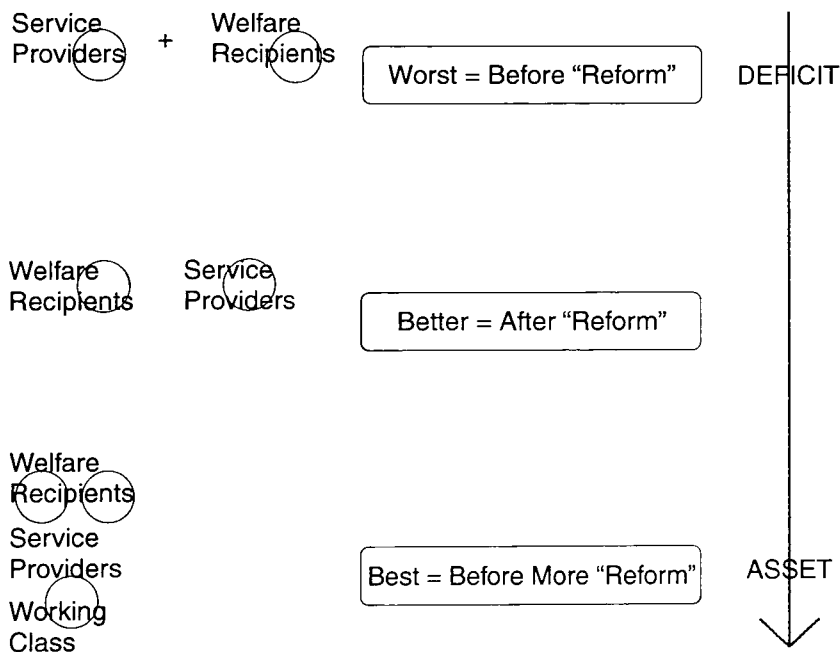
Rather than surrendering to the manipulations of dominant economic and governmental structures, we have vowed to organize our people to build a new culture, and to institutionalize the values of justice, security, connection and dignity for all (p.9).

The role of the provider and of the academic advocate is different: skill building of the constituents so that they become increasingly more competent in modelling and advocating equitable ways to build an income security floor. No longer is the professional seen as "father/mother knows best." The low-income welfare advocate has educated herself to a point where she works alongside a professional, demanding equal partnership and respect in the fight for social justice.

Again, we do not claim that we have reached nirvana. Yet a significant number of human service agencies and staffpersons are approaching recipients in an altered, more respectful fashion. Both the Dudley Agency Collaborative and the Chelsea Human Services Collaborative come to mind as networks of providers and recipients acknowledging the potential of those recipients stepping forward who desire to strengthen their own capacity and share with others.

We honor the welfare rights movement that preceded the wide-Right take-back, and that which continued on in spite of the Right. We think here of the National Welfare Rights Union and its many activist chapters, as well as other pockets of resistance and possibility: Survivors Inc., Coalition of CA. Welfare Rights Organizations, Warriors for Real Welfare Reform, JEDI Women, and the like.

We are seeing a domino effect when it comes to the dissemination of information on the changed welfare rules. Recipients and professionals are going to task force meetings together, and returning to agencies where together they hold informationals to educate others, and snowball the information and campaign strategies. The changed approach of equal partners at the table is illustrated in Figure 1.



Welfare recipients possess the assets to lead the fight for a just change. Women receiving benefits are not weak women, but

strong women in difficult situations. Welfare is a symptom of poverty, not its cause. Too many accept the embellished and demonized welfare recipient as presented by the media and increasingly by politicians. In reality, it takes an organized, determined and knowledgeable woman to survive with the meager benefits received in today's society.

The C/DP's learning regarding the strength perspective

Vision's great but the real world continues to turn . . .

The Partnership vision is of movement away from local communities filled with "clients" of social service agencies. Instead, we envision communities harnessing and directing the caring vitality and power of the residents. As John McKnight (1995) has argued, care is the consenting commitment of citizens to one another, a manifestation of community. Too often, he says, the service society has replaced community with management, and care with commodities. We believe that residents can shape both informal and formal helping mechanisms.

In organizing around this vision, this partnership romanticized the "we" of the partners, and what we jointly could and would do. Insufficient participation of residents in the conceptualization of the response to the Kellogg Foundation RFP is one example of this. Countering the deficiency approach so often "certified" by universities requires more than personal good will on the part of the university-based and/or agency-based representatives.

