



**BUILDING AND EXPANDING SUSTAINABLE CAREER
PATHWAYS TO ECONOMIC SECURITY FOR LOW-
INCOME MOTHERS THROUGH COMPREHENSIVE
EMPLOYMENT TRAINING AND PLACEMENT**

MISSISSIPPI LOW INCOME CHILD CARE INITIATIVE

January 2020

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TRAINING AND PLACEMENT**

SUBMITTED TO



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PREFACE

This research brief was commissioned by the Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative (MLICCI). The organization recognizes the inextricable link between earning a livable wage, access to child care and other work supports, and the economic security and overall well-being of low -income families and children.

The research brief was prepared by Professional Associates, Inc., (PAI) a research, evaluation, training firm founded in 2002. The firm's mission is to provide cutting edge, culturally appropriate planning, evaluation, research and training which help organizations to be more accountable, make evidence-based decisions, build their organizational capacity and engage their constituents more meaningfully. PAI's understanding of the historical, cultural and social milieu of southern and rural life has proven to be a valued asset.

PAI expresses gratitude to MLICCI for having entrusted the firm with this important research. Similarly, PAI is indebted to the individuals and organizations that contributed to the data collection process. Lastly, special thanks are extended to the study participants, specifically the single mothers and employment advocates and organizational representatives, for their time and efforts in sharing their views, perceptions, and lived experiences.

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INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

MLICCI, founded in 1998, is a state-wide nonprofit training, policy change and advocacy organization of childcare providers, parents and communities working collaboratively to address shared concerns regarding child care in Mississippi. MLICCI has more than 20 years of continuous experience working with Mississippi's low-income childcare sector to strengthen the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) subsidy system, improve services to families and strengthen the financial viability of low-income childcare providers. To that end, the organizational focus is on improving childcare funding, quality, access, affordability and work support for low-income families and their children. Despite MLICCI's unwavering work and significant accomplishments in improving child care in Mississippi, there are still unmet needs.

While extensive employment quantitative data are available, there is a conspicuous void in information on the opportunities and barriers to meaningful employment for low-income mothers, as viewed from their perspective. Such data can be quite instructive in testing workforce strategies designed to advance effective employment training, job placement models and policies which strengthen the career pathway of women, and specifically low-income single mothers, in Mississippi as they journey to sustained economic security

Access to and retention of quality and affordable childcare is an essential work support for low-income mothers. It is therefore imperative that the strengthening of any workforce system targeting single mothers include consideration of this essential work support. It is posited herein that in order for single low-income mothers to successfully pursue career pathways which lead to self-sufficiency and economic security, childcare must be a part of the equation.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research brief was to explore the lived experiences of low-income working mothers in Mississippi in securing and maintaining employment which provides their families with economic security in the form of a living wage and essential work supports and benefits. Consequently, the aim was to explore and capture the beliefs, feelings and lived experiences of low-income mothers regarding their experiences in seeking and maintaining employment. In alignment with the views of the respondents, this brief offers insights on programmatic components of an effective evidence-based employment training and placement initiative that are responsive to their lived experiences and expressed needs.

Using a qualitative design, structured group conversations and in-depth interviews were conducted with single mothers and workforce professionals, respectively. The framework used was phenomenological inquiry which allowed for the capturing of the lived experiences of low-income single mothers in securing meaningful employment. For purposes herein, lived experiences refer to one's knowledge acquired about a phenomenon through first-hand direct involvement, and their ascribed meanings (Eastmond, 2007). Use of a phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to examine the experiences of the participants without preconceived notions and expectations. In the words of J. Hoerger (2016), this approach "allows everyone to be their own authority on their experiences." This research seeks to share the stories of their experiences, how they interpreted those experiences, and the impact on their lives.

A purposive sampling approach was used. Convenience samples of single mothers associated with local nonprofits and workforce service delivery systems were recruited. The respondents were selected from three regions of the State: namely, the coastal, central and Delta regions. Separate in-depth interviews were conducted with professionals working in the workforce area. Several different information gathering settings, convenient to local participants, were utilized.

