

New – and Newsworthy – Ideas on Welfare Reform

The *Ottawa Citizen* recently published an op ed on welfare reform (*Back to the poorhouse?* August 9). Classified under the banner “New Ideas,” the story called for a return to the workhouses of the past to spur welfare recipients to develop positive work habits. The concept of the workhouse for the able-bodied unemployed is rooted in the Elizabethan Poor Laws of 16th century England. It exemplifies a disciplinary approach to social policy that worked no better centuries ago than it would today. The ideas in the op ed were neither new – nor newsworthy.

Fortunately, there are some creative and successful efforts under way throughout the country that are helping welfare recipients move into the paid labour market. These efforts are achieving this goal not through a return to the workhouse – but through a return to work. These projects are successful because they promote, not destroy, individual self-confidence and dignity.

Opportunities 2000, for example, was launched by the Lutherwood Community Opportunities Development Association to reduce poverty in Waterloo Region. Its objective was to help 2,000 households exit poverty by the

year 2000. To achieve this goal, the organizers mobilized the entire community to create real economic opportunities involving training, access to funds for business startup and the development of community enterprise.

One of the projects involved the creation of individual development accounts that give low-income Canadians an opportunity to save and accumulate assets over a period of time. For every dollar that a welfare household is able to save, the project deposits three dollars into a designated account (funds for this purpose were contributed by the Co-operators Insurance Group of Guelph). The savings are directed toward a specific goal – such as education, job training or investing in a small business – that increases income or employability. Most important, these assets help bolster participants’ sense of self-esteem.

Opportunities for Employment, based in Winnipeg, has successfully matched thousands of welfare recipients to paid jobs. Nearly 70 percent of recruits placed in full-time work are still employed.

Its solid results are due primarily to the fact that this nonprofit group collaborates closely with the private sector. Opportunities for Employment contacts local businesses to identify possible work opportunities. It then provides short-term, intensive and highly focussed training (called ‘customized’ training) that prepares prospective workers for the identified jobs. The employers for which training programs have been developed include furniture and building component manufacturers, hotels, insurance firms, call centres, food services, and food producers and manufacturers. Training in computer software also is offered to help participants fill administrative positions in a wide range of firms.

There is no guarantee that the trainees will be hired by the firms involved in the project. But it is clearly in their interest to employ workers with job-ready skills. These individuals have been trained explicitly to fill the precise requirements that the employers themselves have identified.

The Learning Enrichment Foundation in Toronto is another example of an organization that employs a form of customized training. It serves an estimated 5,000 individuals a year. The organization claims an 80 percent success rate; participants remain in their jobs for a minimum of six months.

The Foundation provides an integrated package of services that includes job search, training, business incubation to assist the development of small business, job placement and work-related supports. Within this broad spectrum of activities, the program offers customized training in computer applications, industrial skills, child care and language skills.

Early on, the Learning Enrichment Foundation recognized that many prospective participants would not be able to participate in its

programs – be it language, skills training or job search – unless they had access to affordable, high-quality child care. In response to this need, the foundation set up its own network of child care centres and currently operates 14 licensed centres throughout the City of Toronto and 19 before-and-after-school programs.

Based on these successful models, the City of Ottawa engaged community groups, trainers and the private sector in a similar customized approach. Welfare recipients were trained in market-relevant areas and for firms that required designated skills.

The concept was expanded recently to a region-wide employment partnership called TalentWorks and turned over for implementation to the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation. What began as a small project for training the hard-to-employ has evolved into a comprehensive initiative for addressing skill shortages in the major clusters of the local economy including high tech, biotech and photonics. This project is considered unique in the world and likely will become a model for human capital development in future.

So there is some good news – and new news – on the welfare front. Why would we resort to the punitive and ineffective policies of the dim past when there are far more intelligent and humane options to pursue in the 21st century?

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