The C/DP planned an evolutionary model of discernment. Through dialogue around a shared table, we believed residents in the two communities would step forward to embrace discernment of the meaning of resident power. There was underwhelming interest from those living in the two communities. No disdain, even some interest; but little passion and little organizing draw. In part this had to do with old issues about universities as *voyeurs*. In part it had to do with the social services framing of the intent.

Door knocking surveys in Chelsea uncovered little faith in social services as a vehicle to more community self-determination. In Chelsea and in Dudley social service agencies are perceived by a large public as by nature "power over" structures that diminish,

not enhance, a family's connectedness. As the Executive Director of one of the partners, Chelsea Human Services Collaborative Ed Marakovitz, says when community people talk about strengthening families and neighborhoods, they are more likely to talk about safe neighborhoods, parks, jobs, or ESL rather than about social service delivery.

No one disagreed that well-organized, helping/caring services are social necessities, even though they may be utilized differentially by various populations. In Chelsea, survey findings documented that many Latino and Asian people typically do not go to agencies until they have exhausted their family and friends networks.

In this time of economic crunch, the concern was over the relative importance, or lack thereof, of advocating greater community control over social services in the community. Would changes in agency practice improve the range and quality of life opportunities for women and men residing in distressed and marginalized communities? The Steering Committee, which consists of six representatives from the two communities and two university professors, wrestled with this question, as did the entire Partnership.

"Resident powered" fails to delineate which resident/s and why

Further complicating that task was the determination of who is, and who is not, "the community?" Whose realities get voiced and get attention? Whose realities matter? How does one act concretely? All are questions about power.

Having the power to drive a car or bus does not necessarily mean one actually can. One must know how to drive. Near the end of the second year, Rick Vail, BUSSW alum, proposed thinking about the evolving goal as "resident-powered" rather than "resident-driven." Others engaged with this (Withorn, 1997b, p. 3):

Resident powered means we—residents, professionals, agency staff, university colleagues, friends—are all on the bus, but the residents are driving, no matter what. The question is, are the residents driving to get us to a community that will celebrate all its diversities, or to a defended community that cannot face change once again? . . . We're part of this big movement so maybe we're on the caravan of

buses together. We can't leave anyone out. We need to begin making connections at the bus stop; finding out about the bus, about the route, about the schedule. . . . Even as some are now allowed to drive, we need to ask about who is still being told that they can't get on the bus: what about so-called "illegals"—how do we insure that those voices are heard? . . . [M]aybe our conception of vehicles to drive is too confining: it forces us to ask who should be driving. . . . What is the broader context for changing the power so that we can use our creative minds to imagine ourselves and go where we need to go?

These questions continue to permeate the C/DP.

All neighborhoods have distinctive qualities that confound easy collaboration.

The composition of the partnership was complex. The two communities were not contiguous. In the first year, one agency staff person new around the table asked naively:

Is this a partnership or a marriage of convenience? I can see partnership between BU and the University of Massachusetts, but how are we in this [geographic] community partners with them in that community?

Media-created and distorted images of each neighborhood have led to impressions of little commonality, and thus little interaction, between the people who live in Chelsea (across a bridge from Boston) and those who live in Dudley, a neighborhood in Boston which achieved national visibility during the years when court-order school busing was instituted. Both communities are comprised of majority populations of color. Both are experiencing demographic change. The Chelsea majority population now is Latino. Whites comprise 35% of the population, the remainder being African American (7%) and of various Asian descents. Forty percent of the Dudley population is African American, with Puerto Rican and Dominican Latinos comprising another 30%, and Cape Verdeans another 24%. The remaining population (6%) is white, often elderly Irish whose parents were once the majority population.

Cross-racial settings are challenging and pregnant with possibility. Relationships qualitatively different than those previously

encountered with a racially dissimilar other are slowly emerging. At the same time, organizers of color are more often these days insisting on placing a priority on "*organizing our communities to change the economic and social structures that govern our lives*" (Rinku, 1996, p. 8). This is not surprising.

Along with the racial and ethnic diversity factor, then, is also the difficulty in our culture in sustaining identification of the general public/s with people who are poor. This extends to helping professionals as well.

While we move forward, we strive to respect community autonomy as well as differentiate partners' needs. Respectful reciprocity balanced with autonomy is a difficult-to-reach ideal.

Partnership does not mean that everyone is on the same page at the same time.

The C/DP is grounded in the belief in the importance of helping people solve problems for themselves rather than imposing solutions. Fundamental, too, has been recognition over the months that we must interact more intentionally at levels deeper than social pleasantries. Negotiating the Partnership pathways has been a challenge.

