

Saint Louis University Public Law Review

Volume 19
Number 2 *Representing the Poor and Homeless: Innovations in Advocacy (Volume XIX, No. 2)*

Article 12

2000

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Lucie White

Harvard University School of Law, lwhite@law.harvard.edu

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Recommended Citation

White, Lucie (2000) "On Abolitionist Critiques, “Homeless Service” Programs, and Pragmatic Change," *Saint Louis University Public Law Review*. Vol. 19 : No. 2 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://scholarship.law.slu.edu/plr/vol19/iss2/12>

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**ON ABOLITIONIST CRITIQUES, “HOMELESS SERVICE”
PROGRAMS, AND PRAGMATIC CHANGE**

LUCIE WHITE*

I. INTRODUCTION

Several of the other chapters in this volume, as well as a number of other scholars of homelessness, share what Florence Roisman has called an “abolitionist” perspective on homelessness.¹ These individuals share the belief that “homelessness” is but a symptom of deeper institutional dysfunctions and structural injustices in America’s political economy. In their analysis, vulnerable individuals become homeless because of deep systemic failures in housing, labor, and healthcare markets. These failures cannot necessarily be traced to specific bad acts or foolish policies on the part of political elites. Yet they can be corrected by fairly obvious changes in political values and policy priorities. In the abolitionist analysis, a complex interplay of historically-rooted social inequalities, systemic market-failures, and resulting unfair distributions of social capital and political power is both the salient cause of housing insecurity among low income Americans, and the key to policy changes that—if enacted—could eventually make “homelessness” history.

According to the abolitionist analysis, political mobilization to address homelessness should focus on basic social and economic rights for all citizens. That is, advocacy for “the homeless” should seek to build political will to promote the equitable distribution of essential social goods like housing, educational services, healthcare, cash income, and the like, particularly across historically constructed hierarchies of race and class. Legal policy, in turn,

* Louis A. Horvitz Professor of Law, Harvard Law School, B.A. Radcliffe College, J.D. Harvard Law School.

1. See, e.g., Bristow Hardin, *Why the Road Off the Street Is Not Paved with Jobs*, in HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA (J. Baumohl ed., 1996); *Homes for Homeless Common Sense: Why Jobs and Training Alone Won’t End Welfare for Homeless Families* (1996). Report available from the National Resource Center on Homelessness and Mental Illness as Item #6953 of their Annotated Bibliography on Education, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Supported Employment, at http://www.prainc.com/nrc/bibliographies/education_employment.shtml; see generally SHARON PARROT, WELFARE RECIPIENTS WHO FIND JOBS: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THEIR EMPLOYMENT AND EARNINGS? (1998) (reporting that welfare recipients, including the homeless, who find work typically work a substantial number of hours per week but are paid low wages).

should focus on redistributing resources and regulating markets, particularly for housing and income, so that all persons can secure a decent life, according to the society's prevailing standards. Political organizing, at the grassroots and in formal political spheres, should focus on building the capacity of citizens and groups to raise their voices effectively in the policy process.

This abolitionist critique is both logically and intuitively compelling. Yet it has often had little bite, when it comes to improving the lives of *literally* homeless individuals, in the short term. The most avid of the abolitionists might defend this failure by arguing that working to improve the lives of homeless persons—even by enabling them to find stable housing on an individual basis—is politically counterproductive. Relying on an either/or strategic logic, they might argue that *all* state policies and social programs for helping homeless individuals promote a blame-the-victim story of the underlying problem: these policies aim the blame for homelessness at an absurdly wrong target. Thus, according to this either/or logic, individually-focused homeless policies lure people into individualized and even punitive ways of thinking about the problem, and away from the kinds of social vision and political energy that might do some good in the long run.

Yet many with abolitionist leanings, including myself, are not comfortable with so extreme a position. They believe that the state and the private sector should give homeless individuals the resources they need for living better lives today, at the same time that the “system” is changed to guarantee basic economic and social entitlements to every person, over the long term. Contrary to the either/or perspective, I suggest that these two kinds of policy work are not opposed to one another. Indeed, I suggest that the abolitionist critique can be fashioned into a powerful tool for evaluating and improving here-and-now homeless assistance policies. That is, the abolitionist critique can help to guide the evaluation and design of homeless assistance programs, so that those programs improve real lives *and* build public consciousness about the systemic roots of homelessness, at the same time.

In this article, I want to use the case of homeless employment assistance programs to show how the abolitionist critique can re-energize our thinking about *service provision* for homeless persons. Street-level homeless employment assistance programs are generally housed in private non-profit or faith-based organizations, although some are operated by local governmental, quasi-governmental, or public-private entities like municipal mental health clinics, adult education programs, welfare offices, community action agencies, private industry councils, and the like. The legal frameworks that authorize, fund, and regulate these street-level programs are set forth in federal, state, and local legislation. What motivates this article is an intuition—something more like a hope than an argument—that the abolitionist perspective is not too bold to have something important to say about the details of street-level services for homeless persons and the laws that shape them. The article asks how an

abolitionist perspective can re-energize the legal and theoretical debate around these programs in ways that improve our best practices for service provision, while bringing those best practices more into harmony with the long-term political commitment to make “services for the homeless” a subject for history books rather than policy symposia.

This article works off of several examples of street-level programs for helping homeless persons to find and keep waged work. These examples were selected on the basis of a telephone survey of a dozen homeless employment programs that have gained public recognition for innovation and effectiveness. These programs exemplify current thinking about “best practices” for moving homeless individuals into sustained employment. The goal of the initial telephone survey was not to learn about these exemplary programs. A wealth of descriptive information about these and other homeless employment programs has already been compiled, and is readily available in HUD publications, in the press, and on the Internet.² Rather, through the survey, I wanted to probe for the norms and assumptions that shaped each program’s day-to-day practices. In this article I will focus on a few of the programs that were surveyed. Using these examples as a starting point, I will ask if critical scrutiny of such programs’ embedded values and assumptions can suggest *concrete* changes in policy and practice that might both benefit clients in the short term and promote the abolitionist vision.

