

# *From Community-Based to Community-Staffed:*

*The Experiences of  
Three Allegheny County  
Family Centers  
in Community Hiring*



BY CHARLES BRUNER

*A publication of Starting Points  
Office of Child Development  
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report on community hiring represents a real team effort. It involved more than a dozen in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, focus groups with staff at each of the three centers, and a survey of families participating at those centers. It required coding of information from the personnel files of each of the centers and analysis of demographic and service information for the communities in which the centers operate.

While the author developed the overall research design and helped frame the specific interview and survey question, Peter Whitt and Martha Steketee organized and carried out the bulk of the research within Allegheny County. Peter conducted most of the interviews, highlighted key observations, and reviewed and commented on drafts of the report. Martha organized the survey information and provided the demographic information for the neighborhoods. Both are skilled and professional colleagues who met tight timeframes for completing the various research and information gathering elements. Ronald Porter from RDP Consulting Services conducted the focus groups of the workers themselves. Eartha Sewell and Bob Nelkin offered overall guidance and responded to many requests for additional information and for historical background.

Completion of the report would not have been possible without the enthusiastic participation of those involved with the centers—center directors, staff, community organizers, council members, and the families themselves. As Peter Whitt indicated in several discussions, while the report sets out the material elements that helped make community hiring a success, it cannot adequately capture the level of hope and enthusiasm emanating from the centers and those they touch.

Finally, this report was made possible through the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Heinz Endowments, although all views remain those of the author and not necessarily those of the foundations.

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***In 1994 and 1995,*** three new family centers opened their doors in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. What distinguished these three centers from most of the thousands of other family resource centers funded through public and foundation sources around the country was this: in addition to being neighborhood-based, each center was staffed almost exclusively by neighborhood residents.

This report provides a chronology of the experiences of the three centers and draws from interviews, focus groups, and community and participant surveys in describing the benefits and the special challenges and issues that community hiring produces.

In a report, it is not possible to fully reflect the passion and sense of commitment that those most directly connected to the centers expressed. One of the proofs of the strengths of the community hiring approach, however, is that after three years of history, all three Centers continue to embrace it as essential to fulfilling their missions.

## **R**ationale for Community Hiring

Currently, there is much interest in developing more neighborhood-based services, with the involvement of neighborhood residents in the design and governance of these services. The common reasons? Residents are in the best position to understand the needs within the neighborhood and have the most at stake in developing effective services.

Often, community involvement focuses primarily in the areas of design and governance and not in actual service delivery. There are, however, additional reasons to recruit staff for providing services from within the neighborhood:

- For services to be effective, they must be linked with voluntary networks of support, which is easier when residents are involved in the day-to-day operation and delivery of the services;
- Involving residents in the provision of services helps address issues of diversity and minimizes the distance between the culture of the service system and the culture of the community;
- Employing residents at all organizational levels — from management to frontline practice — provides an important message to neighborhood residents that their neighborhoods have the internal capacity to manage their affairs and rebuild themselves; and
- Employing residents creates additional employment opportunities and economic activity needed within low-income neighborhoods.

These are valid reasons for moving toward community hiring. At the same time, however, a number of barriers have been cited which have limited the degree in which programs have hired from within the neighborhoods and communities they serve:

- Work experience and job skills of neighborhood residents may not match the needed experiences and skills for managing and delivering services (at a minimum, this places an additional demand on pre-service and in-service training and may make it difficult to fill some positions with community workers, particularly at the management level);

- Credentialing requirements, union contracts, and prohibitions against hiring individuals with criminal records may disqualify job candidates;
- Liability and confidentiality issues may become more prominent and worrisome, particularly when community para-professional workers rather than professional staff are employed;
- Political pressures regarding hiring may become more pronounced as personnel decisions are made at a more local level, where people are more likely to know those who are applying for positions; and
- Some individuals may not wish to be served by community workers and may prefer services from someone more distant from their immediate lives.

This description of the potential benefits of and barriers to community hiring is a conceptual one. It does not indicate how much each of these benefits and barriers actually occurs when emphasis is placed upon community hiring.

This paper describes, from a variety of perspectives, what actually happened when a commitment was made to community hiring in three family centers, all located in disinvested neighborhoods in Allegheny County. Drawing upon interviews of key stakeholders, focus groups of community residents and staff and consumers, employment records, and staff and consumer surveys, it discusses what benefits actually accrued and what barriers and challenges actually were faced, and how these were addressed. It represents exploratory, field-based research on the important issue of community hiring.

## *Chronology of Community Hiring in Allegheny County<sup>1</sup>*

In 1993, the state of Pennsylvania established a new Family Center Initiative and awarded grants of \$250,000 annually to eight communities, including Allegheny County, for the establishment of a family center. Although substantial flexibility was provided in the design and operation of the family centers, the state required that parents comprise at least one quarter of the Governing Board for the Initiative. Family centers were designed to represent “a philosophy, a process, and a place.” The philosophy was that of a voluntary, community-based, family-focused, asset-based support system for families with young children. The process was one of bringing community stakeholders, including parents, together to oversee the center and also to examine how other service systems could better reflect a family support philosophy. The place was an actual center where people could congregate and where workers could help families address their individual needs through both home visiting and center-based activities.

While most counties started with one center, organizations in Allegheny County leveraged other public and private foundation funds to establish a total of twenty-three family centers, most located in the highest risk neighborhoods. At the beginning stage, several people were critically important both for leveraging the additional funds for family centers and for establishing a community-driven process for the development of the centers. This process resulted in three centers — in Homewood, Wilkinsburg, and Duquesne — being substantially staffed by community residents. Each of these centers was located in one of Allegheny County’s highest risk neighborhoods (see Appendix 1).

