



Tri-County Workforce Alliance

The rural, agricultural Mississippi Delta has often been called the poorest region in the poorest state in the United States. Despite some modest gains in the last decade, it remains so, with a legacy of multi-generational and extreme poverty extending back in time for over a century. The Delta, not coincidentally, was a hub for the cotton trade, the slavery trade in human beings that made such farming possible, and the blues that described the aftermath of both.

The Tri-County Workforce Alliance, which includes people from three Delta counties (Bolivar, Coahoma, and Quitman), was formed to counter decades of neglect of the region's economic and educational development, especially for its poorest citizens. The three counties span 1,600 square miles. In each county, at least a third of the population lives under the Federal Poverty Level, with *per capita* income ranging from \$15,000 to \$18,000 and unemployment between 10 and 11 percent.

To reverse these trends, the Tri-County Workforce Alliance is dedicated to building a competitive workforce through education and job training, emphasizing two groups of residents. One is young people – future workforce members. The other is people who have been out of the workforce for a long time (or perhaps have never been part of it) and who need support and training to either enter or re-enter it. To address the root causes of poverty in the area, Tri-County is also confronting a legacy of racism and the hopelessness that grows out of isolation and poverty.

Building Bridges

Tri-County has two paid full-time staff members (an Executive Director and secretary), five part-time staff members, and a 27-member Implementation Team that functions like a Board of Directors. The Implementation Team includes people from all three counties and brings people together across several dividing lines: race (African-Americans and whites), class (unemployed and low-income people along with more economically privileged people), and sectors (such as business, government, and education). The Team is always open to new members, who have an opportunity to voice their ideas and concerns and to vote on group decisions.

Low-income people are an important, active, and respected part of the Implementation Team and the broader partnership, reflecting Tri-County's belief in the value and dignity of all people, no matter what their socioeconomic position might be. The partnership holds welfare simulations to increase the sensitivity of potential employers, social service providers, government officials, and community leaders to the realities of living in poverty. In these and other gatherings, people on welfare present to others in the group – not the other way around. To help put everyone on a more equal footing and break down barriers, Team members have urged people in suits and ties to put these aside for community meetings. To make partnership meetings accessible to people throughout the three counties, the meetings are rotated to different locations, including places (such as housing developments) that are most convenient for community residents and where they feel most comfortable. The partnership also holds public forums in each of the three counties.

The members of Tri-County's Implementation Team recognize that despite their best efforts, they can't assume that the people they most want to hear from will come to them. Consequently, Team members are constantly on the road, meeting with community residents face-to-face to understand their views about

the problems they are experiencing, and to involve them in addressing these problems.

Sometimes, Tri-County's efforts have been resisted. This has been true, for example, of some of the partnership's job training efforts related to the transition from welfare to work. For generations, a sizable proportion of impoverished people living in the Tri-County region had depended on government assistance, without jobs or the education and skills to get them. The transition from welfare has been difficult for many people, but Tri-County members understand that this challenge is a manifestation of the same oppression they are trying to overcome with better schools, better jobs, and the skills to match people to those jobs. They are determined to break, once and for all, the cycle of multi-generational poverty.

Another historical barrier is racial segregation. Blacks and whites still attend different schools, live in different neighborhoods, and socialize in different places. Against this backdrop, Tri-County's commitment to diversity is unusual.

It was not easy for Tri-County's diverse members to reach their current status of an effective, multiracial organization – especially at the beginning. But the partnership's founders persevered because they realized that without both blacks and whites at the table, they would not be able to accomplish their economic development goals.

Moving from Listening to Empowerment

The Tri-County Workforce Alliance puts a premium on raising voices that are rarely heard in job training and employment discussions: those of people who are outside the workforce. In practice, this means constant contact and a great deal of effort. In addition to partnership meetings and forums, the voices of these

community residents come through surveys, focus groups, open meetings in many different locations, and even knocking on doors.

But getting people's ideas and input is only the first step. To build trust, Tri-County had to show it was listening and basing its actions on what it heard. This has included not only taking steps that respond to the issues people identify, but carefully going back to the sources of information to check that messages have been heard and interpreted accurately.

One example of linking listening to action is the attention Tri-County has paid to the very real obstacle of lack of transportation. In conversations with community residents, Implementation Team members heard a steady refrain of "jobs and transportation" at the top of everyone's list. People who did manage to get jobs at nearby casinos were having trouble getting back and forth, so the partnership organized a new bus route across unused feeder roads to give new workers an easier and faster way to get to work.

Listening and responding are an important first step in chipping away at a sense of hopelessness – a certainty, borne out by past experience, that things are unlikely to change. For Tri-County, the critical next step is for people directly affected by poverty and its consequences to become actively involved in potential solutions – empowering and transforming them in the process.

