Respect, support, and accountability: Lessons in delivering the New Hope Project offer

By Julie Kerksick

Julie Kerksick is the Executive Director of the New Hope Project, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. New Hope's mission is to create pathways to help individuals who can get out of poverty through work. New Hope pursues this mission in a variety of ways: through policy and advocacy work, through technical assistance, and, most recently, through running a transitional jobs and employment program as part of the Welfare to Work program.

The New Hope Project was not created as a welfare reform program, though its potential relevance to welfare reform is how and why most people became interested in us. New Hope was born out of people organizing to create better employment policies for all low-income workers and would-be workers. This bears saying in this context, because we came at our work with significant understanding of and experience with entry-level labor markets. We had spent ten years trying to connect individuals to jobs that would get them out of poverty.

We knew that most of the people who came through our doors could not immediately qualify for "good jobs," though we always tried to help them find the best possible job that they could get. We learned from our successes and even more from our failures that there were serious structural barriers in many of the jobs available to our constituents—jobs that would never lift a person beyond poverty, and not many automatic escalators from those jobs to better jobs. That was the basis for developing the New Hope offer, with its four components: access to work, including limited-term, guaranteed jobs for up to six months; earnings supplements; affordable health insurance; and affordable childcare.

When the evaluators from MDRC discussed their findings with the New Hope Board of Directors and staff back in 1999, they kept referring to a fifth component of the New Hope offer: effective case management. At first, I dismissed this "finding," because I took for granted that an antipoverty employment program would treat participants with respect, deal with them on an individual basis, and follow up even after they had begun working. I didn't like the evaluators making such a big deal out of how "nice" our staff were to the participants, as if that was the revolutionary characteristic of our work. I did not want the need for economic support to be pushed aside or conveniently ignored by policymakers thinking that you don't have to help people get more income, you just have to be warmly encouraging.

At the same time, as I studied the New Hope results—positive and inspiring in some ways, but more modest than I would have hoped in others—I began to understand that how we worked with people was as important as what we and they did together, or the economic supports we offered. This realization was strengthened over the next several years, as I looked at employment and welfare reform programs in Wisconsin, other parts of the United States, and the United Kingdom. I saw that programs needed to address both economic and noneconomic needs of individuals who do not have consistent or stable employment, and that I was taking too much for granted in assuming that program managers understood how to position and train staff to support participants effectively.

The New Hope Project staff understood that an individual's commitment to go to work was necessary, but not always sufficient, to guarantee success in the labor market. It was why New Hope was designed to make work pay. But we also knew that financial incentives would not make a difference if the individual was not ready to take ownership of the process and fact of being a worker, even if he or she hadn't necessarily come to grips with all that required. The motivation might have sprung from external pressures, such as changes in the rules governing eligibility, or it might come from internal motivators, such as a desire to improve the family's standard of living, or feel more in control of one's fate. It was crucial that staff begin by understanding what kinds of things were motivating the individual with whom they were working.

To the extent that New Hope was successful in helping participants make progress toward economic security through work, we did so by having both economic and noneconomic supports and staff who used all these supports to help participants take more control of their goals and undertake the tasks necessary to achieve them. To the extent that we were not successful with participants, some—though by no means all—of the explanation lies in our internal failures to adequately figure out how to work with people so that they would take greater ownership of their goals and of essential tasks.

I have learned a lot from the experience of running the New Hope demonstration and from studying other employment or welfare reform programs. I have seen high-quality programs and low-quality programs, and many in-between. I have thought a great deal about how to codify these lessons, to make them more transparent to myself and other managers. But a decade later, I am still strug-

gling to articulate what makes programs and frontline staff effective. Writing this article is part of helping me do this.

Here's what I think characterizes good case management:

Respect

Good programs send messages to staff and participants at all levels that indicate respect. Respect for what? The list is long, but for starters, it includes the following:

- for the basic human dignity of both participants and staff;
- for the participant's own sense of what is important;
- for the participant's desire to do the right thing for himself or herself and the family;
- for the participant's time;
- for the participant's willingness to do unpleasant or hard things if they are seen as having the potential to lead to greater well-being;
- for the participant's experience;
- for the participant's ability to change;
- for the staff's experience and information;
- for the staff's time;
- for the staff's desire to do a good job;
- for the staff's ability to continually improve.