On the Gulf Coast, the East Biloxi Community Collaborative served as the host for a conversation with a group of single mothers and workforce advocates during lunch at a neighborhood bank. In Jackson, the research team participated in the Black Women's Equal Pay Day Forum attended by approximately 30 advocates and supporters of gender equity. In-depth interviews were conducted with professional staff at MIBEST, the Prosperity Center, and a local proprietary school. In the Delta region, Delta Health Alliance served as the organizational host. A group conversation, during lunch, was conducted with unemployed single mothers living in Indianola. A total of 23 respondents participated in the group conversations and in-depth interviews. Additionally, 30 women participated in the Gender Equity Forum. All of the respondents, mothers and professionals, were African Americans females.

The purpose of the conversations and interviews was to gain insight through quantitative data on the nature and scope of low-income single mothers' experiences in securing employment which provides a living wage and benefits. The conversations and interviews, which lasted 45-60 minutes, were guided by a set of structured questions.

Data collection included group conversations, in-depth interviews and participation in a women's forum on gender equity. All three methods provided timely insights, from varied perspectives, on critical issues facing low-income mothers and women of color as they seek to be meaningfully engaged in the local workforce. The primary focus was on the lived experiences of low-income mothers seeking to bridge their parental roles and responsibilities and the need for employment which pays a living wage. As aforementioned, a total of 13 low-income single mothers and 10 workforce professionals participated in the group discussions and in-depth interviews, conducted by a team of research professionals. Further, approximately 30 women of color participated in the Gender Equity Forum, in Jackson, which addressed a range of related issues.

A frequently used qualitative analytical tool is inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Use of this procedure enables the examination of themes and patterns. This approach was used herein as a means of providing a contextual description of the experiences, and specifically barriers, of low-income African American single mothers in seeking and securing mid-level employment.

With integrity and probity, the researchers have sought to capture the respondents' "truth telling" based on their lived experiences and corresponding understanding using tested qualitative methods. The value of this inductive approach is to extrapolate learnings from these experiences which can be used in the development of strategies that support family economic security realized through increased job training, placement and work support for low-income single mothers.

FINDINGS

Mississippi Gulf Coast

The Gulf Coast conversation consisted of a combined group of single mothers, employment advocates and childcare providers. All of the parents had a pre-K age child which would require childcare in order for them to be engaged in training and/or gainful employment. Health care was an area of interest for the coastal conversation participants. Several of the mothers indicated that they were interested in, had enrolled or completed training as a (CNA) Certified Nursing Assistant or Phlebotomist.

Barriers: The major barriers to full employment with a living wage identified during the conversation were: access to childcare, transportation, and outstanding college debts. It was the consensus of the mothers that stable, dependable and affordable childcare is essential to their ability to have sustained employment making a living wage. Difficulty in securing affordable center-based childcare was noted. Available slots, often fill up fast, especially for infant care (birth to 2 years old). It was noted that many centers have a long waiting list. Furthermore, Early Head Start Programs are very limited. Often mothers are unable to secure

subsidized childcare because their working income slightly exceeds the financial requirement to receive a childcare voucher, but is not enough to pay the established tuition rate.

Transportation challenges manifest themselves in several ways. While the coast has a public transportation system, some participants attend training or reside outside the scheduled routes. Secondly, even private transportation is often hampered by the lack of funds for fuel, vehicle servicing and minor repairs. The necessity of a pool of emergency funds to support such needs was highlighted.

The mothers were asked to share advice which they would offer to other single mothers seeking employment. Suggestions included focus, persistence, well developed resume, interview preparation and appropriate attire. They also indicated that it was important for parents to learn and practice essential life-skills including problem-solving, decision-making, and effective communication.

The advocates indicated that social support has been observed as critical for young single mothers in securing needed resources, as well as receiving need psycho-social support. Familial, community and workplace settings often include an array of stressors which have unique adverse consequences on the psychosocial well-being of low-income mothers and their children, including poverty-related stress and trauma. Financial literacy was also noted as an essential dimension of economic sufficiency. Preparing for, securing and maintaining sustained employment with a livable wage requires the development and use of financial skills and attributes including budget management, credit and debt, savings and investments, taxes and Earned Income Tax Credits (EITC). Lastly, a range of social issues including violence, drug abuse, access to health care, domestic challenges, and child support adversely impact the employment of low-income single mothers. Such impact often lead to the need for access to mental health services.

