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PROJECT CONTRACT FINAL REPORT:

*Advocating for Out of School Youth Employment:
Conversations with Youth from Central Harlem*

New Hampshire College Graduate School of Business

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INTRODUCTION

On July 1, 2000, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) was officially put into practice throughout the nation. In addition to streamlining the way in which workforce development is funded and carried out, the WIA mandates that 30% of Federal youth funding must be spent on out-of-school youth. This provision, born of a concern that the potential of a significant proportion of the younger generation is being wasted, represents an increase in the amount of funding available for this population. As a result it has brought into sharp focus the need to re-evaluate the availability and quality of services to out-of-school youth in New York City at the beginning of the new century.

In September 1999, New York City's Department of Employment with 85 other partners submitted a proposal for the Youth Opportunity Grant (YOG). This nationally competitive grant would have over saturated Harlem (also an Empowerment Zone) with \$48 million dollars in federal monies to reduce the unemployment and high school dropout rate of youth aged 14-21. New York City's workforce system had not been put in to place and was not awarded the grant.

The employment and earnings prospects of out-of-school youth, which includes low educational achievers and high school dropouts, have always been worse than those of high school graduates or of youth with higher educational achievements. Today, the differences in employment and earnings attributable to educational attainment are wider than ever. Major economic and business trends offer little hope that these differences will diminish. Furthermore, the rapidly growing youth population now experiences increasing pressure from: declining real earnings, competition for jobs from immigrants and former public assistance recipients, the impacts of incarceration, and a high rate of out-of-wedlock births.¹

The conditions facing out-of-school youth are not new. Over the past twenty-five years most social initiatives have addressed two key issues, which confront out-of-school youth: access to jobs and job specific training.

¹ Taken from "Out of School and Unemployed: Principles for More Effective Policy and Programs, by Gary Walker.

DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

Our economic future depends on how well the next generation of workers acquires the knowledge and skills to work in high performance workplaces. The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 provides a new vision and framework for providing workforce development and employment services across the nation. A recent report from the National Center for Post-Secondary Improvement, *The Transition from Initial Education to Working Life in the United States of America*, states that businesses are shirking the responsibility of training entry-level workers. Employers are likely to make a greater investment in upgrading the skills of existing workers. Also there is an emerging belief amongst employers that it is the job seeker that must invest in his or her skill acquisition-a prerequisite that has significant implications for young people. The report suggests that too many young people are developing neither the skills nor the attitudes that would make them productive workers. Moreover, as many baby boomers will retire in the next decade, the report says the country will soon become dependent on young people, many of whom lack decent working skills. "In this sense," the study says, "the looming crisis over Social Security in the United States is as much about economic productivity as it is about the actuarial soundness of the system itself."

Johns Hopkins University Sar Levitan Center has estimated that in the year 2000, there are approximately 15.8 million youth aged 14-17, plus 26.3 million young adults aged 18-24. By 2010, there will be approximately 47.5 million young people between the ages of 15-24 in this country, of which more than 30 million will be 18 and 24 years of age. One of America's greatest reservoirs of untapped human potential- out-of-school youth-are at risk of becoming marginal workers or dependent poor who will live on the fringe of society.²

² Sar Levitan Center for Social Policy Studies, Policy Issues Monograph 97-03, John Hopkins University.

The role of this project on a local level was to help youth in Central Harlem identify their own issues to advocate for and document the experience of a group of out-of-school youth. With the help of a local church and some volunteers, the youth educated their peers by facilitating an employment workshop based on the group's overall experience. By facilitating various relationships between elected officials, the community and local businesses the youth were able to find summer jobs and participate in the second annual Harlem Youth Conference sponsored by Assemblyman Keith Wright (D-NY).

