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Tearing Down Walls and Building Lives: A Systemic Approach to Welfare Reform

Marguerite L. Spencer*

Numerous barriers, which are heightened in, or particular to, segregated communities of concentrated poverty, prevent current welfare reform from working. To address these spatial impediments to effective welfare reform, the University of Minnesota Law School's Institute on Race and Poverty hosted a conference entitled *Tearing Down Walls and Building Lives: A Systemic Approach to Welfare Reform* on December 5 and 6, 1997. The purpose of the conference was to outline the status of current welfare reform, to focus attention on the space in which welfare users find themselves, to examine the particularities of poor communities of color, and to explore ways of overcoming barriers to effective reform within these communities. Both national and local in scope, the conference yielded several outcomes upon which it is important to reflect. The introductory remarks of Professor John A. Powell, Director of the Institute, and the keynote address of Professor Peter Edelman, former Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at the Department of Health and Human Services and current faculty member at Georgetown Law Center, follow this brief reflection.¹

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act² (PRWORA) and state welfare reform efforts evidence a shift in objectives from prior welfare policy.³ They aim to change

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1. See *infra* pp. 211-32.

2. Pub. L. No. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2110 (1996) (codified at 42 U.S.C. § 601).

3. The main structural shifts affected by PRWORA include the elimination of the 60-year guarantee of assistance to low income children, 42 U.S.C. § 601(b), the replacement of the federal/state Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) structure with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grants to states, *id.* at §§ 601-19, the imposition of strict work requirements for recipients of cash assistance, *id.* at §§ 402, 407, 602(a), 607, the imposition of lifetime limits on the receipt of family cash assistance, *id.* at § 608(a)(1)(B), and the restriction of Social Security Income (SSI) and food stamp eligibility for many non-citizens, 8 U.S.C. § 1611. PRWORA was modified on August 5, 1997, through the Balanced Budget Act of 1997. See Pub. L. No. 105-33 (1997) (codified at 7 U.S.C. § 2015). In general, the changes allowed many non-citizens to get SSI based on disability, but

behavior rather than to provide income support. Yet these new reforms, by fixating on so-called "behavioral" issues, fail to address the structural barriers that prevent real reform from occurring. As Professor Edelman noted in his keynote address, real reform requires helping people get meaningful jobs and providing real security and protection for children.⁴ Individual welfare recipients, as well as entire communities—especially segregated communities of concentrated poverty—face enormous difficulties when attempting to play by society's rules. One needs assistance to "get a job!" or "get married!" or "be a good parent!" More importantly, one needs to witness structural changes within one's own neighborhood and larger metropolitan region. But when the federal government caps its block grants with no new funding for jobs, training and placement efforts, and provides no new policies to deal with housing and spatial mismatch, one must wonder whether and how states will affect these structural changes.

The limitations of current welfare reform are particularly problematic for people of color living in concentrated poverty. According to a 1998 *New York Times* study, White welfare recipients are leaving the welfare system much faster than minorities.⁵ In New York City, for example, Whites are leaving the system twice as fast as Blacks and nearly eight times as fast as Hispanics.⁶ In fact, Black and Hispanic welfare recipients outnumber Whites by approximately two to one.⁷ This phenomenon, claims the *Times*, "is new, little-noticed and as yet largely unexplained."⁸ But this is not entirely true. Scholars have detailed the structural dangers of segregation and poverty.⁹ Not only do people of color experience more than double the poverty rate of Whites, they are far more

most still cannot obtain SSI or food stamps due to their advanced age.

4. See *infra* p. 218.

5. See Jason DeParle, *Shrinking Welfare Rolls Leave Record High Share of Minorities: Fast Exodus of Whites Alters the Racial Balance*, N.Y. TIMES, July 27, 1998, at A1.