Jackson

Data collection in Jackson differed from the other two regions. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with two employment training programs focused on low-income families, and a private technical training program. The researchers were also participant observers at a Forum on Women and Economic Security.

Based on a national model, the Mississippi Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (MIBEST) program offers individuals without a high school diploma the opportunity to enroll in a career or technical program on a dual track whereby they simultaneously pursue a High School Equivalency (HSE) and earn college credit. MIBEST offers Mississippi residents, without a high school diploma, the opportunity to enroll in select career/technical programs, earning college credits while simultaneously pursuing a High School Equivalency (HSE). The program period is two years with a mission of increasing the number of Adult Basic Education students that receive training in a career area that leads to self-sufficiency. The expected outcomes are: employment in a chosen field of study, continued post-secondary enrollment toward attainment of certification or an Associate Degree, or enrollment in the military.

The program is delivered through 15 community colleges in Mississippi. One of the unique features of the program is the Navigator. Each student is matched with a Navigator, an individual who first and foremost, believes in the participant's ability to succeed, and provides the support, encouragement and skills to do so. The Navigators, non-academic advisors, support the MIBEST participant through each phase of the program from entry to employment. Supports include, but are not limited to, career counseling, financial aid application assistance, tutoring, employability soft skills training as well as socio-emotional supports (motivation, time management, etc.). Most importantly, the Navigator engages with the participant in addressing and resolving barriers which threaten the attainment of desired outcomes. Such barrier include childcare, transportation, housing, college costs and fees, books and mental health services. The program provides

job supports in the form of payment for childcare, mental health referrals, and transportation emergency assistance. Quantitative and qualitative evaluative data provided on MIBEST indicate that the program has been successful in the attainment of programmatic outcomes. Furthermore, the program has consistently utilized best practices and innovations which exceed industry standards. The utilization of Navigators has proven to be a major program asset.

The Prosperity Center of Greater Jackson is a programmatic component of Midtown Partners, Inc. which was initially formed for the purpose of revitalizing, both socially and economically, the Midtown neighborhood. As a means of providing a more comprehensive and transformative approach to community development and social change, the Prosperity Center, based on a national model, was established. An integrated service delivery model designed to increase financial stability among low-income working families is used. The Center's mission is to promote economic empowerment and self-sufficiency of low and moderate-income people through education, training and referrals. Components of this one-stop Center provide a comprehensive continuum of services which address education, financial education, and employment/work supports and referrals. GED classes are provided by an educational partner, Hinds Community College. The Mississippi Department of Human Services, Office of Economic Assistance (MDHS-OEA), partners with Midtown to provide community-based services and programs for the TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program) and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly food stamps) families residing in the Midtown neighborhood.

Prosperity Center uses several nationally developed tools in the framing of their employment program. The Basic Economic Security Tables (BEST) is a tool used to operationalize economic security for low-income individuals. It focuses on jobs with a livable wage *and* long-term economic security. According to BEST, the core components of economic security for working families include two factors-ability to make ends meet and simultaneously save for emergencies and

retirement. The basic premise of BEST is that just meeting basic needs is not enough to be economically secure. The definition of security includes emergency and retirement savings, which can help families of all incomes avoid current and future crises and, in fact poverty. The BEST Index measures the income workers require in order to make ends meet and save. Secondly, it quantifies the value of employment-based benefits; it is a de facto definition of good incomes and good jobs.

Secondly, the Prosperity Center uses mobility coaching and the EMPATH (formerly Crittenton Women's Union) framework as part of its program model. The model, *Bridge to Economic Security and Self-Empowerment (BESSE)*, is specifically designed to help individuals move from poverty to economic independence. BESSE addresses five domains, referred to as pillars, namely: Financial Management, Employment/Career Management, Family Stability, Educational Attainment and Well-being. Coaches partner with participants in acquiring, over time, the skills, resources and behaviors necessary for sustained change. The psychological impact of poverty is a central dimension of this model. Specifically, a sense of self which is a major stressor of poverty is addressed. This includes self-identity, self-efficacy and self-regulation of thoughts, emotions and behaviors. Content covering these areas were incorporated into the model for testing during the second year of the project. MLICCI may find further review and study of these tools instructive.

