

Making the Shoe Fit

Creating a Work-Prep System for a Large and Diverse Welfare Population

**Toby Herr
Suzanne L. Wagner
Robert Halpern**

December 1996

**Project Match
Erikson Institute
420 North Wabash Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60611
Phone: (312) 755-2250, ext. 2296/2297
Fax: (312) 755-2255**

Project Match is a welfare-to-work program that has served the Cabrini-Green community in Chicago since 1985. Since its inception, the program has had a dual mission: (1) to design and implement welfare-to-work initiatives that help participants achieve economic and social stability through customized placement and supportive services, and (2) to document lessons about the process of leaving welfare and disseminate them to policymakers and practitioners. Project Match is known for its long-term commitment to program participants, often extending over a period of years, and for developing a comprehensive set of post-employment services.

Project Match's direct-service site is located at the Winfield Moody Health Center. Its research and policy activities are conducted under the auspices of the Erikson Institute.

The writing, production, and dissemination of this paper were supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation; Foundation for Child Development; the Joyce Foundation; a Human Capital Development Priority Grant through a United Way, Crusade of Mercy, Inc./Illinois Department of Public Aid funding collaboration; Woods Fund of Chicago; and three individuals: Robert W. Fulk, Irving B. Harris, and Jeffrey Herr.

The findings and recommendations in this paper do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction. Welfare-to-Work from a Human Development Perspective	1
Section I. The Limitations of the Typical Work-Prep Approach: Why JOBS Didn't Lead to Jobs for Many Welfare Recipients	4
Basic Education: So Often a Repeat of Failure in the Classroom	4
<i>Getting Stuck in Holding Patterns</i>	7
Job Skills Training: A Better Educational Alternative?	8
<i>The Dangers of Predetermined Sequences</i>	11
OJT, Work Supplementation, and CWEP: Three Little-Used Work-Prep Activities	12
<i>The Importance of Monitoring Progress</i>	14
Job-Readiness Activities: A Component with an Identity Crisis	14
<i>The Twenty-Hour Conundrum</i>	16
Job Search: For Better Results, Add Job Development	18
<i>The Potential of Combining Job Search with Other Activities</i>	20
Drawing Conclusions: A Table of Activity and System Characteristics	21
<i>Thinking of Activities in Terms of Their Characteristics</i>	22
<i>Thinking of Activities in Terms of the Characteristics of the System</i>	25
Section II. A Different Approach to Work Prep: Project Match's Experience as a High-Flexibility Program	27
Using Work as Work Prep	27
Job Search in a High-Flexibility System	30
How Effective Is Project Match's Approach?	32

Section III. Adding the Lower Rungs to the Ladder: How to Help the “Hard-to-Serve”	35
Project Match’s Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence	36
<i>Volunteering/Advisory Boards (Community Service)</i>	37
<i>Activities with Children</i>	39
<i>Self-Improvement Activities</i>	40
<i>The Characteristics of Lower-Rung Activities</i>	42
Why Lower-Rung Activities Help People Prepare for Work: Some Theoretical Rationales	43
<i>How Do We “Teach” People to Adhere to a Work Schedule?</i>	43
<i>Interacting Appropriately with Supervisors, Co-Workers, and Customers or Clients</i>	48
<i>Acquiring Job-Related Skills in Community Settings</i>	55
The New Federal Welfare Law: Where Do the Lower Rungs Fit Under TANF?	59
 Conclusion. Getting From Here to There: The Pathways System	 62
A Tool for Helping People Take Natural Pathways	62
The Three Components of Pathways	63
<i>The Monthly Activity Diary: The Heart of the System</i>	63
<i>The Computerized Tracking System: What Is the Feedback and Who Is in the Loop?</i>	65
<i>Basic Rules and Procedures for Line Workers and Welfare Recipients: Maintaining the Integrity of Pathways</i>	66
Field-Testing Pathways in a Welfare Office in Chicago: How a Group of Hard-to-Serve Welfare Recipients Climbed the Incremental Ladder	68
<i>Who Are the Participants in the Field-Test and Where Are They After One Year?</i>	68
<i>The Progress of Four Pathways Participants</i>	71

Acknowledgments

This paper turned out to be more ambitious in terms of scope and depth than the one we set out to write. And to complicate things further, five months or so into the paper, in August 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was passed in Washington; to the extent possible, we incorporated this new law into the paper. The funders of this paper were both generous and flexible as the months passed. They include the Annie E. Casey Foundation; Foundation for Child Development; the Joyce Foundation; a Human Capital Development Priority Grant through a United Way, Crusade of Mercy, Inc./Illinois Department of Public Aid funding collaboration; Woods Fund of Chicago; and three individual businessmen in Chicago: Robert W. Fulk, Irving B. Harris, and Jeffrey Herr.

As always, Project Match staff have assisted in many ways; we especially want to acknowledge Warrine Pace and Ria Majeske. The final section of this paper describes Project Match's Pathways System, which we are currently testing in welfare offices. Cheryl Stoneking and Ernestine Thomas have been invaluable members of the Pathways team. We also want to thank Joyce Jackson of the Illinois Department of Public Aid, the caseworker assigned to the initial field-test of the Pathways System.

Mark Greenberg and Steve Savner of the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) in Washington, D.C., read parts of the paper with care, as did Ricki Granetz of Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI). Thanks to the three of them.

Finally, we want to express our gratitude to the faculty and staff of the Erikson Institute, under whose auspices Project Match conducts its research and policy work. The expertise of Barbara Bowman, Jie-Qi Chen, Maija May, Joan McLane, Dan Scheinfeld, and Fran Stott have contributed to the theoretical grounding of Project Match's "lower rung" activities. Dr. Stott was also a patient, discerning reader of the final draft. In our work at Project Match in general – and in this paper in particular – our main goal is to help people start to look at the welfare-to-work process from a human development perspective. With such a goal, the Erikson Institute has been the perfect home for our work.

Introduction

Welfare-to-Work from a Human Development Perspective

We began to write this paper long before it became clear that welfare reform would pass this year, but as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 moved through both houses of Congress and then onto President Clinton's desk, we realized that the paper couldn't be better timed. With the new legislation, states are going to have to find ways to help more welfare recipients than ever before to prepare for work, find work, and keep work, and these welfare recipients are likely to be an extremely diverse group. As a result, legislators and administrators must take stock of their welfare-to-work programs and consider how to make them more effective, which is exactly what we set out to do in this paper.

There are essentially two parts to the paper. First, we critique the welfare-to-work approach to which almost all public and private programs have adhered over the years. The federally mandated Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) Program is a consummate example of the typical welfare-to-work approach, and although the new legislation has turned JOBS into a thing of the past, many states are likely to make the activities they provided under JOBS the foundation for their new welfare-to-work programs, so this is a good place to start. In considering the limitations of work prep under JOBS and similar programs, we were not content simply to note the already-documented modest effects and then move on; instead, we tried to stop at those findings and ask why. Is there something inherent in the traditional work-prep activities that limits their effectiveness for some – or even most – welfare recipients? Is it the method of teaching employed or the assumptions about how people learn that are limiting? Is it the setting? Is it a lack of timely and meaningful rewards to sustain motivation? And what role does the administrative framework in which the activities are embedded play in limiting their effectiveness? What are the effects of sequencing policies? How are transitions handled? How quickly and easily can employability plans be modified when a person isn't making progress? In Section I, we ask these questions and others about each of the work-preparation activities most commonly offered under JOBS and other programs: basic education, job skills training, on-the-job training (OJT), work supplementation, community work experience (CWEP), job-readiness activities, and job search.

But we wanted to offer more than just a critique of the prevailing welfare-to-work approach in this paper. Thus, the second purpose of the paper is to present an alternative vision of a welfare-to-work system derived from the lessons that emerge from our critique and also from Project Match's eleven years of direct-service experience and research. This vision is built on a fundamental reconceptualization of work prep that begins by asking, What are the pathways

that people take “naturally” when they leave welfare (i.e., outside of welfare-to-work programs), and how can programs be structured to reflect what we learn from these pathways? The system we propose includes some of the typical welfare-to-work activities and some new ones, thus creating a broader array of choices and making it possible to serve a greater diversity of welfare recipients. Section II describes how even work itself can be a work-prep activity for many welfare recipients; at Project Match, we have found that for many participants real jobs are the best arena for learning about the world of work. This pathway only makes sense, though, if programs provide retention, reemployment, and advancement assistance – now commonly known as “post-employment services.”

Section III describes a series of activities that Project Match has designed specifically for the “hard-to-serve,” a group that is not helped very much by the typical welfare-to-work approach. These work-prep placements include volunteer activities like assisting in a Head Start classroom or serving on a tenant management board; activities with children like taking a child to weekly speech therapy sessions or serving as a scout leader; and self-improvement activities, which range from substance abuse treatment to exercise classes. While a lot of these activities may not sound like work prep to most people, there are many reasons why they are a good starting place for the least job-ready welfare recipients: they can help people (1) learn how to adhere to a work schedule; (2) learn how to interact appropriately with supervisors, co-workers, and clients or customers; and (3) acquire a variety of job-related skills. In Section III, we describe the activities in detail and provide the theoretical rationale for allowing them to serve as work-prep placements; our discussion draws on the fields of developmental psychology, cognitive learning, sociolinguistics, and anthropology. These activities, however, as well as post-employment services, are effective only if the overarching welfare-to-work system is structured to be extremely flexible around such issues as sequencing, combining, and scheduling, and these issues are also addressed in the paper. In fact, the way a system is structured may be even more important than the specific activities offered by a program.

The elements of the welfare-to-work system we outline in this paper do not exist only on paper. Project Match has been offering retention, reemployment, and advancement assistance for years as part of its direct-service activities in the Cabrini-Green community in Chicago, and there are now the experiences – both promising and disappointing – of the four states in the federal Post-Employment Services Demonstration from which to learn as well. Project Match has also developed the Pathways System to facilitate the operationalization of the activities we recommend for the least job-ready welfare recipients (this system was originally known as PRIDE). With Pathways, we have built our ideas for effective work prep into a product that can be picked up and used by government welfare-to-work programs with relative ease. We developed Pathways because program administrators are usually enthusiastic about our

approach to helping the least job-ready but they have difficulty figuring out how to implement it at the street level. The conclusion to this paper describes the Pathways System and its field-test, which is currently under way at a welfare office in Chicago.

Although most of this paper was written when there was still a JOBS program, we have tried wherever possible to go back and consider the implications of the new federal legislation for the ideas and recommendations we present. Because the law is still being interpreted, however, and because many states have not yet filed their new welfare plans with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the implications are not always clear. We believe, however, that the issues we address in this paper will continue to be relevant under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant. In fact, given that there are now strict work requirements and time limits, the issues are more relevant than ever: states *must* find ways to prepare a large and diverse welfare population for work. Surprisingly, the more we learn about TANF, the more we believe it provides a flexible enough framework for the type of welfare-to-work system we are proposing; while much of what we recommend could have been done under JOBS, it is likely to be much easier to do under TANF. Despite the legitimate concern over aspects of the new law, it has opened the door for states to do welfare-to-work differently and better; the trick will be for states to recognize the pockets of flexibility in TANF for innovation and change and to avoid rigid interpretations of the law, which so often happened under JOBS.

In the end, the main message we want readers to take away from this paper is that if welfare-to-work *programs* are to be successful, the welfare-to-work *process* must be viewed from a human development perspective: if welfare recipients are to develop into steady workers, we have to create a welfare-to-work system that reflects what we know about how people learn and grow. We have to wrestle with such questions as why welfare recipients usually do not successfully complete basic education programs, why they have trouble keeping jobs, and how they can be taught the most basic requirements for employment, like adhering to a work schedule and getting along with co-workers and supervisors. Work requirements and time limits alone will not be enough to turn a large and diverse welfare population into steady workers; if this is to happen, we will have to begin to think differently about the nature and substance of work prep.

Section I

The Limitations of the Typical Work-Prep Approach: Why JOBS Didn't Lead to Jobs for Many Welfare Recipients

As part of the Family Support Act of 1988, states were required to create a JOBS program to promote the welfare-to-work process. Although there was some flexibility in what states could do, the federal regulations dictated many of the elements and procedures of the programs. With the new federal welfare legislation, states have considerable freedom to create whatever type of welfare-to-work program they want; while some states like Wisconsin will take advantage of this freedom to do something completely different from JOBS (in fact, the state had already received a series of waivers to do something different even before the new legislation passed), many states are likely to use JOBS as the starting point for their new programs. For this reason, we should look closely at the work-prep approach underlying JOBS and sort out what is worth building on and what should be discarded. It is important to remember while reading this section that although the focus is on JOBS, the work-prep approach used by the program is typical of most other welfare-to-work efforts, and we will discuss other programs as well in the course of the discussion.

Under JOBS, states were required to provide basic education, job skills training, job-readiness training, job development and placement, and at least two out of four other employment-related activities: they could choose among job search, work experience, on-the-job training, and work supplementation.¹ In this section, we will review each of these activities. In assessing their strengths and weaknesses, however, it is not enough to consider the particular activities in and of themselves; it is also necessary to consider them in the context of the system in which they were embedded. In other words, characteristics of the larger system, such as how activities are sequenced and how participation is defined, can be as important to success or failure as the content and format of the activity itself, so we must look at these system characteristics as well.

Basic Education: So Often a Repeat of Failure in the Classroom

When JOBS was first implemented, basic education – which includes ABE (adult basic education), GED (high school equivalency), and ESL (English as a second language) courses – was one of the predominant activities for participants. The Family Support Act required

¹States could also offer post-secondary education and other activities approved by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

teenage parents on welfare to attend an education program if they did not have a high school diploma or GED certificate and in the beginning many states extended this requirement to older welfare recipients as well, believing that without a certain level of education people were unlikely to succeed in the labor market. Thus, on entry into the JOBS program, many people were assigned to basic education up front. Those who didn't go into basic ed usually went right into job search, but if they didn't find employment, it was basic ed, and not other activities, in which they were likely to find themselves.

In many states, recent reforms have moved away from an emphasis on basic education and this trend is certain to spread to other states with the new federal welfare legislation. Although this trend is controversial, it is rather understandable, since recent studies have shown that basic ed has had limited effectiveness. One of these studies is MDRC's evaluation of California's JOBS program, known as GAIN, which included a separate, detailed examination of basic education, since the state had emphasized this activity in its original JOBS plan. The evaluation revealed that most people didn't attend their ABE/GED classes regularly (despite the fact that they could be sanctioned for not attending) and most people also did not end up with a GED certificate.² The very small number who did get a GED were mostly people who entered GAIN with higher literacy scores and thus were close to being able to pass the GED exam in the first place; in fact, MDRC surmised that many of these "completers" just needed a push to take the exam, which GAIN provided.

At Project Match, which is a voluntary program and which doesn't enroll people in ABE/GED unless they want to go, the success rate is not much better than in GAIN. People just seem to hate ABE/GED. They tend to find traditional classroom instruction stultifying: lecture, memorization, drill, pencil-and-paper tasks, more lecture – this is the mode of learning in most ABE/GED programs. Moreover, people who need ABE/GED are in that position because they previously failed in an educational environment; thus, many of them enter the ABE/GED classroom feeling afraid, resistant, ashamed, and even angry – many just expect to fail again. ABE/GED is also difficult because – like school in general – it takes concentration, discipline, and the ability to withstand frustration; these qualities can be particularly difficult to sustain since the rewards of ABE/GED aren't immediate and the relevance of the material is often unclear.

In short, ABE/GED can be quite stressful, frustrating, and overwhelming, and as a recent study articulated so well, many welfare recipients cannot handle this added burden. In *Lives of*

²Basic ed participants in GAIN attended class an average of ten hours per week, about 60 percent of their scheduled hours, and only 9 percent of experimentals determined to need basic education received a GED or high school diploma, compared to 2 percent of controls. See Karin Martinson and Daniel Friedlander, *GAIN: Basic Education in a Welfare-to-Work Program* (New York: MDRC, January 1994).

Promise, Lives of Pain, the developmental psychologist Judith Musick vividly describes the group of young women in the New Chance program who did not manage to get a GED, which was the first goal for all participants in that intervention:

Difficult life circumstances – ones the study subjects may even have helped to create – have propelled them [the women who did not get a GED] into the world of young adulthood and parenthood, a world for which they are often profoundly unprepared. . . . Many young women’s personal histories exhibit recurrent patterns: troubled relationships with family members and partners that often elicit the same responses – pregnancy and dropping out – throughout later adolescence and early adulthood. . . . Difficulties in meeting the academic and other challenges of a program like New Chance may then place further strain on these young women, making their participation highly vulnerable to disruption.³

New Chance was a tremendously supportive and personal program; further, the women in New Chance chose to be there. Still, 63 percent of the participants did not get a GED, and among those who did, most had higher literacy scores at program entry – the same pattern seen in the GAIN findings. As much as New Chance had to offer compared to many large government programs, it still couldn’t overcome the academic shortcomings and psychological problems of many participants.⁴

These findings from GAIN and New Chance, and our own experience at Project Match, indicate that basic education is a mismatch for many welfare recipients. In fact, the findings suggest that if states are going to mandate basic education, they might want to do so only for welfare recipients with higher literacy scores, as they are most likely to succeed in the activity.⁵ (Please note that we are talking here only about high school dropouts; there is no reason why teenage welfare recipients still in high school shouldn’t be mandated to stay there.) This is not just a matter of using resources wisely; since the psychological costs of repeated failure are high, particularly for people whose sense of self-worth is already fragile, we need to consider as well the wisdom of sending people into an environment where their chances of success are so low. In New Chance, for example, even though the program “deliberately sought to bolster participants’ self-esteem and to offer them a warm and supportive (but demanding)

³Janet C. Quint and Judith S. Musick, *Lives of Promise, Lives of Pain: Young Mothers After New Chance* (New York: MDRC, January 1994), pp. 93-95.

⁴See Janet C. Quint et al., *New Chance: Interim Findings on a Comprehensive Program for Disadvantaged Young Mothers and Their Children* (New York: MDRC, September 1994).

⁵It is important to note that although getting a GED is an important milestone, it does not guarantee success in the labor market. In both GAIN and New Chance, a GED did not necessarily translate into stable employment (see James Riccio, Daniel Friedlander, and Stephen Freedman, *GAIN: Benefits, Costs, and Three-Year Impacts of a Welfare-to-Work Program* [New York: MDRC, September 1994]; and Quint et al., *New Chance: Interim Findings*). In Project Match’s experience, however, even if a GED doesn’t lead straight to stable employment, earning one provides a real psychological boost. For many of those Project Match participants who pass the GED exam, it is a confidence builder, and the program makes sure to maintain the momentum by quickly helping people take their next step.

environment,” the young women still showed a fairly high level of depression at the end of the follow-up period; in fact, they were slightly more depressed than control group members. The researchers think that this finding might reflect “a higher level of stress among the experimentals, who might have been faced with conflicting demands as a result of program participation, and perhaps higher – *and unfulfilled* – expectations that their situations would improve.”⁶ In other words, failure had a high psychological cost for many of the young women in New Chance.

Although these findings lead us to conclude that it is probably not productive to mandate basic education for any but those with higher literacy scores, we believe that states should try to find a way to make basic education available to people on a voluntary basis; education is very important and welfare recipients who want a GED should be given the chance to earn one. If basic education is made available, however, states must set up procedures for moving people *quickly* into more appropriate activities if it proves to be a mismatch – that is, if people don’t make adequate progress within a certain amount of time or if they drop out. States should note, though, that they probably don’t need to worry about everyone signing up for basic education if it’s made available: in a survey of JOBS participants, it was ranked last among several activities from which they could choose, even below job search.⁷ And at Project Match we have also found that basic education is not a popular choice.

Getting Stuck in Holding Patterns

The necessity of speedy transitions is a key issue in welfare-to-work programs. One of the many interesting things revealed by the GAIN basic education study is that each month the majority of basic ed participants were not in classes or in fact in any other welfare-to-work activity. Instead, they were “still in GAIN, but not actively participating”: that is, they were “deferred” (i.e., temporarily excused) because of illness, a family emergency, part-time employment, or other circumstances; involved in noncompliance activities; waiting for an activity to start; or waiting for a referral to an activity to be made.⁸ Although deferrals for things like illness are understandable,⁹ all those people who are waiting for activities to start or

⁶See *ibid.*, pp. 158 and 162 (italics not in original).

⁷See Gayle Hamilton and Thomas Brock, *The JOBS Evaluation: Early Lessons from Seven Sites* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

⁸See Martinson and Friedlander, *GAIN: Basic Education*.

⁹We *do* question why people would be deferred for part-time employment, though. Project Match’s experience has been that part-time jobs can be used as a springboard to full-time ones, but that people often need some assistance to make the leap.

referrals to be made (or even for the conciliation process to play out) are another matter – they are stuck in a “holding pattern.”