Respect

We made appointments, but individuals might simply drop in, creating challenges for Project Representatives who were juggling already full calendars. But often participants needed something simple, or just wanted to drop off documents. We would begin by checking if the participant's Project Representative could see him or her, within a 15-minute window. If not, then we asked if someone other than the Project Representative could help. If the answer was yes, we looked for either the receptionist or another staff member to deal with the request. If none of this worked, then we offered to make appointments for the participants with their Project Representative. It didn't always go smoothly, but these steps generally set a responsive tone, while balancing respect for the value of both participants' and staff members' time.

We had a policy of returning all calls within 24 hours. When we were having a lot of trouble administering our child care subsidies, we identified an ombudsman who also had a response time of 24 hours or less. Even if she couldn't resolve all the issues within that time, the participant and her caregiver would have information about what was under way and what the expected timeframe was for resolution.

Support

Support can mean economic and noneconomic support. Participants have come to the program because they need something. Their needs and wants may change over time, so it's important to begin establishing a relationship by asking them about the kinds of help that they want.(It's amazing how many programs do not take this into account. The programs assume they know what is needed, and jump right into whatever method they use for providing it, whether it be persuasion, command, exhortation, lecture, etc.) I think that Toby Herr's work and writings with the Erikson Institute (http://www.erikson.edu/home.asp) and Project Match (http://www.pmatch.org/) have done a great deal to codify these concepts.

Support takes many forms:

- help in defining individual goals, short- and long-term;
- help in finding work;
- help in understanding how systems work that may be affecting the participant's life, for example, the criminal justice system, government assistance, child support, or the school system;
- help in negotiating those systems;
- help in figuring out how to find good child care;
- economic assistance, such as cash assistance, subsidies for child care, transportation, housing, or costs associated with going to work;
- affordable health insurance;
- help in obtaining or recovering a driver's license;
- information about the kinds of experience, skills, or credentials that are required for specific jobs;
- information about how to get training or schooling, and help in finding ways to pay for it;
- help in figuring out the structures that will make it possible for a participant to work on a consistent basis, whether it be child care or the school circumstances of the participant's children;
- help in planning ahead;
- help in solving problems that arise to threaten whatever progress the participant is making;
- help in overcoming negative messages and actions—from the participant him- or herself, or from others.

I always try to combine what I call "concrete" help with less tangible but sometimes equally important moral support.

I remember one of New Hope's Project Representatives telling me how dissatisfied she was with the amount of time she had to put into processing monthly benefits such as child care or health insurance. She wanted to be coun-

seling participants. I reminded her that no matter how much participants appreciated our staff counseling and listening, they would not appreciate it if it meant that they did not get their child care payment processed on time.

It was the combination of economic and noneconomic help that made New Hope effective. And the ratio of one to the other varied by each individual's situation. Some people wanted nothing more from us than our very affordable health insurance. Even if we knew that they might benefit from attending one of our workshops to get a better job, we could not force that.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this work was undoubtedly linked to a sense that we really had made a difference to the economic well-being of the participant. Whether it was the positive effect of the extra money from the wage supplement that allowed a family to buy new shoes for the kids, or to be able to take care of all the family's medical needs, or just to treat themselves to a meal out or go to a movie, we could see the impact.

Equally rewarding, but more difficult to effect, were the times when we helped someone make a breakthrough in the way they were approaching a problem. We could often do this by asking questions, rather than telling them what *we* thought. "Have you thought about what you would like to do for your child's care when school is out for the summer?" would open up more possibilities than simply saying, "You need to deal with child care when school gets out."

The biggest breakthroughs, of course, had to do with helping people deal with real and perceived job barriers. Job cycling is often linked to real negatives, such as low pay or dangerous working conditions. But it's also very hard for us to look at our own behavior when we are not succeeding, to face the question "Have you thought about what you could do differently?" It's not a question of fault; it's a question of efficacy—the sense that you really can do something to change the situation.

Just asking a question didn't guarantee that the participant was open to looking at things differently. But as we often discussed, we needed to be there and ready to go when the participant was ready to make a move.