6. See *id.* Rather than rely on the most recent national figures on welfare and race, which were 17 months old at the time the article was printed, the *New York Times* surveyed 14 welfare programs located in New York City and 13 states (California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin). The areas surveyed account for 70% of the nation's welfare population. See *id.* at A12. The *New York Times* also used census data from interviews with 5,400 welfare recipients conducted in March 1994. *Id.*

7. See *id.* at A1.

8. *Id.*

9. See generally, PAUL A. JARGOWSKY, *POVERTY AND PLACE: GHETTOS, BARRIOS, AND THE AMERICAN CITY* (1997); DOUGLAS S. MASSEY & NANCY A. DENTON, *AMERICAN APARTHEID: SEGREGATION AND THE MAKING OF THE UNDERCLASS* (1993); DAVID RUSK, *CITIES WITHOUT SUBURBS* (2d ed. 1995).

likely to be concentrated in central cities.¹⁰ This racially demarcated concentrated poverty differs from individual poverty. Entire neighborhoods where 40% or more of the residents are below the poverty line cannot sustain themselves economically. Instead, they substantially limit the life opportunities of their residents. Community activists have decried the current welfare reform within this context. Why is it so surprising, then, that minorities would face greater obstacles when attempting to leave the system?¹¹

Much of the welfare conference was dedicated to examining the particular barriers to effective welfare reform within the various communities of color. Local and national experts led discussions by working groups comprised of African American, Southeast Asian, Chicano-Latino and Native American community members. Even though discussions focused on the demographics of the Twin Cities, the conclusions drawn by these working groups illustrate the difficulties many communities of color experience when attempting to reduce their welfare rolls in a meaningful way.

The conference group that discussed the African American community identified several welfare reform barriers, including lack of quality child-care, housing and public education, as well as inadequate career education and high costs of post-secondary education. Inaccurate information, arbitrary advice, lack of a nurturing environment and the system's overbearing bureaucracy were also identified as problematic. Moreover, the group emphasized the dangers of discrimination, stereotyping, generational poverty and hyper-segregation. As possible remedies, the group suggested a review of educational support programs to assure that career advancement is a realistic option, a campaign to assure that recipients utilize all available administrative remedies, an increase in fair employment and housing testing, and a means to monitor the entire welfare system. Finally, the group requested dialogue that would not leave recipients feeling ashamed and non-recipients feeling superior.

The Southeast Asian conference group agreed that serious

10. See INSTITUTE ON RACE AND POVERTY, EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOUSING, EDUCATION, AND PERSISTENT SEGREGATION, FINAL REPORT Feb. 1998, at 3-6 (1998). "As of 1990, more than two-thirds of African American metropolitan residents lived in central cities" compared to one-third of White residents. *Id.* at 5.

11. The *New York Times* identified possible reasons for this disparity: minority recipients obtain fewer high school degrees, attend less adequate schools, marry less often, have larger families, live in poorer census tracts and live in greater poverty. DeParle, *supra* note 5, at A12.

educational barriers prevented successful welfare reform, but noted that the cultural and language barriers were particularly problematic for this population. For example, Ramsey County, Minnesota, which includes the city of St. Paul, has one of the highest concentrations of Southeast Asians in the country, second only to certain areas in California. Fifty-five percent of Ramsey County's Southeast Asian population has no formal education.¹² Moreover, the heads of households tend to be older in this population.¹³ In their native communities, many current welfare recipients would be looking forward to retirement, while here they are asked to seek entry-level positions. Consequently, many of them have lost hope. When these factors are compounded by the larger cultural misunderstandings that occur between the majority culture and non-Western cultures, common barriers to health care, transportation and education appear more significant for Southeast Asians than for any other community of color in the region. Although the Minnesota legislature has attempted to respond to the needs of this population by adding farming to the list of eligible occupations in its welfare reform legislation, it failed to acknowledge that economic resources are required to begin farming. The conference group concluded that the legislature's efforts, however well-intentioned, signal a need to turn to the Southeast Asian community itself to develop structural solutions. The community can build upon its own strengths, particularly its strong kinship networks and extended families.

