

WORKFORCE NARRATIVE PROJECT

Investing in Workforce: Strengthening Distressed Communities and Disadvantaged Populations

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Draft: April 6, 2007

Introduction

Rapid economic change in recent years has produced impressive national growth but also an unsettling turn of events: job insecurity is growing, income gaps are widening, and the bottom seems to be slowly slipping. Workforce developers could play an important role in addressing the situation, particularly in preparing less-skilled adult workers to navigate the uncharted waters of an economy where constant job change and lifelong learning are likely to be a permanent feature of the labor market experience. Yet investments in workforce training are on the decline and political support to reverse the trend seems to be in scant supply.

The reasons for the disinterest are varied, ranging from a national drift away from concern for the urban poor and workers to a sense that previous workforce strategies have been flawed to a simple recognition of ongoing fiscal shortfalls. Reversing the political calculus and enhancing the flow of workforce dollars will require reaching out to both some usual suspects, such as businesses who need more productive workers, and some unlikely allies, such as activists and educators concerned about child welfare. And it will require shoring up the connections with, and arguments for those for whom investment in workforce preparation for adults would seem to be a natural complement to their own goals and activities.

Among the latter group are those in the community development field. Many community developers have been focused on addressing the spatial concentration of poverty, particularly in America's urban areas, and the negative effects that arise from living in locations where work has "disappeared" and social fabrics are torn. Others, often working in immigrant communities with higher rates of labor force participation, have found their efforts to promote neighborhood vitality stymied by the low wages earned by highly motivated but poorly rewarded low-skill workers. Addressing these pockets of poverty involves the pantheon of activities with which community developers have been traditionally associated, including the development of affordable housing, the creation of neighborhood retail, and the strengthening of community institutions. But central to all of these is restoring both attachment to the labor force and an improvement in the rate of return to labor effort.

For these reasons, community developers – and others who care about spatial concentrations of the poor – should be at the forefront of efforts to increase and improve workforce investment, particularly investments that serve the distressed neighborhoods hosting disadvantaged workers most in need of education and training. That they are not speaks to the ways in which workforce and community development have become unfortunately disconnected. Reconnection is a national imperative: workforce investment is a critical factor in alleviating poverty and building healthy communities, addressing such spatially concentrated poverty is crucial to the future of metropolitan America, a new approach to workforce development that is sensitive to both people and place could make a big difference in a complete community-based strategy for the poor.

All Together Now

Being poor is bad but being poor with lots of poor neighbors seems to be worse. Communities in which large numbers of residents fall below the poverty line tend to have higher levels of crime, lower quality neighborhood schools, lower levels of private investment, and reduced access to fresh food and open space (Berube and Katz 2005, Flournoy and Treuhaft 2005). Living in concentrated poverty can even affect the quality of social networks: my colleagues and I have shown how living in poor neighborhoods can limit the range of social contacts in ways that impact the scale of labor market search and the eventual wage reward to any given set of human capital characteristics (Benner, Leete, and Pastor 2007, Pastor and Marcelli 2000, Pastor and Adams 1996). Concentrated poverty, in short, is damaging to both economic health and quality of life.¹

In the community development field, there have been two competing approaches to confronting the negative effects of concentrated poverty. The first is to encourage people to leave, a strategy that can help certain individuals but simply increases the concentration of those poor who stay. The second is to encourage overall neighborhood development, hoping that the effects will eventually rub off on the residents. This “people versus place” debate has dominated the field – and, as we suggest below, it is a rather stale way to think about the problem.

But an equally stale way to think about the problem is to assume that this is an issue of importance only to poor communities themselves. A spate of new research is suggesting that the problems of poor communities often spill over the boundaries of distressed neighborhoods and can affect overall economic prosperity. Some of this, including work by Myron Orfield (2002) sometimes seems alarmist: high-poverty neighborhoods in the central city foreshadow a worrisome future for suburban communities with their own growing concentrations of poverty.² An equally worrisome thing is that the reaction to such data could be to either combat poverty or combat the poor, seeking to exclude them by making suburban housing yet more exclusive.