HISTORY OF YOUTH POVERTY IN HARLEM

The CED environment is located within the Empowerment Zone in the Upper Manhattan region, located in Central Harlem (community board 10)³. Community Board #10's physical boundaries encompass 110th street to 155th street, between 5th and St. Nicholas Avenues. It is important to note that the YOG grant only would have targeted certain zip codes within the community board 10 area. The fact that NYC was not awarded the grant had a significant impact on the funding for yearly summer jobs. Just before the end of the school year, DOE cut 15,000 jobs for low-income youth.⁴ (This left approximately 2400 youth in Central Harlem unemployed⁵.) Organizations that have actively participated as advocates for youth employment in Central Harlem include the Rheedlen Center for Children and Families, STRIVE, The Valley and Abyssinian Development Corporation. Although these programs still exist, it is impossible to imagine that they would be able to employ 2400 youth from Central Harlem. Other advocates include organizations such as Jobs For Youth, Inc. and the Supportive Children's Advocacy Network (SCAN). Within the last 2 years, others have surfaced to take part in the fight against youth poverty in Central Harlem.

The Million Youth March Organizers (MYM), who claim Khalid Mohammed as their leader, is a prominent organization. The first time the organizers of the MYM held the event, there were issues of large numbers of youth being in the Central Harlem community. Leaders of the march charged local elected officials with doing nothing about the poverty problems of Harlem's youth and called one city-council person an "Uncle Tom". It was in response to that comment that the elected officials of Harlem got together with community leaders, residents and youth and held the first annual Harlem Youth Conference on October 29, 1999.⁶

³ See attachment 1

⁴ New York Daily News front page headline April 28, 2000

⁵ New York City Dept. of Employment Summer Youth Program Participants during the summer of 1999

⁶ See attachment 2- letter from Assemblyman Keith Wright to Congressman Charles Rangel.

Youth participation is the key to the healthy development of youth and community. The youth who reside in Community Board 10 are not concerning themselves with the processes that meet their basic personal and social needs. To grow, young people's needs go beyond the basics of food, shelter and clothing to include a safe environment, love, purpose, opportunities to participate, education, meaningful work, responsibility and spiritual enrichment. The youth in the community are affected because these concerns to build skills and capacities are needed in order for them to be able to function and contribute to their daily lives. The causes of this problem result from the lack of family and the community to address underlying issues of poverty, which leads to other problems. This is a nationally recognized problem and a community wide recognized threat.

The need of this project was based on an agenda set by the youth who participated in the first Harlem Youth Conference.⁷ The needs that youth wanted to focus on included Criminal Justice, Education, Housing, Jobs, Sanitation and the creation of a Youth Council. This agenda became a working document for organizations and community members to confront and begin to seek out solutions. Jobs for Youth, Inc. was one of the participating organizations that handed out employment literature.⁸ Jobs for Youth, Inc., one of the leading pioneer of youth employment in New York City, my role in the project began as an organizer to get youth from the conference involved with identifying and solving their own employment issues. My analysis of the root causes of the employment problems in Central Harlem come from the CBO's lack of outreach and knowledge of the opportunities that surround the population of youth that they serve. In-school youth who are directly affiliated with a program (weekend, evening etc) have a better chance at gaining employment opportunities through that exposure, as opposed to youth who are out-of-school. This project only addressed employment issues for out-of-school youth as it related to the 'Job' part of the agenda that was created as a result of the youth conference.

⁷ See attachment 3

⁸ See attachment 4-Press Release

PROJECT GOALS

The general objectives for the project were to:

- Organize youth in the community to have weekly meetings to discuss and help them to identify youth employment issues.
- Network with volunteers to help prepare youth and provide information to them so that they can advocate for themselves.
- Reduce the rate of unemployment for 15 youth by 50%.
- Act as a conduit to the Harlem Youth Conference so that members can participate on the youth agenda for employment related concerns.

The intended outcomes for each objective were accomplished by setting other minor objectives each month over the life of the project (1 year). Some of the objectives included:

- Conducting follow up surveys and focus groups from the conference.
- Begin meeting with youth twice a week at a local church to begin conversations about youth poverty in Central Harlem.
- Conducting site visits to other programs that show best practices where youth are involved in advocacy;
- Develop job leads for youth by meeting and having volunteers to commit to help one young person find a summer job.