One example of such involvement is Tri-County's professionalization curriculum, which was jointly developed by a group of employers, employees, un- and under-employed people, educators, and social service representatives. The group's initial discussions were heated, but productive. (This illustrates another aspect of communication that is important to Tri-County: letting differences of opinion and conflicts surface, instead of sweeping them under the rug.) Voicing their different perspectives, the members of the group identified what employers are looking for in order to hire people, and what unemployed people need in order to go to work.

That information formed the basis for a training and internship program. Today, community residents who want to enter the workforce have a way to ease the transition; employers, in turn, can rely on graduates of the program. The process has had an impact on the people who participated as well. An unemployed woman who served on the committee, and who initially thought no one had heard a word she said, now has the satisfaction of seeing her ideas and life experience valued in the curriculum she helped create.

Upward Mobility: Learning the Carpentry Trade

With the end of at least one part of the welfare era looming, members of the Tri-County Workforce Alliance were looking at industries that might provide higher-wage jobs and some upward mobility for women making the transition from welfare to work. The local health sector seemed promising, but some research revealed that the types of jobs available – data entry, receptionist, and nursing assistant positions – were not much better than the low-wage casino jobs in the area.

When a survey of women seeking work listed carpentry as their top choice among many training and career options, the partnership kicked into gear. Its members worked with Coahoma Community College and local contractors to design and offer an 18-week “Carpentry for Women” course. Incorporating ideas from women seeking this training, the course not only teaches skills in basic carpentry, but also includes 30 minutes of physical activity and stretching at the beginning of each class. Contractors come in to talk about the work environment, and sessions cover other practical topics, like applying for a job, repairing bad credit, budgeting, working as part of a team, and balancing work and family. The students also learn some basic computer skills and apply them to calculating measures and angles for their class project: a fully roofed and wired doghouse-sized structure, complete with interior trim. Help with transportation and child care is available, and the students give back by donating

a week of carpentry work to Habitat for Humanity. Last year, as a gift to the community college that has donated space for the classes, the students wired the college's outdoor field house.

Youth: The Future Workforce

The members of the Tri-County Workforce Alliance are proud of what they have accomplished in the past seven years, but they know there's plenty of unfinished business in their three counties. For example, in 1997, the Team's Future Workforce Taskforce brought some sobering statistics to the attention of the partnership's Implementation Team: 75% of the area's schools were functioning at a level of 1 or 2 (on a scale of 1 to 5). Sixty percent of the students had scored below the state mean in reading and math on state exams. Middle schools students – those in fourth, fifth, and sixth grades – were at the greatest risk of failing these classes. Community business leaders confirmed that students were not graduating from area schools with the basic skills needed to succeed in business and industry.

In response, Tri-County tackled the problem from a variety of angles. One strategy was to launch after-school programs in some of the middle schools in one county. Student performance increased in these schools, and now the program is being adopted by schools in the other two counties. Another strategy was to bring industry representatives and teachers together to understand each others' perspectives and needs. Teachers spent time at local businesses and found ways to incorporate what they had learned into their lesson plans and lectures. Some teachers even pursued internships at area businesses during breaks from teaching.

The involvement of parents in their children's education was a tough issue identified and addressed by the partnership. To learn more about parents' concerns – and about barriers that might be keeping them from becoming more

involved in their children's education – Tri-County sponsored "Parent Rallies" to explore their ideas. One result has been increased enrollment of parents in the parent-teacher organizations associated with local schools.

Helping parents reach their own educational goals has been another outcome. Hearing about the difficulties that many parents were having in helping their children – either because of their own jobs (often covering more than one shift) or because their own educational backgrounds had not prepared them to offer help with reading and math – Tri-County sought ways to give parents more confidence and skills. Leveraging connections within the partnership, Tri-County was able to refer parents and other people to the local community college's successful GED certificate program, which has now awarded 200 GEDs.

To provide parents with additional support, Tri-County is planning a new program called "At Grandma's House." The "grandmas" will be retired teachers who receive small stipends for taking in students after school. During their time together, the grandmas and students will read to each other and the grandmas will be available to help with homework.

Pathways to Collaboration

To meet the profound needs of young people and unemployed adults, Tri-County's Implementation Team has had to rely on many helping hands from its members – and very little financing. Those circumstances have created a strong and active partnership, with many different people and organizations pitching in, deciding what to do, and making it happen. Tri-County's collaborative process brings people together across the geographic expanse of a large rural area with poor transportation. It also connects people across more difficult divides: those of race, class, and sector. Over the years, the partnership has made important strides in building trust and enthusiasm where people had every reason to feel

suspicion and hopelessness. All of these lessons are ones Tri-County is eager to share with the other Pathways partnerships.

At the same time, Tri-County is confident that the other partnerships in the workgroup will have ideas they can use, now and in the future. For example, how can Tri-County involve more of the low-income residents in the community in leadership roles? How can it deal more successfully with policymakers? What strategies from urban settings might translate well to the rural Mississippi Delta? By addressing these and other challenges, Tri-County hopes to create a collaborative process that will change people's lives not only in this generation, but also in those to come.