Another strand of research has suggested that concentrated poverty is bad for a region’s economic health. The reasons are complex and still under-specified but have to do with the resulting underinvestment in basic education, the impact of social tensions on economic decision-making, and the erosion of the “social capital” that can tie a region together. A recent study by Federal Reserve economists, for example, examined 120 comparable metropolitan areas throughout the U.S. and found that high levels of racial segregation and income inequality correlate strongly with negative economic growth, even after controlling for other factors (such as workforce skills and industrial base) that impact regional growth (Eberts et al. 2006; see also Pastor et al. 2000). In a study of over

¹ While there is evidence that concentrated poverty declined in the 1990s (Jargowsky 2003), it remains a serious issue. Moreover, while the deconcentration was a national trend, concentration actually rose in high-immigrant Latino areas in California (McConville and Ong 2003), a set of communities we suggest need special attention later in this paper.

² Puentes and Warren (2006) discuss the increase in concentrated poverty neighborhoods in older suburbs even as such concentrations in many central cities have been on the decline.

300 metro areas in the U.S., I found that concentrated poverty also had a negative impact on regional economic growth (Pastor 2006).

This suggests that doing well and doing good can go together – reducing poverty will improve regional outcomes for everyone. But the challenge is that the traditional way of “doing poverty” doesn’t seem to be working – we seem to have fought a war on poverty and poverty won. Part of the problem, at least in terms of deconcentrating poverty, is that while community development has a long and proud history of working towards strengthening local infrastructure, the field has become excessively focused on neighborhoods. David Rusk’s statistical analysis in *Inside Game, Outside Game*, however, suggests that those distressed neighborhoods that were assisted by the efforts of community developers did not do much better than a control group of distressed neighborhood that were not. The poor remained stuck and the neighborhoods, by and large, remained poor.

For Rusk, the solution is to disperse the poor through mandating suburban low-income housing with fair share agreements and setting up systems of regional revenue sharing. There is certainly merit in this approach, particularly in that it opens up new areas of regional landscapes and provides choice to those who most desperately need it. But there is also a much simpler and perhaps more immediate approach: shift the focus of community development to be more explicitly integrated with workforce development.

Making the Community Development Case for Workforce Development

Bratt and Rohe (2007) report that there are now nearly 4,000 community development corporations (CDCs) in operation in the U.S. While many include efforts at commercial development, parent education, and job training, the “bread and butter” of such groups has been building and rebuilding housing. This is partly because affordable housing is necessary but it is also because it is the arena where financing and resources have been most available, especially since the 1980s.

But the true task of community development is to create communities where people want to live, not affordable housing concentrations where they are condemned by lack of income to reside. A focus on building units to house the poor is, by contrast, likely to retain the poor. Yet as Jeremy Nowak of the Reinvestment Fund argues, “strong neighborhoods are destination places and incubators; they are healthy, not because they are self-contained or self-sufficient but because their residents are appropriately linked to non-neighborhood opportunities” (1997:9). Community developers need to shift focus from their current place-based and real estate-oriented efforts to innovative strategies to raise incomes and create ladders to the middle class.

Part of this is realizing that the bulk of employment need not be in the neighborhood. In this regard, one of the major breakthroughs of workforce development in recent years – a focus on linking workers to the regional economy rather than simply attracting employers back to a central city they have already abandoned – is welcome. For community developers, this can take the pressure off local job generation – which has been mostly unsuccessful, and return the field to its central mission of “community-building” in all its

facets, including the bricks and mortar of housing and retail but also the organization of a vibrant community voice for policy advocacy.

Yet work attachment and work rewards are key. William Julius Wilson has argued convincingly that part of the social dissolution in inner city neighborhoods is due to the disappearance of work – not only because of the resulting lack of income but also because of the ways in which the lack of the regularity of interaction that work provides can further isolate a community from the mainstream (Wilson 1996). In short, we cannot rescue those in areas of concentrated poverty unless we have a full-throttle approach to connecting people to the world of work.

Publicly-sponsored and –funded workforce development, properly done, is central to this task. The market alone will not do the trick – if the low wage demands prompted by poverty were the panacea for market correction, we would have seen the “invisible hand” work its magic in lifting up salaries as businesses moved to, or recruited from, central city neighborhoods. Instead, we have a typical market failure of externalities – but in this case, it is the way in which concentrated poverty affects workers attitudes, skill sets, and connections, and even employer preferences or prejudices with regard to jobseeker addresses (Kirschenman, Moss, and Tilly 1996). To jump start community development, we need less emphasis on houses and more on jobs, less emphasis on services and more on skill-building, less emphasis on retail amenities and more on social networks.