Lastly, the Prosperity Center uses a customized database system, *Apricot Case and Data Management Software for Charities* that offers case management, client tracking and outcomes management. This centralized system allows the program to have access to a real time plethora of client and program data. Apricot is customized through use of the Center's historical intake process, and other forms used by the Center. It has the functionality of enabling staff to track participants their progress toward the achievement of program goals, as well as generate outcome analytics.

The Prosperity Center intervention, BESSE, draws upon several schools of thought. It reflects the BEST operational definition of economic security, the tenets of EMPATH, and the following program components: Career/job readiness, financial literacy, job retention and advancement, and referrals, and GED.

In order to understand private sector employment training and placement, an in-depth interview was conducted with a proprietary technical school. A traditional model of basic, technical and employability skills training is used. However, similar barriers were identified, including lack of childcare and transportation, and ineffective communication. Mental health and the lack of a social network was highlighted as barriers. It was also noted that following training, African American students often experience difficulty in securing a placement as a dental assistant. On the other hand, one of the more successful placements was as a massage therapist. The need for encouragement, affirmation and guidance and access to needed resources were highlighted as essential to successful completion of the program. The nonprofit, Dress for Success, has been an invaluable resource during the job placement phase of the program.

The three-hour Women's Economic Security session addressed a range of issues which highlighted the intersection of race and the gender gap for African American women. The growing incarceration of women, especially women of color, was noted. The racial disparities in incarceration in Mississippi are staggering. For example, African Americans represent 37% of the State's population, but 57% of the incarcerated population. Comparatively, whites are 58% of the state population and 30% of the incarcerated population. The coastal area, specifically Harrison County, has shown a significant increase in the female populations in jails and prisons over the past several years. This has significant implications for employment of low-income single mothers. Those with a felony conviction are required to so indicate on employment applications. This can be a barrier to employment due to the associated stigma, and denial of the right to

vote. Further, many of these women are mothers with small children. Strategies discussion included increasing women's awareness around equal pay issues as well as connecting them with needed employment-equalizing resources. Additionally, empowerment through training and documenting workplace inequities were noted.

Indianola

The Delta region conversation, hosted by the Delta Health Alliance, was quite insightful. The session consisted of nine low-income mothers, with a total of 18 children. The ages of children ranged from 6 months to 14 years of age; however, all except three were age four and younger. One participant was an expectant mother and one was married. Only three of the mothers were currently employed. The married participant had earned her certification as a phlebotomist, and had started pursuing a CNA. However, at this juncture she is not seeking employment because she wishes to be available to her four children during their formative years.

Similar to the Gulf coast region, health care was a very popular career interest area for the participants. Several indicated an interest in working as a CNA. Three have completed training as a phlebotomist; but have not been able to secure employment in this area. It was noted that there is one hospital in Indianola and the next nearest one is 30 miles away. This finding has significant implications for the nature and extent of guidance and coaching these young women are receiving as they seek to embark on a career pathway.

The Indianola mothers consistently highlighted the importance of a social network. When asked if there were available jobs in the area for which they were qualified, the response was "yes". However, the consensus was that the people who get the jobs are the ones who "know someone on the inside". A similar responses was "It's about who you know around here". One mother said, "I see others who are less qualified than I am getting the same job I applied for; they know someone, but I don't have those kind of contacts that can help me". These comments highlight the significance of social capital and specifically having a

social network, which many of them do not have. When asked what they most needed in order to get a livable wage job, two separate responses were “an opportunity” and “fairness”.

The lack of being able to secure subsidized childcare was not an issue. However, the participants stressed the need for wrap-around childcare services. This was indicated as a major employment barrier. In fact, there was general agreement that when applying for a job in the area it is not advisable to specify a preferred work shift because “you probably will not get called for an interview”. Several parents indicated that they have had to decline jobs, that they really wanted, because they were offered a nontraditional shift (evening, night, or rotating), during time periods when they did not have childcare.