GAIN is not the only welfare-to-work program with this problem, and holding patterns – whenever they occur – stand in the way of operating an effective mandatory initiative. The tendency to let people “do nothing” for weeks or months at a time undermines the message to individuals that they are expected to prepare for work, and at a more general level it sabotages the whole effort to change the culture of welfare. From a developmental perspective, periods of inactivity – even short ones – are dangerous because people often lose momentum, forfeit recent gains, and slip back into old, familiar patterns of behavior. One study suggested that “lengthy delays in receiving services may contribute to disillusionment of welfare recipients who were hopeful of new opportunities.”¹⁰

At their root, holding patterns are an administrative problem. This fact lends support to the argument of the policy analyst Lawrence Mead that welfare reform is an administrative challenge more than a policy challenge.¹¹ States need to develop procedures for quickly identifying who has dropped out of or successfully completed an activity and for just as quickly getting them into the next activity. If there are delays because there are not available slots for an activity or because the activity doesn’t start immediately, there should be some sort of short-term, interim activities for people. Some states have already tried this strategy in order to keep people “engaged and attached to the JOBS program.”¹² There must also be procedures for keeping in touch with people who are temporarily excused, so that they get right back into the program as soon as possible.¹³ And there are probably ways to speed up the conciliation process in state programs. Unless we find solutions to these administrative problems, even the best activities won’t be their most effective.

Job Skills Training: A Better Educational Alternative?

Job skills training, often called vocational education, is another work-prep activity states were required to provide under JOBS. Unlike basic education, in which the content and format are standardized and the desired outcome – a GED – is the same for everyone, voc ed spans a

¹⁰Jan L. Hagen and Irene Lurie, *Implementing JOBS: Progress and Promise* (Albany, N.Y.: The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, State University of New York, August 1994), p. 183.

¹¹Lawrence M. Mead, “An Administrative Approach to Welfare Reform,” in *Welfare Reform: An Analysis of the Issues*, ed. Isabel V. Sawhill (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 1995).

¹²See Hagen and Lurie, *Implementing JOBS*, p. 183.

¹³At the Oregon site for the federal Post-Employment Services Demonstration, staff worked on ways to keep people who were temporarily excused from the program attached to it; see Toby Herr, Robert Halpern, and Suzanne L. Wagner, *Something Old, Something New: A Case Study of the Post-Employment Services Demonstration in Oregon* (Chicago: Project Match/Erikson Institute, November 1995).

broad range of content areas, types of coursework, and kinds of credentials. Voc ed is the term used to describe everything from a three-month bank tellers' course to a six-month machinist training program to an associate's degree program in data processing. Furthermore, some voc ed programs are at the secondary level, while others are at the post-secondary level. The characteristics that bind these diverse programs together are that they all prepare people for a specific industry or occupation and they all combine classroom instruction with hands-on learning.

The incredible variety in voc ed makes it hard to generalize about its effectiveness as a work-prep activity for welfare recipients, but there are other reasons as well why we have little hard evidence about it. First, in evaluations of welfare-to-work programs, voc ed is often lumped with other of the lesser-used components in data analysis, which makes it impossible to isolate its particular outcomes. Second, most welfare-to-work programs "mainstream" participants who want voc ed – that is, they send them to local training programs open to the general community – and those programs tend not to keep separate statistics on welfare recipients. Thus, we may know that a specific program has good completion and employment rates, but it is not easy to figure out whether welfare recipients help account for those rates.

Nonetheless, we do have some information on voc ed that can help us in designing programs. First, when surveyed, JOBS participants favored skills training over basic education by a wide margin.¹⁴ Based on our experience at Project Match, this preference stems from a variety of characteristics that make voc ed more appealing than basic education: people like the hands-on learning; they can choose an area of study that matches their interests and aptitudes; and the material seems relevant to the world of work. Another desirable feature of voc ed is that there is some choice in terms of length of the program. As mentioned above, programs can vary from a couple of months to a couple of years. At Project Match, we have found that short-term programs are particularly appealing to participants because the end is in sight from the beginning and the demands are manageable. The New Chance evaluation also found short-term training to be a promising alternative. In the demonstration, women who earned a GED were encouraged to go on to post-secondary education; the researchers found that "for students who are less academically able, or who may lack the supports or the stamina needed to complete a two-year college program, a relatively short-term vocational training program lasting from three months to a year may be a better option."¹⁵ Some of the most successful voc ed programs in the country are relatively short-term: for example, at the Center for

¹⁴See Hamilton and Brock, *The JOBS Evaluation*.

¹⁵Quint and Musick, *Lives of Promise, Lives of Pain*, p. 75.

Employment Training (CET) in San Jose, California, the training courses average six months.¹⁶ Short-term programs are also desirable under TANF because there is a limit on how long a person can be in training and still be counted toward the federal participation rate.

While voc ed has many characteristics that make it both attractive to and appropriate for welfare-to-work participants, it still isn't the perfect activity for everyone. At Project Match, while more participants have completed voc ed programs than GED classes, many still dropped out before finishing. We think a major reason for this is that despite its positive characteristics, voc ed is still *school*: participants must have the discipline to get to class regularly and on time and to do homework and study for exams; people also lose patience because even in the shorter programs there aren't immediate, tangible rewards like a paycheck to sustain motivation.

In a U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) study of training programs deemed to be successful, the researchers tried to identify features common to all the programs that contribute to their success and one of these features was "ensuring that participants are committed to training and getting a job."¹⁷ At many of these programs, staff felt that people are more likely to be committed if they choose to enroll, yet they also recognized that this alone is not enough to ensure commitment. In an effort to reduce dropout rates, these programs implemented initial assessment and orientation activities that test participants' commitment to stick with their training, particularly by emphasizing the expectations for participants in terms of attendance, attitude, and other behaviors. The goal of these activities is to encourage people to screen themselves out before actually enrolling in the program. These strategies might limit the use of training, but they do make completion of training more likely and assure more careful use of public resources.

An important question for administrators to consider is the point at which vocational education should be made available to people. As noted above, in many JOBS programs the first step for people who weren't job-ready was basic education; for people who did voc ed, it usually came after getting a GED. To a large extent, this sequence of activities developed because many voc ed programs require people to have a GED or high school diploma to enroll. There are now voc ed programs, however, that "break" the sequence by integrating remedial education into skills training – the CET program is a good example – and welfare-to-work staff should put programs like these high on their list, since they provide an educational alternative for people who do not want basic education or have failed in it. Also, given the restrictions on

¹⁶The CET program in San Jose is discussed in John Burghardt et al., *Evaluation of the Minority Female Single Parent Demonstration*, vol. 1, Summary Report (New York: Rockefeller Foundation, 1992).

¹⁷U.S. General Accounting Office, *Employment Training: Successful Projects Share Common Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, May 1996), p. 9.

the use of basic ed under TANF, CET-type programs may be the most sensible educational alternative.

The Dangers of Predetermined Sequences

Ideas about sequencing are very ingrained and go beyond the issues associated with vocational education. In most welfare-to-work programs, the sequence of activities is predetermined. This is true whether it is a human capital development program or a labor force attachment program – the only difference is the particular sequence. Though theories about how people are most likely to move into the labor force have played a role in the development of certain sequences, the practice has emerged also because it is easier to administer a program if the sequence is set in advance.

There are two dangers to predetermined sequences, however. The first is that they do not allow for employability plans to be customized. In Project Match's experience, welfare recipients take many different pathways into the labor force; it is impossible to establish one or two pathways and expect everyone to move along them.¹⁸ If people are assigned to a sequence that at some point is not appropriate, they are likely to get stuck in it and to stop making progress. In the New Chance program, for example, all enrollees were expected to participate in the same activities in the same sequence: first, basic skills education and GED preparation; when participants passed the GED exam, they could then go on to such activities as job skills training, college, work internships, and job placement assistance. This tight sequence proved problematic, since many participants did not pass the GED exam and thus never were able to move on to other activities from which they might have benefited. Many of the young women in New Chance either just got stuck in a GED class or got frustrated and dropped out of the program entirely. Even though staff were allowed to let participants move on to other activities if they hadn't passed the GED exam by their fifth month in the program, they tended to encourage people to keep trying.¹⁹ Many of these young women might have been more successful in training programs or work internships. Some of them may even have been happy to try their hand at regular jobs. But the sequencing of New Chance did not give them a chance to find a better match and make progress along a different pathway. As the researchers themselves noted, "The sequential arrangement of services at most sites meant that many non-GED earners, and some GED earners as well, did not move on to skills training or a work

¹⁸See Toby Herr and Robert Halpern, *Changing What Counts: Re-thinking the Journey Out of Welfare* (Chicago: Project Match/Erikson Institute, April 1991).

¹⁹In any case, five months is probably too long to let someone sit in a GED class; in the GAIN evaluation, people who earned a GED did so within 3.5 months. See Martinson and Friedlander, *GAIN: Basic Education*.

internship.”²⁰ Though New Chance is probably one of the most extreme examples of rigid sequencing, it illustrates a problem common to almost all welfare-to-work programs to some degree.

Another danger of sequencing is that it causes program staff to take transitions for granted. As noted above, transitions are critical points in welfare-to-work programs; providing assistance that is both substantive and timely is essential to an effective intervention. Yet when sequences are predetermined and staff know what the next activity is supposed to be, they tend to pay less attention to making sure that the transition is successful – they somehow assume that because the sequence is established the transition is guaranteed. If activity sequences are not predetermined, though, staff are more likely to pay attention to transitions and provide adequate support.

Of course, some degree of sequencing will occur in any program, since there are always goals for participants that will dictate at least the first step in a program. In a work-first program, for example, all participants go into job search upon enrollment. People who don’t find employment are then assigned to a work-prep activity, and it is at this point that rigid sequencing should be avoided. Participants will not be job-ready for a variety of reasons and their next step should be geared toward their interests, needs, and circumstances. And the step after that should not be decided upon before the previous one is even taken – that is, only as a participant makes progress or stalls in an activity should the next activity in the sequence be considered. Decisions about activities should be based on the *current* status of individuals, not on their status at some previous point in the program that was perhaps months earlier. Program administrators and staff in work-first programs may want participants to test the labor market regularly by sending them back into job search at discrete intervals, or by having people combine job search with a work-prep activity, but what people do in between job search attempts or alongside them should not be dictated by a predetermined sequence.

OJT, Work Supplementation, and CWEP: Three Little-Used Work-Prep Activities

The three activities in JOBS that were most “worklike” were on-the-job training (OJT), work supplementation (also known as grant diversion), and community work experience (CWEP), and this quality made it seem as if they would be particularly effective as work prep. Each of these activities uses a real job site as the environment for learning; the participant is given the opportunity both for hands-on experience and for observation of and interaction with “regular” employees. The chance to have contact with people who have succeeded in the workforce is an

²⁰See Quint et al., *New Chance: Interim Findings*, p. xlvi.

important element of these activities that sets them apart from education and skills training. In OJT and work sup, participants actually receive a paycheck from their employer; they may also get a partial grant, depending on their wages. CWEP is a bit less like real work in that participants still receive a full grant and are not paid by the employer.

Despite the apparent appropriateness of OJT, work sup, and CWEP as work-prep activities, they were used very little in JOBS programs. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, less than 0.5 percent of JOBS participants were in OJT, on average, each month in 1992; less than 0.5 percent were in work supplementation; and only about 4 percent were in CWEP.²¹ There are several reasons for the underutilization of these activities, including the heavy administrative requirements of creating and monitoring placements and a lack of interest among employers in providing placements. Some states also cited financial reasons for staying away from these activities.²²

Problems of implementation and administration aside, it is not clear that OJT and work sup should play a larger role as work-prep activities. Experience has shown that OJT and work sup positions, which are usually provided by private employers, are often inappropriate for welfare recipients who aren't job-ready – the qualifications and expectations are just too high.²³ In other words, the fact that the activities are so much like real work is in fact a drawback – they are too big a step for many. Further, if a participant does qualify for a position, she is probably ready for unsubsidized employment and should be receiving more, or better, job search and job development assistance.

CWEP, on the other hand, seems to have more potential as a work-prep activity. The positions are usually provided not by private employers but by public agencies and nonprofit organizations, which tend to be more amenable to making them suitable for people who are not ready for regular employment; thus, CWEP positions are more likely to be developmental stepping-stones to the real world of work. Despite its potential, however, CWEP has often *not*

²¹Cited in Hagen and Lurie, *Implementing JOBS*, p. 93.

²²For more detailed discussions on the limited use of these three activities in JOBS, see *ibid.*, as well as U.S. General Accounting Office, *Welfare to Work: Most AFDC Training Programs Not Emphasizing Job Placement* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, May 1995).

Despite the well-documented problems with OJT, work sup, and CWEP, many state welfare reform proposals include a substantial expansion of the use of these activities. In Wisconsin's W-2 program, for example, all welfare recipients who cannot find unsubsidized employment will be sent into OJT/work sup (known in the state as "trial jobs") or CWEP (known as "community service jobs," or CSJs). Administrators and program designers in Wisconsin have identified many of the barriers to successful implementation of these components; although it is unclear whether their solutions will work (Wisconsin has not yet fully implemented its new program), this will be an important intervention to follow.

²³See Hagen and Lurie, *Implementing JOBS*. Also, in U.S. General Accounting Office, *Welfare to Work*, program administrators told the authors that they often selected "their most capable participants for work activities" because employers did not want to take on welfare recipients who were "unprepared for work" (p. 45).

served as a stepping-stone to unsubsidized employment.²⁴ In our opinion, one reason for this is that CWEP usually is not immediately followed by high-quality job search assistance/job development (this problem will be discussed at length below, under “Job Search”). Another important reason is insufficient monitoring after placement, a significant administrative problem.

The Importance of Monitoring Progress

One study reported that monitoring in CWEP is rarely more than a review of attendance forms or times sheets submitted by employers. In fact, program staff might never have contact with participants during a CWEP placement.²⁵ Thus, staff never know if a placement is appropriate and if the welfare recipient continues to make progress over time.

Under JOBS, most CWEP placements lasted six months and sometimes were extended to nine. Once a person was assigned to a placement, her status usually was not reassessed until the six-month point, unless the participant dropped out or had significant complaints or was so troublesome that the employer contacted JOBS staff. (Although we have not seen any figures on this latter scenario, it seems safe to say that it happened very rarely; employers and supervisors always knew that a placement was temporary, so they were usually willing simply to wait out a bad situation.) Thus, people could easily get stuck in placements that weren't suitable or productive, and six months is a long time to let such a situation go on.

Frequent substantive monitoring increases the responsibilities of program staff and therefore has implications for caseload size, yet it is an important issue to consider. It can be just as bad for a person to be stuck in an activity that isn't working, whether it's CWEP or basic ed or something else, as it is to be stuck in a holding pattern between activities – in either case, the welfare recipient ends up wasting time. And in a time-limited system, every month is important and shouldn't be wasted.

Job-Readiness Activities: A Component with an Identity Crisis

In welfare-to-work programs, job-readiness activities are often combined with other activities, particularly job search. They are almost always offered as a group activity and in a classroom format. The federal JOBS regulations stipulated that these activities should “help prepare participants for work by assuring that participants are familiar with general workplace

²⁴See Thomas Brock, David Butler, and David Long, *Unpaid Work Experience for Welfare Recipients: Findings and Lessons from MDRC Research* (New York: MDRC, September 1993).

²⁵Ibid. Brock, Butler, and Long looked at CWEP in welfare-to-work programs before JOBS, but practices concerning CWEP did not really change under JOBS.

expectations and exhibit work behavior and attitudes necessary to compete successfully in the labor market.”²⁶ In many cases, however, job-readiness classes go beyond this employment focus to include activities that are more usually thought of as life skills training: in many job-readiness classes, for example, activities range from practicing interview techniques to learning how to balance a checkbook to building self-esteem.

In some programs, job-readiness/life skills activities are offered as a stand-alone component instead of being combined with another one. In these cases, the activities often become either more or less employment-focused than is typical. In programs that are geared toward hard-to-serve welfare recipients, for example, job-readiness/life skills often becomes less employment-focused – that is, the job-readiness aspect diminishes. In a review of eight such programs by the Urban Institute, the authors noted that a job-readiness/life skills course frequently serves as the first formal activity for participants. These courses are intended to “help recipients increase their self-esteem, become aware of the education, training and other program options available to them, develop realistic goals and begin to identify for themselves the issues in their lives that may impede their progress towards self-sufficiency.”²⁷ This type of job-readiness/life skills begins to look very much like a support group; indeed, the authors of the report indicated that a specific intent of these activities is to “develop support systems for recipients among their peers” as well as “a trusting relationship with program staff.”²⁸ And sometimes the activity even takes on an assessment function by helping staff identify people in need of more intensive services.

In contrast, there are some programs, usually private ones, in which the job-readiness/life skills component is supposed to mimic the real world of work. Thus, in these programs the life skills aspect diminishes. One such program, STRIVE (Support and Training Result in Valuable Employees), has an initial job-readiness/life skills component that “focuses on the behaviors needed for successful employment – such as punctuality, the spirit of cooperation, and the ability to take constructive criticism, and the attitudes that sometimes impede these behaviors.”²⁹ At times, the component can take on an almost boot camp-like quality: in its annual report, the Chicago STRIVE program describes its job-readiness/life skills training as “rigorous” and “a combination of confrontation and support.”³⁰ One training specialist for this program has said, “A lot of people feel our programs are required to keep you and deal with your mess. But there’s only so far you can go with somebody. If they’re late, they get warned,

²⁶45 CFR 250.44(c).

²⁷LaDonna Pavetti et al., *Designing Family-Centered Welfare-to-Work Programs: Lessons from the Field*, draft (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, April 1996), p. I-9.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹U.S. General Accounting Office, *Employment Training*, p. 36.

³⁰STRIVE/Chicago Employment Service 1993 annual report.

then terminated. The STRIVE program works the same way as a job. . . . We don't hold hands, and we expect people to behave like adults."³¹ One of the consequences of this type of approach is that it weeds out anyone who isn't pretty job-ready to begin with; thus, like the more support group-like version of job-readiness/life skills, the component can serve an assessment function. Approaches like STRIVE's do result in better program outcomes; on the other hand, such an approach means that the program doesn't really grapple with the problem of how to teach job-readiness skills and behaviors to the people who most lack them. In private programs, this isn't really a problem, since they can choose to serve only the most job-ready if they wish, but in a state system it is a problem, since staff must find ways to help everyone prepare for work, from the most to the least job-ready. As one life skills instructor said, if the welfare-to-work program for which he worked "adhered strictly to its stated policy of allowing no more than three unexcused absences and five unexcused latenesses during the first ten weeks of class, 'we'd lose just about everyone in the class.'"³²

Given the various forms that job-readiness/life skills can take, and the different functions the component can serve, program designers need to be careful if they decide to include it. Many people tend to think that job-readiness/life skills is pretty much the same from place to place, but as this discussion has shown, this isn't true. Program designers will need to specify what form of job-readiness/life skills they want to include, and this will depend on the program's goals and the characteristics of the people served. In the end, if a program is serving a large and diverse population, program designers may decide to use several forms of job-readiness/life skills at different points in the program: perhaps one like STRIVE's in the beginning to help sort the job-ready from those who aren't, and another one later on for people who prove to be hard to serve that is more supportive and focuses on more personal and psychological issues.

The Twenty-Hour Conundrum

One of the skills that many welfare recipients who aren't job-ready need to develop is the ability to adhere to a schedule. Program after program has found that participants have problems with tardiness and absenteeism: many people cannot get to a designated place at a designated time on designated days. And as obvious as it may sound, if people can't get to an activity, they will never be able to benefit from it.

But how do you "teach" such a skill, particularly in a classroom and over a short period of time, as welfare-to-work programs try to do in job-readiness/life skills courses? As the

³¹Harold Henderson, "Get a Job: Levon Calhoun's Class of Hard Knocks," *Reader* 24 (May 19, 1995): 19.