The article has three parts. First, I will set forth a map of current programs for assisting homeless persons find and keep jobs. Second, I will describe the survey and profile the surveyed programs. Third, I will critique and evaluate these programs from an abolitionist perspective. In conclusion, I will consider how abolitionism can help improve services for “homeless” persons in ways that challenge the systemic inequalities that sustain the “homelessness” problem.

2. Among the many extensive bibliographies on homelessness, see, e.g., HOMELESSNESS INFORMATION EXCHANGE AND THE NATIONAL COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS, THE ESSENTIAL REFERENCE ON HOMELESSNESS: A FULLY ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY (available from National Coalition for the Homeless, 1612 K Street, NW, Suite 1004, Washington, DC 20006, (202) 775-1322); HHS PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO HOMELESSNESS, 1993-PRESENT, at <http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/progsys/homeless/pubs.htm> (visited Feb. 10, 2000) (containing links to other government web sites including other bibliographies); see also NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER ON HOMELESSNESS AND MENTAL ILLNESS, ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY: EDUCATION, VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION, AND SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT, at http://www.prainc.com/nrc/bibliographies/education_employment.shtml (visited Feb. 10, 2000).

PART I: MAPPING HOMELESS EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

A. *The Legal Scaffolding*³

1. The Legislation

In 1987, Congress enacted the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act,⁴ which provided a comprehensive federal framework for homelessness assistance. In 1990, Congress enacted the PATH program, which authorized formula grants to the states for projects to assist individuals to move out of homelessness.⁵ This program allied the federal government with an “abolitionist” policy orientation toward homelessness. Rather than providing on-going programs of assistance to the “homeless” sector of the population, Congress wanted to focus policy on eliminating the problem.

2. A Focus on Work

Yet not all abolitionist policies amount to the same thing. Over the 1990s, as the debates over welfare reform heated up, the federal government increasingly emphasized *work*, rather than on-going public regulation and subsidization of the housing, labor, and health-services sectors as the appropriate centerpiece of its abolitionist policy. The idea was that if the government could fund good job services for homeless individuals, many would eventually find their way into stable long-term employment. Thus, homelessness would be abolished as low-income individuals were enabled to pay for their own basic needs, including housing and health care, over the long-term. For individuals with the most severe mental illnesses, it was conceded that on-going public assistance, in the form of health services, subsidized or “sheltered” employment, housing assistance, and supplemental income assistance would be required over the long term. Yet even with respect to the mentally ill, the hope was that involvement in work would provide individuals stability, social networks, and a boost to self-esteem.

3. For comprehensive information about legislation regarding homelessness, see the resources of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 918 F Street NW, Suite 412, Washington, DC 20004. For an historical analysis of past and present homelessness legislation, see Micheal Peters, *Homelessness: A Historical Perspective on Modern Legislation*, 88 MICH. L. REV. 1209 (1990). For a bibliography of legislation related to homelessness and mental illness, see *Center for Mental Health Services, Annotated Bibliography: Legislation Concerning Homelessness and Mental Illness*, at <http://www.prainc.com/nrc/bibliographies/legisl.htm>.

4. Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, Pub. L. No. 100-77, 101 Stat. 485 (1987) (codified as amended in 92 U.S.C. § 11301 (2000)).

5. Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Amendments Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-645, 104 Stat. 46731 (1990); Subtitle B-Formula Grants to States for Assistance Regarding Transition From Homelessness.

3. Demonstration Grants

Several federal agencies—Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Labor, the Center for Mental Health Services—took on the homeless employment issue during the early 1990s. In addition to providing funding directly to state and local governments, the federal government has provided funds and incentives directly to non-governmental, community-based organizations to innovate new approaches, at the grassroots level, to serving homeless clients. The typical policy instrument for such assistance is the demonstration grant program: local entities are invited to compete for small grants to design and implement innovative pilot programs for homeless employment assistance. The federal government then evaluates those programs, documents the most successful in “best practice” narratives, and disseminates the results in agency publications.⁶

This approach is exemplified in the Job Training for the Homeless Demonstration Program (JTHDP), which Congress authorized under Section 731 of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987. Under this program, the Department of Labor was authorized to design and implement a job training demonstration program for homeless individuals. The Department’s Employment and Training Administration, in turn, structured the program to award grants to locally-operated demonstration sites in a series of phases between September of 1988 and November of 1995. These grants were intended to provide an incentive for the innovation of new, replicable approaches to job services for different sub-groups of the homeless population, including the mentally ill, chemically dependent individuals, single adults, and families with children.⁷

Under the terms of the initial competition, each grantee was expected to innovate within a program logic that included three features: (1) a standard sequence of job-related services, including outreach, intake/assessment, job

6. See D.J. ROG & C.S. HOLUPKA, RECONNECTING HOMELESS INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILIES TO THE COMMUNITY (paper presented to the National Symposium of Homelessness Research, Oct. 29-30, 1998, and available from the National Resource Center on Homelessness’s web-site, at #7907 of the Education, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Supported Employment bibliography, <http://www.prainc.com/nrc/bibliographies> (visited Feb. 10, 2000)). This paper reviews the track-record of employment programs for the homeless and concludes that comprehensive programs that integrate job services with social support and housing are most likely to achieve results. It also recommends that homeless employment programs concentrate more attention on the development of friendships and social networks (“social capital”) among their clients.