Beyond family, the mothers perceived that there was a lack of community support, especially for childrearing. Specifically, evidence of the “village” concept was lacking in their community, and minimal interaction among neighbors. Mothers expressed reticence regarding utilization of individuals, other than immediate family, for childcare purpose. Moreover, they were unanimously opposed to boyfriends as babysitters. One mother summarized this topic by indicating “everybody can’t keep my children”.

SUMMARY

The following is a tabular presentation of the major barriers to low-income families in the pursuit of a job which pays a living wage and provides benefits and work supports which optimize sustained self-sufficiency.

Table 1
BARRIERS TO PURSUING, ATTAINING AND MAINTAINING A MID-LEVEL CAREER WITH A LIVING WAGE AND BENEFITS FOR LOW-INCOME SINGLE MOTHERS

MAJOR BARRIERS	DESCRIPTION OF BARRIERS
GED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Credentialing to address lack of a high school diploma.
Lack of access to Child care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shortage of affordable childcare slots; slots fill fast. ▪ Limited infant care slots. ▪ Long waiting list. ▪ Limited Early Head Start Programs. ▪ Lack of wrap-around childcare services.
Lack of Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Limited access to public transportation routes. ▪ Lack of funds for private transportation emergencies.
Outstanding College Debts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inability to continue college level studies due to outstanding college debt.
Lack of Access to Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Poverty-related trauma and post-partum issues and the lack of access to therapeutic services.
Lack of Financial Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of financial knowledge and skills including budget management, banking, credit and debt, savings and investments, taxes and Earned Income Tax Credits (EITC).
Lack of a Resourceful Social Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of a resourceful social network which can assist single mothers in accessing needed resources and services. ▪ Lack of community "village" to support parenting.
Familial and Community Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A range of social factors including violence, drug abuse, access to health care, and domestic issues.

Regardless of the employment training and job placement tools or curricula used for low-income mothers, it is imperative that a framework which is undergirded by equity and social justice be established first. Equally important are the guiding principles which will guide such an effort. The author herein recommends the consideration of three critical dimensions of a science-based model developed by the Harvard University Center on the Developing Child. These principles are:

- Supportive responsive relationship for children and adults,
- Strengthen core life skills, and
- Reduce sources of (poverty-induced) stress in the lives of children and families.

The first principle, *Support Responsive Relationships*, focuses on building strong, trusting and responsive relationships among children and adults. For children, such relationships strengthen brain development, foster resilience and provide a defense from the stress and trauma often associated with childhood poverty. For adults- parents, program staff and employers, responsive relationships help build a strong, mutually beneficial, and trusting work culture. Furthermore it fosters the creation of a transformative environment characterized by affirming experiences for all adults, trust, mutual respect, and transparency. This principle embraces transformational relationships which are optimally responsive to the needs of families, children and employers. All parties work, in a mutually respectful manner toward common goals. Moreover, all parties benefit when the child comes first. This is reflected when employers value the fact that their employees are parents; and promulgate a work culture, policies and practices which affirm parenthood. This is beneficial for the employer because the result is a more productive, focused, and motivated employee with organizational longevity. The parent is not put in the position of having to choose between “the child she loves or a job she needs”. Most importantly, the child is able to grow, develop and learn in a nurturing and affirming childcare setting while the mother works.

The second principle, *Strengthen Core Life Skills*, focuses on developing the essential life skills and the ability to make healthy life decisions and choices in order to successfully manage life, work and relationships. These core skills are

often referred to as executive function and self-regulations; and include, but is not limited to, goal setting, financial literacy, parenting, prioritizing, celebrating accomplishments, effective communications, and self-efficacy. The modes of delivery could include coaching and trainings.

The third principle, *Reduce Sources of Stress*, is critically important and often overlooked in the process of providing essential human services. Low-income status, and specifically poverty, has an intrinsic set of stressors. Meeting the essential needs of the family, securing and maintaining employment, responding to job related necessities (childcare, transportation, etc.) and other psychosocial issues, substance abuse, and violence, are all sources of stress for parents and children, and are often traumatic. Addressing such poverty-related stress has benefits for all parties, families and employers. Stress is antithetical to being an optimally productive employee. It often results in diminished productivity and absenteeism.