Bob Nelkin, then-Director of the County Department of Human Services, worked with Chris Groark, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development at the University of Pittsburgh, Laurie Mulvey, Director

<sup>1</sup> Information from this section is drawn from: an in-depth interview with Bob Nelkin, Chris Groark, and Laurie Mulvey on July 21, 1997; a separate in-depth interview with Phil Pappas on July 24, 1997; interviews with the community organizers for each of the three Centers (Phil Pappas on July 24, 1997; Bev Mullins for Homewood on July 1, 1997; Jan Williams for Wilkinsburg on July 2, 1997; and Cheryl Dawson for Duquesne); and interviews and surveys of community residents involved in the initial project planning.

of Family Foundations (a federally-funded comprehensive child development program), and Phil Pappas, a long-time community organizer, to establish the structure for community involvement in the development of new family centers. The core mission of the centers was based upon the family center concept established by the state, which focused upon families with young children and early childhood education and development. In addition, however, these leaders saw the centers in the settlement house tradition, as being truly responsive to and driven by resident interests and needs.

At the outset, these leaders and Initiative designers stressed the need for community decision-making. They developed a list of specific decisions that neighborhood leaders would have the power to make, shown in Table One. Included on this list were hiring practices, which included the issue of community hiring and staffing. Neighborhood leaders would select a community-based organization to serve as the host agency. They also would select the director of the center. The designers believed that existing nonprofit organizations were needed to serve as an administrative host agency to get the centers started and handle administrative and personnel tasks, but that the community councils should set the overall center direction. The vision, commitment, and exercise of the influence of these four county leaders was essential to the establishment of the family centers as truly community-governed entities.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, their ongoing involvement and their continued provision of support and advice, were essential to the centers' development.

Phil Pappas played a lead role in convening community meetings and organizing community residents to participate in this initial decision-making. This involved training community organizers for such activities as door-to-door surveying, awareness building, and recruitment of community members to participate in the design process and on parent councils and other ongoing structures supporting the center.

The designers also established the Partnerships for Family Support within the University of Pittsburgh's

<b>Table One</b>
<b>Decisions Subject to Community Leaders' Decision</b>
The following are the decisions that community leaders were told they would be authorized to make in the development of a center:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whether to have a family support center</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The scope of the family support center</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The process for choosing a host agency</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The recommendation for the host agency</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The appointment of the lead staff person</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The hiring practices</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The location of the family support center</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The days and hours of operation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The center's services and supports</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> Bob Nelkin drew from his own experiences administering the county's child protection system to recognize the value to community hiring. "[Child protective service workers and Juvenile Court workers] were requesting things like cellular phones, gun permits, and bullet proof vests, which was an indication that they did not feel safe going into certain neighborhoods," Nelkin commented in an interview. "Yet people live in these neighborhoods and raise their children. If I were trying to develop a work force, I would choose people that felt comfortable in their work setting, as that is a prerequisite for doing good work. The value of community hiring for these Centers was apparent."

Office of Child Development to provide overall management and administrative support for the centers, including training and networking activities.

At the outset, each of the three sites proceeded somewhat differently in structuring its community decision-making. In each, however, a primary task was selecting the host agency to administer the center.

### **Homewood**

In Homewood, a community council of approximately twenty-five members met every Wednesday during the initial planning period. Council participants were recruited at collaborative meetings and through parents at the schools. The council organized itself, with community residents having two votes, as contrasted with representatives from organizations having one vote. Most participants had been involved in the social services systems in some manner and had views on the needs of community residents for support. The council made the initial decision to hire from within the community and selected the YMCA as the host agency, from two agencies that were considered.

### **Wilkinsburg**

In Wilkinsburg, the community council consisted of approximately twenty residents, recruited through presentations on family support, focus groups with teen parents at the high school, flyers at the YMCA and community organizations, and contacts with such diverse groups as the chamber of commerce, political organizations, and human service agencies. The neighborhood Healthy Start leaders played a major role in organizing and recruiting the council. While the council was strongly attracted to, and eventually selected, Primary Care Health Services as the host agency, they interviewed every agency according to a protocol they developed that included questions regarding financial viability, personnel policies, commitment to families, and congruence of the administration of the Family Center with the agency's other work and mission.

### **Duquesne**

In Duquesne, thirty people were involved in weekly meetings in establishing their center. Community members were recruited through flyers distributed widely throughout the community, community meetings, and presentations to specific groups. The neighborhood Healthy Start leaders represented the original base of support. The Mayor and the School Board also publicly promoted the center's development. The Duquesne Community Council selected the Urban League as the host agency from among three agencies that applied. As with the other councils, Duquesne had to establish its own rules and early on addressed issues related to potential conflicts of interests. The council established procedures that excluded people from voting on issues where they might have a personal interest in the result. This was particularly important later, as the community council in Duquesne also became involved in the hiring process of workers at the center.

### **All Three Sites**

In all three sites, the community councils were charged with actual decision-making — from developing the actual proposal for the center (based upon the state's request for proposal), to selecting the host agency, to interviewing and selecting the center director. While the state proposal formed a basis for developing the centers, individual councils made changes. In Homewood, for instance, the community council felt that the home visiting model needed to be modified so that more of the activities related to child development and case management would take place at the center.

The biggest early issue, one that required leadership from Bob Nelkin and others, was a conflict which arose in Duquesne. After its selection as the host agency, the Urban League hired a center director without community council involvement and not from Duquesne. At the request of the community leaders, Bob Nelkin intervened to reverse that decision and make clear that the community council had

the authority over this decision. This required extensive meetings within the community and negotiations with the Urban League, but resulted in a resolution which affirmed that the county truly was providing community residents the authority over the nine issues shown in Table One. This action helped build trust within the community councils and among community residents that the county was serious in its commitment to resident ownership and community hiring. Ultimately, the community council in Duquesne has been able to take a strong participatory role in hiring the workers at the center, from the director to the community organizer to the family development worker to the van driver.<sup>3</sup>

The community councils played a key initiating role in the centers. As the centers were established, the councils were replaced by parent councils composed of family members who participated at the centers. In both instances, the goal is for the centers' governing structures to be representative of the families and community being served. For simplification, this report makes reference primarily to the community councils and not the parent councils which succeeded them.

