

**S & R PIEPER
FAMILY FOUNDATION**

**FOCUS GROUPS REGARDING
THE NEEDS OF
SINGLE MOTHERS**

SEPTEMBER 11, 2000

PREPARED BY:

THE DIERINGER RESEARCH GROUP, INC.



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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Introduction

At the request of the S & R Pieper Family Foundation, The Dieringer Research Group conducted two focus groups regarding the needs of single parent families. The purpose of the research was to explore how individuals living at or below a poverty existence, feel about the services that are available and whether or not these services are supporting their needs. This is part of a three phase research project, designed to understand the issues facing single parents and to get feedback directly from those most involved and able to articulate their successes or concerns.

Research Objectives

In 1991, The Dieringer Research Group conducted a similar project for the PPC Foundation regarding the issue of AFDC. The purpose of the project was to explore the "make-up" of a person receiving AFDC and to compare AFDC recipients to non-recipients who have similar levels of income. Because of the research objectives in 2000, The Dieringer Research Group first took a look at the major program designed to serve lower income single mothers -- Wisconsin Works (or "W-2"). Wisconsin Works provides job placement assistance and other services to parents with dependent children; under W-2 a less complicated financial eligibility test requires that the family's gross income be at or below 115% of the Federal Poverty Level. In designing this project, we have taken into consideration the revised assistance program.

Methodology

On August 30, 2000, two focus groups were conducted with respondents who met the following profile: single mothers, age 18 or over, had custody of at least one dependent child, were residents of Wisconsin and did not receive Social Security Disability income.

One group consisted of individuals currently participating in the W-2 program and one group consisted of individuals who qualified for the program but were not presently enrolled in the program. The income qualifier for the second group was 115% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) per size of family (see chart on following page):¹

¹ W-2 income information provided by Employment Solutions, Inc, and the Milwaukee Job Center North.

Introduction

Size of Family	115% FPL Monthly	115% FPL Annual
1	\$800	\$9,603
2	\$1,078	\$12,938
3	\$1,356	\$16,273
4	\$1,634	\$19,608
5	\$1,912	\$22,943
6	\$2,190	\$26,278
7	\$2,468	\$29,613

The following report summarizes the reactions of the respondents we talked to in the focus groups. Phase II of the research will further explore these issues among a larger sample of the population.

DETAILED FINDINGS

Detailed Findings

A. RESPONDENTS IN BOTH FOCUS GROUPS RESPONDED SIMILARLY TO A QUESTION REGARDING THE NEEDS OF SINGLE MOTHERS.

All respondents were asked what the needs of single parents were. Participants in both groups were able to articulate the needs of single mothers, including money to pay rent (shelter), food, clothing, child care, education, reliable after-school programs, health benefits, transportation, quality education for children, time to spend with children, education for themselves, job training, decent wages, "child support paid," emotional support ("support groups") and "occasional time for myself."

They understood that a variety of circumstances cause people to apply for assistance programs and services. There were mentions of health problems, drug addiction, divorce, crime, mental illness, abuse, teen pregnancy, "poor planning," no reliable child care, a lack of education and lack of job skills.

B. A MAJOR DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE GROUP CONSISTING OF CURRENT W-2 USERS AND THE GROUP WHO WERE NOT W-2 USERS WAS THAT THE LATTER GROUP CONSISTED OF THE "WORKING POOR."

It was not unusual in the group of lower income single mothers (not on W-2) to hear of individuals working two or three jobs, who still could not make ends meet. Some of the jobs mentioned were at McDonalds, MPS, Walgreens, Froedtert and Aurora. Assistant Manager, newspaper carrier, and housekeeper were also mentioned. Several respondents were also furthering their education (MATC and Mount Mary were mentioned). Some respondents said it was impossible to take care of their families on jobs that paid \$8 or \$9 an hour, so they were working multiple jobs. In some cases, they said they could not get enough hours to qualify for benefits. They asked the question, "how can we ever get ahead?"

"You can't live on a McDonald's job, with five kids." (GII)

"I want more hours. I need 30 hours for health benefits, but they won't give me the hours." (GII)

Detailed Findings

Although they took pride in what they were doing (working multiple low paying jobs, or furthering their education), these respondents still were frustrated about their chances of improving their lives, raising their children in a quality way (good day care and time to spend with their children), and acquiring benefits that would provide their families with a sense of security. However, there was a sense of determination and pride to make it on their own that was not as evident in the W-2 group.

"I don't want to be a stereotype. I don't want to wait at home for a check. I want to earn that check." (GII)

C. THERE SEEMED TO BE A REALIZATION AMONG SOME RESPONDENTS THAT FAMILY SUPPORT PLAYS A ROLE IN KEEPING PEOPLE OFF ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS.