A framework characterized by supportive relationships, strong life skills and responsiveness to poverty-induced stress will provide a solid foundation for building an employment training and placement program which will serve as a pathway to sustained economic security for low-income families.

The programmatic interventions of a program evolve out of the framework and reflect the values which undergird the program interventions. As reflected in Table 2 below, the traditional program components of an employment training program tend to focus on: acquiring the high school equivalent, career and job readiness or employability skills, financial literacy and job placement. While these are essential dimensions of employment training, the research herein and literature suggest a need for an expanded menu of interventions which also take into consideration the systemic barriers.

Table 2**Traditional Employment Program Interventions/Components**

Program Components	Content Areas	Delivery Methods
High School Equivalency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Basic Adult Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Community College system or other established programs
Career/Job Readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Basic Skills ▪ Computer Skills ▪ Problem Solving/Critical Thinking ▪ Time Management ▪ Communication ▪ Personal Responsibility ▪ Employability Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff Training of contracted ▪ Workshops ▪ Job Fairs ▪ One-on-One Counseling ▪ Parenting Sessions ▪ Workshops
Financial Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Basic Financial Products and Services ▪ Goal Setting and Budgeting ▪ Income and Spending ▪ Credit and Debt Management ▪ Savings and Investment Assets ▪ Taxes and EITC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff Guided Training
Job Retention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Periodic Follow-Up and Job Monitoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One-on-One follow-up sessions

The lived experiences of the participants in this research brief suggest the need for an expansion of the traditional model of employment training. Furthermore, this need is supported by the literature. Table 3 reflects several programmatic considerations for an expanded employment training and placement program for low-income mothers. Childcare has been established as an essential work support. Similarly, the necessity of transportation for sustained employment is self-evident. On the other hand, program components which recognize and address

the role of social networks and poverty-related stress on securing and maintaining living wage employment with supports and benefits, are conspicuously absent in most employment training and placement programs. The need however, for interventions which address these areas is incontrovertible.

Table 3
Programmatic Considerations for Expanded Components
of an Employment Training and Job Placement Program
for Low-income Mothers

Program Components	Content Areas	Delivery Methods
Childcare and Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Childcare and transportation assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Build into program design
Poverty-Related Trauma -Informed Care and Other Referrals and Service Needs A. Familial and Community Dynamics B. Equity and Social Justice C. Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consequences of poverty- related stress ▪ Mental Health, and Drug Abuse resources ▪ Training related to self-identity, self-efficacy and self-regulation of thoughts, emotions and behaviors ▪ Violence, drug abuse, family and community dynamics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Referrals ▪ Trauma Staff Development ▪ Training ▪ Equity, Social Justice And Advocacy Training ▪ Life Skills Training ▪ Prevention Information Sessions
Social Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Understanding the value and benefits of building and maintaining social networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Trainings and coaching

A recurring theme throughout the conversations and interviews with participants was the lack of an influential social circle. These women were alluding to social capital. Stated succinctly, social capital can be defined as the resources, tangible and intangible, that are inherent in one’s social connections with individuals, groups and organizations (Matthews and Besemer, 2012). These ties with others are an invaluable source of information, influence, support and

resources. Moreover, a range of emotional and instrumental supports, which are essential to upward mobility, can often be found in one's social network.

We live in a ubiquitously networked age, but many poor people lack meaningful social networks with the capacity to enhance their wellbeing. By typical American standards, most of us have social networks that are ethnically diverse, employed and reside in communities that are external of our immediate neighborhoods. Such is not the cases for low-income individuals. Their networks are often much smaller, localized, and more demographically homogeneous. In fact, such social networks tend to consist of family and peers. While providing strong and invaluable emotional support; such networks have limited influence and access to more instrumental and utilitarian resources (education, jobs, etc.).

While poverty limits social networks, parenting is a further limiting factor for low-income mothers. According to Matthews and Besemer (2012), having young children decreases employed mothers' job related contacts. The demands of parenting tend to limit the number of individual with whom they interact, and the amount of time spent in such interactions is limited.