7. See U.S. DEP’T OF LABOR, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING ADMINISTRATION RESEARCH AND EVALUATION REPORT SERIES 97-F, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING FOR AMERICA’S HOMELESS: BEST PRACTICE GUIDE (1997) [hereinafter BEST PRACTICES GUIDE]. See also JOHN TRUTKO ET AL., EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING FOR AMERICA’S HOMELESS: FINAL REPORT ON THE JOB TRAINING FOR THE HOMELESS DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM (1997) (prepared for the U.S. Dep’t of Labor by James Bell Associates, Inc.).

training, job placement, and job retention;⁸ (2) extensive support services, such as housing, transportation, and child care; and (3) case management, particularly to help the client access appropriate supportive services.⁹ In addition to this standard template of features, programs were invited to add innovative features, such as job development projects, or procedures for improving outreach, job training, or communication with employers after clients were placed in jobs. As the program continued through several funding phases, increased emphasis was placed on encouraging innovations that involved partnership with other service providers and would ensure the long-term viability of the project.

One of the key features of the Congressional mandate was that the Department include a strong emphasis on the evaluation of funded projects, and then translate the evaluation data into knowledge that could inform future policy decisions. Thus, the Department designed a two-pronged evaluation protocol. First, detailed narrative and process evaluations were done of each program. Second, a comparative evaluation was done of all of the demonstrations, based on a standardized survey of client characteristics and outcomes in all of the demonstration programs. Over the seven-year course of the demonstration just over sixteen thousand homeless individuals—about thirty-six per cent of those participating in the program—obtained at least one job.

As a result of the program, approximately the same number of participants improved their housing situation, presumably as a result of the case management and supportive services that accompanied the employment services. Of those who were employed through the program, just half were still working after thirteen weeks.¹⁰ Thus, the evaluation showed that the standard sequence of job services did not work very well for the many homeless clients who could not move along a path from “outreach” to “retention” in lock-step fashion. Rather, these clients needed a service model that was highly individualized, with services tailored to each person’s “expressed needs.”

8. This standard sequence of services has been exhaustively addressed in the literature on vocational rehabilitation. For one reading that applies the standard sequence to the vocational rehabilitation of the homeless mentally ill, see Jerome Vaccaro et al., *Challenge and Opportunity: Rehabilitating the Homeless Mentally Ill*, in TREATING THE HOMELESS MENTALLY ILL (H.R. Lamb et al. eds., 1992). This analysis lists six overlapping stages in job services for this population: (1) engagement; (2) functional assessment and goal setting; (3) prevocational skill training; (4) work adjustment; (5) job seeking and acquisition; and (6) sustained employment. *Id.* at 280.

9. BEST PRACTICES GUIDE, *supra* note 7, at Appendix A. Overview of the Job Training for the Homeless Demonstration Program.

10. *Id.*

B. *Three Program Models*

It should be no surprise that the homeless employment programs that have emerged in the non-profit sector over the last decade have shaped themselves around the template that the legal/administrative frameworks laid out. Thus, virtually all non-profit sector programs—whether or not they actually received a demonstration grant—provide a familiar sequence of conveyor-belt employment services. These move an idealized client from intake and assessment, through training, placement, and retention, even as many real clients fall off of that wagon long before it reaches its elusive goal. Programs tend to add “case management” and “supportive services” to this track, enabling a few lucky clients to get better housing out of these programs, even when the job track leads nowhere. Around the edges of that core set of ritualized services, however, there is a little room for play. Programs tend to cluster into three models of service provision: client-focused services, sheltered employment, and inclusion.

1. Client-Focused Services

A first set of programs focus their attention on individualized case-management services. Their goal is to build up the individual client as much as possible, in the hope that the most robust competitors will have better luck in harsh low-income job markets. Thus, these programs seek to train a corps of savvy case managers. They use creative means to build up a supply of goods, like medical services, housing subsidies, and access to their communities’ best vocational programs. Their case managers can then distribute these goods on an individualized basis. They then send their “empowered” clients out into the low-income job market and hope for the best.

2. Sheltered Employment

A second set of programs create sheltered jobs for their clients. One model is for a program to develop its own agency-sponsored entrepreneurial businesses (ASEBs).¹¹ In some cases, these jobs are viewed as transitional positions, designed to provide on-the-job training for their clients in a more supportive setting than the regular market would be likely to provide. After working in these positions for a fixed period of time, clients are pushed to seek work in the open market. In other cases, however, these sheltered jobs are designed to provide long-term employment for the agency’s clients. Some of these programs work with a “special” sub-population of homeless individuals, like mentally ill or cognitively impaired clients, who are not believed capable

11. Compare the similar trend in employment services for individuals with severe mental illness. See BARBARA GRANGER ET AL., A NATIONAL SURVEY OF AGENCY-SPONSORED ENTREPRENEURIAL BUSINESSES EMPLOYING INDIVIDUALS WITH LONG-TERM MENTAL ILLNESS (1995) (available from Matrix Research Institute, 6008 Wayne Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19144).

of “mainstreaming” into the unsheltered labor market. Other agencies operate small-scale enterprises, often structured as worker cooperatives, that provide an employee-centered work environment to “regular” as well as “special” groups of homeless clients over the long term. The idea here is to offer individuals an alternative to the pressured, and often exploitive, environments of many low wage jobs, and at the same time to set forth a critique of those labor market conditions for all workers.

3. Inclusion

A final group of agencies focus on placing and retaining clients in jobs in the regular low wage labor market. The most innovative of these programs set up processes for on-going communication, negotiation, and problem-solving between the homeless individual and her employer, through the mediation of the agency and its case managers. In effect, the agency plays the role of an intermediary organization, enhancing the worker’s limited capacity to negotiate problematic work conditions as they arise. Most of the programs that follow this third model understand the “problems” that they seek to resolve to arise from *within* the employee, rather than from either the *relationship* between the worker and his boss or the workplace itself. But some of the agencies in this third group view the challenge of retaining homeless persons in paid employment in a more complex way.