³²Ken Auletta, *The Underclass* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 65.

sociologist William Julius Wilson has pointed out, the acquisition of skills like knowing how to keep to a schedule grows out of experiences that people have in families and in communities over the course of a lifetime:

The patterns of behavior that are associated with a life of casual work (tardiness and absenteeism) are quite different from those that accompany a life of regular or steady work (e.g., the habit of waking up early in the morning to a ringing alarm clock). In neighborhoods in which nearly every family has at least one person who is steadily employed, the norms and behavior patterns that emanate from a life of regularized employment become part of the community gestalt.³³

Project Match has always been skeptical that learning how to adhere to a schedule and many other life skills can be taught through a job-readiness course. As will be discussed in Section III of this paper, we have created a series of developmental activities geared toward the acquisition of just such skills. One of the important findings from Project Match's experience that led to the creation of these activities is that along with not being able to keep to a schedule, participants who are not job-ready often cannot handle as big a time commitment as twenty hours per week. In order to make it easier to meet federal participation requirements, states scheduled most JOBS activities for at least twenty hours a week (and we are concerned that this trend will continue under the new welfare legislation). In a report on the implementation of JOBS, however, one field associate said:

The more motivated clients are better able to cope with the 20-hour requirement than persons who have either less motivation or more serious problems in their personal lives. Persons with serious problems tend to lose out on JOBS services because they lack the ability or the motivation to receive the level of intensity imposed by the 20-hour rule.³⁴

Thus, a key to designing activities *for the less job-ready* may be to be more flexible about the required hours of participation, to start at a point that is manageable for the participant and then to build gradually. As will be described in Section III, Project Match's activities for people who aren't ready for education, training, or employment have been designed this way.

Programs may want to consider scheduling other types of activities for less than twenty hours a week as well. In MDRC's evaluation of GAIN, for example, it was found that basic education participants, on average, attended classes only ten hours per week, and this was as true for people who passed the GED exam as for those who didn't.³⁵ In other words, people who did not earn a GED did not seem able to handle more than ten hours a week, and those who did earn one could do it in less than twenty. Thus, a twenty-hour GED class does not

³³William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 60-61.

³⁴Hagen and Lurie, *Implementing JOBS*, p. 126.

³⁵Martinson and Friedlander, *GAIN: Basic Education*.

seem to be a good use of resources or time. It may be more productive and cost-effective to schedule individual activities for fewer than twenty hours a week and to let people combine two or more. A person in a ten-hour-a-week GED course, for example, could combine it with ten hours of job search per week. This was possible under JOBS, of course, except that many states found combining cumbersome when calculating participation rates and thus avoided it whenever possible. In the end, however, it may have been more sensible to find an administrative solution than to keep insisting on twenty-hour activities. Under TANF, there is still the flexibility to combine hours in different activities when calculating participation rates; thus, the lessons we learned from JOBS about scheduling and combining should not be forgotten as states begin to create their new welfare-to-work programs, particularly given the steep federal participation rates – if states let people combine activities, they will probably have an easier time meeting the rates.

Job Search: For Better Results, Add Job Development

Given the fact that the ultimate goal of welfare-to-work programs is to help people get into the labor market, it is perhaps a bit surprising that job search was one of the *optional* components for states to provide under JOBS, along with on-the-job training, work supplementation, and CWEP (states had to provide only two of these four components). States recognized the central importance of job search, however, and in practice it became one of the primary activities in their programs – most participants were likely to be assigned to job search at least once while in JOBS.

At a conceptual level, job search is fundamentally different from other welfare-to-work activities in that its goal is not to move a person *toward* work but instead to actually move that person *into* work. In other words, job search is not work prep, it's the "real thing" – participants contact employers, go on interviews, and wait anxiously to learn if they've been hired. Job search is *the* activity that signals the actual transition from welfare to work.

Job search can be used at many points in a welfare-to-work program and thus can serve several different functions. Sometimes it is used *before* people enter a program: that is, in some places new welfare applicants are required to engage in job search while their eligibility is being determined, in the hope that they will find work and be "diverted" from becoming a welfare recipient. Other programs use job search as an assessment device for new participants: success or failure in job search is the way to learn whether a person is job-ready or not. And in programs that use formal assessments for new participants, job search may be the first activity

for people who are determined to be job-ready. It is also usually the activity that follows completion of other components, such as basic education, skills training, or CWEP.³⁶

Besides its several functions, job search can also take several different forms. Some programs rely on individual job search, which can be supervised to varying degrees or may even be virtually unsupervised. In certain programs, for example, participants are expected simply to contact a certain number of employers each month, to log their contacts, and to submit their log sheets to their caseworker, and they are given virtually no assistance from staff or access to resources that might help them find a job. Other programs rely on group job search, which tends to be more structured, although it can be more or less group-oriented: in some programs, people may come together as a cohort but may engage mostly in individual activities within the group, like calling potential employers from a phone bank at the program office; in contrast, other programs take advantage of the group dynamics and participants do things like share job leads and provide mutual support. When job search is done as a group activity, it is often merged with job-readiness activities and called “job club.”

So what works best? One lesson that has emerged from program evaluations is that unsupervised independent job search is less effective than either group job search or individual job search that includes intensive monitoring and support services.³⁷ Though this finding is hardly surprising, given the nature of unsupervised independent job search, it is not good news for program administrators, since this is the least expensive form of job search.

Another lesson that has emerged is that job development may play an important role in making job search successful. In the evaluation of California’s GAIN program, Riverside was the site with the largest and most consistent impacts on employment, and one of the things that Riverside did differently from other counties in the state was intensive job development. In his book *Improving the Productivity of JOBS Programs*, the program and policy analyst Eugene Bardach describes job development as

(1) persuading employers to look more favorably on JOBS clients than they might have done otherwise, and (2) facilitating a client’s access to the head of a particular employer’s applicant queue. . . . Successful job development requires learning the needs of the employer community, working hard at satisfying them, and drumming up contacts with entrepreneurial vigor, such as calling your mother-in-law’s bridge partners if you think job leads may be found there.³⁸

³⁶In *Implementing JOBS*, Hagen and Lurie outline the different functions of job search (see p. 102).

³⁷This lesson was derived from a comparison of the impacts of a number of pre-JOBS programs that included job search of one sort or another among their activities. See Judith M. Gueron and Edward Pauly, *From Welfare to Work* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991).

³⁸Eugene Bardach, *Improving the Productivity of JOBS Programs* (New York: MDRC, December 1993), pp. 20-21.

Although the GAIN evaluators cautioned that the success of Riverside was probably attributable to several factors in combination, they concluded that the county's strong use of job development played a significant role.³⁹

What the Riverside findings pointed up was that very few JOBS programs, in California or elsewhere, were doing job development, which is rather curious, since it was one of the components required by the JOBS regulations, along with basic education, job skills training, and job-readiness activities. Despite this fact, there did not seem to be any pressure for states to provide the service. This may have been due to the fact that federal funding for state JOBS programs was dependent in large part on states' meeting a designated participation rate. Job development activities are performed by program staff, however, and thus didn't help states meet this rate. Further, there was no incentive in the federal funding structure for job placement; in fact, states were not even required to report the number of JOBS participants who found employment each year. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that job development was a component that received little attention in most states, particularly where resources were tight. But what the Riverside experience showed is that job search and job development are really two sides of the same coin and they probably should not be thought of as separate components. Unless this sort of approach is taken in welfare-to-work programs, other activities may be of little value: that is, even if a skills training component has a fabulous curriculum and most participants successfully complete it, if it is not linked to strong job search/job development, its effectiveness as a welfare-to-work activity will be diminished.⁴⁰

The Potential of Combining Job Search with Other Activities

A solid job search component in which job development plays a prominent role is essential to any welfare-to-work program, but it's not just the component itself that's important, but when it's available. As mentioned above, job search is offered at many different points in welfare-to-work programs; however, it's rarely *combined* with other activities, except for job-readiness. This occurs for several reasons. First, as mentioned above, because most activities are scheduled for twenty hours a week, it is hard to do more than one at a time. Second, because welfare-to-work programs tend to be organized in a linear, sequential fashion, both

³⁹See Riccio, Friedlander, and Freedman, *GAIN: Benefits, Costs, and Three-Year Impacts*.

⁴⁰Many of the studies we have cited in our discussion of the standard welfare-to-work activities reported modest or no labor market impacts for specific activities: for example, as we noted, in Brock, Butler, and Long, *Unpaid Work Experience*, the researchers found that CWEP generally did not increase employment rates. In the programs studied, however, it does not appear that CWEP was combined with the type of high-quality job search/job development that we recommend. If it had been, CWEP may very well have looked like a more effective welfare-to-work activity. This would probably be the case for other activities, too, such as basic ed and skills training.

participants and staff usually think in terms of completing one component before starting another: for example, a person in a basic education component usually is not expected to start job search until she successfully completes basic ed or drops out. And even then she may not enter job search immediately, since, as discussed above, transitions from one component to another often are not smooth and quick. One of the consequences of these circumstances is that the overarching goal of welfare-to-work programs – employment – often fades from the minds of both participants and staff. To reinforce this goal, it may be helpful to set up job search so that people always do it in conjunction with other activities.

By having people combine job search with other work-prep activities, a program increases the chances that participants will become employed. To a certain degree, people become employed when a number of circumstances are right – when they feel confident and motivated to find work, when the right job comes along, when there aren't problems at home with children, and so on – and the moment when all these circumstances are right just may not occur during a three-week or even two-month job search component. A program should be prepared to “catch” the moment by making job search an ongoing activity while people participate in other components. Besides, the ability to combine job search with other activities is an important skill to foster: when welfare recipients do enter the labor market, they usually have to change jobs several times to find a good match and raise their earnings, and welfare-to-work programs should help them learn how to look for a job while doing other things – the last thing we want to do is make people think they have to quit their job in order to look for another.

Drawing Conclusions: A Table of Activity and System Characteristics

In this section, we considered the effectiveness of the work-prep activities that are the building blocks of most welfare-to-work programs: basic education, job skills training, on-the-job training, work supplementation, community work experience, job-readiness activities, and job search. In order to help the reader make sense of the large amount of information and many ideas presented, we have isolated what we consider to be the most important characteristics of both the activities themselves and the system in which they are embedded. These characteristics are presented in Table 1 and we have mapped where each activity falls among them. This allows the reader not only to pinpoint the characteristics that seem to be associated with more effective activities, but also to see where the standard activities cluster together and where they diverge. And as later sections of the paper will demonstrate, the table can be used to figure out how to “re-form” activities to make them more effective and also to create new activities so that there is “something for everyone.” But first we will briefly discuss

Table 1

**The Prevailing System:
Characteristics of Activities
and of the System**

	<i>Basic Education</i>	<i>Job Skills Training</i>	<i>On-the-Job Training</i>	<i>Work Supplementation</i>	<i>Community Work Experience</i>	<i>Job-Readiness Activities</i>	<i>Job Search</i>
ACTIVITY CHARACTERISTICS							
Format of Activity							
Individual			X	X	X		X
Group	X	X				X	X
Learning Approach of Activity							
Classroom	X	X				X	
Experiential		X	X	X	X		X
Variety of Options Within Activity							
High							
Medium		X	X	X	X		X
Low	X					X	
Reward Structure of Activity							
Tangibility of Primary Reward							
Concrete	X	X	X	X			X
Abstract					X	X	
Timing of Primary Reward							
Immediate			X	X			
Near Future	X	X					
Distant Future	X	X					
Unpredictable					X	X	X
Risk of Failure							
High	X						X
Medium		X	X	X		X	
Low					X	X	

SYSTEM CHARACTERISTICS

Flexibility Around Scheduling Hours in Activity							
High							
Low	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Flexibility Around Duration of Activity							
High							
Low	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Flexibility Around Sequencing of Activity							
High							
Low	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Flexibility Around Combining with Other Activities							
High							
Low	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Attention to Transitions							
High							
Low	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

each of the characteristics in the table, so that the reader will have a firm foundation for the sections that follow.

Thinking of Activities in Terms of Their Characteristics

We have isolated four characteristics of the activities themselves that seem particularly important: (1) the format of the activity, (2) the learning approach, (3) the variety of options within the activity, and (4) the activity's reward structure. By ***format of the activity***, we mean whether an activity is an individual or group experience. As Table 1 indicates, in the prevailing system most of the activities are either one or the other format. In some cases, the format is inherent in the activity itself: for example, community work experience is an individual activity by nature; it would be quite difficult to turn it into a group activity. In other cases, the format of the activity could be either individual or group, but in the prevailing system it is set up only one way: this is the case, for example, with basic education, which is pretty much always a group activity in government welfare-to-work programs. As the table indicates, only job search can be found regularly in both an individual and group format. On looking at the table, it is clear that not all "good" activities fall into one or the other format, nor do all "bad" activities: for example, basic ed, a group activity, has a very high failure rate, while job skills training, also a group activity, is often more successful. What the table can help us see, though, is that for activities that aren't working in one format, there is another format that may hold more potential, as long as there is a way to structure the activity in that other format.

In the prevailing system, the format of an activity tends to be closely associated with the activity's ***learning approach***, the second characteristic in Table 1: group activities tend to use a classroom learning approach, while individual activities usually focus on experiential learning. Job skills training is the only work-prep activity in the table that includes both classroom and experiential learning. As our discussion of the standard work-prep activities made clear, most welfare recipients favor experiential learning, often because classroom learning reminds them of previous school failures.

The third characteristic in Table 1 is the ***variety of options within an activity***. In job skills training, for example, participants usually have a choice of fields of study once they enter the activity, while in basic ed the course of study is fixed. Participants in CWEP usually have some choice, although that choice may be constrained by a lack of positions. We concluded above that the more choice there is within an activity, the more likely it is that participants will be able to find a match for their interests and aptitudes and therefore the more likely it is that the activity will be effective. As the table indicates, however, all the standard work-prep activities fall into the medium-to-low range when it comes to a variety of options.

The fourth characteristic is the ***reward structure of an activity***. The concept of rewards is related to the question of what motivates people to persist in doing things that are not usually inherently pleasurable and may at times be very difficult: in other words, the reward structure of an activity is likely to play an important role in its effectiveness. Of course, there can be different levels of reward associated with an activity, but in this discussion we are interested with the primary intended reward.⁴¹

There are three interrelated subcharacteristics of the reward structure: (1) the tangibility of the primary reward, (2) the timing of that reward, and (3) the risk of failure in the activity. By “tangibility,” we mean whether a reward is concrete or abstract: for example, people in OJT or work sup receive the concrete reward of a paycheck; people in education or training receive the concrete reward of a credential, although a credential begins to border on the abstract – that is, the value of a credential is not so immediately obvious as the value of a check. People in CWEP don’t get a paycheck, nor do they earn a credential or any other tangible reward; their rewards are more likely to be something along the lines of positive feedback from a supervisor. Of course, it’s not as if people in school or OJT or work sup may not also get positive feedback or some other less tangible reward; it’s just that in CWEP these abstract rewards end up being the *primary* ones, as they also are in job-readiness activities. In contrast, in job search the reward for doing well is extremely tangible: it’s a job.

An important point to remember is that when rewards are concrete, they tend to be standardized and socially recognized – they tend to have an “officialness” that can increase their value. Abstract rewards, on the other hand, tend to be unstandardized and personalized; thus, they may not have meaning to anyone but the person receiving them, and even that person may not recognize them as valuable. In many cases, abstract rewards are dependent, say, on the quality of the relationship between a participant and supervisor or teacher, or on the ability of the participant to internalize something as intangible as positive feedback as a reward. Relatedly, the timing of abstract rewards is usually unpredictable; in fact, there is the risk that a person might never receive one. Thus, an activity whose primary rewards are abstract may feel to some people as if it has no rewards. In these cases, it may be important to the success of the activity to create a new reward structure that incorporates concrete rewards or transforms the abstract rewards into concrete ones.

Unlike abstract rewards, the timing of concrete rewards is usually predictable, though it can vary: these rewards may be immediate, in the near future, or in the distant future. As our

⁴¹In this paper, we do not consider a grant check to be a reward, even though a grant can be reduced or in some cases completely terminated for failure to meet basic expectations in welfare-to-work programs, such as attendance. But because this possible loss is relevant to all work-prep activities, we consider it a fundamental characteristic of welfare-to-work programs and not part of the particular reward structure of individual activities.

discussion of the standard welfare-to-work activities pointed out, it is often hard for people to sustain motivation when there is no immediate reward. If there does have to be a lag, it is often better to choose an activity that can give rewards in the near future as opposed to the distant future: for example, as mentioned above, people find it easier to stick with short-term training programs than ones that are long-term.

The third and final dimension of the reward structure is the risk of failure in an activity. As we discussed in the critique of individual activities, when people fail in activities, it can have tremendous consequences for their ability to stay hopeful and motivated. This is particularly true of people who have a history of failure, which is the case for many welfare recipients. Therefore, it is important for program staff to understand which activities are likely to result in failure and to measure that risk against the strengths and limitations of the participant. Staff may have to start some participants in low-risk activities to help build confidence or they may have to find ways to help people in high-risk activities cope with failure and turn it around.

In Table 1, the risk of failure in an activity can be high, medium, or low. Basic education, for example, carries a high risk of failure: as discussed earlier, most people who enter the activity do not successfully complete it. Job skills training, however, carries a lower risk of failure than basic ed, since there is a greater variety of programs from which to choose – whether in terms of course of study, degree of academic difficulty, or length of the program. This variety increases the possibility of success because there is a greater chance to make a good match between a program and a participant. Nevertheless, many welfare recipients still drop out of voc ed programs, particularly the long-term ones, so we rate it a medium in terms of risk of failure.

Our critique of the individual activities also explained why OJT and work sup get a medium rating here: they tend to be too big a step for most welfare recipients who are not job-ready – they are too much like a real job. They don't get a high rating in terms of risk of failure, though, because most employers are willing to wait out a placement rather than fire a participant. Thus, the risk of failure is reduced, although not being hired on as a regular employee at the end of a placement can also be interpreted as failing. CWEP, in contrast, is a low-risk activity, primarily because the expectations are lower than for OJT or work sup participants. CWEP is geared more toward people who have few skills and little work experience and the positions tend to be more flexible and supervisors a bit more understanding.

Job-readiness activities fall in the medium-to-low category: when the activities are geared more toward being supportive and helping participants to build self-esteem and the like, there is no real way to fail, but when the activities are more employment-oriented and even boot camp-like, a participant can fail simply by being late too many times. As we discussed earlier,

welfare recipients who aren't fairly job-ready to begin with are likely to fail in the more rigorous job-readiness activities.

And finally there is job search, an activity that carries a high risk of failure – even highly qualified job seekers can have trouble finding employment these days. If more programs were to undertake intensive job development, however, and also made it easy to combine job search with other activities, we believe more people would be successful in this activity and the risk of failure would decline somewhat.

On considering the reward structure of each activity, it becomes evident that when an activity is closer to “real life,” the risk of failure is higher. The risk of failure in job search, for example, is higher than the risk of failure in job-readiness activities. Relatedly, the *cost* of failure is greater in real-life activities: the stakes are higher in job search than in job-readiness activities and the sting of failure sharper. What also becomes evident from the table, however, is that there are few activities in which the risk of failure is low. In other words, there are few alternatives for people who are not ready to assume significant psychological risks and who need to start in activities where failure is less likely and also of less consequence.

Thinking of Activities in Terms of the Characteristics of the System

The first four characteristics in the table – those we just discussed – are characteristics of the activities themselves; in contrast, the remaining characteristics in Table 1 apply to the system in which activities are embedded and are the result of administrative policies and general program structures. The five system characteristics we've isolated as being most important are (1) flexibility around scheduling hours per week in an activity, (2) flexibility around duration of an activity, (3) flexibility around sequencing of an activity, (4) flexibility around combining an activity with others, and (5) attention to transitions. These characteristics were all discussed at length earlier in this section, in the critique of individual activities. Flexibility around scheduling, for example, captures the fact that some people may do better starting at five or ten hours per week in an activity than at twenty, while attention to transitions is relevant to the dangers of leaving people in holding patterns and also to the importance of choosing the next activity carefully. For the most part, these characteristics relate to the capacity of welfare-to-work programs to be responsive to individuals' strengths and limitations and to their different rates of progress. In other words, they relate to a program's ability to customize activities and services.

As is evident in Table 1, however, the prevailing system is extremely limited in its ability to customize: the system characteristics get a “low” rating across the board. What the prevailing system gives us is a one-size-fits-all approach to moving from welfare to work; it favors

uniformity and standardization above most everything else, and although uniformity and standardization simplify program operations, they are not an effective strategy for handling diversity among welfare recipients, much less for discovering new ways to help people make an effective transition to the labor force.

What is interesting about the system characteristics is that they are highly interrelated: once you lose flexibility in one area, you tend to lose it in others, too. If you schedule every activity for twenty hours a week, for example, it makes it difficult to combine two or more activities. Or another example: as mentioned above, when activity sequences are predetermined, staff pay little attention to transitions, since they think of them as being automatic. In the ideal welfare-to-work program, each system characteristic would get a “high” rating: there would be a great deal of flexibility around scheduling, duration, sequencing, and combining of activities and also a lot of attention to transitions. And as the next section will show, such a high-flexibility system may be more important for helping people move toward stable employment than tinkering with the characteristics of the activities themselves.