In both groups, respondents talked about the difference that family and friends can make to low income single mothers. Financial and emotional support could make the difference in applying or not applying for W-2. Coming from a family culture that encouraged hard work and persistence also contributed to an ability to raise one's self up.

"Some people have nobody. No mom, dad, siblings or grandparents. It took me a lot to go through being abused." (GI)

"I didn't plan ahead. I got pregnant out of high school. I still depend on my Daddy." (GII)

"My parents help buying groceries and gas money." (GII)

"My parents help babysit." (GII)

"There's an attitude that comes from family and what they are used to. Kids learn from example and the parents' attitudes carry over. I can take help from people (parents) who know I am doing the best I can do. But if I had to sit at home, I would wither and die. If I got stuck in the system, I would be on it forever. I couldn't stand that." (GII)

"Some people don't have the support, someone to say 'I believe in you.'" (GII)

"Without that support, where would we be? Gang banging." (GII)

Detailed Findings

D. THERE WERE A FEW INDIVIDUALS IN THE GROUP OF NON-USERS WHO HAD USED AFDC, W-2 OR OTHER SERVICES IN THE PAST, BUT WERE NOT CURRENTLY RECEIVING ASSISTANCE.

A few respondents had used assistance programs in the past, namely AFDC and W-2. They were more likely to view the assistance as a temporary measure or a trap into "the system" that should be avoided.

"Certain portions of the program do help while you are trying to get back on your feet. But I hate people who take advantage of the system." (GII)

"I didn't want to be part of the system. You go in and tell them your life story and if you miss one appointment, they cut you off food stamps. So I went to school and got a job." (GII)

E. ALTHOUGH CURRENT W-2 USERS WERE ABLE TO NAME SOME OF THE SERVICES AVAILABLE TO THEM, AWARENESS WAS NOT CONSISTENT.

Not everyone was aware of the services or how they could access them. A couple of individuals claimed that W-2 workers informed them about W-2 services, but not about other programs that could benefit them. Moreover, some Non-Users said they were not aware of services that could benefit them. As one individual said, "Not everyone is aware of these services. They should tell us about these."

Some of the services that respondents mentioned were:

Group 1 (Current W-2 Users)	Group 2 (Not Current W-2 Users)
W-2	W-2
Child care	Child care
Food stamps	Food stamps
Badger Care	Badger Care
Transportation	WIC Program
Job training	Crisis center
Energy assistance	Free health clinics
Shelters	Churches
Transitional Housing Program	
Free lunch program at school	
Rent assistance	
Community organizations	
Food pantry	

Detailed Findings

F. AS SINGLE MOTHERS, ONE CONCERN PARTICIPANTS IN BOTH GROUPS BROUGHT UP WAS THE QUALITY OF DAY CARE AVAILABLE.

Individuals in both groups expressed concern and fear about the quality of day care that was available. They worried about the quality of care and how to handle days when their kids were sick.

"Day care treats kids so bad. You only have a certain amount of time to find day care and there are so many bad day care centers out there." (GI)

"Even when your kid turns five, it's better. Then they can tell you what is going on." (GI)

"I couldn't keep a job because my kid has a serious health problem." (GI)

"If you are working two jobs, who is at home with the kids? If I had my way I would be home. But I am trying to show my kids responsibility, not to be lazy. If you stay home with your kids, they stereotype you as 'lazy.' That's not fair." (GII)

"Do you know day care costs \$192 a week?" (GII)

"Young babies, it's the babies that cost more." (GII)

"Larger companies should put together day care for employees at a discounted rate." (GII)

G. THERE WERE A FEW INDIVIDUALS WHO FELT THAT ABUSES OF AFDC CREATED W-2.

Interestingly, there were several respondents, particularly in the Non-User group who felt that abuses of past assistance programs created W-2. According to some individuals, the haste to make people work, at any job, has created another set of problems. A program that stressed working without higher education or advanced job skills still was considered a limited way of empowering people.

"The system allowed this to happen. If AFDC had stricter rules, they wouldn't have the problems they do now." (GII)

"Wisconsin paid the highest and people from other states would come here. They made it easy to get comfortable." (GII)

"I wish I could have pushed out the women who didn't need it. That's why it's so tough now to get assistance." (GI)

Detailed Findings

H. ACCORDING TO SOME RESPONDENTS, W-2 IS CREATING ANOTHER TYPE OF "SLAVE" OR CASTE SYSTEM MADE UP OF PEOPLE PREPARED TO WORK ONLY IN MINIMUM WAGE JOBS.

