

Applying Research to Create Real Pathways out of Poverty

Deborah Youngblood

CRITTENTON WOMEN'S UNION

In the complex arena of promoting economic mobility among low-income, single-parent households, a model called Mobility Mentoring is showing promising results.

According to the U.S. census, 4.1 million women in poverty are the sole providers for their families. Households headed by a single working mother represent less than 25 percent of all working families, yet almost 40 percent of all low-income households.¹

For such women, caring for children complicates the process of moving up out of poverty. Single mothers rely on limited financial resources to cover big-ticket expenses such as quality child care, needs for larger housing, and family medical expenses. At the same time, they must juggle significant time commitments to activities that help fulfill their children's emotional and physical needs. The poverty conundrum often seems intractable.

Developing a Theory

Crittenton Women's Union (CWU), a Boston-based nonprofit with the mission of transforming low-income women's lives so that they can attain economic independence and create better futures for themselves and their families, has been working hard to design new solutions to the poverty conundrum.

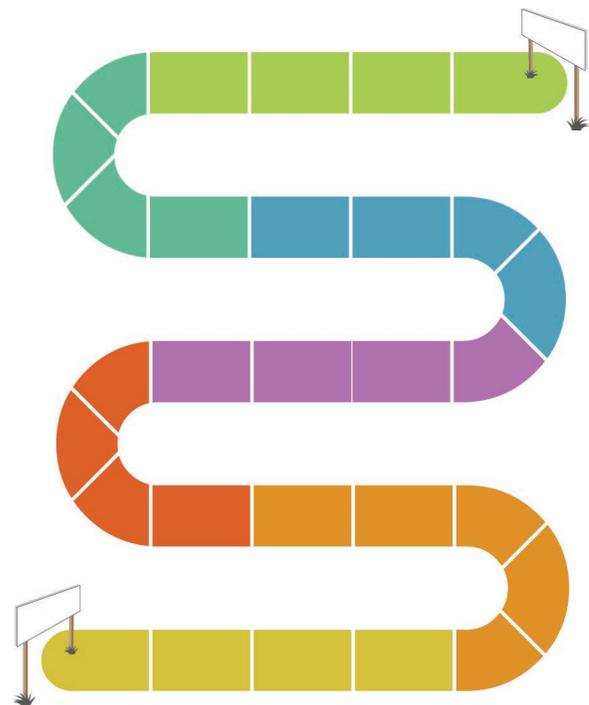
What really works in promoting economic mobility for very low-income single mothers? That question led to the development of CWU's theory of change. The resulting tools and programming are showing promise amid a fairly discouraging environment of widening opportunity gaps and lessening overall economic mobility.

In 2006, CWU embarked upon the strategic development of a new framework for promoting economic mobility. Tapping current research and many combined years of social-service practice, agency employees produced a comprehensive theory of change called the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency. The theory asserts that in order to become self-sufficient, individuals need to optimize their lives within five primary domains: family stability, well-being, financial management, education, and career management. Deficiency in even one of those areas can seriously weaken a person's ability to attain economic independence.

The Bridge to Self-Sufficiency is integral to a new pilot program, Mobility Mentoring services. Typically, social-service programs focus on a single program area. For example, there are organizations that specialize in finding people housing, boosting parenting skills, or se-

curing job training. Rarely do we find social-service organizations that address the overlapping nature of the issues that families face.

The Mobility Mentoring approach rests on the premise that in order to effectively promote sustainable economic independence, all areas identified along the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency need to be addressed effectively and in conjunction with one another. Mobility Mentoring proponents also believe that long-term, individualized coaching is the best vehicle for supporting individuals toward their self-sufficiency goals. Long-term coaching provides guidance and, over time, builds participants' decision-making, problem-solving, goal-setting, and reasoning skills. The transfer from an external process of being guided by a mentor to an internal process in which participants essentially mentor themselves promotes sustained, long-term success after the formal intervention.



Putting Theory into Practice

Consider this hypothetical example. Carol, a 34-year-old single mother of two young children, is encouraged by a mentor to enroll in community college and obtain her associate's degree. Carol had started college twice before but each time was derailed by circumstances that prompted her to withdraw.

With the help of her mobility mentor, Carol is able to identify nursing as a career she wants to pursue. Jobs in this field are available and pay enough to sustain Carol and her children. Armed with more concrete plans and with support in place, Carol goes back to school. However, in her third semester, Carol's estranged ex-husband returns and starts legal proceedings to obtain custody of their children. Carol knows him to be an abusive and unfit parent and is terrified of potentially losing custody.