Section II

A Different Approach to Work Prep: Project Match's Experience as a High-Flexibility Program

Back in 1985, when Project Match opened its doors, the program differed from government welfare-to-work initiatives around two key characteristics in Table 1: first, the program believed that attention to transitions was the key to helping people and, second, it had no strict policy about the sequencing of activities. The attention to transitions developed from observing that many welfare recipients – whether successful in an activity or not – had trouble figuring out what the next step should be. And even when the next step was clear, many had trouble getting there, particularly in a speedy fashion. Many people seemed to lose momentum and direction in those in-between spaces.

The policy regarding sequencing developed mainly because the program was anxious to learn the natural pathways by which people leave welfare. By “natural pathways” we mean the activities in which people engage *of their own volition* and *not necessarily with the conscious aim of leaving welfare*; the way these activities are sequenced; and the time frame for moving from activity to activity. Further, by “activities” we mean not only traditional work-prep activities, but also activities in which people engage in their day-to-day lives that may not be expressly geared toward leaving welfare but that may play a role in developing skills and behaviors that contribute to self-sufficiency. To allow the pathways to emerge, staff and participants were given the freedom to determine what to do at each stage of the welfare-to-work process. The policy regarding flexible sequencing also developed because it is a natural corollary to attention to transitions: if each transition is used as an opportunity to reassess a participant's status, then it is impossible to prescribe a sequence of activities for a participant at program entry.

These two policies were the basis for a high-flexibility system at Project Match and, as this section will describe, they would lead the program to develop a very different approach to work prep than in government programs.

Using Work as Work Prep

One of the first things Project Match discovered was that education was often not the first step in a pathway out of welfare – at least not the first step in a natural pathway. When people entered the program, most wanted to find a job. They did not want to go to GED classes or other education programs. Project Match staff did encourage many to go, believing that

education credentials would improve their job prospects, but we quickly saw that most people simply dropped out of the classes or failed to make progress. So staff decided to help participants get what they wanted – a job.

Unfortunately, though perhaps not unexpectedly, almost as many people were as unsuccessful at their first jobs as had been unsuccessful in basic education: 57 percent lost or quit their first job within six months and 70 percent within twelve months.⁴² Program staff felt that there were ways to counter this trend, however, and since many people still were motivated to work, even after that first failure, Project Match set about creating a new set of services. We began to offer reemployment assistance to people who lost or quit jobs; retention assistance for people who were working to help them address problems at work and at home that could result in job loss; and also advancement assistance to help people move up in the labor market, since most entry-level jobs would never bring families out of poverty.

At the heart of these services is the idea that, for many people, work itself can serve as work prep: like school or other welfare-to-work activities, jobs can serve as learning experiences that lead people toward stable, family-supporting employment. In fact, at Project Match we tend to think that working is actually the best way to learn about work. So many of the things that programs try to teach in job-readiness classes, for example, make much more sense to people when they are learning them in a real job: you can lecture participants in a job-readiness class about potential problems with supervisors, for instance, but it is likely to be so abstract as to be meaningless to most people there. But when a person is on the job and experiencing a *real* problem with a supervisor – that’s when guidance and advice will mean something and that’s where retention services come in. To some extent, using work as work prep is based on one of the principles of OJT, work sup, and CWEP – the principle of experiential learning. The view at Project Match, though, is that if someone is ready for OJT, work sup, or CWEP, she is probably ready for the real thing.

Of course, using real jobs as a training ground means that the program must be more interested in serving its participants than local employers: in other words, what a participant may gain from a job is more important than what the employer might gain. As a recent report on community-driven employment programs pointed out:

A growing trend among programs is a belief that placement efforts must be driven by a philosophy that the potential employer is a client or customer of the program. Thus the program must orient its placement efforts around the concept of meeting client or customer (business) needs. . . . This often leads programs to focus their training efforts on the most job ready.

Project Match is a clear exception to this approach. Because of the desire to serve most enrollees and the belief that participants will gain experience and develop under different circumstances, Project Match tends to view employers more as a training resource than a

⁴²Herr and Halpern, *Changing What Counts*.

client. . . . The introduction and short term attachment to work is seen by Project Match as an important and necessary step in the overall evolution to self-sufficiency.⁴³

Using jobs as a training ground also means that the program must view movement from job to job as natural and it must be prepared to support this movement through reemployment and advancement assistance. Further, the program must be ready to help people go back to school if they decide that is the best next step. In fact, this sequence of activities – work first followed by a return to school – has emerged as one of the natural pathways at Project Match in moving toward self-sufficiency: we have found that many people, after working in low-paying entry-level jobs, begin to see that further education is probably the only way to get a better job. They may want to go back to school full-time or they may want to combine it with part-time work. (We should probably note here that Project Match participants have been more likely to complete education programs when they work first than when they do education first and it is worrisome that the “work first/school second” pathway will be extremely difficult to pursue under current federal welfare reform.)

When work is used as work prep, the distinction between the pre-employment and post-employment phases blurs. Thus we think it is misleading to use the term “post-employment services” to describe retention, reemployment, and advancement assistance, although for convenience’s sake we ourselves have used the term in writing about Project Match. No matter what name you give them, though, any program that is serious about helping people become economically independent will have to start offering these services and viewing that first job as a starting point, not the end point. Project Match is not alone in showing high job loss rates and low wages at first jobs. In Riverside, California, for example, which is often cited as having the best government welfare-to-work program in the country, these same problems exist: in MDRC’s evaluation of the program, 67 percent of all experimental group members were employed at some point during the three-year follow-up period; however, only 31 percent were employed during the last quarter of year 3. Further, only 23 percent were working *and off* welfare by the last quarter of year 3 and only 14 percent of the experimentals earned \$10,000 or more in year 3.⁴⁴ Although Riverside’s accomplishments have been significant, the numbers show that getting a first job does not mark the end of the welfare-to-work process; instead, first jobs – and probably second and third ones as well – must be seen as building blocks, as steps along the way toward self-sufficiency, just like other welfare-to-work activities. Of course, once this fact has been accepted, it changes the nature of job search in welfare-to-work programs.

⁴³Brandon Roberts and David Gruber, “Trends in Community Driven Employment Programs” (Baltimore: Brandon Roberts + Associates, n.d.), pp. 6-7.

⁴⁴Riccio, Friedlander, and Freedman, *GAIN: Benefits, Costs, and Three-Year Impacts*.

Job Search in a High-Flexibility System

When it comes down to it, reemployment and advancement assistance are really just job search. But what form of job search should they look like? As we discussed in the last section, job search can take two principal forms: it can be independent, which tends to mean it's unstructured and relatively unsupervised, or it can be done in a group, which usually means it's quite structured and highly supervised. Although both forms can be found around the country, group job search seems to be the more common approach and it has been recommended as the more effective form of the activity.⁴⁵ It is hard to imagine how programs would use the group job search format for either reemployment assistance or advancement assistance, however. Group job search may be just the activity when people are coming into a program for the first time, but it is unlikely to meet the needs of people who lose jobs or who are working but want to find a better job.

When it comes to reemployment, the key is *immediate* access to job search assistance, particularly to avoid people's reapplying for welfare or going back to a full grant. But if a person has to wait for a new cohort to begin a group job search component, chances are the assistance won't be immediate. Further, to be eligible for group job search, a person would probably have to go through a reenrollment process in the welfare-to-work program. And once in group job search, the person looking to get reemployed would end up repeating the job-readiness activities that are often part of the component; these activities may be helpful the first time around, but the second time around they just slow down the process of finding another job.

When people need reemployment assistance, they should not have to go through any bureaucratic process to get access to job leads, word processors, telephones, and advice and guidance from staff. They should not have to wait for the next group job search class to start. They should not have to go through job-readiness sessions that they've attended once already. Instead, they should have immediate one-on-one help to determine what went wrong at the job and to address specific problems. Does the person need advice about how to interact with a supervisor? Does the person need help arranging new child care? Or does the person simply need to find a job that is more convenient to home? Every problem that leads to job loss may not be difficult to address or require tons of staff time; we have found that quite often people mostly need access to job leads. And remember: program staff could always determine that a

⁴⁵See, for example, Amy Brown, *Work First: How to Implement an Employment-Focused Approach to Welfare Reform*, draft (New York: MDRC, July 1996).

person *would* benefit from going through a group job search component again and could make the referral.

When it comes to advancement assistance, group job search would be inappropriate not only because it wouldn't be an effective use of time or resources – just as with most people looking to become reemployed – but also because it is usually offered at a time when people who are working cannot attend – that is, during the day. The big issue when it comes to advancement assistance is having job search staff and resources available during the evening and on weekends to be used as needed by people looking for better jobs. In other words, the key here is ***convenience***. People shouldn't have to quit a job in order to get assistance to find another.

As difficult as it may be for people to imagine how job search for reemployment and advancement might be implemented in a large government program, it is important to realize that the seeds of such flexible, individualized job search already exist in many states. We're talking about what Oregon calls the "resource room," although something similar exists in many other places as well. Oregon does not currently use resource rooms for reemployment or advancement assistance; they are used by people applying for welfare for up-front job search and by participants in the state welfare-to-work program, who are looking for a first job. During the Post-Employment Services Demonstration, however, a federally sponsored project in which Oregon participated, it became evident that resource rooms have the potential to be used for the type of reemployment and advancement job search we are recommending.⁴⁶ Although Oregon would have to make certain changes and solve some administrative problems for the resource rooms to be used to their fullest potential (e.g., keep them open evenings and weekends), the basic setup of the rooms can serve as a model for other welfare-to-work programs.

In Oregon, a resource room is located at some branch offices of the welfare department and at all sites for the state welfare-to-work program. Job developers for Oregon's welfare-to-work program send leads to the resource rooms, where job openings from the Oregon Employment Division are posted as well. The resource rooms also subscribe to newspapers and periodicals that list employment opportunities. Telephones, typewriters, word processors, fax machines, copiers, bond paper, and other materials necessary for applying for a job are also available in each resource room, and staff members are there to assist people on an individual basis. There are also some group workshops conducted in the resource room: for example, each week there are sessions on job openings in various labor market sectors led by resource room staff and job developers.

⁴⁶See Herr, Halpern, and Wagner, *Something Old, Something New*.

Something like a resource room is the foundation upon which every program should build. A resource room can be used for either group or individual job search. It can be used for either more guided or more independent job search. It can be used for first-time job search, for reemployment job search, and for advancement job search. In other words, it is the key to being able to offer job search assistance in a high-flexibility system. At Project Match we do not have a resource room; though we provide reemployment and advancement assistance without one, we now know that a resource room would be a tremendous benefit both to participants and staff, and we would include one at any future site.

How Effective Is Project Match's Approach?

Table 2 describes Project Match's work-prep activities in terms of the characteristics first laid out in Table 1. A comparison of the tables points out some of the fundamental ways that Project Match differs from most government programs. There are, of course, a few places where there are no differences – like when it comes to basic education and job skills training. Project Match refers its participants to local ABE/GED and voc ed programs, most of which have the drawbacks that we discussed in the previous section: for example, most of these programs meet at least twenty hours a week. Because we cannot control the design and curricula of these programs, there is not always much we can do to improve participants' chances of success in them.⁴⁷ We can do our best, though, to steer participants to those programs that we think are more effective: for example, in most cases we encourage participants to enroll in the shorter-term voc ed programs since we have found people are more likely to complete them. And there are some other things that Project Match can do to improve the likelihood that participants will get the most out of their educational experience. As we just noted, for example, Project Match's flexibility around sequencing has meant that participants can go back to school after they've entered the labor market, and this has proven to lead to completion of programs more often than when participants do education before working. In short, when it comes to basic ed and voc ed, we can't always do much to improve the activity itself, but we can do some things to improve the context of the activity – for example, by ensuring attention to transitions.

In almost every other way, however, Table 2 looks different from Table 1. OJT, work sup, and CWEP don't appear at all, since we use unsubsidized work as a work-prep activity instead.

⁴⁷Project Match at one time did design and operate its own ABE/GED program, which we hoped would be more effective than local programs. The main changes were to reduce the weekly time commitment, to provide individualized instruction, and to introduce some activities outside the classroom. We no longer offer this class, however, because even our innovations were not enough to motivate people.

Table 2

**Project Match:
Characteristics of Activities
and of the System**

	<i>Basic Education</i>	<i>Job Skills Training</i>	<i>Job-Readiness/Job Search</i>	<i>Unsubsidized Work</i>
ACTIVITY CHARACTERISTICS				
Format of Activity				
Individual			X	X
Group	X	X		
Learning Approach of Activity				
Classroom	X	X		
Experiential		X	X	X
Variety of Options Within Activity				
High			X	X
Medium		X		
Low	X			
Reward Structure of Activity				
Tangibility of Primary Reward				
Concrete	X	X	X	X
Abstract				
Timing of Primary Reward				
Immediate				X
Near Future	X	X		
Distant Future	X	X		
Unpredictable			X	
Risk of Failure				
High				
Medium	X	X	X	X
Low				

SYSTEM CHARACTERISTICS

Flexibility Around Scheduling Hours in Activity				
High			X	X
Low	X	X		
Flexibility Around Duration of Activity				
High			X	X
Low	X	X		
Flexibility Around Sequencing of Activity				
High	X	X	X	X
Low				
Flexibility Around Combining with Other Activities				
High	X	X	X	X
Low				
Attention to Transitions				
High	X	X	X	X
Low				

Also, job-readiness has been merged with job search: it is done individually by program staff in conjunction with job search, which, of course, is also individualized. Staff teach participants how to prepare a resume and then create one with them; they set up mock interviews; they talk to participants about how to dress at work; and they address other issues that seem pertinent to the individual. Because Project Match does job development, staff often gear their job-readiness efforts toward what they know about the particular employer with whom a person will be interviewing. There is no set job-readiness curriculum, however, and as we said before, many of the things that other programs try to teach in job-readiness classes we don't believe can be taught there – they must be learned through experience. And most important of all in Table 2, we have gone for high flexibility wherever and whenever possible.

The inevitable question at this point is, How much more effective is the Project Match approach than the typical welfare-to-work approach? As we noted earlier, Riverside, California, is considered to have the most successful government program in the country, but according to the recent evaluation of the program, a decreasing number of experimental group members worked each year during the three-year follow-up period: 52 percent were employed at some point in year 1, 49 percent in year 2, 45 percent in year 3, and the percentage decreased to 31 percent by the last quarter of year 3.⁴⁸ The pattern at Project Match looks quite different. First of all, our work-as-work-prep approach makes us even more work-oriented than Riverside, which has been noted for its employment focus. Thus we tend to get more people working right off the bat, since very few people go into education programs or other traditional work-prep activities. Data on a sample for which we have five years of follow-up show that, in year 1, 87 percent of the participants worked at some point. Over the next four years, this percentage stayed pretty steady, climbing slightly to 93 percent by year 5. Of course, as we related earlier, Project Match participants do have a high rate of job loss; however, because we are prepared to address job loss quickly through reemployment services, we get many people back into the workforce. Thus, in our five-year sample, the number of people employed doesn't keep dropping from year to year. An even more encouraging pattern that emerged from our data is that during the follow-up period an increasing number of sample members were working full-year with each passing year: in year 1, 26 percent worked all twelve months of the year; the number climbed to 36 percent in year 2, 38 percent in year 3, 45 percent in year 4, and by year 5, 54 percent.⁴⁹ Although the process is gradual, over time many Project Match participants do become steady workers.

⁴⁸Riccio, Friedlander, and Freedman, *GAIN: Benefits, Costs, and Three-Year Impacts*.

⁴⁹The research that yielded this data is being conducted by Project Match with the support of the Joyce Foundation, Woods Fund of Chicago, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Bowman C.

There are, of course, several reasons why the Riverside data and our data are not directly comparable, among them the fact that Project Match is a voluntary program, while Riverside is a mandatory one. Also, Project Match has never been evaluated using a random assignment research design, so we don't know what would have happened to people in the absence of Project Match. (In Riverside, experimental group members did do better than controls when it came to employment, though the difference declined over the follow-up period so that by the end their employment rates differed by only seven percentage points.) Nevertheless, we believe that if Riverside offered retention and reemployment assistance similar to Project Match's, it would not have seen such a decrease in the number of people working over the years – a fair number of people probably would have been helped to find their way back into the workforce.⁵⁰

Despite the success of our approach to the welfare-to-work process, there have been some participants who have been left behind. There are some people who cannot find jobs at all or who can but they never keep them long and never stabilize – they just keep cycling from one low-wage job to another, often with long periods of unemployment in between. By and large, most of these people have failed in education programs as well. Given their limitations, we believe that this group also would not succeed in the work-prep activities not offered through Project Match – OJT, work sup, and CWEP. Some people in this group would typically be exempt in a government program, while others would not be and would simply hit the wall in a time-limited system. Further, we have found that we cannot predict who will fall into this group: yes, some of them have substance abuse problems, but some of our participants who are now steady workers also once had such problems. Likewise with other “barriers.” But no matter why they end up in the “no progress” group, the fact is, they end up there, and at any given time they can range from 20 to 50 percent of Project Match participants.⁵¹ Because we are committed to helping everyone who comes to our program to find ways to move toward self-sufficiency or at least to become better parents and community members, we have spent considerable time figuring how to serve this group and our efforts are described in detail in the next section. Our experience with this group is extremely relevant to recent federal welfare reform, since states must now serve far larger numbers of people in welfare-to-work programs than ever before, including many who previously would have been exempt.

Lingle Foundation Trust, WPWR-TV Channel 50 Foundation, and BankAmerica Foundation. The first report on this research will be published in early 1997.

⁵⁰Riverside did recently participate in the federal Post-Employment Services Demonstration; however, the impact evaluation for the demonstration, which is being conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, is not yet available.

⁵¹See Herr and Halpern, *Changing What Counts*.

Section III

Adding the Lower Rungs to the Ladder: How to Help the “Hard-to-Serve”

Project Match is not alone in having already run into the question of how to help the “hard-to-serve.” In recent years, some states have moved toward universal or near-universal participation in welfare-to-work programs and as a consequence they have been brought face to face with this problem as well. Utah is one of those states. A recent report on its Single Parent Employment Demonstration Program indicated that 28 percent of the participants in the demonstration fell into the hard-to-serve category.⁵² Data on these participants show that many of them had their first child as a teenager and also that many had “multiple barriers” to employment at the time of the demonstration, including mental health problems, chronic medical problems, and chemical dependency, among other barriers. (The report noted, however, that the presence of barriers – even multiple barriers – did not inevitably lead to being among the hard-to-serve; many participants with one or more barriers found employment and left welfare during the demonstration.) Utah’s approach for the hard-to-serve is to move them into activities to address specific barriers. These activities can include mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, etc., and they count toward participation in the welfare-to-work program; people are not exempt while they are in these activities and they can be sanctioned for nonparticipation.

Utah’s approach is typical of most efforts – both public and private – to help the hard-to-serve in that the identification and treatment of barriers is the focus of the intervention. Project Match has developed a somewhat different approach, however, one in which treatment is not the sole activity. In fact, in Project Match’s approach, treatment is usually not even the core activity. Instead, Project Match has created a whole set of new work-prep activities that address a broad range of psychological, social, and cognitive issues that are common to most welfare recipients who are not ready for work or school and that treatment alone would never be able to address. In other words, although many people who end up in the hard-to-serve group do have problems such as substance abuse or abusive boyfriends or spouses, often it is not these problems alone that keep them from getting and keeping jobs; there is usually a host of more subtle, harder-to-pinpoint problems that would hold them back even if they did overcome a drug habit or other perceived barrier.

⁵²LaDonna A. Pavetti, “. . . And Employment for All: Lessons from Utah’s Single Parent Employment Demonstration Project,” draft prepared for the annual conference of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, Washington, D.C., November 2-4, 1995.

Project Match's Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence

There are three groups of work-prep activities that Project Match has created for the hard-to-serve – volunteering/advisory boards (community service), activities with children, and self-improvement activities – but before we discuss each of these groups it is important to briefly describe the larger model in which they are embedded, which we call the Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence (see the figure on the following page). Besides these three groups of new activities, the Incremental Ladder includes education/training activities and employment. With this broad array of activities, ***there is a place on the Ladder for every single welfare recipient***, from the most to the least job-ready. Underlying this welfare-to-work model is a developmental approach; thus, the different ***activities are arranged on the Ladder so that they are progressively more demanding***. On each rung there is an increase in skills, competencies, and expectations that builds on those already developed; there is also a gradually increasing time commitment as people move up the Ladder. Another feature of the Ladder is that ***it establishes discrete incremental benchmarks to measure progress***. Its numerous activities and levels of time commitment create a series of intermediate steps that serve as indicators of achievement to sustain participants as they struggle toward the upper rungs. (These benchmarks also serve as outcome measures to ensure program accountability.)

