

TYING TOGETHER MANY THREADS OF SUPPORT: WHEDCO

Cheryl Wilson made her way out of a homeless shelter and into subsidized housing last year, but she still needed a job. Her public assistance worker told her she qualified for "Innovations at Work," a two-week training seminar offered by the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDCO) in the Bronx, so she joined and soon learned how to work as a case manager for a company that processes benefits applications for the city. Weeks later, this single mother of three had found a job.

Shortly after, she received a letter in the mail inviting her to take part in another WHEDCO program that helps recently homeless families settle into their new homes, live on a budget and deal with issues that could threaten their stability. Soon Cheryl was taking part in support programs she hadn't imagined when she first approached the organization. WHEDCO's housing unit even connected her with a counselor who helped her and her 18-year-old daughter resolve difficulties that had threatened to break up the family.

Wilson has been lucky not only to land at an organization that is committed to providing a wide range of services, but also to have been selected for a special pilot program WHEDCO staff developed in an effort to maximize their flexibility and meet clients' true needs, rather than simply plugging people into one pre-designed program at a time.

Most poor people in need of social services must navigate a rigid and unforgiving system. Instead of encountering variety and flexibility—something most middle class and wealthy Americans are accustomed to in this service-oriented society—they often encounter programs designed to limit the extent of support they receive or that are entirely inappropriate for their individual situations.

This "user-unfriendliness" often stems from the sources of funding. Government money comes with many strings attached, including rigid rules that determine whom organizations can enroll in their programs and how services

must be delivered. Private philanthropic foundations also parcel out resources with very specific requirements, usually targeted only for a particular program or project.

Government contracts and foundation grants are also increasingly "performance-based," meaning programs are paid according to the number of clients who reach a certain clearly defined endpoint, such as employment or housing. The concept makes sense, helping government and foundations identify and weed out or improve ineffective programs. Yet poorly designed or overly specific outcome requirements can limit an organization's effectiveness, because the family issues these programs are paid to address often grow out of a complex thicket of troubles.

"The problem with both government and philanthropy that gives categorical money is that somehow they've gotten into the business of widget counting," says WHEDCO's executive director, Nancy Biberman. "But working with human beings dealing with complex social problems doesn't lend itself to widget counting."

Biberman contrasts the current performance-based approach with the health care system. While physicians seek to resolve underlying medical conditions that give rise to the symptoms of an illness, the opposite is usually true in taxpayer-supported human services. "Social service agencies are incentivized to put a band-aid on problems, but they are not incentivized to cure the illness," says Biberman. "Nobody in this field wants to take the long view."

Located less than a dozen blocks from Yankee Stadium in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, WHEDCO has served as a key part of the community's infrastructure since it opened its doors in the renovated, formerly abandoned Morrisania Hospital building in 1997. With the goal of integrating services and serving families holistically, WHEDCO provides a wide variety of services, including Head Start and day care, job training and assistance for small-scale entrepreneurs, housing, youth services

and family support and counseling. The agency has also trained more than 140 women who now manage their own family day care programs.

Yet despite its best intentions, WHEDCO is constantly constrained by rules that dictate how city, state, federal and private money can be spent. Enrolment in WHEDCO's workforce development program, for instance, is restricted by its primary funder, the city's Human Resources Administration, which requires that participants not only be on public assistance, homeless or very recently homeless, but that they also be approved by HRA to receive services.

Frustrated with such limitations, Biberman and her colleagues debated how best to make sure clients received exactly the services they needed rather than those dictated by external guidelines. In June 2004 the organization received a one-year grant allowing them to begin enrolling women in several programs at once while tracking their progress and learning how different services might work more effectively with one another. Though clients throughout the organization had always been informed about the range of services available, those in the pilot group receive extra attention. Ivalese Melendez, a social worker hired through the grant, regularly calls all clients to ask how they're doing and to assess their changing situations.

Sixty families are currently in the pilot project. WHEDCO tracks which services they use and what outcomes they achieve along the way. This data will help identify gaps in its programs and document instances in which clients haven't used certain services because of problems with eligibility criteria. The tracking also provides the agency an opportunity to learn about itself. "It was really to break down barriers between departments that had been

artificially created by this categorical eligibility problem," says Barbara Zerzan, WHEDCO's vice president for programs.

Representatives of WHEDCO's five service units now gather for monthly intensive case conference meetings to discuss the client families they have in common. These sessions are time-consuming, but Zerzan deems them invaluable. "They encourage people to share their expertise," she says. "We have a lot of talented staff but they don't frequently have opportunities to collaborate."

Biberman has found that the grant doesn't come close to covering the cost of service integration, however. "It's a great program. I wish we could afford it," she laughs. The only lasting solution, she adds, will come when government and foundations comprehend that families will receive cross-cutting, effective supportive services only when greater funding flexibility becomes the norm, not the exception. "It's hard work," she says. "Nothing happens the way it's supposed to, that's the inevitable nature of social services and government. That's why we need to be flexible for our clients, constantly, constantly."

Cheryl Wilson, after finding a job and other help through WHEDCO's pilot program, missed several days of work when she had to bring two of her children, who both suffer from sickle cell anemia, to doctor's appointments. Within five months of taking her new job, she was fired. It's a common problem for low-wage working mothers who have little job security—and lots of family responsibilities. WHEDCO staff members are now assisting Cheryl with a second job search, updating her resume and identifying job opportunities. Even after she finds her next job, WHEDCO will be there to help.

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