C. *Using Critique to Improve Service Practices: A Rejoinder*

All homeless employment assistance programs are not the same. Most programs fit within one of the three service models that I outlined, even if they have some features of all three. Programs that fit within the inclusion model—and thus seek to change the mainstream low-wage workplace, rather than merely rehabilitate homeless individuals—will tend to be more in synch with the abolitionist perspective. That point should be fairly obvious.

Yet beyond that broad point, there is a more nuanced way of evaluating job programs within *each* model through an abolitionist lens. Programs in each model can be *designed and implemented* in ways that are more or less consistent with an abolitionist sensibility. That is to say that each of the three models can be realized through a wide range of activities, staffing policies, and organizational cultures, which subtly convey different *political* constructions of the “homelessness” problem. That range of variation within each model might be plotted along a spectrum, ranging from the pole of individual moral rehabilitation to that of systemic transformation. The on-going evaluation and improvement of any program might then seek to move it *along* that spectrum, toward the pole of systemic change.

This kind of pragmatic evaluation and redesign would be especially effective if it were done against a background “reference map” created through the following research project. First, a sample of “good enough”¹² programs reflecting each model would be selected for detailed case study and process evaluation. If funding permitted, such a study would investigate each program’s official rhetoric, institutional design, and day-to-day practices, using a combination of survey, interview, and observational methods. It would investigate each sample program from the perspective of each stakeholder group with a significant interest in its activities, such as staff, clients, target employers, target co-workers, etc., in order to map their differing *understandings* of the roles, relationships, motivations, and behaviors at play in the program, both normative and actualized. Based on this data, the sample programs reflecting each model would be plotted along a spectrum ranging from less to more “abolitionist” in their overall organizational cultures. The resulting background “reference map” would permit several things.

First, it would remind us that each of the three models of homeless employment programs can be realized in a range of politically contrasting ways. For instance, it would show us that employment programs that focus on building the capacity of individuals to find and keep jobs are not *necessarily* “conservative.” Nor are workplace-inclusion focused programs necessarily “transformative.” Rather, all three program models can be implemented in ways that are more or less abolitionist in their overall ideological orientation. The ideology is embedded in the ways that the programs realize their goals on a day-to-day basis.

Second, and more importantly, such a background map would give us a baseline and sense of direction as we evaluate and seek to improve programs that follow each model of service provision. The reference map would help us to set forth benchmarks for measuring the progress of programs of each type toward a more abolitionist organizational culture.

A pragmatic commitment to improving the *political* culture of street-level homeless service programs is premised on two assumptions about politics. The first is the idea that progressive political change—the kind of change that might lead to the “abolition” of homelessness—happens, in large part, by infusing a new political sensibility into everyday organizational practices. The second idea is that *sustained* political change is unlikely unless those individuals who are the most vulnerable to unjust distributions of wealth and

12. I borrow this term from D.W. Winnicott and use it to denote a rough measure that is somewhat akin to a negligence standard. Thus, a “good enough” homeless employment service program would be viewed as reasonably sound—competently managed, consistent with relevant legal rules and practice norms, and effective—by the relevant communities of providers, consumers, funders, regulators, and the like.

power figure significantly, as *agents*, in reinvigorating our political institutions and practices, from the ground up.

Two interesting corollaries that are specific to “homelessness” follow from these premises. The first is that an “abolitionist” politics of homelessness, simply in order to be effective *in political terms*, must have its base in those places on the social landscape that homeless people actually inhabit, particular places like state-sponsored social programs where their lives most directly intersect with state power. Thus, agency-based “service” programs for homeless people are not marginal to the issues with which abolitionists should be engaged: the practices and opportunities in those programs should be *central* sites of abolitionist critique and reconstruction. Second, the politics of homelessness is not marginal to a wider politics that seeks to reinvigorate democracy. Rather, homelessness should be understood as a *central* site for that politics.

III. A MAP OF HOMELESS EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

A. *The Survey*

It is beyond the scope of this article to set forth the kind of detailed map I have described above. Rather, I could only do telephone surveys of a small sample of agencies that had achieved recognition for effectiveness. Working with a research assistant, I sought out agencies that exemplify each model of service provision that I have described; i.e., programs that provide client-focused services, sheltered employment, and inclusion. To construct the sample, I researched government reports, organizational web sites, and newspaper databases. We sought agencies that had received recognition on multiple occasions for the success of their programs. Given the time and resources available for the project, I did not seek to survey all relevant stakeholders in the programs I profiled. Rather, I interviewed each program’s director or another important staff member. I asked open-ended questions about the program’s design and function, about the key features that might account for the program’s effectiveness, and the major obstacles that impede it, and about the nexus between the program and state funding, oversight, and regulation.

B. *The Programs*

The following sketches are drawn from the telephone survey and program materials. Following the sketches of programs that fall neatly within each model, I have included several examples of hybrid or atypical programs.

1. Programs that offer client-focused services
 - a. Homeless Initiatives Pilot Project of the King County Regional YWCA, Seattle, WA¹³

The YWCA of Seattle, King County Region, runs a Homeless Initiatives Pilot Project (HIPP) as one of its employment services. The program offers a traditional sequence of employment and training services to homeless individuals: skill and interest assessment; the collaborative crafting of an employment plan; the agency's brokering of services, with an emphasis on occupational skills training and financial aid; case management through the training phase; coaching on job-finding skills; and follow-up after placement to ensure retention. The program is offered in partnership with the Seattle-King County Private Industry Council (SKPIC), which has coordinated a range of employment-related services for homeless persons in the Seattle area.