By October 2000, the overall goal of the project was to meet with 15 youth and document their conversations about issues affecting employment for out-of school youth in Central Harlem; [and] allow these youth to share their experiences with their peers by facilitating an employment workshop at the 2nd annual Harlem Youth Conference.⁹ These young people were consistent with participating in the group and working over the summer.

⁹ See attachment 5- 'request for participation' letter from the State Assemblyman's Office. The format for the conference changed during the last month of the project, which allowed me to only act as a panelist for the Employment opportunities workshop. The youth were only allowed to partially participate in the workshop.

METHODS

Community Characteristics

The factors guiding youth into or away from employment differ by ethnicity. It is acknowledged that white youth are working more and earning more than black youth.¹⁰ Unfortunately, this trend extends into adulthood (Holzer, 1994). Discrimination in hiring, higher rates of illegal activity, a mismatch of skills, competition from immigrants and location of employment in suburban areas are all valid possibilities (Desaran Keithly, 1994) for the disparity in rates of employment and earnings among white and black youth. Theories as to the cause of this range from “culture of poverty” theories in which the individual is to blame for lack of employment (Murray, 1984) to “opportunity structure” theories in which the insufficient opportunities afforded the individual through the school system and the labor market are to blame (Johnson, 1989). While support can be found for both theories, it is clear that there are no simple solutions. Obtaining a high-school diploma does not uniformly lead to a job for every individual. Therefore, it needs to be determined what other factors are making the difference in the rates of participation in employment.

During the course of the project, 15 youth from Central Harlem committed to participating in weekly meetings with 7 volunteers to discuss employment issues affecting out of school youth. The volunteers were inclusive of three ministers from the New York Theological Seminary, one New York City Board of Education High School teacher, a vocational career counselor (myself), and two business individuals. Each week there were topics planned for discussion that pointed out the major barriers affecting youth employment. After the first two months it was decided that the most important factor affecting youth is the lack of caring, respectful adults in either the family, school or community that could help point them (youth) in the direction of resources that would be able to help them find and keep a job. The project outcome was unclear in the beginning because the youth were not sure what they wanted. Once the youth became acclimated to the volunteers, the objectives for themselves and the group became much clearer: The youth wanted summer jobs so that they could share

their experience with peers at the 2nd Annual Youth Conference. To accomplish this, each volunteer committed to helping one young person find a summer job, cutting the unemployment rate of the group by 50%. Eight youth worked in non-profits within the community (Harlem).

The following timeline was created as a guideline during the planning procedure to get youth prepared for the Youth Conference:

■ **October 1999-Harlem Youth Conference**

Conduct follow-up surveys and focus groups to get youth interested in employment item of youth agenda.

■ **November**-Youth submit a proposal to Assemblyman Keith Wright's office to form the Harlem Youth Council.

■ **December**-Find space for youth to meet and begin to identify their own employment issues to advocate for.

■ **January**-Recruit youth from neighboring community and youth programs to meet twice a week to discuss issues.

■ **February**-Begin meeting with youth twice a week on Tuesday's and Thursday's from 5-7 p.m. at local church.

■ **March**-Recruit volunteers from church congregation and seek out other resources to find commitments for adult-youth participation.

■ **April**-continue to meet with youth and begin documenting issues already identified as barriers.

■ **May**-Invite guest speakers of local area businesses and other youth groups to research similarities and come up with items to forward to the Assemblyman's office.

■ **June**-Begin job search for 15 youth for the summer. Get commitments from volunteers; plan fundraiser to pay for youth to go on field trip. Make commitment to help one youth find a job and monitor progress through bi-weekly meetings and phone calls.

- **July**-continue to meet with youth and document work experience of Michael Davis and the other seven working youth.
- **August**-Begin to recruit the youth from the group into a vocational program to receive training in order to act as a conduit to upcoming youth conference.
- **September**-After follow up with Michael Davis, prepare to plan for workshop to be facilitated by youth (in group at the church) for 2nd annual Harlem Youth conference.
- **October**-Produce rough draft of notes from yearly youth meeting to be included on the agenda for employment workshop at the Youth conference.