Why have community developers lost sight of the centrality of employment and the skills and networks that support jobseekers? Part of it is the financial incentives for housing production that we have mentioned. But part of it as well is the way in which workforce advancement can actually have short-term negative impacts on community development efforts. In Camden, New Jersey, a paradigmatic example of a “weak market” city with high levels of poverty, the standard is that any family that makes its way above \$30,000 a year will move to the suburbs – and the rule seems to operate with uncanny and frightening clockwork, meaning that workforce gains are community losses. Community developers therefore circle the wagons around the neighborhood and sometimes downplay the importance of job programs that will cause residents to leave.

But this is a losing game for both distressed communities and the larger regions in which they reside. The trick is to figure out how to couple investments in individual employment outcomes with community development efforts seeking to retain well-employed families in their neighborhoods. By the same token, for those in “strong market” areas facing the challenges of gentrification and displacement, the only way to retain residents is to improve their incomes in place. Workforce development, particularly for adults, is critical to strengthening distressed communities.

Connections Not Made

Is our current workforce development system up to the task? There are several trends that bode well. The first has been the shift by at least some practioners to a focus on the working poor (see Bernick 2005). While still quite incomplete, it is heartening to see the field move beyond a notion that its task is to just serve the long-term unemployed or help

individuals with their first position in the labor market. In today's economy, it is all about retraining and mobility, particularly for immigrants who exhibit high rates of labor force attachment but very low earnings (Pastor 2007). A focus on the working poor, particularly if coupled with strategies to enhance asset accumulation (like Individual Development Accounts), can be a real complement to community-building efforts.

The second positive trend, noted by Osterman (2005), is simply innovation in the field. In a recent volume I co-authored with Chris Benner and Laura Leete, *Staircases or Treadmills* (2007), we suggest that intermediaries perform three fundamental roles: *market meeting* (in which those on the supply and demand side are contemporaneously matched), *market molding* (in which workers' careers are facilitated by focusing on occupational progression over time), and *market making* (in which employment quality is increased by working to both skill up workers and reposition companies or industries – what Holzer and others have termed the “high road”). The evidence we present in *Staircases or Treadmills* suggests that such transformative “market making” approaches can yield positive long-term results – and there are some growing efforts, often rooted in community non-profits and labor-affiliated organizations, headed in that direction.

But there are significant challenges as well. One of these is, of course, funding: given the needs, the system is woefully underresourced. But this may be putting the cart before the horse, or perhaps better said, the money before the rationale. We need to make a forceful case for investment in the adult workforce but it is not a question of simple cheerleading in the hopes that a sufficiently enthusiastic argument will bring along doubters to the existing system. We must also address the changes in workforce development system that will make potential allies come along by virtue of their own recognition of common interests.

In this regard, there are several shifts in workforce development that could be helpful. In general, these involve developing an increased sensitivity to the interaction of place and people, and the importance of some key new constituencies.

On the place side, the positive trend toward thinking regionally and focusing on industry clusters also seems to have a downside: workforce developers have often seemed disconnected from particular communities of need. Part of this is structural – the shift to the WIB structure has led to a relative consolidation at a geographic level. But as much sense as this may make in terms of operational efficiencies and the need to train for a regional economy, it can lead to a failure to effectively serve critical populations, such as immigrants, the poor, ex-offenders and others who are geographically concentrated. To address economic disparities, workforce development organizations need to work directly with disadvantaged workers in their full context, including the communities where they live.

Recognizing the importance of place in people's lives, Robert Giloth has stressed the utility of creating neighborhood pipelines – systems in which there are multiple entry points (education, social services, or employment itself) through which labor market participants then bounce in and out of training depending on the vagaries of the market and also of their lives. This community-centered approach, in which services and career

information are seamless, may be especially appropriate for areas of concentrated poverty where there are significant skill gaps between populations and locally available jobs.³ As a result, workers will need to advance from a first job with publicly-provided training and functioning routes into local community colleges at every step of the way. Pipeline systems can do the trick – and this is exactly the sort of strategy that can bring community developers closer to the orbit as it has the added benefit of keeping workers in their neighborhoods as they advance through their careers.

On the people side, workforce development needs to be tailored to adult populations whose challenges are new and whose numbers are growing. By way of illustration, we focus here on two groups – immigrants and ex-offenders – both groups for which community- or place-based strategies may be especially useful.