There are several distinctive features of the HIPP project. First, it targets its services to parents, particularly women, and regularly provides child care while clients are participating in educational and training programs. Second, it provides direct financial aid—a wage equivalent—including some paid internships, with its occupational training. Third, the program is coordinated with the local private industry council's other employment-related services, as well as the YWCA's other programs. Fourth, the program maintains extensive computerized listings of job openings in the region. Fifth, several innovations ensure close communication between the program and potential employers. It sponsors employer panels several times a year, at which employers talk with HIPP clients about their expectations. It has an Employer Advisory Group (EAG), consisting of employers, service providers, and community volunteers, that meets regularly to develop job opportunities for HIPP clients in the region.

In his response to the telephone survey, the YWCA's director of employment services highlighted several other features of the program. First, the program's services are all participatory, in the sense that the *individual* client works closely with program staff in a "coaching" relationship that seeks to produce "one on one" job readiness. Second, through information it receives from the local private industry council, the staff continually re-tunes its job training programs to target "ladder" jobs (i.e., those in which low-skilled entry-level workers have some chance to move into higher-paid positions) in growth sectors of the local economy. Relying on an organizational partner to supply on-going information about the local labor

13. See <http://www.ywcaworks.org/southking.htm> (visited Feb. 10, 2000); U.S. Dep't of Labor Employment and Training Administration, The YWCA Works: South King County Region, BEST PRACTICES GUIDE, *supra* note 7, at Appendix B (Synopsis of 21 JTHDP Multi-Year Projects, Entry on Homeless Initiatives Pilot Project, Seattle-King County Private Industry Council) [hereinafter The YWCA Works].

market and then using that information to shape the training program improves the chance that the services that clients receive will in fact make them more competitive and more successful labor-market participants.

The greatest obstacle that the director sees to the program's success is in the demeaning culture of low-wage work-sites and attitudes of low-wage employers. The program's effort to build up the self-confidence of a prospective worker can be undermined in a moment in a workplace atmosphere in which homelessness becomes an object of ridicule or abuse. The director ended the interview by observing that reforms like the provision of more affordable housing to homeless job-seekers or the decriminalization of homelessness would challenge this culture of stigma at the same time that such reforms would provide direct benefits.

b. Massachusetts Career Development Institute, Springfield, MA¹⁴

The Massachusetts Career Development Institute (MCDI) is an accredited educational institution that provides literacy, adult education, and occupational training services to low-income local residents.¹⁵ MCDI's homeless program involves mainstreaming persons recruited from local shelters, soup kitchens, and outreach workshops into its regular vocational courses, such as Graphics, Word Processing, Nursing Assistant, Manufacturing Technologies, and the like.¹⁶ These programs combine classroom and laboratory experiences. Each subject area has an active private-sector advisory board which reviews curricula, teaching staff, equipment, and instructional methods. The programs are open entry/open exit, to make participation easier for homeless clients.

The agency offers two additional programs to homeless job-seekers. One focuses on interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and motivation.¹⁷ The second, "Enjoyment While Seeking Employment," offers an on-going psychosocial peer support group for participants.¹⁸ Unlike consciousness-raising or popular education-oriented support groups, which focus on enhancing participants capacity to *critique and change* challenging environments, the MCDI group focuses on enhancing the client's capacity to *adapt* to them. In addition to these groups, the program offers an unusually wide array of what it calls supportive services, including part-time employment, mentorships, psychological counseling, health services, and child care in the program's on-site day care center. Through its combination of intensive education and

14. BEST PRACTICE GUIDE, *supra* note 7, at Appendix B.

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

multiple forms of social support, over 70 per cent of MCDI's clients have obtained private sector jobs at wage levels averaging over \$7.00 an hour.¹⁹

In a telephone interview, the project director emphasized several innovative ways that the program creates relationships through which its services are shaped to clients' needs and extended into the workplace. First, because it provides literacy and adult basic education as well as vocational training and job readiness, the program typically develops a long-term relationship with individual clients. Relationships develop through which the client's particular challenges—domestic violence, for instance—can be picked up and “smoothed down” before the client enters the competitive job market. Second, the pre-employment support groups continue to function after an individual has been placed in a competitive job, providing both on-going emotional support around these issues, and a continuing link with program services. Indeed, an advisory group drawn from these support groups is sometimes called upon to intervene when an employer calls about a workplace problem.

2. Programs that Provide Sheltered Employment

a. An Example of an Agency-Sponsored Business Enterprise: Heartland Candleworks, Iowa City, IA²⁰

Heartland Candleworks is a small, for-profit business that, since 1996, has employed between ten and twenty-five homeless and formerly homeless persons to produce candles.²¹ It offers its employees a flexible, non-traditional work environment. In addition, it co-signs leases and loans, and provides funds for security deposits. Many of the employees have been referred by local homeless shelters and Goodwill Industries. A local bank provided working capital loans and a line of credit to the business. A private non-profit housing assistance program provides supportive services for Heartland employees. Goodwill Industries provides pre-service job training and on-going job coaching to employees. In 1996, Iowa City committed funds from its federal community development block grant to assist Heartland fund five job positions.²²

In his telephone interview, the current program director explained that the most important feature of the program's supportive work environment is the mutual support that is encouraged among workers. An employee council provides a formal shop-floor structure for providing this support. It also

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.* Blue Ribbon Practices in Community Development: Heartland Candleworks, at <http://www.candleworks.org> (visited Feb. 10, 2000).