At Project Match, we ***use the Ladder to help participants develop natural pathways to self-sufficiency***. The Ladder helps staff and participants to consider their alternatives at each step by laying out a variety of options. Not only can people move up and down the Ladder, but they can move sideways or diagonally. As mentioned earlier, a common natural pathway at Project Match is for people to enter the program and start working at either part-time or full-time jobs. Many just keep moving up the Ladder, while others at some point straddle employment and education rungs. Other participants may move down the Ladder and onto a volunteer rung. The time frame for each participant is different and the Ladder can accommodate this variation as well. In short, ***the Ladder embodies the characteristics that make for a high-flexibility program***: there is flexibility around scheduling of hours in activities, around duration of activities, and around sequencing and combining. Attention to transitions is also inherent in the Ladder model.

The rungs of the Ladder that include employment and education/training activities are pretty clear-cut, especially to anyone who has just read the two previous sections of this paper. The three new categories of activities will probably need some explanation, however, if the reader is to understand their role in a welfare-to-work program. First we will briefly describe the activities and then we will outline the theoretical rationale for using them as work prep.

And in the final section of this paper we will explain how Project Match's Pathways System can give welfare-to-work program staff the tools to operationalize these "lower rung" activities.

Volunteering/Advisory Boards (Community Service)

There are many, many settings in which people can volunteer and our Ladder presents only a handful of options: Head Starts, children's schools, tenant management boards, local school councils, churches, hospitals, and national organizations such as the Red Cross. Although volunteering is not a subject that has been systematically studied, there is ample anecdotal evidence – some documented, some not – that it can serve as the lower rungs of a career ladder.

Typically, volunteerism – particularly volunteerism that results in upward mobility – is associated with well-to-do women. In her book *Invisible Careers: Women Civic Leaders from the Volunteer World*, the sociologist Arlene Kaplan Daniels describes how volunteering has been a natural pathway for many middle- and upper-class women. One woman Daniels interviewed describes how she almost inadvertently developed a career in education policy:

It's interesting what kind of volunteer energy comes out of the co-op nursery movement. . . . From there I went to the PTA. . . . I was president of the PTA in another school seven or eight years later when my oldest child was in junior high. . . . Then when I was President of the PTA, I became a delegate to the citywide advisory council on school integration. During this time I also was a volunteer in the schools. . . . When my kids went on I was president of that PTA and then secretary of the citywide PTA. . . . The PTA had gotten me into the political scene. Through the labor friends I had developed I was appointed to various commissions by the mayor.⁵³

In this scenario, as in so many others related by Daniels, the career trajectory starts with a personal interest – in this case the schools attended by the woman's children – and although the initial involvement may be relatively low-key and low-level, it provides an opportunity to develop skills, build confidence, and create a social network. It also opens the door to other opportunities.

Although the pattern may not be quite as dramatic or high-profile for lower-income women as for Daniels's subjects, volunteerism can serve a similar career-building function for them. Perhaps the most frequently cited example concerns Head Start. Parents of children in Head Start are encouraged to volunteer for the program, either in the classroom or on policy committees, and quite a few go on to become Head Start staff. In 1993-94, for example, 31 percent of Head Start staff were parents of current or former Head Start children.⁵⁴

⁵³Arlene Kaplan Daniels, *Invisible Careers: Women Civic Leaders from the Volunteer World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 70-71.

⁵⁴U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Project Head Start Statistical Fact Sheet, February 1995.

When volunteering leads to regular employment, it is not always within the same agency or organization or even the same labor market sector. One Project Match participant was a volunteer at her child's elementary school, where she worked in the administrative office calling the parents of children who did not come to school to verify why they were absent. She now works at Federal Express, and although the connection does not seem so obvious, we know from working with her that it was this volunteer experience that laid the foundation for her to go out and get a regular job, not just in terms of skills and work habits but also in terms of confidence and motivation. It took some prodding from Project Match, though, to help this woman realize she had developed marketable skills and was ready for a regular job – this was not a case where momentum simply carried a volunteer upward and onward, as sometimes happens. This was a case where the volunteer needed some help to build on the experience. Just because a pathway is “natural” doesn't mean it will unfold without attention to transitions.

Often when we talk about volunteer activities, people say they sound very much like CWEP. There are several important distinctions to be made here, however. First, volunteer positions do not have to be created by welfare-to-work program staff. For CWEP, program staff must work with local agencies and organizations to develop slots; this requires a great deal of time and effort and programs that offer CWEP generally have trouble creating enough slots.⁵⁵ For volunteer positions, in contrast, programs can take advantage of openings and opportunities that already exist in the community – and there are generally a very large number of these. A recent study of a low- to middle-income neighborhood in Chicago revealed 320 associations *in that one area* in which residents could be involved, from school associations to religious groups to park associations to advocacy groups to neighborhood improvement groups and on and on.⁵⁶

Another way in which volunteering is different from CWEP is that the volunteer position is chosen by the participant and is something that the participant has a vested interest in – a child's school, the safety of the neighborhood, the outreach activities of a local church; a person is more likely to be motivated if they are doing something that has a personal connection, which is usually not the case in CWEP. In fact, many welfare recipients get involved in volunteer activities on their own: one Project Match participant was volunteering for a program that delivers meals to the elderly in her neighborhood, yet it had never occurred to her that this activity might have value from a work-prep perspective. Also, by its very nature, volunteering has a whole different “feel” to it than CWEP does. In CWEP, participants are usually at the bottom of the totem pole where they have been assigned to work and many feel

⁵⁵See, for example, Brock, Butler, and Long, *Unpaid Work Experience*.

⁵⁶The Woodstock Institute, “Rediscovering Local Associations and Their Powers: Tools and Methods,” draft prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, August 1995.

that “the agency [is] getting the better of the deal.”⁵⁷ But volunteers often feel that instead of having something done *to* them, they are doing something *for* others. Volunteering usually makes people feel good about themselves because they are made to feel they have something to offer.

In the end, of course, the goals of CWEP and volunteer activities are very much the same: to use a work or worklike setting to help welfare recipients who aren’t job-ready develop skills and behaviors that will help them gain regular employment. In our minds, however, the structure and context of volunteering make the activity a better choice for many people (as well as for the programs that serve them), and at the end of this section we will discuss how volunteering and other lower-rung activities might be used to count toward the state participation requirements under the new federal law.

Activities with Children

This category of activities is sometimes hard for people to understand. On the very lowest rung it includes activities like taking a child to reading hour at the local library each week or making sure that a child gets to regularly scheduled speech therapy appointments. As a person moves up the rungs, activities may include mother-child play groups at the local Y or infant-stimulation classes for low-weight babies. On the highest rungs of this category a person may do things that involve not only her own child but other children as well, such as being a scout leader or the coach of a sports team or a homeroom mother. (Many of these highest-rung parent-child activities begin to cross over into volunteer activities.)

Project Match began to consider these activities when we observed that many of the people who couldn’t get to school or work on time were the same people whose children were always late to school or never made it to appointments and extracurricular activities. We reasoned that the best place to start learning how to adhere to a schedule was with parent-child activities. First, many welfare recipients seem more willing to do things for their children than for themselves: for example, it somehow seems easier for many to accept that their children ought to get to school on time than that they ought to get to school on time. Second, there aren’t a lot of expectations to overwhelm or confuse parents in these activities: the only real expectation on the lowest rung of the parent-child activity category is that the parent will get the child to a certain place at a certain time; the parent is not faced with additional expectations once she gets there, like having to learn algebra or how to talk to potential employers. All she has to do is get herself and her child someplace.

⁵⁷Brock, Butler, and Long, *Unpaid Work Experience*, p. 33.

One wonderful example of how activities with children can help someone move up the Ladder is the story of a Project Match participant who, though trained as a medical technician, was unable to work because she was terrified to the point of paralysis. At Project Match, we did not continue to try to push her into a job; instead, she was encouraged to have her daughter join a local scout troop and to attend the meetings regularly with her. Over time she rather naturally began to assist the scout leader in creating flyers, assisting with craft projects, and doing other things for the troop. After a while her “position” in the troop was formalized and she worked as an assistant scout leader for a year. This experience helped her to gain confidence and overcome many of her fears about working and she applied for a med tech job. She is now working steadily in a hospital as a phlebotomist and earning more than eight dollars an hour.

Self-Improvement Activities

There are two kinds of self-improvement activities on the Ladder: counseling/treatment/support groups and hobbies/athletics. Although we recognize the importance of counseling, treatment, and support groups, we believe that such activities should always be done *in conjunction* with other activities on the Ladder. The reasons for this may not be self-evident, particularly since in most other welfare-to-work programs people who are in treatment activities are usually not expected to be involved in other activities. Outside of welfare-to-work programs, though, people with problems – even serious problems – usually have to get the help they need while continuing to function at some level as workers, parents, spouses, or in other roles; part of being an adult is learning how to balance multiple roles, including the role of “patient.” At Project Match we try to prepare people for this reality by helping them tackle their problems while continuing to work or go to school. If a participant’s problem is so severe that it makes school or work impossible, then we help her to do less demanding things like volunteer, but we always try to keep her involved in nontreatment activities to some degree. (If a person is unable to do even the most simple lower-rung activities, she probably should be in a residential treatment program of some type.) We’ve found that doing things in addition to treatment helps to keep people from thinking of themselves only in terms of their problems, and it keeps others from thinking of them that way as well. Further, engaging in other activities gives participants the opportunity to meet new people, to be exposed to different environments, and to feel a sense of accomplishment, which is what gives many the hope and determination to begin the recovery process. Isolation and inactivity often worsen problems like depression and substance abuse and family violence.

Project Match also does not conduct an up-front assessment to identify “barriers.” First, we have found that many participants will not divulge serious problems such as domestic abuse or drug dependency right off the bat. And second, even when it is clear that someone has a problem, we find it hard to predict whether it will really constitute a barrier.⁵⁸ One participant may be in an abusive relationship, for example, but may find a job and gain the confidence and courage to end the relationship, while another’s abusive relationship may keep her even from going on interviews. As a consequence of these two factors, we tend to deal with problems only as they emerge in the course of participation or as they begin to interfere with the welfare-to-work process. And even when we feel a problem needs to be dealt with, there is no guarantee that the participant will be ready or willing to accept help. In these cases, we try to keep people involved in some type of activity until they are ready to face down their problem. This has proved far more fruitful than forcing people into treatment or counseling before they are ready to change.⁵⁹

While most people will understand and accept the inclusion of treatment and counseling as work-prep activities, the inclusion of hobbies and athletics will surely make eyes roll. Yet there are some good reasons why hobbies and athletics are an appropriate place to start for the least job-ready. Welfare-to-work staff in Utah and elsewhere have noted that “many of the [long-term] recipients they see have never been successful at anything and are afraid to try anything new.”⁶⁰ According to the renowned psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, people need to “acquire the enjoyment of work and pride in doing at least one kind of thing really well” if they are to grow to be productive adults.⁶¹ Erikson writes that children who acquire this capacity tend to do so in school. We know, however, that the school environment is not conducive to this kind of development in adult welfare recipients; school simply seems to reinforce patterns of failure and discouragement for this group. Hobbies and athletics, however, can provide an alternate arena for positive development. The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has described how hobbies and athletics, like school and work, can lead to experiences where “alienation gives way to involvement, enjoyment replaces boredom, helplessness turns into a feeling of control,

⁵⁸Project Match’s experience with barriers has recently started to be confirmed by other researchers; see, for example, Pavetti, “. . . And Employment for All”; Krista Olson and LaDonna Pavetti, *Personal and Family Challenges to the Successful Transition from Welfare to Work* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, May 1996); and Susan Lloyd, “The Effects of Domestic Violence on Women’s Employment,” *Effects of Violence on Work and Family Project*, Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University, July 1996.

⁵⁹For a discussion of Project Match’s assessment policy, see Toby Herr and Suzanne L. Wagner with Robert Halpern and Ria Majeske, “Understanding Case Management in a Welfare-to-Work Program: The Project Match Experience” (Chicago: Project Match/Erikson Institute, May 1995).

⁶⁰Pavetti, “. . . And Employment for All,” p. 12.

⁶¹Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 125.

and psychic energy works to reinforce the sense of self.”⁶² Further, Csikszentmihalyi writes that hobbies and athletics – more even than school or work – are perfectly designed to lead to such experiences because of the way they are structured: hobbies and athletics “have rules that require the learning of skills, they set up goals, [and] they provide feedback.”⁶³ In other words, while we tend to think of hobbies and athletics as just “fun,” they can actually play an important developmental function and can also serve as a forum for learning specific skills and valued behaviors, like knowing how to follow instructions and being able to work with others as a member of a team.

People in low-income communities usually have access to a variety of hobby classes and sports activities through the local YMCA, the park district, community centers, public high schools, and other organizations. To legitimately function as lower-rung work-prep activities, though, these classes and groups must meet regularly and have set times for starting. Informal activities should not be included in employability plans; there has to be structure to an activity so that it can function like the standard welfare-to-work activities – that is, an activity must have a schedule that can be verified.

The Characteristics of Lower-Rung Activities

Table 3 presents the lower-rung activities in terms of the same characteristics we discussed in Tables 1 and 2. As we noted at the beginning of this section, the lower-rung activities are all flexible when it comes to scheduling, duration, sequencing, and combining. They also cannot be implemented without paying attention to transitions. These characteristics automatically differentiate the lower-rung activities from the work-prep activities offered by most states, although these differences are not inherent in the activities themselves, reflecting instead Project Match’s high-flexibility program model. But putting the model aside, in and of themselves these new activities look very different from the typical work-prep activities like CWEP and basic education and skills training. To create activities appropriate for the least job-ready we had to put aside most of our usual images of work prep and think in almost opposite terms. Most important to note in Table 3 is that the lower-rung activities are all based on an ***experiential learning approach***; they all provide a ***variety of options*** from which participants can choose; and they all carry a ***low risk of failure***. These three characteristics constitute several themes that will keep emerging in the pages that follow, where we will explain some of

⁶²Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), p. 69.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 72.

Table 3

**A High-Flexibility System:
Characteristics of "Lower Rung"
Activities and of the System**

ACTIVITY CHARACTERISTICS	Volunteering/Advisory Boards	Activities with Children	Self-Improvement Activities
Format of Activity			
Individual	x	x	x
Group	x	x	x
Learning Approach of Activity			
Classroom			x
Experiential	x	x	x
Variety of Options Within Activity			
High	x	x	x
Medium			
Low			
Reward Structure of Activity			
Tangibility of Primary Reward			
Concrete			
Abstract	x	x	x
Timing of Primary Reward			
Immediate			
Near Future			
Distant Future			
Unpredictable	x	x	x
Risk of Failure			
High			
Medium			
Low	x	x	x

SYSTEM CHARACTERISTICS

Flexibility Around Scheduling Hours in Activity			
High	x	x	x
Low			
Flexibility Around Duration of Activity			
High	x	x	x
Low			
Flexibility Around Sequencing of Activity			
High	x	x	x
Low			
Flexibility Around Combining with Other Activities			
High	x	x	x
Low			
Attention to Transitions			
High	x	x	x
Low			

what is happening in lower-rung activities that makes them so constructive when it comes to helping the least job-ready prepare for work.

Why Lower-Rung Activities Help People Prepare for Work: Some Theoretical Rationales

Although participation in lower-rung activities can have many beneficial effects, there are three in particular that are directly relevant to preparing people for work: lower-rung activities can help people (1) learn how to adhere to a work schedule, (2) learn how to interact appropriately with supervisors, co-workers, and customers or clients, and (3) acquire a variety of job-related skills. The first two effects are critical because they involve capabilities that many of the least job-ready welfare recipients lack and, as we argued earlier, job-readiness classes are generally not an appropriate vehicle for teaching such skills and behaviors. The third effect – acquiring job-related skills – is important because many hard-to-serve welfare recipients have trouble learning in a traditional school environment; as an alternative, lower-rung activities provide “natural” settings in which people can pick up a range of skills that will help them in the labor market.

To understand on a more theoretical level how and why lower-rung activities can help people in these three ways requires diving into some fields of study that are generally bypassed in discussions of welfare-to-work. These include the fields of human, social, and cognitive development. Although the following discussion will not be comprehensive – entire books could be written on this topic – it will provide a basic theoretical foundation for the efficacy of lower-rung activities. Following this discussion, we will conclude the section with a summary of where lower-rung activities intersect with the new federal welfare law.

How Do We “Teach” People to Adhere to a Work Schedule?

There is a difference between not being able to adhere to a work schedule because a person never learned how to do so and not being able to adhere to a schedule because frequent crises or chronic problems such as an ill child or an abusive spouse prevent a person from doing so. Among welfare recipients, tardiness and absenteeism are common for both these reasons, yet each reason requires a different sort of intervention. In this section, we are concerned with the more abstract issue of how to “teach” people to adhere to a work schedule, since this half of the problem is the part that has been addressed least thoughtfully in the welfare-to-work field.

What we tend to forget is that notions of time can differ dramatically. Every culture, in fact, is marked by a particular temporal framework. In industrial cultures like ours, the temporal framework is defined by the fragmenting of time into small units that are tied to clock time and

by a linear view of the relationship of these units to one another. According to the anthropologist Jules Henry, people who have internalized this sense of time are sensitive to “immanent temporal cues,” and he offers an illustration of what he means by this:

If Mr. Lane wants to visit his friends on a Sunday afternoon, he must remember to stop watching TV at a particular time because he knows it will take him half an hour to shave, shower, dress and drive over to the Williamses’ (by the main highway, because the shortcut is blocked). Thus everything Mr. Lane has to do in connection with his visit is touched off (or cued) by what preceded it and by what follows and since such cues exist in every series of actions directed toward an end, I call them *immanent temporal cues*. A sense of how events must be adjusted to one another in this way is sensitivity to immanent temporal cues.⁶⁴

In other words, getting somewhere on time – whether to a friend’s house, a local school council meeting, or a job – requires developing a temporal framework in which a person thinks and acts upon an understanding of the succession of events in relation to his or her own actions and to desired goals.⁶⁵

In our culture, people become “temporally literate” in many different ways and there are many aspects to the process. William Julius Wilson, who looks at the question from a sociological perspective, has emphasized the importance of regular employment among family members and other people in a community in helping children as well as adults learn about time and work schedules:

In neighborhoods in which most families do not have a steadily employed breadwinner, the norms and behavior patterns associated with steady work compete with those associated with casual or infrequent work. Accordingly, the less frequent the regular contact with those who have steady and full-time employment (that is, the greater the degree of social isolation), the more likely that initial job performance will be characterized by tardiness, absenteeism, and, thereby, low retention. In other words, a person’s patterns and norms of behavior tend to be shaped by those with which he or she has had the most frequent or sustained contact and interaction.⁶⁶

Considering the acquisition of a time sense from a developmental perspective, Dolores Norton has looked at the day-to-day interactions between mothers and very young children to explore how children learn about time, noting in particular how mothers use “time language” – for example, phrases like “We will go home after we finish eating” or “Eat, if you want to get to Granny’s in time to see Thunder-Cats.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴Jules Henry, *Pathways to Madness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 12.

⁶⁵See Dolores G. Norton, “Understanding the Early Experience of Black Children in High Risk Environments: Culturally and Ecologically Relevant Research as a Guide to Support for Families,” in *Zero to Three*, the bulletin of the National Center for Clinical Infant Programs, vol. X (April 1990).

⁶⁶Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, p. 61.

⁶⁷See Norton, “Understanding the Early Experience of Black Children.”

These kinds of broad theories help us understand on an abstract level how people learn about time, yet they don't help us figure out how we can teach people in a more deliberate and explicit way. To understand how lower-rung activities can be structured to teach people to adhere to a work schedule, we need to consider three principles of learning: (1) people – whether adults or children – are motivated to learn by the prospect of engaging in enjoyable or personally useful activities; (2) learners need to begin with simple tasks before they can move to more complex ones; and (3) each task needs to be within the learner's "zone of proximal development."

Begin with Enjoyable or Personally Useful Activities. Most of us have vivid – and recent – memories of learning to use a computer. Unlike today's children, who often learn to use computers at such an early age that it's second nature, most of us found them completely foreign and intimidating and had to overcome deep-seated resistance. A real motivation for jumping in often came from a desire to use software programs that we believed would be useful in our lives, like programs for word processing or organizing finances and paying bills, or programs that would be fun, like games and other entertainment software. In the same vein, if we want welfare recipients to learn how to adhere to a schedule, it will help to start out by making the activities in the employability plan ones that they feel are enjoyable or personally useful, something they *want* to get to. As just described, the lower rungs encompass a broad range of activities among which most every welfare recipient would be able to find something she wants to do, either for herself or her children; in fact, in many cases people might already be doing things that can be incorporated into an employability plan, as long as the activity has a regular schedule.