On the immigrant dimension, Justin Scoggins and I (2006) recently completed a study of working poverty in California over the 1990s. After considering eighteen different definitions of working poverty – six separate determinations of work and three separate calculations of poverty, we arrived on one that seems most robust – a definition that requires that the number of hours worked in a family sum up to full-time work and employs a 150 percent poverty level as the benchmark with regional cost-of-living adjustments a la Reed (2006). Using that measure, we found a remarkable fact: while immigrant Latino households make up 16 percent of all California households, they constitute 52 percent of the working poor households.

Workforce programs for this working poor and immigrant population need to be different in several ways. There are obvious issues of shifting training so that it can be part-time and off-peak hours so that the working poor can continue to work even as they train for mobility. But the immigrant workforce is also especially suited to community-based systems, such as adult learning centers that combine basic training with access to childcare, proximity to home, greater cultural sensitivity, and a sense of belonging (see Benner et al. 2005). And adult learning centers which can provide residents with ESL and other classes without checking for legal documentation may be particularly important for communities with high concentrations of unauthorized immigrants.⁴

Community-based approaches may also be useful for integrating ex-offenders back into the workforce. Holzer, Raphael and Stoll (2002, 2003) have produced a series of useful studies looking at the increase in ex-offenders in the adult population, employer preferences (or aversions) with regard to hiring such ex-offenders, and the ways in which

³ In East Palo Alto, California, for example, only thirty percent of the adult labor force has at least an Associate's Degree but nearly sixty percent of the jobs in the local labor shed require such qualifications. This is typical of many other low-income communities in the heart of thriving regional economies.

⁴ For example, in a survey of an East San Jose neighborhood conducted with Empowerment Research of East Palo Alto, we found that approximately 60 percent of the local labor force had experienced barriers due to issues with social security numbers, a proxy for a lack of legal documents. The number was startling and so we cross-checked it with an indirect estimate based on methods developed by Marcelli and Heer (1997) and Pastor and Marcelli (2004) and found that the direct and indirect estimates were consistent.

tighter labor markets may not necessarily open up new doors to jobs, particularly in recent years. They call for labor market intermediaries to provide transitional employment as one means of assisting ex-offender labor market records. The missing link here is the geographic nature of both the ex-offenders and the intermediaries.

That ex-offenders are geographically concentrated would seem to be common sense: many leaving prisons return to the higher-crime and higher-poverty areas from which they left, and the higher incarceration figures for Blacks and Latinos, coupled with continued residential segregation, adds extra force to this phenomenon. A recent effort by the Urban Institute has mapped such concentrations in twelve different urban areas (Vigne et al. 2006; see also the mapping effort for Maryland by Vigne and Kachnowski 2003). And a recent detailed study of Chicago suggests that ex-offenders who settle post-prison in communities with higher perceptions of job availability and social capital (which can include community-serving institutions) tend to have much lower rates of recidivism and higher rates of employment and time at work (Visher and Farrell 2005).

While there are other specific demographic groups that deserve workforce attention, both of the groups highlighted here are critical to the future of the country: unless we can figure out a way to successfully incorporate immigrants and bring the rising numbers of ex-offenders back to productive roles in society, we will face rising social tension, crime, and inequality. Raising our overall investments in workforce development for adults in these groups is paramount – but shifting those investments so that they have a sharper focus on “people in place” will be even more fruitful. Immigrant entry points, for example, can serve as either successful springboards or become spatial traps for the poor. Job programs that open up new industries can either have a broad cast or contribute to targeting hiring from distressed areas.⁵

Making workforce development more sensitive to the nuances of communities – and making community developers more cognizant of the overwhelming importance of work – will cement an alliance that is seemingly natural but too often disconnected.

Hooking It Up

One place where we do see the connection between community development and workforce development being made in recent years is under the rubric of community benefits agreements (CBAs). Such CBAs generally emerge from place-based conflict in which a developer who needs some sort of public subsidy – and therefore is likely to face public hearings – seeks to facilitate a project by meeting early (or being forced to meet early) with residents and others to ameliorate its negative impacts and provide measurable gains. Labor has gotten into the game, partly because this is a way to secure traditional project labor agreements as well as access to unionizing the workforces that

⁵ In Los Angeles, for example, Workplace Hollywood, an innovative program to open up starting positions in the entertainment industry to disadvantaged minorities was casting a broad net until community partners both struggled for and helped provide resources to implement an approach focused on particular zip codes (Pastor and Matsuoka, forthcoming).

eventually staff the businesses that occupy the development. Community developers have jumped in, usually to secure affordable housing arrangements and other neighborhood improvements.