Advocacy organizations can play a critical role in fostering social networks among low-income female program participants. Such efforts must be intentional in encouraging mixed social networks as a means of minimizing social isolation. Shared training experiences can be instrumental in creating an understanding of and appreciation for social networks. Resourceful staff coaches are well suited to serve as organizational brokers in identifying and linking employment training participants to needed resources. Social capital also includes building a community of like-minded women and advocating for a parent friendly workplace. As advocates, program staff can be invaluable in teaching and empowering participants to "give voice" to issues that protect their rights and propel them toward internalized self-efficacy and sustained self-sufficiency.

Poverty-related Trauma

Albeit belatedly, there is nevertheless a growing recognition that poverty is stressful, has many adverse consequences, is a structural barrier to optimal and sustained wellbeing, and warrants professional intervention. Living, and rearing a family in poverty-ridden communities has a multitude of negative consequences that are the result of environmental systemic factors, rather than individual deficits. It is therefore important that the structural conditions (policies, practices, attitudes, behaviors, etc.) that created the trauma be understood, addressed and dismantled; and then treated. Such treatment and care must reflect an understanding of the precipitating conditions-poverty and racial inequities.

Stated succinctly, trauma-informed care is an intervention to reduce the negative psychosocial consequences for adult and children who have had continuous, and unresolved exposure to trauma that results from strong, frequent and prolonged adversity (Kirkham). Poverty is indeed strong, frequent and prolonged adversity for low-income mothers. Furthermore, one of the three criteria of a traumatic event is a lack of control over when such encounters and experiences occur. People of color and poor people lack control over poverty and racism. The trauma of poverty (borne out of racism) occurs and has intergenerational adverse educational, health, economic and social consequences for the individual, family, school and community. Trauma-informed care is understanding these vulnerabilities for those who have been exposed to trauma.

Frequently the literature speaks of helping individuals and communities “cope with” stress. However, an alternative perspective is offered herein. The alternative is an empowerment approach which focuses on helping low-income women “overcome,” rather than “cope with” the stressors and barriers which hinder their access to employment leading to economic security and sustained wellbeing. This entails addressing the negative consequences of poverty as well as the systemic and structural conditions which created the trauma. A central part of this is trauma informed care such as mental health and other therapeutic services.

Other issues include, but are not limited to, normalized trauma, depression, violence, drug abuse, interpersonal relationships and interactions, self-identity, and self-efficacy. Policies and practices which support and allow poverty-related trauma to exist are areas for intervention. In other words, it is not enough to just address the individual deficits (GED, soft skills, etc.), instead structural issues (racial and gender inequities, etc.) must also be a part of the intervention. Lastly, it is important that low-income mothers develop the knowledge and skills and internal capacity to recognize, advocate against and dismantle structural and environmental barriers.

Key Staffing

In order to implement the expanded components of an employment training and placement program, key staffing is an important consideration. Becoming engaged in employment training can be a new and often intimidating experience for low-income mothers. Their success is often contingent upon having the dedicated support of an individual who understands their lived experiences and resultant vulnerabilities, and is invested in their success.

Whether the position is framed as a navigator, coach, community catalyst, mentor, or natural helper, provision of a dedicated, resourceful, nurturing and carefully selected and trained individual to assist the participants in traversing the myriad of educational, psychosocial, racial and financial issues common to low-income families is absolutely essential. Stated succinctly, the role of this individual is to help another person (participant, client, etc.) get to where they are trying to go. This staff person needs to be grounded in understanding issues related to racial and gender equity, structural racism, poverty-related trauma, and social networking, at a minimum. Professional staff development, throughout the life of the project, is an appropriate training vehicle for content delivery. This staffing model has proven to be most effective, through the use of Navigators, in the MIBEST Program. Further exploration could be instructive for program planning purposes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the data collection process, and substantiated in the literature, the following areas emerged as programmatic dimensions of an effective evidence-based employment training and placement program, and are therefore offered as recommendations for consideration for a statewide employment training and placement initiative.

High School Equivalence — Motherhood for many low-income women preempted their educational journey before completing high school. This is an essential credential for the pursuit of a career. Consequently, it goes without saying, securing the high school equivalence is a necessary, but not sufficient, component of any employment training program.