For those who question why welfare recipients who've shown they don't know how to manage their time should be "coddled" in this way, remember that for many of them the threat of a sanction – or even actually *being* sanctioned – has not proven to be enough of a motivator: we need only look at the attendance rates for mandated activities like ABE/GED and job-readiness classes to know that we need some carrots in addition to the sticks to get people in the habit of attending regularly scheduled activities. Also, once a person proves that she can get to scheduled activities that are "fun," we know that if she subsequently doesn't get to less enjoyable activities, it is not because she doesn't know how to adhere to a schedule but because there are other problems to be addressed.

Begin with Simple Tasks. When we learn to use computers, we start with the most basic and essential tasks. The first step is usually learning to manipulate the mouse, to practice pointing, clicking, dragging, and dropping. At this point we are not supposed to worry about anything else. Many computers come with a version of the game solitaire that is especially good for learning to use the mouse because the only thing a person has to do is click on items

on the screen and move them from one place to another. Once a person has mastered the mouse, she can move on to learning other tasks related to using a computer.

Similarly, the lowest rungs of the Incremental Ladder have been designed so that getting places regularly and on time is the only skill a person is working on. At this level, we usually ask people to do only one activity and that activity typically involves only a few hours a week. Further, we try to make that one activity as easy as possible to attend – that is, we eliminate the more complicated elements such as transportation, child care, and other common worries that go along with participating in a work-prep activity. We do this by choosing an activity within walking distance of a person’s home or one that can be reached easily by public transportation; we also choose an activity that doesn’t require finding child care. Because many of the lower-rung activities take place in or near the community where a welfare recipient lives, the transportation problem disappears, and many of the activities do not require people to find child care in order to participate because they take place while children are in school or they actually involve children.

As a person shows she is able to meet the expectations of a simple schedule (and this can happen very quickly), more hours in the activity – or more activities – should be added to the employability plan. The initial activity could also be replaced by an activity or activities that require the participant to be more planful (e.g., to think about complicated bus schedules and child care arrangements, to make the time to do “homework” for an activity, like following up on a problem a tenant management board is trying to solve). We have found that some people naturally begin to take on more hours, greater challenges, or additional activities once they get going, while others need a “push” to move up the Ladder.

Find the “Zone of Proximal Development.” For a caseworker, the trick in moving from simple to more complex employability plans is knowing when a person is ready to tackle a bigger challenge and also knowing what the challenge should be. In the field of cognitive learning, this is known as finding the “zone of proximal development.” The zone of proximal development is a concept developed by the psychologist Lev Vygotsky.⁶⁸ He described the zone as the difference between what a person can do alone and what the person can do with assistance. The assistance can range from explaining or demonstrating something to structuring an activity so that a person is within her zone, neither repeating tasks that she has already demonstrated she can do nor being expected to perform tasks that are beyond her reach. Among educators, structuring activities in this way is often referred to as “scaffolding.” As tasks are mastered, expectations increase and activities change.

⁶⁸Lev S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).

To illustrate what the zone means in the context of a welfare-to-work program, let's look at the hypothetical case of two women who have both been assessed as needing to work on time-management skills in a lower-rung context. Both women are given the same *initial* employability plan: every Tuesday they are to take their youngest children to a ceramics class that meets from 4:00 to 5:30. The caseworker isn't exactly sure if this is the right zone for each woman, but she will have some evidence in a month.

At the end of the month, the caseworker finds out that one woman got her daughter to all four classes during the month on time. The woman also helped the ceramics teacher put the children's projects into the kiln, even though this type of volunteering was not part of her employability plan. The other woman brought her son to only two of the four classes, however, and was half an hour late for both of them. Unlike the other mother, she did not stay for the class, but simply dropped off her son and picked him up at the end. (The means for collecting such information on a monthly basis is the subject of the next section of this paper, "Getting From Here to There: The Pathways System.")

Based on this information, the caseworker determines that the first woman is ready for a more challenging employability plan for the next month. The woman is still expected to take her daughter to the ceramics class, but the caseworker also asks her to see if it's okay to assist the teacher on a regular basis. If this is possible, volunteering in the class will become an official part of the employability plan. The caseworker and the welfare recipient also agree to add another activity to the plan – a neighborhood development group that meets one evening a week. To attend this weekly meeting, the woman will have to find a babysitter, so she will have to be more planful.

The second woman, in contrast, is not ready to move to a more challenging plan. The caseworker would have to do some probing to find out exactly why she had trouble getting her son to the ceramics class. Perhaps she didn't take him to the two classes because he was sick, in which case the caseworker would keep the same plan for another month, to make sure it is within the woman's zone. Or perhaps the caseworker will learn that even this simple schedule is too difficult for the woman, in which case the plan would have to be revised.

On the lower rungs, the key to helping people make progress is a constant fine-tuning of employability plans based on detailed information gathered each month. All the fine-tuning in the world, however, will not ensure that a welfare recipient gets to her activities each month. As the anthropologist Jules Henry reminds us:

In our culture, time is regulated also by hope, for what makes the middle-class person stick to the groove of time is the organization of his life, and his life is organized by his hopes for himself and

his children. Where there is no hope . . . time loses significance. To paraphrase an old proverb: When hope flies out the door, time flies out the window.⁶⁹

Ultimately, the welfare recipient will keep to the schedule of her employability plan only if she has hope that she and her children will benefit from what she does.

Interacting Appropriately with Supervisors, Co-Workers, and Customers or Clients

Cynthia was working in a day care center as a child care worker. She complained all the time to a friend who also worked there that her supervisor was unfair and that she had her “picks” (i.e., her favorites). Whenever the supervisor asked Cynthia to do something – even something that was part of her job – Cynthia felt resentful and angry, although she never actually said anything to the supervisor. Cynthia’s friend kept trying to tell her that she didn’t think the supervisor was really that bad, that she seemed to treat everyone pretty much the same. But Cynthia never saw it that way. She continued to feel resentful and after four months she walked off the job.

Sheila was a participant in a state demonstration for post-employment services. She was bright and enthusiastic about working but nevertheless had lost three jobs in as many months. Sheila’s caseworker in the demonstration asked her if she could talk to all three employers, since it wasn’t clear why Sheila was having trouble keeping jobs, even to Sheila. After talking to the employers, the caseworker learned that although they all thought Sheila was smart and could do the job, her behavior with co-workers was inappropriate: she would tell them what to do and always thought she knew best, and she would tell people she hardly knew very personal things about herself, which made them extremely uncomfortable. The employers all said that although Sheila’s behavior was not mean-spirited or obstreperous, it made it impossible for her to work well with other people, so they fired her.

Tera was a merchandise tagger at a discount children’s clothing store. One day, one of Tera’s co-workers complained to their supervisor that Tera wasn’t tagging properly. After the supervisor talked to Tera to find out if she was indeed having problems, Tera exploded at her co-worker for going behind her back to the supervisor. The two women, who were in the back of the store, started yelling and pushing one another and they got so loud the supervisor came over and fired them both on the spot.

Not acting appropriately with supervisors, co-workers, and customers or clients is a common reason for job loss; in fact, some studies have suggested that it is a more common reason for job loss than low skills.⁷⁰ As the vignettes show, however, “not acting appropriately” can mean many different things. In the first vignette, Cynthia never actually said anything inappropriate to her supervisor, but her inability to understand and accept her supervisor’s authority made the job untenable for her, even though in this particular case the supervisor did not misuse her authority – Cynthia only perceived it to be that way. And in the

⁶⁹Henry, *Pathways to Madness*, p. 12.

⁷⁰See Quint and Musick, *Lives of Promise, Lives of Pain*, and Linnea Berg, Lynn Olson, and Aimee Conrad, *Causes and Implications of Rapid Job Loss Among Participants in a Welfare-to-Work Program* (Evanston, Ill.: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University, October 1991).

second vignette, Sheila's inappropriate behavior with co-workers is much more subtle than, say, the fighting in the third vignette, though equally as damaging.

As with learning about time and schedules, the process that leads to an understanding of the relational dynamics of the workplace is gradual and complex, involving cognitive, social, and emotional development: first, a person must "learn" the rules and expectations that govern how to behave at work and, second, a person must develop the psychological resources to be able to act on those rules and expectations. In this discussion, we will look at how lower-rung volunteer activities can foster both these aspects of the process, which are distinct but by and large occur simultaneously and in relation to each other. (We focus here on volunteer activities because other lower-rung activities usually do not provide the necessary ingredients for developing this important job-readiness "skill.")

Learning the Rules and Expectations of Relationships at Work. Work, like other institutions, has its own relational culture; it is governed by its own values and customs regarding how a person interacts with supervisors, with co-workers, and, in some businesses, with customers or clients. When it comes to interacting with supervisors, a person must learn about lines of authority and how hierarchies operate and must also accept the fact that most workplaces are not a democracy. When it comes to co-workers, it is important to understand concepts like teamwork and mutual respect. And when it comes to customers or clients, it usually means accepting the dictum that "the customer is always right." With all three types of relationships, there are ways of interacting that are acceptable and unacceptable and these can differ not only in relation to the specific person but also to the specific setting.

Many welfare recipients who fall into the hard-to-serve group need to learn this complicated and subtle set of rules and expectations and they are usually sent to job-readiness classes to do so. As we said earlier, though, this activity – with its classroom-instruction format – is not particularly effective. People may come out of these classes able to verbally articulate the rules and expectations but they are often unable to apply their lessons to real-life, on-the-job situations. This breakdown occurs because, as the linguist James Paul Gee would put it, there is a difference between "learning" and "acquisition." Gee describes learning as "a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching. . . . This teaching involves explanation and analysis."⁷¹ In contrast, acquisition is "a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models and a process of trial and error, without a process of formal teaching. It happens in natural settings which are meaningful and functional."⁷² Gee goes on to say that "acquisition is good for performance, learning is good for meta-level knowledge. . . . Acquirers

⁷¹James Paul Gee, "What Is Literacy?" a paper prepared for the Mailman Foundation Conference on Families and Literacy, Harvard Graduate School of Education, March 6-7, 1987, p. 4.

⁷²Ibid.

usually beat learners at performance, learners usually beat acquirers at talking about it, that is, at explication, explanation, analysis, and criticism.”⁷³ People who are able to adjust their behavior to different situations usually develop the capability through a process of acquisition, not learning, and this is due in large part to the fact that behaving properly in a given setting is a “performance” skill and not a “talking about” skill. Thus, following Gee’s paradigm, it is easy to see why job-readiness classes aren’t the best approach: they promote learning instead of acquisition. Yet when it comes to keeping a job, it’s performance that counts.

To help welfare recipients develop social competencies, we need to set up situations that will lead to acquisition. This is one of the goals of the volunteer activities we’ve described. In most volunteer settings there are both formal and informal policies regarding interpersonal behavior that are similar to those in normal work settings, and there is also the same sort of hierarchical structure. Thus, the volunteer settings provide one of the key components for acquisition: exposure to role models. A volunteer at an elementary school, for example, has the chance to observe how the teachers interact with the principal and other administrators and how that differs from the way the teachers interact with each other and with support staff. A volunteer can also observe how the teachers manage conflict and frustration among themselves and with other school personnel. This type of observation is critical to acquiring the rules of the world of work. Of course, it is unlikely that everyone a volunteer observes will be a “good” role model; however, being able to compare bad role models to good ones can itself be instructive.

Besides exposure to role models, according to Gee acquisition also depends on a “process of trial and error” or, as we like to think of it, on practice. But key to practicing is a certain amount of safety: the consequences for failure must not be too severe. In lower-rung settings, people tend to be able to make mistakes without suffering serious consequences and they get the chance to try again. One Project Match participant, for example, was volunteering at a local Head Start. Her job was to prepare a parent newsletter and she was doing this with another woman. When this other volunteer would make mistakes, the Project Match participant would get furious: she would call her stupid and sometimes storm out of the building and go home. If this were a real job, the participant would likely have been fired for such behavior. At Head Starts, however, there is generally more latitude for everyone, and most particularly for volunteers. This is not to say that the volunteer’s behavior was ignored, though. On the contrary, the parent-involvement coordinator called her on it. But the coordinator also gave the woman some advice about how better to handle her frustration and anger and she also gave her another chance – several chances, in fact. And over time the Project Match participant did

⁷³Ibid., p. 5.

learn how to keep her temper and to deal more effectively with such situations, which has helped her to keep the full-time job she now has.

Obviously, exposure to role models and the chance to practice appropriate behavior is possible in some of the standard work-prep activities, like OJT, work supplementation, and CWEP; however, compared to these activities, lower-rung activities are better for learning social competencies because the settings are almost always familiar and meaningful. The importance of such settings becomes evident when considered in light of the work of the developmental psychologist Margaret Donaldson, who has described how people learn better and more quickly when what they are being taught is “embedded” in settings and language that are part of their lives and that they can relate to.⁷⁴ In Donaldson’s words, the context must make “human sense” to the learner. Donaldson, for example, describes an experiment in which adults in a non-Western culture “were given the task of learning to operate a machine so as to get a [reward]. In order to succeed they had to go through a two-stage maze. The stages consisted merely of pressing the correct one of two buttons to get a marble; and of inserting a marble into a small hole to release the [reward].”⁷⁵ The adults were unable to complete the task. When the apparatus in the task was changed to resemble something more familiar to the adults, however, they *were* able to complete the task. As Donaldson goes on to say, “The task seems formally to be the same. But psychologically it is quite different. Now the subject is dealing not with a strange machine but with familiar meaningful objects; and it is clear to him what he is meant to do.”⁷⁶ Donaldson writes that when something makes human sense – when it is embedded – “the *motives* and *intentions* . . . are entirely comprehensible.”⁷⁷

In a “Donaldsonian” sense, most volunteer settings are familiar and meaningful. Because the settings are usually *community* agencies and institutions, the volunteers often know the people there (e.g., the staff, the other volunteers, the children if it’s a school, Head Start, or similar setting). Moreover, in community agencies and institutions at least some of the staff members are likely to be ethnically or racially similar to the volunteers, which is important in fostering identification with and imitation of role models. People also often already know how to get to the place where they are volunteering and they are familiar with the physical layout of the building or office. And on a more abstract level, they usually understand the purpose of the agency or institution and the various roles and responsibilities of the people there. Because the settings make human sense to the volunteers in terms of people, place, and purpose, the acquisition of social competencies is more likely to occur.

⁷⁴Margaret Donaldson, *Children’s Minds* (New York: Norton, 1979).

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 17.

Developing the Psychological Resources to Be Able to Interact Appropriately. A person may know what the rules and expectations of workplace relationships are, but that is not the same as being able to act on them. To do this requires the development of certain psychological resources, most notably the ability to “self-regulate.” At the heart of self-regulation is balancing one’s immediate needs and feelings against the longer-term consequences of acting on them in ways that are counterproductive, hurtful, destructive, or even dangerous. In an employment context, an example of self-regulation is not walking off the job when you don’t like your supervisor but instead either finding a constructive way to address the problem on the job (e.g., ask to be transferred to another division) or continuing to put up with the situation while you look for another job.

For most people, self-regulation requires strong motivation, since it means acting in a way that is contrary to what you are thinking or feeling, to the way you’d really like to act. In any given situation, there are both positive and negative motivators at work; when it comes to the welfare-to-work process, the system focuses primarily on financial motivators. On the positive side, this has meant finding ways to “make work pay,” including child care subsidies, transitional medical benefits, earned income disregards, and the Earned Income Tax Credit. On the negative side, this has meant sanctions (the reduction or cancellation of a grant) and, most recently, time limits on eligibility for welfare. These financial carrots and sticks do motivate many people (of course, we do not yet know what the effect of time limits will be, but it is likely to be a spur for many welfare recipients); however, there has been a significant group for which these motivators have not worked – either singly or in combination – and even time limits probably will not be a strong enough incentive for many of them.

For people who need more than financial incentives and disincentives to change, the lower rungs add a layer of psychological ones, which go deeper and for many people can be more powerful. The key to the psychological layer is self-esteem, which, in the field of human development, is generally considered to have two dimensions or sources: *competence* and *acceptance*. In lower-rung activities, both the desire for competence and the need for acceptance are brought into play as motivational forces.

Competence has been defined by Fran Stott, a human development researcher, as deriving “from satisfaction taken in independent, self-generated activity. . . . Success in this dimension ultimately results in competence in the world of school and work.”⁷⁸ Developing a sense of competence is at the heart of the Incremental Ladder, which is designed so that there is an appropriate rung for every person: the competency represented by the rung must not be so high that a person cannot hope to master it, yet it must be high enough that a person has to

⁷⁸Frances M. Stott, “Self-Esteem and Coping,” in James Garbarino et al., *What Children Can Tell Us: Eliciting, Interpreting, and Evaluating Information from Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989), p. 21.

“stretch” to achieve mastery. What we mean by this will become clearer if we use a concrete example involving a Project Match participant who has severe learning disabilities and difficulty completing simple tasks. A couple of years ago, Project Match was working closely with a local Head Start to develop a series of lower-rung activities. This woman had a child at the Head Start and we thought that a good activity for her would be to sign up other Head Start parents to volunteer there: it was clear that this task would be a challenge yet we believed it was within the woman’s capabilities, or her zone of proximal development. At first she had difficulty working the sign-up table, but eventually she could do it with relative ease, at which point we began to push her toward the next incremental competency: providing a monthly summary of parents’ volunteer hours at the Head Start. By giving the Head Start volunteer progressively more demanding tasks that, with the proper guidance, she could go on to master, we helped her to feel a sense of competency.

The lower rungs are also set up to foster the second dimension of self-esteem – acceptance. Stott defines the need for acceptance as “the need for approval from significant adults and the desire to be like them and participate in their activities.”⁷⁹ This need influences our behavior, our decisions, the way we feel about ourselves. The lower-rung volunteer activities help people to feel accepted because, as volunteers, they tend to be welcomed and appreciated by the agency or institution they have chosen. This is particularly true in settings that rely almost exclusively on volunteers to get the work done, like churches or food banks, but it is also true of Head Starts and schools, which actively try to involve parents.

Lower-rung settings also provide the opportunity for welfare recipients to become part of a new social group. Because community institutions and agencies tend to be relatively small and informal, to have a more inclusive atmosphere, and to encourage interaction and socializing among staff at all levels, it is easy for volunteers to meet new people and make new friends. At Head Starts, for example, it is not unusual for teachers, support staff, and parent volunteers to have lunch together and even to go together to Head Start-related meetings outside of normal working hours. These new “reference groups” are important from a work-prep perspective because they are composed primarily of working people who can serve as role models, yet these role models are easier for the volunteers to identify with because, as we mentioned before, they are often similar to the volunteers in many respects – they may live in the same neighborhood, they may be the same gender, they may be racially or ethnically similar, they may even once have been welfare recipients. The process of identification, for example, may be more likely to take place between two African-American women with similar backgrounds

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 26.

than between, say, an African-American woman and a white male with completely different backgrounds.

Fostering people's self-esteem through the development of a sense of competence and acceptance is essential to helping them learn to self-regulate. As Stott has written, people "whose self-esteem is most fragile are the most likely to distort both social (that is, 'objective') reality and their subjective experiences."⁸⁰ In the context of workplace relationships, this fragility is likely to manifest itself as the inability to distinguish between real grievances that might require formal action or looking for another job and situations that may be upsetting or irritating but that are normal in the workplace and that most people find a way to deal with. And without this ability to distinguish between "social reality" and "subjective experience," self-regulation on the job will never be possible.

The Issue of Workplace Diversity. Before closing this discussion, we think it is important to note that race and ethnicity can affect the ease and comfort with which people learn to interact appropriately on the job. In the United States, most workplaces are governed by white cultural norms. For many potential workers, these norms may be quite foreign and thus it may be more difficult to understand them. And even for those who understand the norms, they may not feel comfortable with them, which is a whole different problem: it takes a strong ego not to feel like you are buckling by conforming. While employers have been more likely to recognize these issues in relation to immigrants, there has been less recognition of the tensions between African-American culture and white American culture in the workplace. In our opinion, one of the main reasons for these tensions comes down to different ways of communicating. In his book *Black and White Styles in Conflict*, Thomas Kochman, a professor of communication, describes some of the differences between black and white modes of expression: for example, "black culture allows its members considerably greater freedom to assert and express themselves than does white culture. . . . It also values spontaneous expression of feeling. . . . White culture values the ability of individuals to rein in their impulses."⁸¹ Anyone who has attended services in both black and white churches has probably noted this difference: in most mainstream white churches, the congregation sits quietly, speaking and singing only where the liturgy indicates they should; in many black churches, in contrast, the congregation is much more spontaneously responsive, speaking and singing when moved to do so. In and of themselves, neither mode of expression is better or worse; they are simply different. But this difference can lead to discomfort, miscommunication, and conflict when the two styles come together, as they often do in the workplace. Given the reality of

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 38.