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

convenes regular meetings between workers and employers to ensure that communication remains open and clear. Even with all of the support structures that the project offers and the partial subsidy through the block grant program, the biggest challenge to the program is to retain trained, competent workers.

- b. An Example of an Agency-Sponsored Subsidized Job Program: Employment and Training Opportunities for the Homeless (ETOH) Program City of Waterbury, CT, Department of Employment, Education, and Grants Administration²³

The ETOH program, while it was in existence, targeted homeless clients with four specific employment barriers: skill levels too low to qualify them for on-the-job training programs; histories of incarceration or substance abuse; high academic performance but a history of low functioning; and diligent effort but difficulty finding employment.²⁴ The theory behind the project was that persons in these groups are likely to face discrimination in seeking jobs.²⁵ Furthermore, even if they are hired, they are especially vulnerable to a vicious cycle of low employer expectations, erosion of employee self-confidence, and workplace failure. The program provided employers who hired its clients with two months of deep wage subsidies (75% for the first month and 50% for the second).²⁶ The employers then provided training services and weekly evaluations.²⁷ The program provided its clients a specific list of expectations, both on and off the job.²⁸

3. Programs that Promote Inclusion

- a. For Workers with Severe Mental Illness: Fountain House, New York, NY²⁹

Fountain House provides transitional employment and long-term employment support to chronically mentally ill persons who have experienced homelessness.³⁰ Homeless clients receive the same array of services as other Fountain House members.³¹ The first phase of this residential program is for clients to work for several hours a day in one of FH's in-house work units,

23. See The YWCA Works, *supra* note 13.

24. *Id.*

25. BEST PRACTICES GUIDE, *supra* note 7, at Appendix B (Synopses of 21 JTHDP Multi-Year Projects, Entry on Employment and Training).

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*

29. See The YWCA Works, *supra* note 13.

30. *Id.*

31. *Id.*

which include food/dining services, a beauty shop, and a bank.³² This sheltered employment allows clients to build up self-confidence without the stress of ordinary employment. Clients then move into the transitional employment unit, which places clients in workplaces around New York City. Typical jobs include working in mailrooms or mass mailing centers.³³ FH provides on-site training and case management. Critical to the program's capacity to retain employers is the fact that it guarantees the placement: if a client does not show up for work, the program sends one of its staff members to fill in.³⁴ Many clients stay in the transitional employment program for an extended time, changing work-sites every six months.³⁵

According to the project director, who was interviewed for this research, the critical features of Fountain House's success are that it provides supportive housing to the large majority of its clients, and that it has worked hard over the years to develop close co-operative relationships with the employers in the transitional work program.³⁶ Because of this relationship, the employers are committed to the program. Thus, Fountain House and an employer can anticipate and resolve problems with individual workers before they produce workplace failure. Because of the clients' on-going difficulties in managing routine workplace stress, the program must maintain this channel of communication over the long term. Only gradually, after establishing a long track record of successful employment, do some clients achieve enough capacity to handle workplace stress that they can move on from transitional employment to an unsupported work setting.

b. For Workers with Multiple Disabilities: Jobs for Homeless Consortium Center for Independent Living, Berkeley, CA³⁷

The Center's Jobs for Homeless Consortium serves homeless persons with mental or physical disabilities.³⁸ In addition to providing pre-service job counseling, basic education, vocational training, and supportive services, the program offers its clients self-esteem and problem solving workshops that focus on the particular challenges faced by disabled clients.³⁹

In his interview, the director of the Center's homeless project emphasized the issue of the clients' "internal barriers" to moving toward better lives.⁴⁰ In

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.*

35. *Id.*

36. Interview with Michael Daniels, Project Director of Center for Independent Living: Jobs for Homeless Consortium, Berkeley, California (1997).

37. See The YWCA Works, *supra* note 13.

38. *Id.*

39. *Id.*

40. Interview with Tom Malamud, Project Director of Fountain House, New York (1997).

addition to the “first-order” barriers that are created by their disabilities, they also face the “second-order” barriers of stigma, low self-esteem, and social isolation, that arise from the *social meaning* that is placed on the intersection between their underlying disabilities and their homeless status in this society.⁴¹ As we have seen in several other programs, the Center seeks to counter those barriers by building supportive relationships for clients, particularly with their peers. The Center’s peer group process starts as soon as clients are “wheeled in here.” All of the Center’s job preparation activities are seen as sites for developing peer and mentoring relationships. Clients are organized into “job clubs” to look for jobs. Clients participate in a support group for up to a year *after* they are placed in a job, to ensure that the peer relationships that developed during the job preparation phase are sustained. If clients lose a job, they rejoin a job club and continue their work.⁴²

On the job development front, the Center relies on deep, on-going relationships with forty to fifty area employers.⁴³ Some of these employers have worked with the Center for over a decade. This core group of employers funnel job prospects to program counselors, who work with the employers to adapt these positions to particular clients’ needs. A large part of the Center’s work involves educating these *employers* about how to work successfully with formerly homeless and disabled employees.

The Center offers a formal mentoring program to employers in which their personnel managers and supervisors are trained in how to develop effective on-the-job training programs. The mentoring focuses on how to break tasks down into learnable units, and how to deal with a natural range of learning styles. Both large and small area employers participate in this program. Each year, roughly 40 to 50 of these employers come together with clients in seasonal “job fairs,” where they present job opportunities to the client community.⁴⁴ The Center also arranges for labor unions to do on-site presentations to the Center’s clients, and to take part in the training and coaching of clients after they are employed.⁴⁵ The Center facilitates problem solving between employers and client-employees. Because of its relationships with both clients and employers, the Center has developed the capacity to successfully resolve just about all of the job conflicts that arise.

41. *Id.*

42. *See* BEST PRACTICES GUIDE, *supra* note 7.