Support

One staff member followed up the participant's responses to her opening question by talking about the variety of summer camps available. I remember the pleasure of that participant when she discovered she could send her daughter to a six-week dance day camp, using her child care subsidy. Then the challenge was to ensure that all our staff understood this as well, so that they could offer their participants the same kinds of creative options as had the Project Representative in this example.

To the characteristics of respect and support, we add a third and equally central element: mutual accountability.

Accountability

Accountability is a word that is frequently used to describe the responsibilities that we expect participants to accept for themselves. And this is certainly one part of what we mean. But in the experience at New Hope, we applied it to the reciprocal nature of the relationship we tried to forge with participants. We expected participants to be accountable to us for doing what was required for their own progress, but we also expected ourselves to do what we said we would do.

The whole premise of the New Hope offer was that if participants did their part (work at least 30 hours per week and provide us with regular documentation of that work), then we would provide them with access to work supports as long as they were eligible.

In training our staff, we asked them always to think in terms of reciprocity and specific actions. It was important to end every meeting by summarizing what each of us would do: the participant and the Project Representative.

This list includes:

- Understanding that it is the participant who gets him- or herself a job, not the staff. We can create opportunities, find job openings, help get interviews, but it is the participant in the end who must persuade the employer to hire him or her. It is the participant who will perform in ways that either keep the job, or lose it. From the get-go, we want to encourage the participant to take as much initiative as possible, since that is a precondition of long-term independence.
- We are responsible for doing our part in a timely manner.
- We need to follow up with people, especially if they have not followed through on something they agreed to do. A lot of programs practice the-ball-is-in-your-court method of working with participants. There is a limit to what program staff should do, but it should never be set at the participant's first failure to follow through.
- Program staff should model the behavior they expect from participants.
- Accountability includes helping staff and participants understand why someone is not following through and using that information to break through to that individual's next level of achievement.

There isn't just one type of approach or personality or work style that captures effective case management or job

coaching. The need to develop greater staff capacities never ends.

I wish we had been able to apply all that I've written more consistently in the original New Hope demonstration. But for all the gaps, I know that we did enough of the right things to make a difference for a lot of New Hope's participants. I know that because of feedback from the evaluators' reports. Even more important, I know that because of encounters, years after we closed the program, with participants who credit New Hope staff with teaching them how to plan, or find resources, or be more adept at solving problems in their lives. From that, I take not only satisfaction, but also great encouragement and motivation to keep improving our understanding of staff roles and development. It's what makes our work worth pursuing.

Accountability

No One Is Unemployable, by Debra L. Angel and Elisabeth E. Harney, is one of the best resources I know to help staff develop a good sense of effective and positive accountability. For their Web site, go to <www.worknettraining.com> .

2004 Luxembourg Income Study Summer Workshop

The Luxembourg Income Study has made comparable over 130 large microdata sets containing comprehensive measures of income and economic well-being for a set of 29 modern industrialized welfare states. The LIS databank currently covers countries including: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Russia, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The LIS Summer Workshop is a one-week pre- and post-doctoral workshop designed to introduce young scholars in the social sciences to comparative research in income distribution and social policy using the LIS database. The 2004 Summer Workshop, our sixteenth such event, will be held in Luxembourg. Applications are available from the LIS homepage at: http://www.lisproject.org/workshop.htm and are due by April 15, 2004. Please note that space is limited.

The language of instruction will be English. The course of study will include a mix of lectures and assistance and direction using the LIS database to explore a research issue chosen by the participant. Workshop faculty will include the entire LIS staff (including Timothy Smeeding, Overall Project Director; Lee Rainwater, LIS Research Director; and John Coder, LIS Technical Director) and other experienced LIS users.

For more information about the workshop, please contact:

Caroline de Tombeur, LIS Administrative Assistant, 17, rue des Pommiers, L-2343 Luxembourg City, Luxembourg (e-mail: caroline@lisproject.org) or Kati Foley, LIS Administrative Assistant, 426 Eggers Hall, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244-1020 USA (e-mail: lisaa@maxwell.syr.edu)

For information about the LIS Project, see http://www.lisproject.org/.