## **C**ommunity Hiring Experiences

It is one thing to make a commitment to hiring from within the community; it is another thing to carry out that commitment. Each of the three family centers developed different processes for community hiring, and each had both common and unique experiences. While each center developed its own structure for hiring and only Duquesne required hiring exclusively from within the community, nearly all staff hired at the three centers were from the community they served, and most of the rest were from neighboring, low-income communities.

### **Employment Statistics<sup>4</sup>**

All three centers currently employ around twelve staffmembers, including the director. Most of the staff are involved in direct work with families, under various designations in different centers: as case managers, child development specialists, family advocates, family support workers, family development specialists, parent educators, or care coordinators. In addition, each center employs van drivers, who in some instances have moved from that position into direct work with families. Centers also have bookkeepers.

In two of the three centers, Wilksburg and Duquesne, there has been little staff turnover. The third, Homewood, experienced extensive turnover in the first year, but its current workforce has been fairly stable.

Wilksburg, which opened in May, 1994, has eleven staffmembers currently, five with more than three years' tenure (beginning in 1994) and two with almost three years' tenure (beginning early in 1995). Of the five staff who left, one was the first director for the center, who did not work out, and three were hired by the host agency. Eleven of the sixteen staff who have been employed with Wilksburg live in the community (70%).

Duquesne, which began operations in May, 1995, has twelve current staff, with ten serving the center since at least July of 1995. Three staff have left Duquesne, all for personal or health reasons. All Duquesne staff reside in Duquesne.

<sup>3</sup> Residents in Duquesne found challenges to being involved in all aspects of hiring, some logistical (scheduling and participating in interviews), and some more substantive (residents often knew, and sometimes were related to, applicants for positions; and residents had different views of what they wanted.) In the end, they developed an interview rating scale to make the process more objective. As one Council member noted, "There were a lot of personal relationships with people that interviewed [and] we had to make sure they didn't interview a relative...It was sometimes hard on relationships; some people were not even speaking to each other; but over time it worked out."

<sup>4</sup> Materials from this section are taken from employment profiles by the three Centers of all employees hired by the Centers since their inception.

Homewood, which opened in January of 1994, has eleven current staffmembers. Overall, thirty-four different people have worked at Homewood, of which twenty-eight were from Homewood itself (82%) and the rest from neighboring low-income communities. Seven of those departing left due to nonperformance; five were promoted by the host agency; and two were laid off. Of the current staff, however, six have been employed at Homewood since 1994 and two since early in 1995. Homewood started with a fairly large initial staffing level of twenty-two, so some of the turnover was reflective of initially hiring more staff than could be sustained.

Increasingly, at all the centers, new staff have been hired from program participants. In fact, participants often moved from participant to volunteer and then to part-time work at the center and then into full-time work. Overall, nine of the staff at the three centers began as program participants and moved into staff positions working directly with other families at the centers. Half of all hirings since 1995 at the three centers have been parents who previously participated at the centers.<sup>5</sup>

Generally, the three centers have fairly flat organizational structures, with the director serving as the primary administrator and other staff serving in direct service or support capacities, which are compensated at relatively low levels consistent with human service employment.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the centers contribute to the economy of the communities they serve. In all, approximately \$500,000 annually is provided in salaries and compensation to the nearly thirty employees who both live and work in these three communities. This contrasts with much smaller percentages of local staff, and hence local expenditures for other human service programs operating in these communities.

### ***Implementation of a Community Hiring Process<sup>7</sup>***

The directors at each of the three family centers believe the emphasis upon hiring from within the community has been an important one, although one that has required adjustments to traditional hiring and staff development practices.

Each director has assumed a somewhat different role in the hiring process. Faith Brown, Director of the Duquesne Family Support Center, guided the community council through a process of defining jobs and expectations, and involved residents in the interviewing process. She then recommended individuals for final hiring to the Urban League. Paulette Davis, Director of the Wilkinsburg Family Support Center, conducted initial interviews but invited finalists to meet with families for an evening. The families then voted to make recommendations. To date, Paulette and the families have agreed upon candidates. Beverly Mullins, who recently resigned as Director of the Homewood Family Center, considered herself as the ultimate decision-maker, although she drew upon families for input from time to time.

All three directors cited common themes in constructing an effective community hiring process. First, schooling and credentialing did not serve as a good screen for community hiring, both because it narrowed the pool of candidates from within the neighborhoods and because it did not help distinguish among people with the skills and orientations to do the work. In fact, two directors indicated that college degrees and book knowledge often ran counter to developing relationships with the families who came to the center. The Homewood experience was that, while sufficient MSWs could be (and were) recruited who lived in Homewood, many had training backgrounds that placed them at odds with the work expected of them. Homewood's initially high turnover largely was a result of hiring by credential

5 It should be noted that not all these hirings have worked out. Three of the nine parents who were hired did not work out, either due to a lack of understanding of their new roles and responsibilities or their inability to maintain confidentiality. Special care has to be taken in hiring from former program participants to insure that the same standards are applied and the same competencies required as for other workers. Robert Halpern discusses this issue in his evaluation of the community hiring activities of the Ford Foundation's Fair Start for Children initiative. See: Halpern, Robert, *Fair Start for Children*.

6 The pay staff receive is equivalent to that provided to other host agency employees and to other community-based human service workers. Center directors make at least \$30,000 annually; community organizers \$17,000 to \$22,000; and case managers \$18,000 to \$23,000.

7 The information in this subsection is drawn from individual interviews of the three Center Directors conducted in late July, 1997.

rather than by experience. Skills and work orientations directors felt important for this work were flexibility in assuming different roles, commitment to the community, and belief and interest in working with families.

Second, directors found that hiring from within the community required new safeguards against political favoritism, particularly since credentialing was not used to screen out potential candidates. In each center, community councils and families who participated in the screening and hiring process themselves, with the help of the director, established structures to guard against favoritism and cronyism. In fact, residents took this responsibility very seriously. In the end, directors greatly valued resident perspectives, and were able to use the knowledge the community had of itself to advantage in the hiring process.