The multi-dimensions of power are a factor here: 1) power to make decisions does not necessarily overlap with 2) power to set the agenda of policy and public debate; and, most importantly, 3) the power to shape the way people define things through the control of social myths, language and symbols. In a time of the politics of resentment, "resident-driven" may be an abstract luxury.

An imperative has a distinctive priority over academic discussion of paradigm shifts.

Social workers talk about the construction of social problems. While we do, the public (better understood as "the publics") develops its own views of social problems. We have come to realize at deeper levels that strengthening families and communities involves both social and economic development. And it means responsiveness to immediate imperatives.

The urgency of now became clear to the C/DP in our second year. This has led to Partnership-wide uphill work to counter the

demonization of welfare moms. The state changes became the common "enemy". These, combined with the federal changes in welfare assistance, proved to be a galvanizing draw. The new welfare law took effect on November 1, 1995, and has had ripple affects on, at minimum, 1) those who were cut off of AFDC, 2) those now receiving Transitional Assistance to Needy Families, 3) their landlords and neighbors; 4) the schools their children attend, 5) small businesses in the community, 6) community health centers, 7) community churches, 8) service providers, and 9) communities at large.

Nero fiddled while Rome burned; are helping professionals following his example?

For decades, the professorial class has seen its role as being analytical; even better, being the class capable of rendering objective data from which policy can be formed. Times have changed. We live in an era where evidence does not count for much in political arenas.

Some academics have fought the good fight, opposing "workfare" when it was supposedly just a social experiment twenty years ago. And some foundations have funded experiments such as ours, and the other nine partnerships in the Kellogge Cluster. W.K. Kellogg Foundation is funding the Urban Institute \$30 million dollar project, "Assessing the New Federalism." The three year project is measuring the consequences of devolution upon the poor and other aid recipients in 12 states. Among the methods to be used in this non-partisan study is door-knocking of 50,000 households in both 1997 and 1999 (Black, 1997). But will its findings be of use in enhancing that which improves the quality of women's and children's lives? We doubt it. Not because of any lack of good intention by the researchers, but because the way the "game" is played has been changed. Post WWII faith in science is not as broadly shared as it once was.

A *Wall Street Journal* article (Harwood, 1997) argues that both liberals and conservatives are positioning themselves already to counteract the findings of any studies around welfare, saying that all studies are about politics, and thus not objective. "Pseudo-academic research" is already a code word in this climate of "ideological suspicion".

And then there is David Ellwood, once the "guru" of the blue-ribbon Ford Foundation panel on Social Welfare & The American Future, then the architect of the Clinton Administration approach to changing welfare. Now a Kennedy School academician, he speaks of the corruption of his idea that cash assistance to poor women and their children should come with time limits. He acknowledges that this conceptualization assumed universal health care, access to job training, and other supports.

The 1989 panel of experts after extensive study criticized today's splintered social welfare system as pitting one group against another. *The Common Good Final Report*, (Ellwood et. al., 1989) states:

The current social welfare system appears oriented to picking up pieces rather than preventing the original breakage. . . . [It is] essential that we improve economic opportunities and strengthen social protections for our most vulnerable citizens.

The Report called for new forms of social support to help reduce the insecurities that occur in every stage of life. How long has it been since we heard this analysis? And what did it lead to? It failed to counter the politicized scapegoating which has led to setting aside the abundant research findings that contradict the direction taken by the welfare overhaul.

Having Said All That, The Challenge is Before Us

Genuine solidarity involves not mere subjective identification with oppressed people but concrete answerability to them
(Harrison, 1985, p. 244).

What can human service providers do which enhances—fully utilizes and expands—the human capital strengths within communities?

Providers must be more accepting and responsive to the resident-articulated needs and alternatives. This requires increased interaction among and between residents and agency staff as co-learners. It recognizes that the agency person has connections and information to share which need to be brought to the table so that all around the table are fully informed.

Thus, the agency staff must be willing to share knowledge and resources they have with the residents, in order to further develop the capacity of and for residents to become effective leaders in community change. This can be accomplished by agencies providing ongoing training and capacity-building sessions pertinent to their context and the articulated needs. How can this be done?

Human service providers must be willing to change their infrastructure to accentuate the benefits of a strengths perspective throughout their agency. This can be done by analyzing the current level and substantive, rather than symbolic, content of resident participation. Resident leadership on staff and within committees and boards can be productive.

Agencies must be willing to evaluate their current efforts in developing community leaders and promoting residents within their agencies. A working strengths perspective is only substantial if agencies learn what is working and what needs to be changed.

If agencies serious about enhancing the capabilities of residents would collaborate, positive attention would be drawn towards community transformation. Collaborative efforts help politicians visualize public problems more clearly, and are particularly suited for education and advocacy at state levels. Surely, community participation in political processes goes a lot further than agency staff participation. Certainly, it is a lot more valuable.