One of the earliest CBAs, for example, focused on the expansion of the Staples Convention Center near downtown Los Angeles. It was a sometimes unwieldy coalition of resident leaders worried about gentrification and displacement and labor leaders hungry to serve their members with new "living-wage" jobs. But since these leaders and members are often the same people – low-income workers have to live somewhere and it is generally in low-income communities – deals were struck and the resulting CBA promised that 70 percent of new jobs generated would be unionized or pay a living wage, 50 percent of new jobs would be local hires through a community-run job training and placement center, a minimum of 20 percent of housing units would be affordable to low income people, and \$1 million would be set aside for parks and recreation facilities within a 1 mile radius.

CBAs have taken off as a mechanism in other locales but our central point here is that they have also been a successful way to "reframe" what public subsidies should be producing (public benefits) and how meeting social justice imperatives can actually facilitate rather than slow economic growth. They have coupled business, labor, and community in productive conversation and they have had a clear appeal to a fiscally concerned middle class, particularly given the emphasis of CBAs on utilizing public dollars to produce maximum social and economic impact. And they have blended the imperatives of place and people – of community and workforce development – in new and effective ways.

This is quite parallel to the political task facing the workforce development community. Training programs must show they can meet the needs of regional and national competitiveness. They must have some appeal to the middle class as prudent investments in the future, including as a way to address the insecurity prompted by globalization and the need to constantly retrain. And they must be more thoroughly integrated with community development efforts to help the populations and neighborhoods most in need.

If they do, then the political coalitions to support enhanced investments in workforce development can be strengthened. Community developers may not be the most important element in the political calculus – I would concur with others that engaging business is most critical – but they do have some leverage on the political scene (as evidenced by the persistence of the low-income housing tax credits) and important linkages with urban political leaders.

To truly make the case, we will need to deepen the research as well as the rhetoric. We need to be clearer about neighborhood pipeline systems that work. We need to demonstrate the key role of workforce systems in immigrant incorporation and intergenerational mobility. We need to uncover the importance of place in the reemployment of ex-offenders. All of this will require experimentation and evaluation and a close connection with community-based implementers.

Our Workers, Our Communities, Our Future

Two metaphors, both from frontier days, are often used to capture the American essence. The first is the lone adventurer (sometimes a gunslinger) – the independent spirit who makes his own fortune through self-reliance, skill, and hard work. The second is the barn-raising – whereby a community comes together and collectively assists in the construction of a structure that will allow for improvements in individual productivity, knowing all the while that someday they too may need to call for help.

When we think of worker paths through a changing labor market, the gunslinger seems to be dominating American labor market policy: individuals are expected to be flexible, adept, and ultimately on one's own. But there is another path, one that recognizes the need to provide support and one that ultimately recognizes the centrality of community in not only our metaphors but our policies.

Why should we as a nation invest in workforce development? Because one of the most critical issues facing distressed communities and disadvantage individuals is the lack of access to good jobs. Because workforce development – especially when it is coordinated with other interventions by place based intermediaries such as CDCs – can lead to greater mobility and stronger communities. And because when people have good jobs and communities are strong, the nation as a whole benefits.

Concentrated poverty keeps not only individuals but also entire communities from jobs that lead to upward mobility. Funding workforce development – and capitalizing on the connections community developers have at the local level to resident most in need of training and education – can mean that groups such as immigrants and ex-offenders can integrate themselves into mainstream economic life. And supporting a transformation of the CDC field from one that is primarily neighborhood based to one that creates and links to opportunities throughout the region can enable the field to move from just “bricks and mortar” to “benefits and mobility” for its clients.

The tools are there – labor market intermediaries, neighborhood pipelines, tailored training and education programs, and community benefits agreements among other -- but the funding and political is missing and sorely needed. While a boost in workforce development efforts would benefit distressed communities, the positive effects go beyond that: concentrated poverty is bad for a region's economic health and addressing concentrated poverty through both workforce and community strategies is a task that should concern all Americans. We cannot claim economic success as a nation when so many are left behind. And increasing workforce investment for adults is an important, indeed essential, part of such a full anti-poverty effort.

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