⁸¹Thomas Kochman, *Black and White Styles in Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 29-30.

workplace diversity, we believe that employers must do some “learning” about the culture of their workers – whether African-American, Asian, Hispanic, or something else – just as we expect workers to learn about the culture of the workplace. Through better understanding, tensions are likely to diminish.

Acquiring Job-Related Skills in Community Settings

Lower-rung activities are unique in that they provide an arena for welfare recipients to develop the “soft” skills of being able to adhere to a work schedule and interact appropriately on the job, but they can also be extremely useful in helping people acquire a variety of “hard” skills that are needed in many entry-level jobs: for example, basic math and reading skills, computer skills, office skills such as filing and phoning, writing and presentation skills, teaching skills, child care skills, and cooking skills, to name a few.

As in CWEP, OJT, and work sup, people in lower-rung activities acquire job-related skills through hands-on experience; however, the lower rungs are often a better place for learning such skills than any of these three traditional work activities. Though there are many reasons for this – for example, a “human sense” context is as important to learning hard skills as it is to soft skills – the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger is the most useful for understanding what is happening in lower-rung settings. In their book *Situated Learning*, Lave and Wenger argue that social processes are as important to learning as cognitive processes are; they examine both formal and informal apprenticeship situations in different cultures and isolate the social conditions that promote the acquisition of specific skills.⁸² Among these conditions are three that are particularly evident in the community agencies and institutions where welfare recipients can volunteer: in these settings, (1) the “community of practice” is relatively easygoing and engaging; (2) the volunteer can start out in a peripheral role and then move “in”; and (3) the volunteer has the chance to perform many different tasks and to try out different roles. (Although volunteers are not actual apprentices, in most cases they are in an apprentice-like learning role; thus, for the purposes of this discussion, *volunteer* and *apprentice* are synonymous.)

The Qualities of the “Community of Practice.” Lave and Wenger write at length about the community of practice in apprenticeship situations. By “community of practice” they mean not just the people but also the *gestalt* of the setting – its mission, values, atmosphere, attitudes, and other characteristics. The particular qualities of a community of practice will affect the learning process of the apprentice; in particular, “conditions that place newcomers [apprentices] in

⁸²Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

deeply adversarial relations with masters, bosses, or managers; in exhausting overinvolvement in work; or in involuntary servitude rather than participation distort, partially or completely, the prospects for learning in practice.”⁸³ In most community agencies and institutions, the conditions are the exact opposite: there is usually a feeling of mutuality among staff and volunteers, a sense of working together for a common cause. As we described earlier, in these settings there is usually frequent contact and an easy rapport between volunteers and staff at all levels and the atmosphere is more relaxed than in more traditional work settings. Further, it is significant that volunteers get to choose a community of practice, as opposed to being assigned to one, which is usually the case with CWEP, OJT, and work sup; when people are given no choice it is more likely they will feel put-upon. Having some control over where you’re going and what you’re doing can make a huge difference in attitude.

Starting in a Peripheral Role. Lave and Wenger describe how, in the beginning, apprentices need to be able to observe more experienced people and to play a peripheral role: “Newcomers [must] have broad access to arenas of mature practice. At the same time . . . a newcomer’s tasks are short and simple, the costs of errors are small, the apprentice has little responsibility for the activity as a whole.”⁸⁴ In fact, in the beginning observation may be the primary mode of learning. Then, usually gradually, the apprentice moves from the periphery toward the center, taking on more difficult and challenging tasks.

Many volunteer activities allow for this initial peripheral involvement. Community advisory boards and local associations provide a good example: some of our most isolated participants have embarked on a career pathway through a marginal role on a local school council, a tenant management board, or other similar group. One Project Match participant, for example, joined a Head Start policy committee. In the beginning her involvement did not extend beyond attending meetings and watching and listening. During this period of “peripheral participation” she had the opportunity to learn about the topics of concern to the committee as they were discussed at meetings; to read documents like agendas, minutes, and budgets; and to see how meetings are organized and conducted and what different people do on the committee.

If a person just stays on the periphery, however, the learning process stalls; the newcomer must have the chance to start playing a more active role. The value of many lower-rung volunteer settings is that they allow for this type of movement from the edges toward the center: for example, the Project Match participant on the Head Start policy committee was elected to the position of secretary after about a month. Now she had to take notes during each

⁸³Ibid., p. 64.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 110.

meeting and write the minutes. She could use the minutes she'd already read as a model and she had watched the previous secretary during other meetings, so she knew where to start. Also, because she was both self-conscious and conscientious, she had the social worker at the Head Start site proofread her minutes and point out errors in spelling and grammar. As the secretary of the policy committee, the Project Match participant had a real opportunity to work on her reading and writing skills in a supportive and instructive environment.

While many volunteer settings allow people to start on the periphery and then move into more active roles, many CWEP, OJT, and work sup positions do not have this advantage. First, many people in these welfare-to-work activities do not have a chance in the beginning to just observe and soak up what's happening. Instead, they tend to be given tasks right away and they often have no idea how what they're doing fits into the operation as a whole: for example, a person may be asked to photocopy large amounts of material, but the photocopier is off in a room apart from everyone else and the worker has no idea what she's photocopying and what the copies are intended for. (The person may not even be sure about how to operate the photocopier and may be afraid to ask.) Further, in many CWEP and other standard work activities, the welfare recipient doesn't ever have a chance to move into a higher position: people usually get slotted into an open position and do the same thing for the length of their placement – there isn't the type of fluidity that exists for volunteers.

Performing Different Tasks and Different Roles. Another way in which volunteer activities tend to be “fluid” is that people often have the chance to perform many different tasks and to try out different roles. According to Lave and Wenger, this is another hallmark of a good apprenticeship situation. In their descriptions of five apprenticeship situations, for example, they describe how Vai and Gola apprentice tailors in West Africa have the chance to observe and practice all the different aspects of creating garments: they learn to sew by hand and also by machine, to press clothes, to cut cloth for different patterns, to attach buttons and hem cuffs, and on and on. In contrast, Lave and Wenger describe apprentice butchers in modern supermarkets. For economic and organizational reasons, these apprentices often get pigeonholed for a single task and never get exposed to the range of tasks that are a part of butchering; thus, according to Lave and Wenger, their apprenticeships are a failure:

When he arrives at a store, an apprentice [butcher] is trained to perform a task, usually working the automatic wrapping machine. If he handles this competently, he is kept there until another apprentice comes. If none comes, he may do this job for years almost without interruption. . . . In this situation, not only apprentices but journeymen, too, seldom learn the full range of tasks once proper to their trade.⁸⁵

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 79.

In a community agency or institution, the volunteer is more like the apprentice tailor than the apprentice butcher when it comes to doing a lot of different things. At Project Match we have observed that many volunteers get to do a variety of tasks instead of being assigned to a single, highly routinized task. One Project Match participant volunteered in the library of the elementary school where her sister had also volunteered. Because the librarian was always shorthanded, the volunteer got to help in many different ways: she learned to use the computer to locate books, she cataloged and shelved books, and she helped children to use the library. The computer and clerical skills she learned in the library landed her a position in the school office as a clerk.

Another Project Match participant volunteered at a hospital-affiliated thrift shop in her neighborhood. As in many charity-related thrift shops, most of the work was done by volunteers and the manager was the only paid employee. The Project Match volunteer started out tagging merchandise, but she soon had the opportunity to learn to operate the cash register, to create window displays, and to assist customers. She proudly “complained” that on a few occasions she had to open and close the store, which involved operating the alarm system, among other things.

These loosely structured, open-ended community volunteer placements stand in contrast to most CWEP, OJT, and work sup placements, where a division-of-labor principle usually predominates. In these positions, welfare recipients usually do not have the chance to move around laterally and learn a variety of skills, just as they seldom have a chance to move up. Like the apprentice butcher, they are unlikely to learn the full range of tasks associated with an operation.

* * * * *

Although there is tremendous potential for acquiring “hard” job skills in lower-rung activities, we recognize that volunteering – like CWEP, OJT, and work sup – does not result in a diploma or credential that can be presented to an employer. If employers are going to recognize the value of volunteer experiences or other work-based placements, welfare-to-work programs must find a way to help welfare recipients articulate and market their newly acquired skills. A critical part of this is a good resume. A volunteer placement should be included on a resume, just the way a college student includes an unpaid internship on a resume. Not only should the placement be included, but responsibilities should be clearly detailed. Most welfare recipients will need help pulling out the elements of a volunteer experience that will make a resume shine. Unfortunately, the average welfare caseworker often does not have the time or expertise to sit with a person and do this; this is a point where a place like a resource room – with its specialized staff – can be of real value. The community agencies and institutions where

people volunteer should also be brought into the loop: welfare recipients should ask their volunteer supervisors to provide letters of reference. As we said earlier in this paper, attention to transitions is one of the most important aspects of the welfare-to-work process: if volunteer activities are to lead to unsubsidized employment, welfare-to-work programs must build on the experience and provide immediate and substantive job search assistance.

**The New Federal Welfare Law:
Where Do the Lower Rungs Fit Under TANF?**

With the passage of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant legislation, states have realized they will have to find ways to help hard-to-serve welfare recipients to prepare for work. We believe that the lower-rung activities are states' best option for this group. As we have shown in this section, these activities are not a "dumping ground"; they are developmentally sound starting points for the least job-ready that can help them build a foundation for future success at school and work. Properly implemented, these activities will maximize the number of welfare recipients who either become steady workers within a state's time limit or who at least make real progress toward that goal. Proper implementation is, of course, a big issue, one that we will address in the next section of this paper. But before we do that we want to describe the specific places where the lower rungs fit under TANF.

Meeting Participation Rates. Of concern to many states are TANF's progressively increasing annual participation rates: by the year 2002, 50 percent of single parents on welfare must be engaged in "countable" activities as defined by the federal government; for two-parent welfare families, the rate is 90 percent by 2002. These rates become even more daunting when one considers the fact that over the next couple of years, as many of the more job-ready welfare recipients move off the rolls, states' caseloads will be made up increasingly of the hard-to-serve. Given this fact, states are unlikely to consider implementing lower-rung activities unless they are countable under the federal guidelines.

Luckily, many of the lower-rung activities fit into the federal category called "community service." In the TANF legislation, community service is distinct from CWEP; further, the definition of community service has, at this point, been left to the states and, according to legal experts, as long as an activity "serves a public purpose," it should be allowable as community service. Thus, among the lower-rung activities, virtually every volunteer activity would qualify as community service (remember, in our description of volunteer activities we were careful to explain how they are different from CWEP placements). Also, many of the activities with children would qualify, like being a scout leader or the coach of a sports team. Probably *none* of the self-improvement activities would qualify, though treatment activities, which are part of this category, might have a special place in state plans apart from TANF.

It is important to remember that TANF allows people to combine activities within categories and across categories to count toward the participation rate. Thus, states should not disallow activities that take up fewer than twenty hours a week or, in future years, thirty hours. Two or more activities that require fewer hours per week can be combined to meet the federal participation rate. As we discussed earlier, combining might be difficult for states administratively, but, as we learned from JOBS, in the long run both states and welfare recipients end up paying in other, more serious ways if combining isn't allowed.

Meeting the Two-Month Community-Service Requirement. Under TANF, states must require welfare recipients to engage in community service after two months on the rolls unless they are “engaged in work” or exempt from work requirements. States may opt out of this provision, and many are expected to do so, but for states that don't, here is another place where volunteer activities, as well as many activities with children, would qualify as legitimate placements. Also, concerning this provision, states can determine the minimum hours per week for community service, so they are not tied to twenty or thirty hours a week.

Meeting the Two-Year Work Requirement. Under TANF, welfare recipients must “engage in work” after two years of assistance (whether or not consecutive) or when a state determines the recipient is ready to engage in work, whichever is earlier. The definition of “engaged in work” has been left up to the states and here again they have considerable latitude. We consider the two-year work requirement an opportunity to broaden the definition of “engaged in work” to include *all* lower-rung activities, based on the theoretical arguments presented in this section. Because each of the lower-rung activities can play a work-prep function either by helping people learn how to adhere to a schedule, or learn how to interact appropriately on the job, or acquire job-related skills, we believe there is no reason not to consider them as legitimate work-prep placements for the two-year work requirement. As with the two-month community-service provision, states can set the minimum hours per week of participation. In doing so, they should keep in mind that some people need to build gradually to twenty or more hours per week; they should also keep in mind that allowing people to combine activities is a good way to create an employability plan of twenty or more hours a week.

* * * * *

Lower-rung activities are meant to be a *first step* in the welfare-to-work process. To ensure that people don't get stuck in them and end up “hitting the wall” of the time limit, the activities must be implemented and administered properly: this means making sure that the activities chosen are developmentally appropriate for a person (i.e., that they fall within a participant's zone of proximal development); that participation in activities is closely monitored; that there are clearly stated sanctions for not participating in activities according to the terms of the

employability plan without good cause; and that employability plans are reviewed monthly so that people move up to more demanding activities as soon as they are ready. To help states implement and administer welfare-to-work programs that include lower-rung activities along with the standard work-prep activities, Project Match has created the Pathways System, which is briefly explained in the next, and final, section of this paper.

Conclusion

Getting From Here to There: The Pathways System

A Tool for Helping People Take Natural Pathways

Over the years, people have expressed agreement with the principles that underlie Project Match's Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence, particularly the need for, and the potential of, the lower-rung activities; the Ladder is frequently cited in discussions of welfare reform by conservatives and liberals alike.⁸⁶ Yet there has been a disjunction between support for the broad principles and the ability or motivation to operationalize them in large government programs. (Many small private programs *are* already using the Ladder.) Program designers and administrators have been either unable or unwilling to do the R&D needed to translate the Ladder into practice in their programs. At Project Match, we were both intrigued and frustrated by this disjunction – or what the policy analyst Laurence Lynn has called the “scaling-up problem”⁸⁷ – so we decided to take on the charge of R&D ourselves.

The first step in this process was to test and further develop the lower-rung activities in a non-Project Match setting. This was done in a demonstration project in 1993-94 in collaboration with Chicago's Department of Human Services, with funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The setting chosen was a Head Start program in Cabrini-Green whose existing parent-involvement component was the perfect vehicle for the development of a series of lower-rung activities.

When the Head Start demonstration ended, we were ready to take on the real scaling-up task: moving the lower rungs into a mandatory government welfare-to-work setting. To do this, however, we realized it would not be enough simply to further articulate the Ladder model in terms of a public system and present a list of administrative and procedural changes necessary to implement it. Rather, we would have to create a “product” that would embody the principles of the Ladder and that could literally be handed to line workers who, with training, could easily use it within the context of the existing system. Used properly, the product would allow line workers to implement the Ladder without having to understand all the underlying theories and rationales. An analogy for what we wanted to do might be found

⁸⁶See, for example, Mary Jo Bane and David T. Ellwood, *Welfare Realities: From Rhetoric to Reform* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); and Lawrence M. Mead, *The Decline of Welfare in Wisconsin*, Wisconsin Policy Research Institute Report (Milwaukee: Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, March 1996).

⁸⁷Laurence E. Lynn, Jr., “Scaling Up: Translating Service Models into Public Programs,” *Applied Behavioral Science Review* 1 (1993).

in the way that Apple created Macintoshes – and, later, that Microsoft created Windows – to make it possible for the average person to use a personal computer with ease and without having to know much at all about how the machine works.

The product we ended up creating is called the Pathways System.⁸⁸ In this section, we will briefly describe the three components of the system and we will conclude with a summary of the first year of the field-test of Pathways, which is currently being conducted in a welfare office on the South Side of Chicago with the cooperation of the Illinois Department of Public Aid.

The Three Components of Pathways

There are three components of the Pathways System: (1) the monthly activity diary, (2) the computerized tracking system, and (3) the basic rules and procedures for line workers and welfare recipients. The brief descriptions of the components that follow are not meant to constitute a manual for implementing Pathways. Along with the summary of the field-test, the descriptions are meant simply to give readers an idea of how Pathways works and what it can help line workers and welfare recipients accomplish.⁸⁹

The Monthly Activity Diary: The Heart of the System

The activity diary is an eight-page paper booklet that welfare recipients complete and return to their caseworker at the end of each month. It includes four main sections: the activity menu, the monthly employability plan, the activity verification logs, and a self-assessment section.

The Activity Menu. Each diary has an activity menu that is used by the caseworker and the welfare recipient to develop a monthly employability plan. The array of activities is drawn from the Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence and they include employment activities (e.g., full- or part-time work), pre-employment activities (e.g., job search and job-readiness), education/training activities, volunteer activities, activities with children, and self-improvement activities. Each category includes a list of specific activities; a welfare office can eliminate some of the activities in each category or add to them depending on what is available

⁸⁸The Pathways System was originally known as the PRIDE System. The development and field-testing of the system have been supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and three Chicago businessmen.

⁸⁹The materials for the Pathways System are copyrighted. Project Match is eager for states to use the system, though the materials must be purchased through Project Match.

in the community, but each category must have options in it – the full range of activities must be available.

The Monthly Employability Plan. On the front of the activity diary is a space for the monthly employability plan. To facilitate combining, there is room for up to three activities. An important feature of Pathways is that the employability plan is reviewed each month and revised. In this way, a person is never “standing still”: if she is doing well in a volunteer activity, for example, the next month the caseworker might push for more hours, more challenging tasks, or even a transition to a higher rung on the Ladder. And if the person has not been able to adhere to her plan, the caseworker might change the activities or reduce the hours to get the participant back on track.

The Activity Verification Logs. Participation in each activity of the employability plan is logged and verified on a separate page of the diary. There is a calendar for the month on each participation/verification page on which the welfare recipient notes the days, and hours each day, actually spent in an activity. Below the calendar is a box for verification of participation by the instructor or supervisor for the activity. The welfare recipient is responsible for obtaining verification for each activity each month before returning the diary to her caseworker.

In addition to a separate participation/verification page for up to three activities in an employability plan, there is a fourth page for a “substitute” activity. The possibility of substituting an unplanned activity for a planned one is an important feature of Pathways. Welfare recipients who fall into the hard-to-serve group tend to have more problems and crises than others do; therefore, there tend to be more occasions when they are unable to fulfill their employability plans. In JOBS, determining “good cause” was often a drawn-out and subjective process and it was frequently hard to figure out who had legitimate reasons for not going to scheduled activities and who was just trying to avoid an activity or obligation. The substituting feature of Pathways makes it easier and quicker to determine good cause and possible even to avoid initiating the whole conciliation process, because welfare recipients have the opportunity to verify in the diary why they did not meet the terms of their employability plan. A person may not be able to go to a scheduled activity one week because her child is sick, for example, but she can use the extra participation/verification page to record a visit or visits to the doctor. Or say, for example, that a participant’s car breaks down and she can’t get to her training program for a week while it’s being repaired; her child’s Head Start is within walking distance of home, however. She knows from the activity menu that volunteering at Head Start is an approved activity, even if it’s not part of her employability plan that month, so she volunteers there for several hours each day while her car is in the shop. She records the hours in her Pathways diary and gets her attendance verified; this way her caseworker knows that during

that week she fulfilled the spirit of her employability plan, if not the exact terms. In other words, the welfare recipient is able to show in the diary that she has made a good-faith effort.

The Self-Assessment Section. There is also a self-assessment section on the front of the diary that a welfare recipient fills out at the end of the month, prior to submitting the diary to her caseworker. The welfare recipient must check one of the following statements:

- I did more than I planned.
- I fulfilled my plan.
- I did not fulfill my plan.

There is also a checklist of “needs,” including “Need help to find a job,” “Need help to find child care,” “Just need someone to talk to,” and more. Project Match considers the self-assessment section to be an important feature of the diary because it requires the welfare recipient to reflect on the month just past and to articulate what help she needs, if any, to keep moving forward; unlike in the typical caseworker-welfare recipient relationship, the self-assessment section puts the welfare recipient in the position of making a judgment about her status and initiating action. Also, by asking the welfare recipient to assess her status and needs, Pathways makes the recipient an active participant in the “feedback loop,” which, as will be described below, is another important feature of the system.

***The Computerized Tracking System:
What Is the Feedback and Who Is in the Loop?***

The second component of the Pathways System is a computerized tracking system, which has been created to capture, process, and distribute the information recorded in the activity diary. Although the tracking system has the capability to generate a variety of reports, during Pathways’ field-test we have used it to generate three kinds of monthly printouts: one for caseworkers, one for welfare recipients, and one for administrators. The feedback loop that is created through these three reports is critical to the effective functioning of a welfare-to-work program: without accurate, detailed, and timely information, caseworkers cannot properly assist their clients, welfare recipients cannot know just what is expected of them, and administrators cannot learn what is working and what isn’t in a program.