Third, directors and the centers had to focus more attention on addressing issues of confidentiality than they had encountered in previous work. Each center not only provides training in maintaining confidentiality, but also has policies for resolving instances where families feel their confidentiality has been breached. In addition, directors also had to prepare workers for the fact that, living in the community, they would see families they serve in grocery stores and in church and their own personal space would be interrupted. “Duquesne has a very small, close knit community,” Faith Brown indicated. “That means you’re never off from work. If you go to the Giant Eagle, you may run into someone and we have to have staff who are prepared to make that a positive.”

Still, directors felt they were able to resolve this concern because they could attract workers who looked at their work as more than an eight-to-five job. The biggest pluses directors cited regarding hiring from within the community were that workers knew the people and resources in the community and were dedicated to making a difference. The rapport they felt workers were able to establish with families was in large part reflective of the fact they were part of the same community.

## **S** *taff Perspectives on Their Work and Employment.<sup>8</sup>*

Staff at all the centers cited a number of reasons for seeking employment, including the need for a job (although the actual compensation was not seen as an incentive). Inevitably, however, staff were drawn by the opportunity the work presented. Many indicated they relished the chance to be “on the ground floor” of a new initiative; others saw the work as an extension of their prior community activism and volunteerism. Staff generally saw their work as “mission driven” rather than “money driven.” In Homewood, for instance, staff were unanimous in defining their work as a “24-7-365” commitment.

Staff generally felt they started with the basic, or baseline, skills needed to do the work, but benefitted from training and support in addressing specific issues. They found their work involved “continuous problem-solving” with families and their knowledge of the community and its residents was a real asset. At the same time, they identified certain issues, such as dealing with children with AD/HD, working on language development with young children, and support group facilitation and motivational interviewing, as areas where they would benefit from outside help. The training and orientation that was provided through the Partnerships for Family Support was valued, although staff felt they had to work most issues out on their own.

Either through recruitment and selection or through orientation and training, staff expressed strong and deep support for the family support model, both its programmatic components (home visiting, intensive work with selected families, parent and child development) and its philosophical approach (partnering

<sup>8</sup> Information in this subsection is drawn from three focus groups of current staff at the Centers: a focus group of eight Wilkinsburg staff on July 23, 1997; a focus group of twelve Homewood staff on July 25, 1997; and a focus group of seven Duquesne staff on July 25, 1997.

with families, building on strengths, being holistic in response). Consistent with this approach, they believed that the most important skills and orientations workers needed to have included: “being able to accept people where they are,” “patience and empathy,” “mothering, networking, being creative, communicating, and listening.” They expressed greatest satisfaction with their jobs when they could see families succeed and, in particular, help troubled families to a position in which they no longer needed intensive counseling and support.

Staff were universal in believing that living in the community was an asset, if not a necessity, for this work. Staff at Wilkinsburg stressed that being from the community is a distinct advantage because they are accepted as “authentic” and do not have to “prove themselves.” Staff at Duquesne recognized the challenge this presents to confidentiality, as “many of the people who are clients are people we grew up with.” While a legitimate concern, staff felt they could deal with it professionally and their position in the community opened many doors that otherwise might be closed. In addition to the issue of access and credibility, several of the male workers in Homewood volunteered that their job at the center provided them the opportunity to serve as role models for community youth.

Some of the struggles and challenges staff expressed with their work are common to family-centered practice. For instance, staff indicated that some families are difficult to reach; others are prone to become dependent upon the center and its resources rather than moving toward self-sufficiency. These struggles, however, are offset by the rewards of seeing other families grow.

Other struggles and challenges are more specific to community, as opposed to professional, staffing. Staff at all three focus groups indicated that low salaries and limited opportunities for professional advancement were a concern, although some recognized that the centers provided them an opportunity for getting into this line of work. Staff felt that at times host agencies imposed red tape that limited flexibility and change. The complexity, as well as the volume, of the paperwork was cited as a general frustration.

In general, however, workers had strong praise for the family centers and saw them as a vital new force within their communities. They were proud to be part of the centers and believed that the centers could produce real and needed change within their communities.

## **T**he Role of Host Agencies and the Partnerships for Family Support<sup>9</sup>

In the original design, county leaders recognized that the communities themselves did not possess all the technical expertise and infrastructure to manage and operate family centers. They structured the initiative to use host agencies to provide the fiscal and personnel management structure for the centers. Further, they established the Partnerships for Family Support to provide technical assistance and administrative support to the centers, recognizing that the centers had staff training needs.

Host agency directors generally expressed support for the community hiring process and believed it was consistent with their agency’s overall mission. They also were more likely to see problems than either the center directors or staff. One expressed concerns about having 100% of staff hired from within the community, particularly when specialized skills were needed. All found it a challenge to apply existing agency personnel policies to the new structures. In general, they expressed less confidence in community hiring as an effective way of providing services than did center directors, staff, or the families served. While they supported it at the three centers, it generally was not reflected in their other programs and services.

<sup>9</sup> Information for this section is drawn from individual interviews with Directors of the three contract agencies in July, 1997 and a joint interview with Eartha Sewell, Herb Bajuiley, Lisa Enoch, and Glynda Lowery of the Partnerships for Family Support on July 24, 1997.

Still, all felt they developed good working relationships with the community and were able to provide the needed technical expertise and infrastructure to effectively oversee their budgets. Moreover, center directors and staff generally felt the arrangement was positive. In several instances, host agencies offered career development opportunities for family center staff, which both directors and staff acknowledged as a benefit.

One host agency director also stressed that her agency learned from the process. She felt it helped her agency generally become more engaged and connected with the neighborhood in other programs she administered and that she could draw upon tools and strategies used successfully at the center for use in other programs.

