



Community Leadership Team of Beyond Welfare (CLTm)

Story County is home to Iowa State University, in the university town of Ames. It is a mostly urban environment, with about three-quarters of the county's 79,981 residents (including 27,000 students) living in town. The county is 91 percent white and median income hovers at \$40,000. This relatively prosperous area, though, also includes a significant level of poverty – affecting at least 12 percent of the county's households, or 9,600 people. As in other parts of the country, people of color are over-represented in this group.

Eight years ago, the eight founders of the Community Leadership Team (CLTm), themselves recently off welfare and still solidly in the ranks of the working poor, started asking people on welfare what they wanted and needed to be safely out of poverty. Topping the list were transportation and informal relationships with community members who could connect families to work and to their communities – priorities that are still evident in the partnership's shape and activities.

These discussions were part of a county-wide effort to respond at the local level to changes in the wake of federal welfare reform, but grew into something much broader – and much more significant. Today, the CLTm includes participants (people marginalized by poverty) and allies (people with sufficient income who partner with them). In 2001, the original group, supported by a local Community Action Program (CAP) agency and Move the Mountain Leadership Center, created a nonprofit spin-off, Beyond Welfare. Beyond Welfare provides a more formal organizational home for funding, staffing, and particular initiatives sparked by the CLTm partnership.

The small circle of eight first had to convince *themselves* that they were leaders, with gifts and talents to share. They did so in fits and starts, with a combination of “laughter and trembling.” They convinced each other to trust their knowledge of their own lives – knowledge that no one else had. Better than any expert, they knew what had held them back and pushed them down. It was, they concluded, not just a lack of money, which is only the most obvious manifestation of poverty. It was also the devaluing of everything worthwhile about them – intelligence, talent, having something to offer. It was the profound isolation from other people – both poor and privileged. It was the particular way that believing you had nothing to offer stole meaning and purpose from your life.

Really, they decided, it was the interplay of money, meaning, and relationships that kept people entrenched in poverty, aided and abetted by a one-way “helping” paradigm among service providers that actually made things worse instead of better. In other words, it was a combination of individual or internal causes and external, systemic ones. And they had some ideas, from their own lives, about how all of these factors could be changed.

Rules of Engagement: Building Relationships

Relationships are central to everything CLTm does; the partnership’s structure looks like concentric circles of different types of relationships. These include Beyond Welfare’s Board of Directors of nine people, five of whom are currently or formerly living in poverty, and two full-time staff; up to 75 active CLTm participants (people marginalized by poverty); and 100-plus allies across the county (people with sufficient income). A third of the participants are African Americans – a larger proportion than the general population, reflecting CLTm’s intentionality in engaging people of color, as well as the intersection of poverty and race.

The configuration of relationships shifts depending on the situation, but intentional relationship building is incorporated into every activity and interaction. Relationships are both an integral part of the collaborative process, as well as part of the solution of breaking down the isolation of poverty. For example, every Thursday, CLTm holds dinner meetings that draw between 40 and 50 people – two-thirds experiencing poverty, and a third their allies who have sufficient income. The economic distinction of income – marginalized by poverty, or with sufficient income – is the only distinction between participants and their allies. At the weekly meetings, this distinction is dropped at the door. Visitors to the meetings have commented that it is impossible, from the interaction in the room, to tell who is staff, who is poor, and who is not.

The weekly meetings include a half hour of fellowship over a free meal. Parents are encouraged to bring their children so that they, too, can participate in a gathering that crosses lines of class, race, and gender. After the meal, the adults meet to discuss the group's work, with two meetings a month devoted to self development and two to policy issues and systemic change. Free, high-quality child care is provided for children while adults are meeting, along with transportation, if needed. People marginalized by poverty speak first; a goal is to communicate how much their intelligence and voice are valued. (This is in direct contrast to other systems designed to "help" poor people, which communicate the opposite: that their voices and insights are not needed or valuable.) Listening pairs (in which one person speaks at a time, without reaction or interruption from a partner) are one tool to bring out views, along with an emphasis on strengths and appreciation of contributions and talents.

One important aspect of the weekly meetings – and one of the reasons they are so consistently well-attended – is their responsiveness. As concerns or challenges are raised, the group decides what to do about it, on the spot. Perhaps it can be resolved that very evening. If so, that's what happens. If not, another concrete step is organized before the end of the meeting – another

meeting, a spin-off to a workgroup, or placement on a Board agenda. If a larger-scale initiative is called for, this too is arranged immediately, with people who are interested in the issue invited to convene again at a specific time and place.

The next circle is that of Family Partners. Trained volunteers, initially drawn from local congregations, commit to being a sounding board and source of support to a participant and his or her family. These allies may work with participants in various ways, such as identifying employment opportunities through their own social and professional networks.

Another way that relationships are built is through Circles of Support. These circles involve several allies (not just one paired more intensively with a family, as happens with Family Partners). The group of allies together wrap around a participant, meeting monthly to help participants meet their goals. Commitments range from short-term and less intensive support (like occasional babysitting, or looking over a resume) to more major types of support – such as when a Circle of Support member took in a participant's children when she entered a residential drug treatment program.