In order for this project to successfully accomplish its overall goals and objectives, the following methods had to be used in order to establish smaller objectives during the course of each month:

METHOD	RELATION TO ROOT CAUSE
Organized three community forums in relation to 48 mil. Grant application for youth services in Upper Manhattan	Community participation (Elected officials, businesses and residents) is needed in order to find a solution to youth poverty in Harlem
Conducted follow up Survey's and Focus groups with youth and organizations who participated in conference	The community needed to find a way to organize and/or collaborate with the reserve of youth who were willing to help advocate and solve their own employment problems.
Organized youth and volunteers to facilitate and participate in weekly meetings	Adult/youth participation is recognized as the key to a healthy community.
Discussed and Documented major issues affecting out of school youth employment	Youth wanted to make a difference by educating their peers during the 2 nd annual youth conference
Researched best practices using the Internet, New York City's Department of Employment and other resources where youth are involved in advocacy and joined the National Network For Youth	There is a lack of physical and institutional resources that are easily accessible for youth. Youth also lacked skill building experience which is a barrier to gaining and keeping employment
Requested that volunteers commit to helping one young person find a summer job in order to reduce the unemployment rate for 15 youth by 50%	All 15 youth were out of school and unemployed; but just needed to be pointed in the right direction.

Participated in 2 nd annual Harlem Youth Conference to discuss how to get access to jobs (employment part of youth agenda established at 1 st youth conference.)	Youth are able to share their experience with their peers by facilitating an employment workshop.
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The only method that changed during the course of the project occurred during the last month of the project when the format of the Conference changed. Only two young people represented the group on a panel in a workshop entitled “*Jobs, Jobs, Jobs: How Do I find One?*”

RESULTS

This project sought to accomplish the previous mentioned goal of having the youth share their summer work experiences with their peers at the youth conference. Only two young people, representing the entire group, participated in the employment workshop. A number of panelists from various local youth organizations, The Department of Labor and the 125th Street Business Improvement District also participated through information sharing. The workshop was very informative from the perspectives of both the youth and the panelists. After the conference was over, the 15 youth met again to share the outcomes of this project in relation to their participation in the workshop and came up with the following results:

- **Teamwork:**

The project provided adult mentors (volunteers) from all walks of life to work with individual youth. Committing and helping eight youth find employment reduced the unemployment rate for the group (15 participants) by 50%. In partnership with Jobs For Youth, the project was able to orient youth to the world of work.

- **Communication:**

The youth were able to identify their own issues to advocate for through the youth/adult partnership created during the meetings, which later helped them to share their experience with other youth. The project intentionally promoted relationships with the youth and volunteers characterized by respect, honesty, fairness, openness, and a sense of humor.

- **Project Management:**

During each month, the volunteers and myself would meet to set goals and action steps. Part of the process was to facilitate meetings and reflection with the youth; recognize the difference between community needs and one's own interests. The consistency with the youth is what made this project a success.

- **Personal Identity:**

The youth now understand the relationship between self and community; they have pride in being part of a group larger than oneself and were able to identify areas for self-improvement and take responsibility for [their] actions.

- **Professionalism:**

After working during the summer the youth were able to demonstrate a sense of tact and protocol; understand and strive for quality in his or her work and present his/herself in a positive light to strangers.

WORK EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH

Michael Davis:

This project was also able to accomplish placing one of the youth in the group in an internship at the Abyssinian Development Corporation (ADC) as an intern. During Michael Davis' summer experience, he accompanied the Director of the Community Liaison Unit to special meetings and events. He also designed a picture that he painted on the gate of a local business.¹¹ Michael's internship lasted 4 months and he was paid \$9.00 and hour. His internship experience in community development permitted him to gain experience in Community Economic Development that he could express in his own words to the youth who participated in this project and at the Youth Conference.