43. *Id.*

44. *Id.*

45. *Id.*

4. Cross-cutting Strategies

Some homeless employment service programs use strategies that cross-cut each program model. This section provides three examples.

a. Investing Co-Workers in the Client's Success on the Job

Often formerly homeless persons encounter negative attitudes from co-workers, even when the employer has not been informed about the client's homeless status. In addition, some formerly homeless workers will require flexibility or accommodation in their work setting, either because of underlying physical or psychiatric disabilities, or because of needs that stem from the client's formerly homeless status. Some programs have developed job retention strategies that focus specific attention on the relationships between the client and his work group at the same time that they address the more familiar issues around conflict and accommodation between the program, the client, and the employer. In the context of psychiatric rehabilitation, techniques have been developed for "mapping" the social networks in the workplace environment, so that work group members can be included in an accommodation intervention strategy.⁴⁶ After existing relationships, alliances, and interests are sketched out, areas of potential conflict can be predicted. Then educational programs and shop-floor support groups can be developed for addressing these issues *before* they erupt into overt conflict.⁴⁷ At the same time, processes can be set up for addressing tensions between co-workers when they begin to appear.⁴⁸

b. Giving Clients Provider Roles

It is a well-established practice in psychiatric rehabilitation to place clients or consumers in helper roles vis-a-vis other clients as a strategy for building the self-confidence, motivation, and job-readiness of the helper.⁴⁹ This strategy has been picked up among homeless employment service providers. Thus, several of the programs described above use peer counseling or peer support strategies.⁵⁰ An extension of this idea is to give clients roles in the management or operation of the agency itself. Particularly when an agency runs an in-house enterprise for its clients, giving clients managerial

46. *Id.*

47. *Id.*

48. *See, e.g.,* Laurence Gates et al., *Relationship Accommodations Involving the Work Group: Improving Work Programs for Persons with Mental Illness*, 21 *PSYCHIATRIC REHABILITATION* 264-27 (1998).

49. *Id.* at 271. Examples of this approach abound in the psychiatric rehabilitation literature. For instance, in the Denver Consumer Case Management Project, persons with mental illness are trained for employment as case managers in mental health agencies. *See, e.g.,* RUSSELL PORTER & PAUL S. SHERMAN, *THE DENVER CONSUMER CASE MANAGEMENT PROJECT* (1988).

50. *Id.*

responsibility can give a substantial boost to their self-esteem, while at the same time helping them to develop specific employment-related skills. Thus, the Heartland Candleworks describes itself as an enterprise that was established by and for homeless and formerly homeless persons.⁵¹ Another ambitious example of involving homeless persons in the management of an in-house enterprise is the Homeless Employment and Related Training (HEART) project, which has developed a replicable, community-based model for a project that trains its homeless and formerly homeless participants to build and renovate affordable housing for their own community.⁵² Such projects become suspect when their sponsors or advocates claim that they offer comprehensive solutions to systemic failures in housing markets.⁵³ Yet as strategies for teaching job skills and building up the self-confidence of homeless persons, they can have valuable effects.

c. Promoting Service and System Integration

A final cross-cutting strategy is for the program to promote the integration of service *systems* as well as service *provision*. A prominent theme in recent writing on welfare delivery has been the importance of integrating the *delivery* of services, so that the whole range of a client's needs can be addressed in a holistic way. The major strategy for achieving integration at the level of individual client services has been case management. The idea is to create a new corps of providers, usually employed by the front-line non-profit service agency, who broker services for a small number of clients while playing a coach or mentor role.⁵⁴

Recent literature suggests that this approach to service integration has a band-aid logic.⁵⁵ It does not ensure that the services that the case worker patches together will complement or build on one another. If the entities that design and produce the services are not *institutionally* integrated, there is no assurance that the array of services will mesh together sensibly from the perspectives of either the individual client or the overall client population. Institutional integration will allow for joint planning of overall strategies of

51. *Id.*

52. See Elen Rossman, HEART TO HEART: CREATING A SOLUTION TO HOMELESSNESS FOR HOME BUILDERS INSTITUTE (1993) (unpublished guide on file with the Home Builders Institute).

53. *Id.*

54. See Gary Morse, *A Review of Case Management for People Who are Homeless: Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research* (unpublished paper presented at the 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research and posted, available at <http://aspe.os.hhs.gov/progsys/homeless/symposium/7-Casemgmt.htm>).

55. See DEBORAH DENNIS ET AL., WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT SYSTEMS INTEGRATION AND HOMELESSNESS? (unpublished paper presented at the 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research, available at <http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/progsys/homeless/symposium/12-Sysintg.htm>).

service delivery, so that agency staff can team up on particular projects in ways that do not merely avoid duplication, but actually improve the value of what is provided. As a result of several studies documenting that *systems* integration pays off in improved *services* for individual clients,⁵⁶ public and private service providers in cities and regions are beginning to take the steps required to get agencies to collaborate effectively on an on-going basis. These steps include creating interagency coordinating bodies and staff positions and, even more importantly, engaging the cooperating agencies in meaningful processes of joint, forward-looking strategic planning, so that joint work can take place on new projects from the ground up.

This is a behind-the-scenes strategy that will not show up in case studies of individual service agencies. Yet it can make an enormous difference in the creativity and quality of the projects that these agencies are able to undertake. For instance, high quality joint strategic planning between a private industry council and service agencies might enable better integration of labor market data with skills training and job search programs. Joint planning between legal services providers and agencies working with employers might generate projects that engage employers and co-workers to design accommodations for disabled workers *before* workplace problems arise. The McKinney Act has promoted the idea of system integration since the late 1980s.⁵⁷ It is only more recently, however, that best practices for realizing this goal are being defined, and the positive link between system integration and service quality is getting documented.

