

CSBG Spotlight: Missouri's Plan for Service Integration

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In September of 2003, the Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA), through a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Community Services, released a groundbreaking report entitled *Planning for Service Integration to Support Working Poor Families*.

According to research gathered by the Missouri Association for Community Action, working poor individuals struggle to maintain a level of stability as well as to attain the supports needed for their advancement towards self-sufficiency. Hence, MACA believes that the primary focus of community action agencies should be to provide the working poor with the services necessary to first attain a level of stability and secondly, to support them as they move towards self-sufficiency. MACA identified a core group of survival needs that together provide a base for the stability and support working poor individuals need in order to survive and advance. These needs include: emergency cash assistance, housing, childcare, health insurance, medical care, transportation, and higher education. Realizing that few community action agencies provide all of these services in a holistic way, and that most customers have multiple barriers to stability and self-sufficiency, Missouri began the use of integrated services statewide. The goal of community action in Missouri has thus become not just to sustain the survival of the working poor, but also to enable their movement toward self-sufficiency.

There are several ways that the Association suggests community action might move toward the provision of integrated services. These suggestions include changing:

HOW WE THINK

Community action must begin to think strategically. According to the report, since the stability and advancement of working poor families require services in a number of areas, community action may need to think more holistically about its provision of services. This would mean assessing the capacity of the agency and community to address the multiple and interrelated needs of the working poor and planning service and partnership strategies accordingly.

HOW WE PLAN

During the assessment process, agencies should examine the overall needs of working poor families through board discussions and public hearings, staff surveys and focus groups, and a review of the "indicator" data and information. Moreover, agencies should assess the community's capacity to respond to the needs of the working poor. This can be done using all of the techniques previously mentioned to develop a consensus regarding the current capacity of the community to provide services necessary for the working poor. Notably, when examining how they plan, agencies should take the opportunity to reexamine and redefine as necessary the agency's function, mission, goals and objectives. The decision to function as a safety net, source of stability, or promoter of self-sufficiency enables your agency to clearly plan and organize resources around specific goals and objectives.

HOW WE ORGANIZE AND PROVIDE ASSISTANCE

Agencies should create a common and comprehensive intake and assessment process for all programs and services to ensure that working poor families are linked with all the necessary pieces to enable their stability and advancement. To ensure accountability and measure success, agencies must also put in place a system for keeping track of the progress of the working poor families served by the agency. Additionally, agencies can create and maintain inclusive and coordinated self-sufficiency programs specifically for working poor families.

HOW WE EMPOWER LOW-INCOME INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

Community action agencies can mobilize the working poor to advocate more effectively on their own behalf. Also, they can train low-income individuals to assume leadership roles in such advocacy efforts and help mobilize the poor around candidates for public office that are understanding of the things that they need to achieve stability and advancement.

HOW WE BUILD COMMUNITY CAPACITY AND SUPPORTS

Community Action does not have the capacity to meet all the needs of working poor families. Therefore, Community Action Agencies must work to engage a new level of community commitment that will expand supports for families. Education of the community regarding poverty, the needs of working poor families, partnerships, and advocacy are all important. Moreover, tripartite board members should be genuine advocates for the needs of the working poor. Working poor individuals should be represented to assist the board in identifying their specific needs. The elected officials to the board should be asked to help Community Action Agencies better coordinate with services already provided by local government. And, the private sector representatives should focus on the needs of the working poor for better housing, employment, and education.

In conclusion, the causes and conditions of poverty are interrelated. Consequently, when community action deals with each of these causes and conditions in isolation, it warrants their continued attention. To circumvent this practice and encourage a move toward greater self-sufficiency for the working poor, the integration of services by Community Action Agencies is definitely part of the solution.

Planning for Service Integration to Support Working Poor Families can be viewed at <http://www.communityaction.org/News.htm>. For more information on the report, please contact Elaine West by email ewest@communityaction.org or phone (573) 634-2969.