The other seven youth:

Through the Youth Employment Program administered by the Department of Employment, Seven other youth were given subsidized employment slots. Since they were permitted to choose a work site, seven of the volunteers helped to find work sites within the community.

¹¹ See attached picture

Approximately, five of them worked for 10 weeks at one organization entitled Exodus Transitional Services (ETS), while the other two worked for Jobs For Youth, Inc. ETS is a multi-social service program that uses a faith-based model of transitioning former non-violent ex-offenders into employment and housing. The responsibilities of the interns were largely administrative which included preparing materials for job readiness workshops and career days. This kind of exposure had an important impact on the view that these youth had about the criminal justice system and how ex-offenders (young and old) have a very hard time gaining and keeping employment.

The summer experiences of all 8 youth were invaluable to the principles surrounding this project. The series of weekly meetings, coupled with work experience, helped the youth learn about policy advocacy and how it plays a role in *Community Economic Development*. Participating in the 2nd Annual Harlem Youth Conference and using it as a forum made it easier for the youth to talk about their experience to their peers. Upon completion of the workshops, each young person was given a book entitled “The Guide to Adolescent Services in Northern Manhattan”. This book lists all of the non-profit, faith-based, community based organizations in Harlem (located in Northern Manhattan) that offer services to youth. It is a very detailed resourceful tool for both youth and adults who are in need of specific activities (and services) for youth.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The six-month period before an election is a critical time for youth advocacy. The Assemblyman who sponsored the 2nd Annual Harlem Youth Conference was careful to schedule the event during the last 72 hours of the Presidential and New York State Senate campaigning efforts. Every Election Day voters have the chance to reward the responsiveness of pro-youth candidates and send a message to others that youth count on the ballot.

As an advocate, it was the responsibility of this project and its participants to educate the Assemblyman and other candidates for office about issues affecting out-of-school youth and call on them to respond to the issues that were raised during the Conference. This project intended to educate the public and the community about youth issues so they can hold the elected officials accountable to their actions, and make an informed, pro-youth vote on November 7 (3 days after the conference was held).

Lessons learned:

Professional

- ✓ **Include youth/adult partnerships.** The most effective way to influence policy for out-of-school youth is to include youth in the process. Youth offer creativity and new perspective to all forums. It is important to identify youth in the community, local agencies and schools. By giving the youth in this project leadership responsibilities-the adults (volunteers) did not have to be the workshop planners.

- ✓ **Build coalitions and mobilize grassroots support.** Working with others increased the impact that this project had. Through the follow up focus groups, this project identified community allies, organizations, and youth who shared in the commitment to improving the lives of Central Harlem youth.

✓ **Develop relationships with the media.** The Youth Conference received a substantial amount of local media coverage¹². Working with the media increases the visibility for youth issues, coalitions and programs.

Personal

✓ **Financial and institutional support.** Aside from the space that the church provided, there was not any financial or institutional support offered by the church. Functioning between both the seminary and the church made it difficult to house this project.

✓ **Project environment.** The faith-based setting of the project helped with gaining adult volunteers to help move this project forward. Many of the youth were unfamiliar faces from the neighborhood that possessed more potential than any group of kids that regularly participate in extra curricular activities.

NEXT STEPS TO B E TAKEN:

Key Principles of Any Advocacy Effort

There are numerous election-related advocacy events that projects like this and/or a coalition of youth and supporters can organize to effectively educate others about out-of school youth [employment] issues. The events should be designed to rally support for youth issues, educate the community, encourage candidates to support a *youth agenda*, and call on other elected officials to respond to the needs of youth. The non-partisan election-related activity that one can organize can include:

1. Non-partisan voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts;
2. Conducting non-partisan candidate forums on issues of concern to the group {i.e. employment, sanitation etc}.
3. Making substantive issue-oriented presentations, and providing substantive issue-oriented materials to (and arranging site visits for) platform committees, media and the public.

¹² See attachment 7- news letter from November 8th Amsterdam News

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