The Partnerships for Family Support was established to provide a variety of services and supports to the three family centers, including pre-service training, in-service training, creating parent and other committees, and general trouble-shooting. The Partnerships for Family Support has sought to be flexible in responding to challenges and issues as they occurred, while providing technical support in the principles of family support and child development. It has tailored its assistance to the developmental needs of the family centers, and sought to grow as the centers grew.

One of the key roles the Partnerships assumed was as an intermediary between the host agency and the community family center, ensuring that principles of family support and community engagement were maintained. Partnerships staff recognized the tensions of placing management within host agencies which had other missions and the tendency for the host agencies to view the centers as an extension of their other programs and departments. The Partnerships served in that intermediary capacity by providing support both to the centers and to the host agency.

The Partnerships also served in a capacity of resolving disputes as they arose and helping maintain the county's and the Office of Child Development's vision for the Initiative. The Partnerships succeeded in this role because of the credibility of its leadership, which had prior experience and recognition at the community and at the county level.

## **F**amily Perspectives on Working with Community Workers<sup>10</sup>

Altogether, the three family centers provide intensive services to approximately two hundred families, including individualized assessment and service planning, home visiting, counseling and goal setting, and referral to other services. Another six hundred families have access to a variety of center activities, including recreational and educational groups and classes.

The value of a family support center largely must be measured by its impact upon the individual families who participate, although the center may have other community-building and organizing impacts as well.

Families from each of the three centers were asked to complete simple, one-page surveys regarding their views of the center and its staff, including their perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of hiring workers from within the community.

The completed surveys showed overwhelming support for the centers and for employing people from

<sup>10</sup> The information for this section is drawn from a Family Support Center Parent Participation Survey administered by site staff in July, 1997. There were 70 completed surveys; 27 from Duquesne, 29 from Homewood, and 14 from Wilkinsburg. They are reported on collectively, as there were few differences across the sites on responses to the close-ended questions.

the community. Of those responding, 94% felt that employing people from the community made the center feel more representative. Almost all, 96%, felt that they had been treated fairly by staff; 3% indicated that they had received mixed treatment; and only 1% felt they had been treated unfairly. The vast majority, 86%, expressed no difficulty in working with someone from the community as staff to the center; while 13% described it as “a little difficult” and only 1% described it as “very hard.”

On the first of two open-ended questions, “What are your general perceptions about how the staff at your center responds to your needs?” 92% were positive, with 5% mixed and 3% negative. Respondents stressed sensitivity and warmth (indicated in 30% of the positive responses), the immediacy of attention and response (18%), the general responsiveness to family concerns and needs (29%), and the response to specific, individual family circumstances and needs (18%). Among the responses to this question were: “caring and understanding to my immediate needs,” “always with concern and quickly,” “fast and with great concern,” “better than other agencies,” and “they try to help in every aspect of your life.” There was less mention made of professionalism and expertise, however, which occurred as part of only 5% of the positive responses.

Of the few mixed and negative responses, the responses were more reflective of family conditions than center response. “Well, I have many needs and some the center can help me with; others they cannot,” and “sometimes very quick and other times not” were two of the mixed responses. “Sometimes I just feel there’s nothing they can do for me,” was one of the negative responses.

Overall, however, the respondents gave extremely high marks to center staff, stressing the personal nature of the attention they had received.

<b>Table Two</b>	
<b>Family Support Center Parent Participant Survey</b>	
Question 8. <i>What do you think is good about hiring center staff from the community? Do you think there are any problems with this way of providing services?</i>	
<b>Benefits (52 surveys included written comments describing benefits, with 59 different benefits expressed).</b>	
Description of Benefits	
14	Knowledge of community, its needs and resources
7	Understanding of residents and their needs
5	Ability to relate and empathize
10	Staff approachability, familiarity, and trust
7	Jobs, economic benefit to community
5	Staff having stake, investment in community
4	General benefit to community ownership and pride
7	Other, general restatement of value
<b>Problems (35 surveys included written statement that there were no problems; 4 provided specific problems).</b>	
Description of Problems	
2	Confidentiality
2	Professionalism of response

On the second of the two open-ended questions, “What do you think is good about hiring center staff from the community? Do you think there are any problems with this way of providing services?,” the responses again were overwhelmingly positive. 74% of those returning a survey wrote out at least one benefit, and only 6% identified any problem (50% specifically stated that there were no problems). Table Two provides a summary of the responses to this question.

### ***Responses regarding the benefits to community hiring fell into seven general categories.***

- Many (27% of all those who listed at least one benefit) indicated knowledge of the community and its needs and resources as a benefit (“They are aware of the environment and know daily activities in the community” and “They know what’s going on”).
- Others (23%) cited a better understanding of residents and their needs (“It’s their insight to the problems in the community that can help them be sensitive to an individual’s needs” and “They understand my economic situation”).
- Still others (10%) described the ability of workers to empathize and relate (“You do not have staff rushing to get home because they do not want to be in your community after dark” and “People from the community can relate to your problems; they have been there before themselves”).
- A large number (19%) indicated they felt workers were more approachable and it was easier to establish trust (“It’s really good to have people you know instead of trying to talk with a stranger” and “It’s a lot easier to come to them with your needs”).
- The specific benefit of jobs for community residents (13%) also was mentioned (“Helps the economy of the community” and “I think the fact that the jobs are offered to people in the community first is good; they need more jobs”).
- Also cited by some (10%) was the value of having workers with a stake or investment in the community (“They want to see their neighbors better themselves and therefore better the community in which they, staff and people, live” and “These people have the best interests of their community at heart”).
- Finally, some (8%) responded that there was a value to the community of ownership and operation of the center (“Helps to involve residents directly in the community” and “It allows the community to feel that their input is important; community should be a part of what goes on in the community”).

Of the few persons who identified problems, most (75%) also described benefits as well. The comments that were provided generally spoke to issues of confidentiality and professionalism (“For the most part, there aren’t any problems, but sometimes confidentiality and personal lives can be violated when you interact with staff at the center as well as outside the center,” “Everyone knows everyone else’s business and tends to gossip and that’s bad,” and “Sometimes people that know the community are too comfortable and sometimes not professional”).