Carol's first impulse is to manage this new crisis by putting everything else on hold. Her mobility mentor offers her a different perspective and points out that while Carol needs to address the current challenge, withdrawing from school again and derailing her own goal achievement may not be the best strategy. Her own educational progress could work in her favor and allow her to successfully protect her children. Carol and her mobility mentor work together on effectively containing the crisis, addressing it but not allowing it to undermine all the positive aspects of Carol's life. Over time, with practice, Carol will internalize such behavior. She will be able to do a better job of addressing and meeting day-to-day obstacles using the long-term planning skills the mentor helps her learn.

The coaching model is informed by recent developments in brain research that posit that experiences of social discrimination, entrenched poverty, and trauma can directly undermine brain development and the skills most needed for success.² The research finds that the well-documented stress of living in poverty—recurring threats to personal well-being and safety, food and shelter insecurity, violence, social discrimination resulting in low self-esteem, and so on—can have significant negative effects on decision-making processes and the ability to plan effectively for the future.

At the risk of over-simplifying: If one's experiences are primarily crisis-oriented, which is common in very low-income households struggling to make ends meet, then a reactive response to the immediate crisis is the most likely coping mechanism. Unfortunately, being reactive comes at the expense of long-term goal setting and goal achievement.³

The mentoring approach provides answers to questions that participants face on a regular basis:

- How much do I really need to earn in order to support myself and my family?
- Which jobs pay a family-sustaining wage and offer career pathways and critical benefits, and who is hiring?
- What kinds of training and soft and hard skill sets do I need to obtain those jobs and maintain them?
- What other aspects of my life do I need to address in order to achieve long-term stability?
- How can I find answers to such questions and effectively use that information to build a positive, productive, self-sufficient life?

The practice of Mobility Mentoring, while still in the pilot stage, is showing early evidence of effectiveness. In CWU's most intensive five-year program, single parents apply to engage in ongoing coaching through Career Family Opportunity (CFO) and are accepted on the basis of demonstrated motivation and willingness to actively pursue

self-sufficiency through education, training, and program support.

So far, CFO participants receiving Mobility Mentoring services are achieving excellent outcomes. As of June 30, 2013, we saw the following:

- 50 percent of participants were pursuing higher education and training, which is higher than for comparable community programs;
- of the 50 percent *not* enrolled in school, 95 percent had already earned a college degree or had completed advanced training while in the program; and
- 68 percent were employed (43 percent in careers that pay enough to fully sustain their families without government assistance). In comparison, at program entry, none were employed in positions paying enough to sustain their families.

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Poverty today is different from poverty in decades past. The current knowledge-based economy has transformed the labor market to one in which family-sustaining jobs require advanced education or training as well as sophisticated soft skills. Mobility Mentoring effectively combines well-researched tools that illuminate what people need to develop concrete, informed, individualized pathways out of poverty.

The program is a guiding framework for low-income individuals working to transform the course of their lives. One participant expressed gratitude for the help to “envision and structure my education, career, and financial goals in such a way that they finally seem attainable. Long-term goals are made into a series of short-term goals. This way the journey is more manageable. I feel like I *can* get from here to there. My family does not have to continue to be part of that statistic of female-headed households living in poverty. I have been heard, understood, and supported in my plan to lift my boys and myself from a life of mere survival into the realm of achievement and self-sufficiency.”

Deborah Youngblood, PhD, is vice president of research and innovation at Crittenton Women's Union in Boston. Contact her at dyoungblood@liveworkthrive.org.

Endnotes

¹ See Deborah Povich, Brandon Roberts, and Mark Mather, “Low Income Working Mothers and State Policy: Investing for a Better Economic Future” (Working Poor Families Project policy brief, winter 2013–2014), http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/WFPF_Low-Income-Working-Mothers-Report_021214.pdf.

² For a general overview of the brain-science literature on executive functions, see Russell Carlock, “Defining and Measuring Executive Functions in Adults: Applications for Practice and Policy” (white paper, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, July 2011).

³ For a detailed overview of how brain science research informs the model, see Elisabeth D. Babcock, “Using Brain Science to Design New Pathways out of Poverty” (Crittenton Women's Union brief, 2014), http://www.liveworkthrive.org/research_and_tools/reports_and_publications/ef_report.