The Chicano-Latino conference group also identified language and lack of adequate education as serious barriers in welfare-to-work efforts. In Minnesota, for example, the Chicano-Latino population is one of the fastest growing communities and is comprised of many recent immigrants. According to Jesse Bethke Gomez, Executive Director of Chicanos Latinos Unidos En Servicio (CLUES), 54% of this population either has not graduated from high school or has only a G.E.D.¹⁴ Combined with the far-reaching changes in immigration reform, welfare reform leaves Chicano-Latino welfare recipients without providers competent to assess their needs. In fact, there is not a single certified Chicano-Latino

12. See LAURIE HESSNESS & BRIAN MEYER, WELFARE REFORM SOURCE BOOK: 1992-1995 LONGITUDINAL AND GEOGRAPHIC STUDY OF AFDC CASES IN RAMSEY COUNTY 10 (1997).

13. See *id.*

14. See Jesse Bethke Gomez, Remarks at the Conference Tearing Down Walls and Building Lives: A Systemic Approach to Welfare Reform (Dec. 5, 1997) (transcript available at the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School).

employment provider in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. As Gomez observed:

If you don't know the language, and you don't understand the culture, how are you possibly going to do an adequate job . . . ? We need . . . to get certified to help our people, help us help ourselves. We have to build common ground. There is much affinity amongst communities of color right now and the poor and disadvantaged. Again, as a member of the human race, an American, I just believe these laws, frankly, are scandalous.¹⁵

Finally, the Native American conference group identified barriers within its community. They found that, like most welfare recipients, Native Americans do not understand the termination of federal entitlements, and many are in denial about the issue. More particularly, the general population appears to lack an understanding of the historical relationship between Native Americans and the federal government. Consequently, stereotypes such as "all Indians get checks from casinos" and "Indian people are not stable" prevail, leaving Native Americans feeling victimized. In reality, continuity of services for Native Americans is a problem because many of them migrate back and forth between urban and rural communities. With obligations in both places, they can appear unstable. One group participant suggested conducting a study of Native American employment success stories. Unfortunately, the group's discussion of stereotypes did not address the problem of how to affect meaningful reform within the structures that create and perpetuate these stereotypes. For example, the lack of continuity of services resulting from the unique configuration of the Native American community should be addressed when fashioning welfare-to-work strategies. Instead, the group stressed the need for community-based service providers who will empower the community to survive the welfare reform transition.

In addition to eliciting discussion of the particular barriers within the various communities of color, the conference also considered the spatial components of effective welfare reform. As *The New York Times* noted in its examination of the obstinate minority welfare rolls, "[r]ace is intertwined with place."¹⁶ According to its data, only 31% of White welfare families live in urban centers, compared to 63% of Hispanic and 71% of African American welfare

15. *Id.*

16. DeParle, *supra* note 5, at A12.

families.¹⁷ Furthermore, as the welfare rolls increase in minority populations, they also become more concentrated in these urban centers.¹⁸ This concentration is exacerbated by the lack of adequate educational and housing opportunities resulting from persistent segregation or resegregation and by job scarcity.¹⁹ "Spatial mismatch" describes this phenomenon in terms of employment opportunity.²⁰ This suggests that inner city job seekers are out of luck because jobs are found in the suburbs rather than in the inner cities. During the 1970s and 1980s, the flight of jobs out of the central city reached its peak. For example, Chicago, Detroit and New York collectively lost 842,000 jobs between 1967 and 1987, while their suburbs gained 1,672,000 jobs.²¹ This trend has continued through the 1990s.²² Confounding these statistics with increased poverty in the nation's inner cities, continued substantial concentration of communities of color, and suburbanization of middle class minorities, one sees further depletion of employment opportunities in these areas.²³

As documented by William Julius Wilson in his book *The Truly Disadvantaged*,²⁴ this spatial mismatch limits employment opportunities by causing commuting problems and by complicating city-based job training programs. It also limits the ability to learn about job opportunities through social networks in the first place. Even suburban African Americans are highly concentrated in areas near old ghettos, far from the actual centers of suburban employment growth. Wilson more recently documented a shortage of appropriate private sector jobs in appropriate locations, even with today's low unemployment rates.²⁵ And, as Professor Powell pointed out in his closing remarks, this spatial mismatch didn't just happen: we created it.²⁶ We created a situation where Blacks and Latinos and Asians are essentially confined to center city and

17. See *id.*

18. See *id.*

19. See, e.g., John A. Powell, *Living and Learning: Linking Housing and Education*, 80 MINN. L. REV. 749, 758-59 (1996).