C. *Politically Salient Variations in Agency Practices*

In the first part of this article, I suggested that each model of homeless employment services might be implemented in a range of different ways. I suggested further that the variations in each model might be plotted along a political spectrum. Informed by the brief program sketches in the last section, I now want to name some of the key dimensions of *politically salient* variation for each of the three program models.

1. Client-Focused Services: How Good is the Link Between Labor Market Conditions and Program Design?

An extreme abolitionist critique would reject all homeless employment service programs for aiming at the wrong target. Others would claim that employment can have positive effects for homeless persons, both psychological and political, even if sustained low-wage employment, alone,

56. See Randolph, *supra* note 23; Martin Cohen, *Supported Housing: Insights from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Program on Chronic Mental Illness*, 13 PSYCHOSOCIAL REHABILITATION J. 43-50 (1990).

57. *Id.*

will not resolve a homeless person's underlying shelter insecurity. Service programs that seek to offer clear, accessible, on-going communication between the program and reliable sources of local labor market information will be more politically progressive for several reasons. First, such programs will be less likely to erode clients' morale by setting them up for frustration and failure in the labor market. Second, such programs will be less likely to promote the unrealistic idea that competitive employment can be a route out of "dependency" or into affordable housing for homeless individuals.

Finally, such programs can take advantage of occasional growth spurts in regional low wage labor markets, in two ways. First, they can target their skill training and job-search activities toward those sectors, thus enabling some clients to experience some success in the labor market. Second, they can educate and mobilize their clients and constituents around state policies and grassroots economic development strategies that seek to expand and exploit those growth sectors while they last.

2. Sheltered Employment: How Fully Does the In-house Enterprise Challenge Narrow Vision of "Productivity"?

I use the term "empowering" reluctantly, because it is at once vague, ambiguous, and overused. Yet none of the obvious alternatives work any better to convey the multiple features that must come together to create the optimal shop-floor culture in sheltered work-sites, from the perspective of their clients' *political* development. What are some of these features? At the most basic level, the workplace culture should treat its formerly homeless client-workers with absolutely consistent dignity and respect. That much should be obvious, and that much seems to be preached, if not always practiced, in most sheltered employment programs.

To treat formerly homeless persons in this way, the program will have to root out all forms of status-based stereotyping and denigration, including that which is based on people's differing capacities to do the work. To accomplish this, the workplace will have to subject its job categories, production processes, and priorities, to continual re-evaluation. How does it define "productivity," "efficiency," "profit," or "value"? Are those terms defined in ways that workers with cognitive or psychological disabilities, for instance, are, *de facto*, considered to be of less worth to the collective enterprise than workers without those challenges?

In order for the firm's work processes to be subject to this kind of scrutiny, the workplace will have to give all of the workers an effective voice in defining the firm's core mission. A workplace that draws formerly homeless workers into enterprise management at this level will double as a school for citizenship. It will be a place for its workers to hone capacities for democratic participation that will carry over into other realms of political activism. Furthermore, as the enterprise seeks to practice its egalitarian values *and*

produce goods and services for a competitive market, its workers will learn critically important lessons about political economy.

Because of the circumstances of their workers, the constraints that agency-based enterprises face are huge. It bears repeating that the features of an “empowering” workplace that I am naming define the *far end* of a spectrum of politically salient practices in sheltered work-sites.

3. Inclusion Programs: How Fully Does the Program Draw the Employer and Co-Workers into Processes of Organizational Change?

A key dimension of variation in the third program model is defined by two related questions. The first question has to do with how fully the program draws the employer and co-workers—as well as the formerly homeless employee and agency staff—into the process of addressing conflicts or problems that arise on the job. Does the process make clear to the employer and co-workers that the “problem” does not reside *inside* the formerly homeless worker, but rather in the relationships between employer, managers, and workers that comprise the workplace culture? The second question has to do with how fully the program regards the process of resolving issues between the formerly homeless client and co-workers as an on-going *forward-looking* process of improving the workplace culture to pre-empt potential problems before they arise, as opposed to one of settling conflicts or problems after they have erupted. A more progressive program would work closely with its core group of cooperating firms to shape on-going practices of employer and co-worker education and shop-floor communication. The goal of that education and communication would be, in turn, to shape a flexible and responsive shop-floor culture for all workers, particularly the most vulnerable.

The kinds of workplace-based education and communication that define the far end of this spectrum may seem far-out, as indeed they should. Yet the examples that were set forth include several features, such as the Center for Independent Living’s *employer* mentoring program, that point toward that pole. It bears repeating that the point of setting forth what the practice at that pole might look like is to sharpen our capacity to critique and improve existing homeless employment service programs, so that they can work to advance the abolitionist political project.

IV. CONCLUSION: A WORD OF CAUTION

Throughout this essay, I have felt uncomfortable with much of the language I have used. I do not like the tone that gets set when words like “client services” and “formerly homeless individual” are repeatedly used. Yet this is the language that is used in the domain of employment services—by the groups who are doing it, by the governmental agencies that are funding and regulating it, and by the academics who are evaluating and researching it. I

could create my own different language to describe what very low income people need in the way of help with finding jobs. Yet the project of seeking to link a pragmatic internal critique with the abolitionist aspiration is one that challenges us to speak inside of that language at the same time that we seek to push beyond it. Even as I pursue that dangerous project, I feel qualms about whether the project is worth doing at all, from a political perspective. Perhaps it is best to leave the domain of homeless service programs alone, and concern ourselves instead with the few projects—like the late Mitch Snyder’s Center for Creative Non-Violence, or On the Rise in Boston, which empowers homeless women—that do not choose to take the state’s money, or to speak its language, and have no confusion about “which side” they are on.