Respondents who are currently on W-2 had a number of criticisms about W-2. In spite of the fact they understood the basic concept of job training and working instead of "welfare," they said that the type of job training and jobs that were available were keeping them in dead-end situations. Examples are respondents with nursing skills, accounting skills, computer skills, and tailoring skills being placed in unskilled manual labor jobs. There was anger over the quality of job training, interruptions in job training and the jobs themselves. Respondents asked "how can we better ourselves or ever aspire higher when all we're being prepared to do is work at Good Will?"

"W-2 sends you to places which provide poor training." (GI)

"The training just isn't there." (GI)

"I have a background in accounting and they sent me to a job where I break hangers all day." (GI)

"What kind of jobs are available -- welding, construction, truck driving?" (GI)

"They will help you get a job, but not one that will support your family." (GII)

"They are all dead-end jobs. Who wants to work at the Salvation Army?" (GI)

"W-2 gives you a job, but not a good job." (GII)

"We can work for five years, but if they never train us, we will never get ahead." (GI)

"Just having a job does not mean you have a future. W-2 misleads you into thinking you have a future." (GI)

I. A SIGNIFICANT QUESTION FROM RESPONDENTS WAS WHY W-2 DOES NOT ADDRESS HIGHER EDUCATION.

Respondents in both groups said they felt that the "ticket" to improving their lives was both job training and higher education, in particular college courses. There were questions about why W-2 included opportunities to finish high school, but not college.

"Under W-2 you have to work. But what about school? How can I work, go to college and raise four kids at the same time, all by myself?" (GI)

Detailed Findings

"They try and send some people to school for their GED. The problem is college -- which would give you the more skilled job training." (GI)

"They should send people to school or help with tuition. Does the program help to get the education to get the benefits? No, just a job. We need more than just a job to improve our lives." (GII)

J. RESPONDENTS BELIEVE THAT UNDER W-2, THERE SHOULD BE A "PLAN" TAILORED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF EACH INDIVIDUAL.

Participants in both groups were able to articulate that in order to better their lives, a "plan" was necessary to bring them to the next step in their search to become independent and better their lives. One respondent asked, "Don't you need a plan to succeed in anything? Where is the plan in W-2?" Rather than a cookie-cutter approach, the request was for individual plans to help respondents improve their lives.

"They should look at you and your individual situation. Some of us have physical problems or education issues." (GI)

"No two situations are alike that made us need assistance." (GI)

"W-2 doesn't give you what you need; they give you what they think you need." (GI)

"Rules are set for everybody, even when each situation is different." (GI)

"They need to help a person work toward their goal. You've got to have a plan or you're screwed." (GI)

K. ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS, A MAJOR PROBLEM WITH W-2 IS THE "FEPS" OR FINANCIAL EMPLOYMENT PLANNERS THEY WORK WITH.

Although there were a few individuals who praised their W-2 worker, there were reports that W-2 workers looked down upon participants, were rude, lazy, overly aggressive in "sanctioning" participants (money or benefits reduced/denied for "perceived violations") and even purposefully sabotaged their opportunities for success. While current users were grateful for any child care steerance, the medical benefits and food stamps, they were very concerned about the way they were treated by the FEPS. A few individuals suggested more training for the FEPS on "working with the public."

Detailed Findings

"The people working there are ex-AFDC people, and they have this attitude; they look down on you. 'I have a job and you don't.'" (GII)

"We are not on their level. They act real uppity because we are on assistance and they are not." (GI)

"They treat you like a number. There is not even common courtesy." (GII)

"They hold your life in their hands. If she thinks you need help, she will help you." (GI)

"There's a real nasty attitude." (GI)

"They don't like their jobs and so they take it out on you." (GI)

"You wait for hours for your appointment only to find out your FEP is on vacation." (GII)

"They tell you to come in and they are not there. They make you wait and then tell you they are not there." (GI)

"If you dare to complain, they will treat you badly." (GI)

"She conveniently loses my papers." (GI)

"She doesn't listen to me. We don't have an opinion. We have to do what they tell us." (GI)

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Based on this research, there appear to be real needs on the part of lower income single mothers, with mitigating circumstances ranging from divorce to health issues. Those women who were not currently on W-2 differed in that they tended to have more "safety nets" in the form of family members providing financial and emotional support, and were working multiple jobs to manage their financial needs. There was some feeling from both groups that the W-2 system was good in theory, in that it encouraged work as a way to an improved financial existence, but they questioned the quality of the job training (and jobs) and the lack of higher level education in the program.