Concluding Remarks

These changes, however, are only part of answer. We face a steep climb up the rough side of the mountain. In a recent article on activism (Kaufman, 1995), Cynthia Kauffman poses a question of relevance for us:

Why do so few people I know even talk about doing anticapitalist work any more? Why does it seem almost embarrassing to say that one is interested in getting rid of capitalism. Surely part of the answer lies in the fact that we are living in a time when we are losing many battles, both small and large. . . . What I crave in my own anticapitalist activism is a sense of hope and accomplishment. I want to feel like what I do matters in some way. Without a sense

of a meaningful project, high levels of social activism are hard to sustain (p. 66).

It doesn't have to be this way. We must stop thinking of capitalism "as an all-encompassing and all-creating monster." We must block "the ability of those with capital to act in ways that are destructive to our lives." We must support a variety of initiatives chipping away at the economic inequality and social injustices that are so ever present.

So what will it take to build a movement advocating and defending income support for the most vulnerable? June Jordan names it: commitment, the commitment of people willing to work across difference creatively. One innovation our Partnership tried was popular education training, building upon cultural components that residents can use in designing educational skits for performance in various settings. In Roxbury, Caribbean popular educator, Ras Mo, helped several groups develop performance pieces which have been featured at town meetings, city-conferences and neighborhood gatherings.

As long time advocates for the rights of the "veterans of poverty", Ann Withorn and Diane Dujon have written (1996, pp. 3, 5):

As the U.S. economy and family structures have become less secure, somehow we have been bamboozled into reducing, not increasing, the only trust fund that most of us have—public programs. . . . it seems to us only a short time before those who now think they will be secure when 'welfare cheats are forced to work,' will find themselves needing the very assistance that has been taken away. . . . only when 'the veterans of poverty' take leadership will successful strategies for change be adopted.

The challenge is before us—will we meet it? In Chelsea and Dudley, collaboratives have responded to the imperative. Both the Chelsea Human Services Collaborative, and the Agency Collaborative in Dudley, active partners in the C/DP, have working groups and projects advocating for meaningful change that are participating in coalitional campaigns. A priority has been placed on training for those experiencing the devastation most directly. We must develop effective responses to structural povertization: overturning the learnfare requirement, including high school and

college attendance as meeting the work force requirement, and more jobs with family-supporting wages and childcare. We believe that the "veterans of poverty" are the strongest advocates for change in this state and beyond. We call for a more accountable national system of income support. The real issue is an economy of impoverishment, not welfare use. We advocate a more fully accountable national economic security system, and the reversal of the federal devolution to the states on basic human rights issues: food, shelter, access to safe water and health care, and the like. We do so in collaboration with colleagues.⁶

Notes

1. See Gans, (1995) for extensive discussion on how and why the labeling of the poor as inferior diverts attention from real structural causes. "By making scapegoats of the poor for fundamental problems they have not caused nor can change, Americans can also postpone politically difficult and divisive solutions to the country's economic ills" (p. 7).
2. For further discussion of this point, see the October 21, 1996 issue of *Monday*, the bi-weekly newsletter of Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program, NCCUSA.
3. Bob Grant, a New York City talk show host, is an example. He routinely refers to African Americans as "savages." When Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown's plane crashed in Bosnia in 1996, Grant commented on air that Brown might be the lone survivor "because I'm a pessimist."
4. Among them are the Vietnamese American Civic Association, Jewish Community Relations Council, Sicilian Society, Cambodian Community of Greater Fall River, Jewish Community Housing for the Elderly, Chinese Progressive Association, Chelsea Human Services Collaborative, Dudley Agency Collaborative. The Massachusetts Immigrant & Refugee Advocacy Coalition coordinated this action. This was the second of two days of focus around the change in welfare practices.
5. A rally the day before President Clinton signed the overhaul legislation clearly demonstrated this. Held at Boston's Federal Building Plaza, there were no more than 50 persons present. A further indicator: the first speaker, a welfare recipient, set the tone for those who followed by repeatedly offering her credentials as a member of the "deserving poor," unlike so many.
6. Among the colleagues: Academic Working Group on Poverty; Action for Boston Community Development, Inc.; Boston College Media Research Action Project; Cooperative Economics for Women; Northeastern Law School; NASW MA chapter; ARMS (Advocacy for Resources for Modern Survival); MA. Human Services Coalition; MA Law Reform Institute; Women's State Wide Legislative Network; Political Research Associates; and more.

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