Overall, this short survey of families served by the family centers indicated that families have extremely positive views of the centers. They expressed very high regard for the staff and believed that the center served as a very welcoming and approachable place that was a part of the community, rather than an outside agency coming into the community. They liked the fact that the centers were staffed by community workers, and saw very few problems with community staffing.

## **L**essons Learned

Three family centers in Allegheny County — in Homewood, Duquesne, and Wilkinsburg — made an explicit effort to recruit and hire community workers. After three years, they are staffed nearly entirely from within their own communities, from the director to the frontline staff and van drivers.

These centers are the result of a commitment made and honored by the centers' planners and funders at the county level to give decision-making control over the organization and operation of the centers to community residents. From the perspective of the county planners and funders, the directors and staff at the centers, and the families served, the centers play a vital role in these low-income communities in supporting families. Moreover, there is general consensus that community hiring has many advantages and helps the centers fulfill their missions, in large part because staff have a stake in their community's development and view their job as part of their life's work.

The most basic "lesson learned" from this Initiative is that community hiring and staffing is possible, even within very distressed neighborhoods and communities. The centers have established themselves; structures are in place to provide fiscal and personnel accountability; staff from within the communities have been recruited, trained, and retained to perform their roles; and families are satisfied with their services and enthusiastic about the Center and its role in their own, and the community's, growth and development.

A number of factors or elements contributed to making community hiring a reality, which represent additional important lessons learned.

### **Leadership**

First, there was leadership at the county level that was willing to relinquish control over a variety of decision-making aspects regarding the centers and was able to secure funding for the centers. Moreover, this leadership was willing and able to back up its decision when it was being challenged. When one of the host agencies made a hiring decision regarding a director that the community had not recommended, the planners exerted their influence to change that decision. Up front, this county leadership articulated what decisions the community would make, and lived up to these promises.

### **Community Governance**

Second, there was a financially supported strategy at the county level to assist the community in its decision-making role, while recognizing community limitations on technical and management expertise needed to operate the centers. County leaders supported community organizers to create community councils to plan for the centers and establish community awareness about the centers as a truly "new way of doing business." County leaders also required community councils to select host agencies to house the centers in institutions capable of providing needed fiscal and personnel oversight. Finally, county leaders supported a separate technical assistance and management arm for the three centers, the Partnerships for Family Support, that the centers could feel responded to their needs. Each proved to be needed.

The community-organizing work was essential in bringing together community residents, familiarizing them with the overall philosophy of family centers, and constructing a community council of community residents committed to this task. People were present in the community with a commitment to the philosophy of family support and a desire to improve their community, but it required organizational work to coalesce them around the initiative. The host agencies were needed as fiduciaries, as the under-

taking required more personnel and fiscal management expertise than the councils themselves possessed. The Partnerships for Family Support played a critical role in helping the centers get up and running and in maintaining the vision for the centers as staff were hired and began work. Without the partnerships, it is likely that the host agencies would have molded the family centers in the direction of their other programs and departments, which did not focus on community hiring and decision-making. Instead, there is some evidence that experiences with the councils and the family centers helped host agencies broaden their own focus on how to work within neighborhoods.

Leaders within distressed neighborhoods and communities often do not have experience managing and directing large organizations and budgets. The use of host agencies balanced with the Partnerships was a workable strategy to address this issue, while retaining community control over the direction of the centers. As the family centers continue to develop, new strategies may be needed to create the capacity for the fiscal management of the centers within the community.

Even when community hiring and decision-making are the goals, it is unfair to communities to immediately devolve all aspects of planning, decision-making, and program and fiscal management to the community. The three strategies used in Allegheny County — community organizing, host agencies, and the partnerships — required financial and political support from the top and proved successful in getting the centers started and helping them grow and develop. While there may be alternative strategies for addressing these needs, it is likely that any effort to promote community hiring will have to develop and support strategies to address these concerns.

### ***Community-based Recruitment***

Third, community hiring required community-based recruitment and selection strategies which were different from those traditionally used by nonprofit human service organizations. In particular, the recruitment itself is likely to involve different types of posting of positions and identifying of potential candidates. Advertisements in community newspapers, posting of positions at local business sites, and word-of-mouth proved to be more effective ways of identifying candidates than advertising in metropolitan newspapers or posting in universities and schools of social work.

Given its local nature, the selection process must guard against favoritism towards individuals who may be well-connected or related to community members involved in center decision-making. While this represents a challenge, the experience from the three centers was that community council members themselves identified these “conflict of interest” issues and developed processes to address them. They felt they had a stake in ensuring that hiring was done on the basis of “what you know and can do and not who you know.”

Just as importantly, the selection process requires different criteria for selection than ones based solely upon education or credentialing. The family centers found that, while it was possible to find master’s and baccalaureate-level people from within their communities to fill the position, these credentials did not correspond to the type of work they envisioned at the center. They had to devise other screening tools to ensure that workers had the skills and qualities they desired: patience, ability to listen and empathize, knowledge of community resources and supports, and problem-solving expertise.

### ***Identification With Community***

Fourth, community hiring reduced the distance between the staff and the families being served, which produced both benefits and challenges. Staff in each of these communities identified with their communities. Many grew up with the parents they now were expected to serve. Parents cited this familiarity and approachability as a value of the center and what made it different from other agencies. At the same time, this also raised issues of confidentiality and of separation, with which each center struggled. Because staff were largely para-professional, they had not had backgrounds or training that stressed confi-

dentiality. Training helped address that issue, but it remains a challenge. Breaches of confidentiality that occur within a close-knit system are more likely to be spread across the community and preserving confidentiality under these circumstances is especially important.

Staff also were challenged by their familiarity with their community. Since they lived in the community, they were likely to see families they served in local businesses, at church, and in the neighborhood. Families did not necessarily distinguish between a worker's working hours and free time. In effect, many staff saw their job as more than a job and as a commitment to community or "24-7-365." Since centers sought staff with this perspective, they were able to better address the issue of separation of job from personal life that comes from working within the community where one lives.