Critical to this role is the ally's understanding that the relationship is a two-way street. CLTm members have sponsored poverty simulations and role plays to help people who have never experienced or thought about poverty understand it better, but sometimes this is not enough. In fact, some allies have been so uncomfortable with this idea – that they have much to learn from people in poverty and poor people are not somehow damaged, needing to be fixed – that they have dropped out of the program. But for those who are willing to examine their own perceptions about poverty and its causes, their own biases and stereotypes – for them, it truly is a rewarding experience, in sometimes unexpected ways. For example, recently a financial advisor who had been paired with an impoverished Mexican family spoke up at a weekly meeting about how his interaction with this young mother and her amazing children had

changed *him*. An unquestioning product of a privileged upbringing, he had never thought about the concentration of wealth and power in our society, nor about the effects of policies on her and families like her. “Now,” he told the group, “I have this new friend . . . and I think about these things every day.”

An internal evaluation has supported CLTm’s instinctive emphasis on the power of relationships. The group found that the variable that explained most of the variance in whether CLTm families moved towards self-sufficiency was the extent to which they had chosen to get involved in the relationships built through meetings, Family Partners, and Circles of Support – not how long they had been on welfare, whether or not they had been abused, or the age at which they had started families.

In all of these activities – weekly dinner meetings, Family Partners, and Circles of Support – relationships cross class lines in ways that are meaningful to both sides of the interaction. It is no coincidence that CLTm’s sense of purpose talks about everyone, rich and poor. It talks about us, not we or them: “. . . That everyone in our community has sufficient money to meet their basic needs; that all of us have mutually supportive, safe and stable family and community relationships that support our gifts and dreams; that all of us wake up in the morning with a sense of purpose and meaning, knowing that our presence and participation in the community makes a difference.” This is why CLTm sees its role as community-building.

Sharing Gifts: Reciprocity

An aspect of finding meaning that is particularly important to CLTm’s founders – and absent from programs designed to help poor people – is the notion of reciprocity. CLTm’s values and philosophy emphasize that the fact that people live in poverty has nothing to do with what they can contribute. In the group’s

very first meetings, CLTm participants said that they did not want “something for nothing.” They didn’t want to be treated as if they had nothing to give.

The partnership’s first initiative – the “Wheels to Work” program – was a response to the extent of transportation problems among people in poverty – undermining employment opportunities and keeping people isolated in the process. The group organized a car donation program (supported by donated services from mechanics) that has collected 130 cars so far – cars that help people get back and forth to jobs, to school or job training classes, weekly CLTm meetings, and many other activities. Yet the cars are not simply given to those in need. People who receive a donated car are expected to give back – perhaps by giving rides to others or offering occasional day care. The point is not just the expectation that recipients “should” give back, but rather that they too have gifts and can offer those gifts to others.

The donor of the first “Wheels to Work” car has just finished his Family Partner orientation training, moving from a generous act of charity to a more significant commitment of time and relationship-building. And the recipient of that car? She is in her fifth year on the job, proud of a steady stream of promotions and raises.

Influencing Policy

The voices of people marginalized by poverty are raised within the weekly meetings, Family Partnerships, and Circles of Support – all a good start. But to truly change society, CLTm believes in raising these voices in a particular way outside the group as well. To accomplish this, participants are encouraged to get involved in addressing the systemic problems that affect them – and receive training and support to do so. So far, over a third have pursued these types of activities. This has included telling their stories to local, state, and federal policy makers to help them understand the consequences of different policies as well as serving on boards at the local, county, and state levels. For example, CLTm

participants serve on the state's Community Advisory Team that advises human service agencies throughout the state. Another group of participants created a resident leadership team at a HUD housing complex and together were able to leverage new funds for community improvements.

Through their contact with legislators, CLTm participants helped protect Iowa's child care funding from the cuts experienced by other public programs. A new initiative is to work with a local chapter of the League of Women Voters on a living wage campaign. Beyond Welfare and CLTm members achieved a significant – and hard-won – victory when they worked with local workforce development staff to get involvement in CLTm's activities to count for up to half of the 20 required weekly hours of work-readiness activities.

Pathways to Collaboration

CLTm's accomplishments illustrate the power of viewing problems through the lens of people who are directly experiencing them. Because people marginalized by poverty founded CLTm and have continually been in leadership positions, the partnership has been able to appreciate the limitations of the "helping paradigm" in moving people safely out of poverty and the centrality of building meaningful, two-way relationships that cross the lines of race and class. The relationships that CLTm is intentionally building are enhancing the lives of involved allies as much as those of people experiencing poverty. These relationships are directly addressing the root causes of poverty by breaking down the isolation that holds poverty in place. At the same time, they have laid the foundation for a strong, collaborative process in the community that is addressing many other factors that contribute to poverty.

CLTm's founders are grateful that in *Pathways to Collaboration* they have found a forum for their partnership that is full of people who, in their words, "get it." Unfortunately, this has not always been their experience. In particular, CLTm

sometimes has had trouble convincing human service providers that there is a distinct and important difference between service provision and community building. For these service providers, it is hard to understand and adopt CLTm's insight that service alone may not work over the long haul if families are not also connected to communities. With the help of the Pathways workgroup participants, they hope to learn more about how to shift perceptions at this level – as well as the programs that flow from them.

The process of applying for inclusion in the *Pathways to Collaboration* Workgroup caused CLTm to give more scrutiny to its organizational structure. As the partnership grows, its members are interested in how others balance more structure without becoming, as they put it, “too institutional.” Overall, they are looking forward to learning more creative ways to put their philosophy about money, meaning, and relationships to work, to fulfill their dream of building community and ending poverty in Story County.