20. John Kain first described this theory in a 1968 paper. See E. Douglass Williams & Richard H. Sander, *The Prospects for "Putting America to Work" in the Inner City*, 81 GEO. L.J. 2003, 2020 (1993).

21. See *id.* at 2022.

22. For example, New York City has lost 227,000 jobs since 1990. See Peter Edelman, *The Worst Thing Bill Clinton Has Done*, ATLANTIC MONTHLY, Mar. 1997, at 52.

23. See Williams & Sander, *supra* note 20, at 2022-23.

24. WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON, *THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED* 60-61, 102 (1987).

25. See WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON, *WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS* 24-26 (1996).

26. See *infra* pp. 213-14.

inner-ring suburbs, and jobs are located in the outer-rings.²⁷ Therefore, real structural changes and strategies, such as those detailed in the conference, are needed to remedy it.

One strategy is to provide a spatial picture of a metropolitan area that depicts where welfare recipients live, where different types of jobs are available, applicable bus routes and travel time. This mapping will help policy-makers begin considering regional spatial issues. Professor Laura Leete of Case Western Reserve University detailed how this data can be used by transportation commissions to alter bus routes, by county commissioners to draw up welfare-to-work training programs, and by workforce commissions to locate one-stop training hubs.²⁸ Community profiles that focus more closely on one neighborhood and provide "localized area information" can also be helpful. If industries disappear, for example, replacement businesses, if any, can be documented through the profiles. If certain occupational categories predominate in a neighborhood, then training can be tailored toward those categories. According to Dennis R. Davis, an independent consultant and labor market analyst in the St. Paul area, while 80% of the information uncovered in such a profile may already be known to the neighborhood, the other 20% may be the most helpful to the community in undertaking its own planning.²⁹

A second complementary strategy makes transportation to the suburbs more readily available, as in the Bridges to Work demonstration programs sponsored by Public/Private Ventures in Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Milwaukee and St. Louis. While Wendy McClanahan, a member of the Bridges to Work team, acknowledges that transportation alone is not the solution to welfare-to-work, as part of a larger strategy it can greatly minimize

27. See WILSON, *supra* note 25, at 185. According to Wilson, in 1990, three-quarters of the dominant White population "across the nation lived in suburban and rural areas, while a majority of blacks and Latinos resided in urban areas." *Id.* Furthermore, the declining influence of American cities, the New Federalism and the most recent economic recession, leading to municipal cutbacks, have multiplied the problems of poverty and joblessness. See *id.*

28. See Dr. Laura Leete, Remarks at the Conference Tearing Down Walls and Building Lives: A Systemic Approach to Welfare Reform (Dec. 5, 1997) (transcript available at the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School). Dr. Laura Leete is an Assistant Professor of Economics at Case Western Reserve University. She detailed this mapping approach and is currently working with the Center on Urban Poverty and Social Change at Case Western Reserve University on labor market information systems aimed at identifying job opportunities for low-income workers in the Cleveland area.

29. See Dennis R. Davis, Remarks at the Tearing Down Walls and Building Lives: A Systemic Approach to Welfare Reform (Dec. 5, 1997) (transcript available at the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School).

spatial mismatch.³⁰ In each of the cities, Bridges to Work is testing a three-part strategy to overcome what it identified as the major barriers to job access for poor but work-ready adults. These include the administrative barrier that requires job-training programs to work within limited jurisdictions, the physical barrier created by a lack of car ownership and unsuitable public transportation, and the support services barrier, including child-care, that prevents job-seekers from sustaining the transition to self-sufficiency. The strategy, then, provides a placement mechanism to connect inner-city residents with jobs in the suburbs that match their skills, a commuting service that enables workers to reach their suburban jobs efficiently and reliably,³¹ and limited support services aimed at mitigating problems created by a daily commute to a distant and largely unfamiliar area.³² In sum, Bridges to Work is less about transportation than it is about job access. It connects individuals to suburban employers with different locations, starting times, shift lengths and skill requirements. According to McClanahan, success results from combining the trip with the destination: a good job at the other end of the line.³³