### ***Economic Benefit***

Fifth, the centers did provide additional employment for community residents and economic activity within the community as a whole. Economists could calculate the "multiplier effect" of such employment to estimate the overall economic benefit to the community, but it is clear that community hiring has economic as well as social benefits to the community.

At the same time, workers largely did not seek this employment for the size of the salary it provided. Pay schedules, although comparable to those in the field, were relatively low. Workers did not feel that their positions provided career advancement opportunities, although host agencies provided some opportunities for advancement in their other programs, albeit usually outside the community. One of the major challenges to community hiring? Creating avenues for upward mobility that allow the experiences and skills acquired on the job to substitute for academic qualifications.

Sixth, and finally, community hiring created a different dynamic within the family centers and the community. This extended beyond the feelings of individual families that the center supported them and met their needs "immediately," "with compassion," and "different from other agencies." In effect, family center staff and the families they served felt they were building a resource for the community. One of the proofs of the strength of the approach in is that all three centers continue to embrace community hiring as essential to meeting their mission.

## **C** ***Conclusion***

In the community building literature, there is much discussion of the importance of "social capital" in rebuilding neighborhoods and communities. This social capital includes community norms toward civic involvement, leaders committed to a vision of the community and the common good, and dense networks of associational and affiliational ties that bind people together. Despite the interest in and importance of social capital, however, there are few illustrations of how to build social capital in neighborhoods where it is not already evident.

Allegheny County's community hiring experience in Homewood, Wilkinsburg, and Duquesne provides field-based evidence of one way to build this social capital. These centers have become points of congregation in their neighborhoods, with staff serving as initiators and supporting links for new relationships among families for the common good. They have created institutions that are more owned by and reflective of the aspirations of the community than other agencies and organizations that operate in these same communities. While community hiring may not be the sole strategy for building this social capital, it may prove to be an essential one for reform efforts truly serious about building community capacity to improve results for children, families, and the neighborhoods in which they live.

## ***Appendix 1***

***Characteristics of the Three  
Allegheny Community Hiring  
Sites***

## ***Appendix 2***

***Methodology – Information  
Gathering Techniques***

# Appendix 1

## Characteristics of the Three Allegheny Community Hiring Sites

Allegheny County is composed of 130 municipalities and 88 designated neighborhoods within Pittsburgh. In 1994, the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development published *Overcoming the Odds: Another Look*,<sup>11</sup> which examined a variety of demographic, service utilization, and incidence data and defined 52 of these neighborhoods or municipalities as communities at “highest risk.” Homewood (actually composed of three neighborhoods — Homewood North, Homewood South, and Homewood West), Duquesne City, and Wilkinsburg Borough all were part of these “highest risk communities.” The following provides demographic, service utilization, and incidence data for each of these three neighborhoods, for the 52 “highest risk” communities as a whole, and for the remaining neighborhoods and municipalities in Allegheny County.

Clearly, these three neighborhoods reflect economic and social conditions that place their children and families at much greater risk than the community as a whole, across multiple dimensions of well-being. Homewood, in particular, represents a community that faces major challenges to achieving social and economic vitality.

	Duquesne City	Homewood	Wilkinsburg Borough	High-Risk Neighborhoods	Other Neighborhoods	All of Allegheny County
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>8,524</b>	<b>11,511</b>	<b>21,080</b>	<b>222,865</b>	<b>1,113,584</b>	<b>1,336,449</b>
Per Capita Income	\$8,404	\$7,130	\$13,000	\$8,474	\$16,402	\$15,115
% of Children Under Six Living in Poverty	50.60%	61.60%	30.30%	55.00%	11.70%	19.00%
Child & Youth Services (CYS) Caseload per 1,000 Children	99.60	102.80	62.80	84.60	9.80	23.80
% of Births That Are Low Birthweight	10.50%	15.80%	10.50%	12.60%	5.80%	7.40%
Violent Crimes per 1,000 People	7.6	27.2	16.4	16.4	2.3	4.7

These figures indicate that the three centers served neighborhoods in Allegheny County that truly were “highest risk.” A subsequent study by the Child and Family Policy Center, *Allegheny County Study: Potential Returns on Investment from a Comprehensive Family Center Approach in High-Risk Neighborhoods*,<sup>12</sup> indicated that the public costs associated with these higher rates of child and family problems are nearly \$300 million annually within the 52 neighborhoods for AFDC, Medicaid, food stamp, child welfare service, jail prison and juvenile detention expenditures alone.

11 Farber, Anne, Jeanne Williams, and Christina Groark. *Overcoming the Odds: Another Look*. University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development: Pittsburgh, PA: June, 1994.

12 Bruner, Charles (with Stephen Scott and Martha Steketee). *Allegheny County Study: Potential Returns on Investment from a Comprehensive Family Center Approach in High-Risk Neighborhoods*. Child and Family Policy Center: Des Moines, IA: January, 1996.

## **A**ppendix 2

### **Methodology — Information Gathering Techniques**

#### **Allegheny County Community Hiring Project Questions, by Informant Type Designers (Individual and Group Interviews)**

- How did you develop the idea for this project?
- What was your original vision for this project?
- How did the project move from vision to concrete plan? (prior to implementation)
- What do you consider to be the critical points in the early history of this work?
- In particular, what were unexpected challenges, surprising or unexpected results, or problem-solving activities to address particular concerns that arose?
- Who was particularly important in this early work and what roles did they play?
- How is community defined for “community workers”?
- How is this “community” related to the service territory for the center in which employed?
- Describe the role that the members of the Family Support Round Table played in supporting (or hindering) the conceptualization and implementation of community hiring.
- Describe the selection process for the three partnerships.

#### **Original Community Organizers Prior to Founding the Centers (Individual Interview)**

- What strategies did you use to get resident involvement?
- How many community residents were active in developing your plans for resident involvement in the centers?
- Did these community residents need some type of training?
- How did the community react (e.g. eager? hesitant?) to your objectives and goals for the project?