Access to Childcare – MLICCI has extensive expertise in the need for accessible and affordable childcare as an essential work support. Stated succinctly, it is imperative that any employment program targeting low-income mothers include support for childcare.

Transportation – The necessity of a pool of emergency funds to support and sustain employment was consistently highlighted by the study participants and is therefore recommended as a critical support for a successful work support program for low-income families.

Financial Literacy - Economic security entails more than earning a living wage; it also includes financial management. A carefully designed financial literacy component is recommended.

Outstanding College Debt – Having an outstanding student loan can be an additional source of stress and strain on an already stretched and inadequate income for a low-income mother. With guidance and assistance, an essential initial step in this process for low-income individuals is to become knowledgeable regarding their options and potential resources. Loan forgiveness, deference, refinancing, and income-calibrated repayment are potential possibilities to be explored.

Social Networks – A recurring theme throughout the conversations and interviews with participants was not knowing individuals who were in a position to help them gain employment. These young women knew and understood that social capital garnered through one's social connections

could be an invaluable employment asset. *Unfortunately, they also knew that they had no such connections.* For them support could be as simple as: a “heads-up” regarding a job opening, a job reference or “just putting in a good word” with a potential employer, or permission to use the name of a person of influence as a reference.

Information, influence, trust, and access to resources can be critical to low-income women as they travel their career pathway to economic security and sustained wellbeing for self and family. Teaching, coaching and modeling for mothers on how to connect and build a resourceful support network are invaluable tools. Social network can yield priceless career advice, education guidance, financial coaching, emotional support, shared services (transportation), mobility coaching, bartering and reciprocity. In other words, having a social networks is an invaluable employment resource for low-income mothers.

Poverty-Related Informed-Trauma Care – Trauma Informed Care is currently recognized as an intervention approach which acknowledges trauma and its symptoms and accepts the role that it has played in a person's life. Trauma has many adverse consequences and can have a lasting impact on the mental and physical health and well-being of children, parents and families. Physical, emotional and sexual abuse, drug abuse, divorce, violence, parental incarceration are just a few of the adverse effects of trauma. Many of these same factors also have strong linkage to poverty. Furthermore, training and coaching undergirded by trauma-informed care that recognizes trauma as an inherent aspect of poverty, with severe adverse consequences and vulnerabilities, is a gravely needed component of any employment training and placement program targeting low-income individuals.

Key Staffing – One of the best practices of an employment training and placement program is the inclusion of key staff. One such key role is a carefully selected and trained individual whose singular focus is to help the program participant get to where they are trying to go. This requires assisting participants in navigating their way through an array of educational, psychosocial, racial, and financial issues to economic security. Although referred to by many different names, such an individual is a dedicated, resourceful, and nurturing natural helper. This individual is grounded in issues related to racial and gender equity, structural racism, poverty-related trauma, informed trauma care, and social networking, at a minimum. This can be accomplished through a well-planned and

resourced staff professional developed component which provides on-going training throughout the life of the employment training and placement program. The inclusion of this key staff role has proven to be an effective strategy in assisting participants in mitigating barriers and thereby successfully attaining employment security. The use of career coaches has been proven to be most effective in the MIBEST and Prosperity Center evidence-based employment programs which targets low-income families. Closer examination may be instructive in planning a statewide initiative.

Celebration – Oprah Winfrey has been quoted as saying, “The more you praise and celebrate your life, the more there is to celebrate”. Celebratory rituals are an integral part of cultures throughout civilized societies. Whether it is a new birth, birthday, bar mitzvah, graduation, baptismal, marriage, or job promotion, it is a cause for celebration. For many low-incomes families, and specifically single mothers, such joyful moments of communal affirmation highlighting their accomplishments are few. Such events, can be ever so simple, yet a tremendous source of encouragement, inspiration and motivation, not only for the honoree, but their children, family, peers and community as well. Because many low-income mothers miss out on many of the traditional celebratory experiences, it is recommended that the development of an employment training and job placement program for low-income women in Mississippi include a beginning and ending community celebration.

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