Reports for Caseworkers. Each month, caseworkers receive a printout for each person on their caseload. The printout reports whether the welfare recipient submitted a diary for the month, what the employability plan was for that month, and what the recipient actually did that month. The caseworkers’ printout also includes other information important to case management, such as the support services used during the month and whether a letter was sent

out initiating the conciliation process. This monthly report is cumulative – that is, it includes all the months a person has been using Pathways – and it provides caseworkers with the information that makes it possible to evaluate accurately a welfare recipient’s *actual* performance and to revise the employability plan quickly to maintain momentum or to get people back on track if they’re headed in the wrong direction or just simply stuck in one place.

Reports for Welfare Recipients. Each welfare recipient gets a report similar to the one that goes to her caseworker. In the field-test, we only recently started generating this report; we did so because we realized it is a very effective and concrete way of letting welfare recipients know how they’re doing and what they need to do. In a time-limited system, it is more important than ever that welfare recipients understand where they stand, because ultimately, even in states with the best intentions, the responsibility falls on the welfare recipient to use her months of eligibility wisely. The monthly reports motivate people to take their employability plans seriously and they also serve as a quiet reminder that the clock is ticking.

Reports for Administrators. The monthly reports generated for administrators contain two types of statistics. They provide “point in time” information (i.e., cross-sectional data), such as the number of participants involved in each activity (including work) in a particular month and the number of people who did not participate and why they didn’t. The reports also provide cumulative, or longitudinal, data so that administrators can know what happens to individuals and groups of people over time.

Basic Rules and Procedures for Line Workers and Welfare Recipients: Maintaining the Integrity of Pathways

There are some basic rules and procedures that line workers and welfare recipients must follow if Pathways is to be effective. These rules and procedures fall into two categories: (1) those that cannot vary from state to state or program to program and (2) those that allow states or programs to choose among options to fit their specific goals and circumstances.

Rules and Procedures That Are Fixed. There are seven rules and procedures that must be implemented without variation:

- 1. Caseworkers must create monthly employability plans through negotiation with the welfare recipient** (i.e., plans cannot be created unilaterally).
- 2. The full range of activities must be available.** Programs may vary as to the specific activities available in each category of the menu, but each category must have a selection.
- 3. Welfare recipients must be allowed to combine activities within or across categories.**
- 4. Welfare recipients must be allowed to start with fewer than twenty hours per week of participation and to build up from there.**

Where Am I on the Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence?

Circle or fill in all current activities and activities in which you have participated during the past two years

Name: _____

Date: _____

Unsubsidized Jobs 40 Hours/Week (Over \$6.00/Hour, Benefits) Over 5 Years 4-5 Years 1-3 Years		Unsubsidized Jobs 40 Hours/Week (\$6.00/Hour or Less) Over 1 Year 7-12 Months 4-6 Months 0-3 Months		Unsubsidized Jobs 20 Hours/Week or More		Unsubsidized Jobs Less Than 20 Hours/Week 7-12 Months 4-6 Months 0-3 Months		Unsubsidized Jobs Less Than 20 Hours/Week	
Scheduled Hours 20 Hours/Week or More		Scheduled Hours 20 Hours/Week or More		Scheduled Hours 20 Hours/Week or More		Scheduled Hours 11-19 Hours/Week		Scheduled Hours 11-19 Hours/Week	
Completed		Completed		Completed		Completed		Completed	
B.A. Degree A.A. Degree Training Certificate High School Diploma GED Certificate		B.A. Degree A.A. Degree Training Certificate High School Diploma GED Certificate		B.A. Degree A.A. Degree Training Certificate High School Diploma GED Certificate		B.A. Degree A.A. Degree Training Certificate High School Diploma GED Certificate		B.A. Degree A.A. Degree Training Certificate High School Diploma GED Certificate	
College Courses Vocational Training ABE/GED Literacy		College Courses Vocational Training ABE/GED Literacy		College Courses Vocational Training ABE/GED Literacy		College Courses Vocational Training ABE/GED Literacy		College Courses Vocational Training ABE/GED Literacy	
5-10 Hours/Week		5-10 Hours/Week		5-10 Hours/Week		5-10 Hours/Week		5-10 Hours/Week	
College Courses ABE/GED Literacy		College Courses ABE/GED Literacy		College Courses ABE/GED Literacy		College Courses ABE/GED Literacy		College Courses ABE/GED Literacy	
3-4 Hours/Week		3-4 Hours/Week		3-4 Hours/Week		3-4 Hours/Week		3-4 Hours/Week	
Book Club Exercise Class/Aerobics Counseling Other		Book Club Exercise Class/Aerobics Counseling Other		Book Club Exercise Class/Aerobics Counseling Other		Book Club Exercise Class/Aerobics Counseling Other		Book Club Exercise Class/Aerobics Counseling Other	
1-2 Hours/Week		1-2 Hours/Week		1-2 Hours/Week		1-2 Hours/Week		1-2 Hours/Week	
Book Club Exercise Class/Aerobics Counseling Other		Book Club Exercise Class/Aerobics Counseling Other		Book Club Exercise Class/Aerobics Counseling Other		Book Club Exercise Class/Aerobics Counseling Other		Book Club Exercise Class/Aerobics Counseling Other	
Activities with Children		Volunteering/ Advisory Boards (Community Service)		Employment		Education /Training Activities		Self-Improvement Activities	



5. **Welfare recipients must submit a completed activity diary each month to the welfare department and there must be policies for failure to complete and submit a diary.** The diaries can be returned in person or welfare recipients can be given a pre-addressed, pre-stamped envelope for returning it.
6. **Caseworkers must review employability plans each month when the diaries are submitted.**
7. **There must be policies for failure to adhere to employability plans without good cause (i.e., sanctioning procedures) and the administrative capacity must exist to enforce these policies in a consistent and timely manner.**⁹⁰

Rules and Procedures That Have Options. There are three basic rules and procedures that have options among which states or programs must choose when implementing Pathways. Our discussion here of the options is not comprehensive, but we want readers to have a general idea of the issues states and programs will need to think about.

1. **Which welfare recipients will use Pathways?** Because the diary's activity menu contains the full array of work-prep activities from the Incremental Ladder, Pathways can be used with all types of welfare recipients, from those who aren't ready for the standard welfare-to-work activities to those who are working. Thus, states will need to decide who will use the system: **welfare recipients for whom lower-rung activities are appropriate**, either because they are assessed up front as needing them or because over time they prove to be hard to serve; or **welfare recipients who aren't working and are in *any kind* of work-prep activity** (i.e., not just lower-rung activities); or ***all* welfare recipients, including those who are working**. Once a person starts to use Pathways, though, the system is designed for her to continue to use it as long as she receives a grant, even when, for example, she goes from being in lower-rung activities to working part-time.
2. **How will caseworkers decide what the first activity should be?** Caseworkers will need guidelines about which type of activity a person should start with. Many states already have assessment instruments and they may choose to continue to use these or they may want to come up with new ones. At Project Match, we created the form "Where Am I on the Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence?" to help caseworkers and welfare recipients determine the initial placement (see the following page).
3. **Which format will caseworkers use for the monthly review of employability plans?** There are several ways caseworkers can handle the monthly review and the one chosen will depend on such things as caseload size and welfare recipients' schedules. The monthly review could be handled one-on-one or in a group format or using some combination of the two formats. For Pathways' field-test, we have mostly been using the group format; this is easier when line

⁹⁰While Pathways was designed for a mandatory program, and we believe it is most effective in such a program, it can be used as well in a voluntary setting. In addition to the field-test in a welfare office in Chicago, Pathways is being piloted in several nonmandatory settings, including an Early Head Start program in Chicago. In this Head Start program, staff view Pathways as a potentially powerful case management tool and also as the means to integrate welfare-to-work goals with family-support goals. Pathways is also being piloted in Iowa's Family Development and Self-Sufficiency (FaDSS) Program. Although this program is mandatory, failure to participate does not result in financial sanctions; it results in being sent back to Iowa's regular welfare-to-work program.

workers have large caseloads. We have also found that the participants like this format. At this point it is not clear to us whether one format is significantly more effective than another, though the group format is very promising.

States should remember that flexibility is the spirit of Pathways; it can operate in many different ways and in many different settings. In creating the system, we have tried to balance set rules and procedures that offer standardization and guidance against rules and procedures with options that give administrators and line workers discretion about how to customize their use of the system to best meet their needs.

Field-Testing Pathways in a Welfare Office in Chicago: How a Group of Hard-to-Serve Welfare Recipients Climbed the Incremental Ladder

In May 1995, Project Match began a field-test of the Pathways System at a welfare office on the South Side of Chicago with the cooperation of the Illinois Department of Public Aid (IDPA). This field-test is now in its second year, and the first year proved so promising that IDPA agreed to let us expand the demonstration. We must note that during the first year, which is the period we discuss here, we were still very much in the midst of the R&D process with Pathways: we were learning what worked and what didn't and making changes accordingly – even the Pathways activity diary changed over the course of the year. This process stands in contrast to what frequently happens in welfare-to-work demonstrations, where, for reasons often relating to evaluation protocol, it is usually difficult to make major changes midstream. Moving into the second year of the field-test, many of our procedures are tighter and better defined; the one issue that has not yet been completely worked out, however, is the conciliation and sanction process. During the first year, there were problems with the process: for example, conciliation letters weren't always sent out when they should have been and even when the caseworker filed the papers for several sanctions, somehow the sanctions never were processed. In part these problems occurred because IDPA has itself been reviewing and revising its conciliation and sanction process, but they also happened because there appears to be ambivalence in the state about sanctioning. We believe Pathways' effectiveness during the first year was probably compromised by this inconsistent follow-up; however, the first-year outcomes were still beyond our expectations, and IDPA's too.

Who Are the Participants in the Field-Test and Where Are They After One Year?

IDPA assigned thirty-three women to the Pathways field-test, the majority of whom (twenty-seven) entered during the first three months; therefore, almost all the women had at

least nine months using Pathways by the end of the first year of the field-test. We should say right off the bat that almost all the women were considered hard to serve by IDPA, which used as its criteria for assignment (1) failure in previous JOBS activities; (2) being in a “holding pattern” or failing to make progress in a current JOBS activity; or (3) failure to comply with the mandate to participate in JOBS. Of the twenty-seven women for whom we could obtain data on the length of their *current* welfare spell, 22 percent had been on welfare for ten to fifteen years; 30 percent for six to nine years; 26 percent for three to five years; and 22 percent for less than three years. In other words, this was a tough group.

By the end of the first year of the Pathways field-test, fourteen of the participants were employed – only one was off welfare completely, but given Illinois’ generous earned income disregard, it is common for people to work and remain on welfare – and the rest of the active participants were engaged in work-prep activities. The following table breaks down the status of all participants as of June 1996:

<u>Active Participants</u>	22
In employment only	11
In employment and education/training	1
In employment, volunteer activities, and job search	1
In education /training only	1
In education/training and volunteer activities	2
In education/training, volunteer activities, and parent-child activities	1
In job search and volunteer activities	1
In job search and parent-child activities	1
In volunteer activities and self-improvement activities	1
In volunteer activities and parent-child activities	2
<u>Inactive Participants</u>	11
Working and off welfare	1
Exempt	1
Never participated	6
Moved out of the area or transferred by IDPA to another program	3

As this table makes clear, most of the participants were straddling various rungs of the Incremental Ladder by the end of the first year. When the women came into the field-test, the

majority of their initial employability plans focused on lower-rung activities, but in a short period of time many moved up the Ladder. Although we felt confident that Pathways would move people along in this way, even we were surprised at how quick the progress was in many cases.

The Progress of Four Pathways Participants

To round out our discussion of the field-test, we have included brief case histories based on the experiences of four women who have been using Pathways.

Alice: Turning Problems with Children into Progress with Work

Alice is in her thirties, single, and African-American, with a daughter in high school. When she was assigned to Pathways, she attended the first monthly group meeting to learn how to use the activity diary and create an initial employability plan, but after that she did not return and no one ever heard from her. Because conciliation and sanction procedures were inconsistent during the first year of the field-test, she did not receive a conciliation letter until her fifth month of nonparticipation. This warning letter did push her to attend the next scheduled monthly meeting, however, and she quickly made a place for herself in the group. Alice is warm and outgoing and when the caseworker and other participants asked her why she hadn't been attending the meetings, she said that her daughter was always in trouble at school and she was spending all her time there trying to work things out.

While Alice's daughter's problems might usually be good cause for nonparticipation, from the perspective of Pathways those problems might be woven into an employability plan. By this time in the field-test even the other welfare recipients in the group understood this concept and, along with the caseworker, they encouraged Alice during that monthly meeting to turn all the time she was spending at her daughter's school into a lower-rung activity. They told Alice that since she was spending so much time at the school she ought to volunteer there, explaining that "your daughter won't get in so much trouble if you're there."

That month Alice's employability plan was to let the school know she wanted to become a volunteer: she was to figure out who to talk to, meet with that person, and set up a volunteer schedule. A lot happened that first month. First, Alice volunteered for twice as many hours as she was scheduled. Second, she demonstrated to the assistant principal that she was reliable and she was given the opportunity to try her hand at being a hall monitor.

By the third month at the school Alice had been offered a stipend of four dollars an hour and was working twenty hours a week. She would come back to the monthly Pathways meetings and amuse the group with her "complaints" about having to be up and out early in the morning, but she was clearly delighted with herself. She had been on welfare for fifteen years, since her daughter was born, and had not worked or been involved in any regular work-prep activity in all that time. This was her first paycheck in fifteen years.

Unfortunately, during the summer when school was out, Alice's daughter started getting in trouble again and this fall she was transferred to a special school. Alice's employability plan in September was to reapply for her job at her daughter's old school, which she did, but she was told that because her daughter is no longer there she is not eligible for the position. Alice's current plan is to do job search. She clearly gained enough experience in her school job to prepare her for private-sector employment, though we think it is likely that she will cycle through several jobs as she learns about the world of work and tries to find the right position.

Sandra: The Benefits of Regular Contact and Fine-Tuned Employability Plans

Like Alice, Sandra did not attend the monthly Pathways meetings regularly at first. It was never clear why she did not attend, but when she started coming regularly she threw herself wholeheartedly into job search. Sandra is in her late twenties and she has two children. She is a high school graduate and over the years has been in and out of jobs and also in and out of touch with the welfare department – in fact, she said she had been working during some of the months when she hadn't come to the Pathways meetings.

Sandra was determined to find some sort of public-sector job. One month she went to City Hall, reviewed the job listings, and took exams for the positions for which she felt qualified. The next month she applied for food-service and bus-attendant positions in the Chicago school system and also at a couple of suburban schools. Each month she carefully documented her considerable job search activities and gave the Pathways group a blow-by-blow account of her efforts, including how she answered specific questions on applications and what she was asked during interviews. Everyone felt sure she'd get hired by someone – it was just a matter of persistence and good timing. During those months of job search, the Pathways group functioned primarily as a support group for Sandra: she already had a plan in her own mind, but the encouragement of the group helped her keep going. And the group learned a lot by watching Sandra's intensive job search up close.

During one of the monthly meetings, Sandra said that one of the schools had asked her for references and told her to get a physical and take a drug test. She wasn't exactly sure what this all meant. The group told her that it meant the school was seriously considering hiring her. Sandra wasn't sure what to do at this point. A hallmark of Pathways is that employability plans can be fine-tuned each month to fit the circumstances of the moment. Thus, that month Sandra's employability plan focused on putting together a list of references, scheduling appointments for a physical and drug test, and then *going* to those appointments. In short, the plan focused on making sure that Sandra did everything necessary to stay in the running for

the job. Sandra followed her plan to the letter and at the next meeting she announced she had been hired as a bus attendant for special ed students, earning more than ten dollars an hour.

Sarah: Building on Self-Initiated Activities

Sarah is a shy, inarticulate, and earnest twenty-eight-year-old Hispanic woman who has been on welfare continuously for ten years. For a couple of years before being assigned to Pathways, she had been volunteering regularly at the school her two children attend, spending ten hours a week calling the homes of children who were absent. Her volunteering had not been considered a legitimate work-prep activity by the state.

One of the strategies of Pathways is to take people's current, independently initiated activities and interests and to build on them to create a natural pathway. Thus, when Sarah first came into Pathways, her initial plan was simply to increase her hours of volunteering, to see if she could stretch a bit. She did this willingly and easily. Also, from day one she took the Pathways activity diary seriously: she was meticulous about recording the hours each day she volunteered, getting the principal to sign the verification log, and tallying her hours to demonstrate she had fulfilled her plan.

It became clear pretty quickly that Sarah was ready to tackle a more challenging plan and we followed a key principle of Pathways when creating that plan: make sure people keep one foot in the comfort zone, where there is a low risk of failure, while inching them into a more demanding zone. For Sarah, that more demanding zone was a training program. She had heard about a child development associate program that would qualify her for a paid position at her children's school. For the next few months, her employability plan called for her to continue volunteering and also to learn more about the training program and, if possible, to enroll. To the average person this might not sound like much, but for Sarah it was a lot: she would have to talk to an administrator at her children's school whom she did not know and convince her that she deserved the paid position – a pretty overwhelming task for someone as shy as Sarah. She was also to get information from several local colleges that offer a training program similar to the one she had heard about, so she could consider different alternatives.

This plan turned out to be too ambitious for Sarah; we had overestimated her ability to initiate actions like talking to the administrator and calling different colleges. We had *underestimated* her desire to go to school, however. At the next monthly Pathways meeting we learned that she had responded to a telephone solicitation for a proprietary school that was offering a general business curriculum. To our surprise she had already taken and passed the entrance exam, signed for a loan, and purchased her books, and she was scheduled to start school the next week.

Everyone at the Pathways meeting was upset about Sarah's decision; many of the women shared horror stories about people who had dropped out of proprietary schools and been left with huge loans to repay. Some of the women suggested free programs for which Sarah would be eligible and informed her she could still get out of the loan since she had not attended her first class, but Sarah ignored the advice.

Since Sarah started school, her days have been filled with classes and homework and she no longer has time to volunteer, so it has been dropped from her monthly plan. She is still conscientious about attending monthly meetings, however, and although her shyness keeps her from talking about her accomplishments, she brings evidence of them to the group that speaks for her: her activity diary documents her regular attendance at school and it is always verified by a school administrator; Sarah also folds copies of her excellent report cards and letters of congratulation from the dean into the pages of her diary. Without having to say a word, Sarah has found a way to share her progress with her caseworker and the group, receiving enthusiastic feedback and support in return.

Sarah's confidence has grown tremendously since she came into Pathways, in part because of the monthly meetings. Though she is still almost mute, she keeps upping the ante: a few months ago, when a community agency offered her the chance to apply for a job with a shipping company, she seized the opportunity. She is now in the final semester of her business program and has been working part-time for two months earning eight dollars an hour. Her newly acquired accounting skills, the business certificate she will soon earn, and her current work experience have all put her on a stable and promising pathway off welfare.

Charlayne: Trying to Distinguish Between Good Cause and Bad Excuses

Of the twenty-two women who have been active in the field-test, we have had the least success with Charlayne; we have not yet found a pathway for her to take.

Charlayne is a thirty-two-year-old African-American woman with four children, all under age twelve. She has been on welfare continuously since her first child was born and has virtually no work experience. When she came into Pathways, it was hard even to find any activities in which she was involved that might count on the lower rungs. Her daughter was enrolled in a singing group that requires parents to bring their children and to help out, but upon questioning it became evident that something always "came up" that prevented Charlayne from getting her daughter there. Just what was coming up was unclear, but this seemed to be the only activity around which to organize Charlayne's first employability plan.

That first month, Charlayne didn't complete her plan, nor did she fill out her diary. There is a space in the diary to explain why a plan wasn't met, but Charlayne said she didn't want to

put anything in writing in the diary, even though she said she had good cause. The requirements of the diary were explained again to Charlayne and we ascertained that she did in fact understand how to use the diary and had the literacy skills to complete it. We also decided to try another plan for the next month: she was to volunteer at her youngest child's Head Start.

From month to month thereafter we tinkered with her plan, increasing or decreasing her hours at Head Start based on what she had done the previous month and including job search at times at her request, but Charlayne never seemed to go anywhere with her plans. She consistently had weak excuses for not fulfilling her plan and continued to refuse to use the diary even to document good cause. At one point, her failure to fulfill her plan was absolutely justified – her son had been beaten with a baseball bat and her month was spent at doctors' offices and caring for him. Still, although she knew she should have, she did not use the diary to explain the crisis or document the hours spent handling it with doctors.

As we've already noted, the conciliation and sanction process was not used consistently during the field-test, so it is unclear whether the threat of a sanction or even an actual sanction might have motivated Charlayne. At this point, it is unclear what Charlayne is capable of doing. She still attends the monthly Pathways meetings, however, and participates in the discussions, and in the world of Pathways this is something to build on.