#### **Community Residents Involved in Initial Project Planning (Survey and Individual Interview)**

- How were recruitment and selection of workers done? Include impressions of the effectiveness of different strategies.
- What were the struggles, challenges, and benefits faced by those responsible for hiring and supporting community workers experienced in the process?
- What made hiring community workers effective or problematic?
- Was the program model for this project good for your community?
- What role did you play in the implementation of this project?
- Did you feel like the residents had power in the decision-making process, and why or why not?
- How has this project affected you as a member of the community?
- What skills did you think the site director needed?
- What role did the community residents have in selecting the host agency?
- Did you expect residents to gain employment from this project? Were your expectations met?
- What types of residents appeared to get hired in the project?

#### **Partnerships for Family Support Managers (Group Interview/Focus Group)**

- What strategies did you use to train community residents and staff?
- How did you provide support to the community residents?
- What type of support did you receive from your employers (the County, OCD) in implementing the community hiring agenda?
- Did your group have to advocate for community residents and staff to ensure community hiring?
- What was your role for the project? Did that role change during the process of implementing the project?

- For the initial positions in the family centers actually filled by community workers (management, administration, direct service), what were the responsibilities, initial qualifications, and compensation structure?
- How is “community” defined for “community workers”? (geography, neighborhood leadership position, other)
- How is this “community” related to the service territory for the center in which employed?
- Describe training, staff development, and staff supervision of community workers.
- What were the struggles, challenges, and benefits faced by those responsible for hiring and supporting community workers experienced in the process?
- What made hiring workers effective or problematic?
- Describe issues that emerged in credentialing, union contracts, liability or confidentiality issues, and how those were addressed.
- Describe the procedures and protocols the centers have developed (or would like to develop) in recruitment, selection, development, supervision, and oversight of staff.
- Given that you were “breaking new ground” in this initiative, what did you learn as you went forward?
- What advice would you give to others on the “dos” and “don’ts” of community hiring?

### ***Directors of Contract Agencies (Individual Interviews)***

- What were your initial views about the project and about community hiring in general? Have these views changed in the course of the project?
- Do you believe community hiring creates community empowerment (the ability to make decisions that affect a community and the residents themselves)?
- What kind of results do you believe community hiring created?
- Has the process of implementing a community hiring strategy for this project affected the hiring philosophy, policy, or procedures in the rest of your agency?
- Describe worker turnover rates, both at beginning of process and currently for each of the centers, and reasons for the turnover.
- Describe the degree to which the community workers reflected the ethnic, cultural, gender, and class backgrounds of the support center community.
- What were the struggles, challenges, and benefits that those responsible for hiring and supporting community workers experienced in the process?
- What made hiring community workers effective or problematic?
- Describe your perception of the strengths and limitation of hiring community workers versus alternative hiring strategies, including overall employee costs.
- Describe additional issues that emerged and had to be addressed in the recruitment, selection, hiring, and maintenance of community workers in the three family support centers.
- Does your agency have plans for future community hiring beyond the family center?

### ***Directors of Center Sites (Individual Interviews)***

- What were your objectives and goals for this project?
- Did you receive any special training for this position?
- Did you believe you had the skills to do the job?
- How well did you know the needs of the community when you started as director?
- Did you find opposition or support from community residents as site director?
- What did you gain from holding this position?
- Did this position help your career?
- What role did you play in hiring staff?
- How were recruitment and selection of workers done? Include impressions of the effectiveness of different strategies.
- Describe training, staff development, and staff supervision of community workers.
- Describe staff and career advancement opportunities and experiences for those workers outside the family center.

- What were the struggles, challenges, and benefits experienced by the workers that you observed?
- What made the work fulfilling? What made the work frustrating?
- From your perspective as site director, describe what you know about the reasons workers initially sought positions in your center. For example: compensation, type of work, location close to home, etc.
- From your perspective as site director, describe worker career advancement over time, and things that supported or hampered that advancement.
- From your perspective as site director, describe issues that emerged in credentialing, union contracts, liability, or confidentiality issues, and how these issues were addressed.
- From your perspective as site director, what are the benefits of community hiring to the families served?
- Have you observed any limitation or problems with the community hiring model?
- How do families respond to being served by community workers? Are there any particular strengths in or limitations to developing relationships between community workers and families?
- From your perspective as site director, what are the benefits of community hiring to the neighborhood and community?
- Have you observed any tensions or problems related to successful or problematic implementation of the community hiring initiative?
- Describe issues that emerged regarding politics or pressures in making hiring decisions, and how they were addressed.
- What were the struggles, challenges and benefits faced by those responsible for hiring supporting community workers experienced in the process?
- What made hiring community workers effective or problematic?
- Describe additional issues that emerged and had to be addressed in the recruitment, selection, hiring and maintenance of community workers in your family support centers.
- If you were to give advice to other site directors on how to implement a community hiring strategy, what would be the most important thing you would tell them?

### **Center Staff (Focus Groups)**

- Did you receive training for this position?
- Did you believe that you had the skills to do the job?
- What did you gain from this experience and how has this affected your career and job plans?
- Where are you presently working? (If no longer at the center)
- How did you feel about the project?
- Describe staff and career advancement opportunities and experiences for those workers, outside the family center.
- What struggles, challenges, and benefits have you experienced?
- What makes the work fulfilling and frustrating?
- Why did you initially seek positions at the family centers (compensation, type of work, location, etc.)?
- How do you feel families respond to neighborhood workers, as opposed to professionals from other areas?
- How has being a resident of the neighborhood affected your work with area residents?
- What skills and background enable you to be most effective in working with families?
- What additional support would you like to have to make you more effective in your work?

### **Parent Participants (Survey)**

- How did the staff respond to your needs?
- Were you treated fairly?
- Was it difficult working with someone from the community?
- What do you think is good about center staff being from your community? Do you think there are any problems with this way of providing services?
- Do you think employing people from the community helps make the center feel more representative?