Lorrie Louder, Director of Industrial Development for the Saint Paul Port Authority, argued that port authorities can utilize a variety of techniques to diminish spatial mismatch and close the gap.³⁴ Jobs can be created where the recipients are already living by turning brownfields into greenfields. St. Paul, for example, has over a thousand acres of brownfields, which are fallow, contaminated parcels of land. Once the land is cleaned up (converted to a greenfield) and returned to the marketplace, businesses are encouraged to develop it so that people in the neighborhoods can get

30. See Wendy S. McClanahan, Remarks at the Conference Tearing Down Walls and Building Lives: A Systemic Approach to Welfare Reform (Dec. 5, 1997) (transcript available at the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School).

31. See *id.* Each city takes a slightly different approach to providing transportation: Two cities use a private for-profit vanpool service; two cities use regional public transit supplementing the van service; and one city is using private not-for-profit bus service. See *id.*

32. According to McClanahan, about 320 people to date have been placed in suburban jobs. See *id.* While she believes that the programs are successful for a small but growing number of people who are placed, hard outcomes will not be published until 2001. See *id.*

33. See *id.*

34. The St. Paul Port Authority's mission is to create and retain jobs for neighborhood residents at good living wages. See Lorrie Louder, Remarks at the Conference Tearing Down Walls and Building Lives: A Systemic Approach to Welfare Reform (Dec. 5, 1997) (transcript available at the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School).

well-paying jobs that provide benefits.³⁵ Businesses are required to maintain 60% of the new jobs for St. Paul residents and to pay starting wages of least \$8 an hour with benefits. In addition, because there is often no meaningful relationship between the job-seeker and the employer, the Port Authority must work with its partners in the neighborhoods and foundations to provide multi-level training both for employees and employers.³⁶ Only then can quality, living-wage jobs be permanently retained.

As both Wendy McClanahan and Lorrie Louder noted, no single strategy can lead to effective welfare reform—especially within communities of color living in concentrated poverty.³⁷ Indeed, tackling the most obvious barriers such as employment, training, transportation and child-care is only the beginning.³⁸ Without an interrelated approach, these barriers overwhelm recipients.

Lastly, recognizing the need for an integrated approach to welfare reform, the conference aimed to “tear down walls and build lives,” as its title suggests. Tearing down the walls, although undocumented in any formal way, was nonetheless the most notable conference outcome. Because conference participants ranged from national policymakers to local recipients, and from academicians to community service deliverers, the discourse focused on how to overcome real-life structural barriers, rather than on how to engineer the federal government’s paternalistic notion of “personal responsibility.” The conference forged connections between these participants and stressed community-academic collaborations. Communities of color aired their concerns as participants sincerely listened to each other’s “stories.”³⁹ Institute director John Powell insisted in his closing remarks that the welfare issue is really not a

35. According to Louder, the Port Authority calls this process “carpe dirt” since they seize the opportunity to clean up dirty dirt. *Id.*

36. *See id.*

37. *See Louder, supra* note 34; McClanahan, *supra* note 30.

38. The second day of the welfare conference attempted to examine these and other less obvious barriers, including housing, health care, disabilities, sexism, domestic violence and the welfare system itself. Most of these barriers resulted from problems of inaccurate information, language and cultural differences, racism, lack of accountability, and the need to raise awareness of the complexity of successful reform.

39. Ann Withorn, Professor of Social Policy at the College of Public and Community Service, University of Massachusetts at Boston, spoke during the first day of the conference on linking scholarly and community work. Ann Withorn, Remarks at the Conference Tearing Down Walls and Building Lives: A Systemic Approach to Welfare Reform (Dec. 5, 1997) (transcript available at the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School). Her focus was on the need to listen to each other’s stories. *See id.*

welfare issue at all.⁴⁰ Rather, it is about the misrepresentation of women of color as welfare queens and about the differing social structures constructed for Whites and populations of color. These structures affect everyone, however, and we must discuss them in order to tear them down and build lives.

40. john a. powell, Remarks at the Conference Tearing Down Walls and Building Lives: A Systemic Approach to Welfare Reform (Dec. 5, 1997) (transcript available at the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School).