Suggestions for improving the present program included:

- more sensitivity training for W-2 workers
- creating individual "plans" to address the needs of each single mother

APPENDIX – RECRUITING SCREENER

Appendix – Recruiting Screener

Group #

080038563

08/24/00 - 2

FOCUS GROUP RECRUITING SCREENER

INTERVIEWER: _____ DATE: _____

INTERVIEWER : ASK TO SPEAK TO FEMALE HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD. IF THIS PERSON IS NOT AVAILABLE, ASK WHEN WOULD BE A GOOD TIME TO CALL BACK.

Hello, my name is _____ from The Dieringer Research Group, an independent marketing research company. We are a professional research organization that surveys the attitudes and opinions of people on various issues. Today, we are talking to people about how they feel about different assistance or aid programs offered by government agencies.

A. Would you be willing to take a few minutes to answer some questions?

_____ Yes
(PROCEED TO B.)

_____ No
**(TRY TO SCHEDULE A CALL BACK,
OTHERWISE THANK AND TERMINATE)**

B. *What is your marital status?*

_____ Single **(PROCEED TO C.)**
_____ Married **(THANK AND TERMINATE)**
_____ Divorced **(PROCEED TO C.)**
_____ Separated **(THANK AND TERMINATE)**
_____ Widowed **(PROCEED TO C.)**

C. Do you have custody of any minor children under the age of 18?

_____ Yes
(PROCEED TO #1.)

_____ No
(THANK AND TERMINATE)

QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever received any kind of financial assistance or aid through a government organization such as the State of Wisconsin?

_____ Yes
_____ No

1.1. Specifically, have you ever received any of the following kinds of assistance?
(READ LIST. CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.)

_____ Food stamps
_____ Medical assistance

_____ W-2
_____ Work and Training programs

Appendix – Recruiting Screener

2. Are you presently receiving any kind of aid or assistance through a government organization such as the State of Wisconsin?

_____ Yes **(PROCEED TO #2.1.)**
_____ No **(SKIP TO #2.2.)**

- 2.1. Which, if any, of the following kinds of assistance are you presently receiving?
(READ LIST. CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.)

_____ Food stamps
_____ Medical assistance
_____ W-2 (“USERS”)
_____ Work and Training programs

**(INTERVIEWER NOTE: IF RESPONDENT SAYS ‘YES’ TO ‘W-2,’ IN #2.1, THEY ARE A “USER” (GI)
OTHERWISE PROCEED AS A “NON-USER” (GII)**

- 2.2. Are you presently receiving any Social Security Disability income?

_____ Yes **(THANK AND TERMINATE)**
_____ No **(PROCEED TO #3.)**

**** IF RESPONDENT IS A “USER” SKIP TO #4.**

Appendix – Recruiting Screener

3. Including yourself, how many people are living together at your present address?
(CHECK ANSWER UNDER #3. BELOW.)

3.1. Is your household's total yearly income (before anything has been deducted) ...
(READ INCOME FOR CORRESPONDING NUMBER OF PEOPLE. RECORD UNDER #3.1.)

#3. <u>No. of people</u>	#3.1. <u>Yearly income</u>	
_____ 1		(THANK AND TERMINATE)
_____ 2	_____ \$12,900 or more _____ Less than \$12,900	(THANK AND TERMINATE) (PROCEED TO #4.)
_____ 3	_____ \$16,250 or more _____ Less than \$16,250	(THANK AND TERMINATE) (PROCEED TO #4.)
_____ 4	_____ \$19,600 or more _____ Less than \$19,600	(THANK AND TERMINATE) (PROCEED TO #4.)
_____ 5	_____ \$22,950 or more _____ Less than \$22,950	(THANK AND TERMINATE) (PROCEED TO #4.)
_____ 6	_____ \$26,275 or more _____ Less than \$26,275	(THANK AND TERMINATE) (PROCEED TO #4.)
_____ 7	_____ \$29,600 or more _____ Less than \$29,600	(THANK AND TERMINATE) (PROCEED TO #4.)

(INTERVIEWER NOTE: PEOPLE WHO QUALIFY IN #3.1. ARE “NON-USERS” [GII])

4. In which of the following categories does your age fall? (READ LIST.)

- _____ Under 18 (THANK AND TERMINATE)
- _____ 18 – 29 years (PROCEED TO #5.)
- _____ 30 – 40 years (PROCEED TO #5.)
- _____ 41 – 50 years (PROCEED TO #5.)
- _____ 51 + years (THANK AND TERMINATE)

(DO NOT READ) _____ Refused

5a. Are you a U.S. citizen?

- _____ Yes (PROCEED TO #5b.)
- _____ No (THANK AND TERMINATE)

Appendix – Recruiting Screener

5b. Are you a legal resident of Wisconsin?

Yes **(PROCEED TO #6.)**

No **(THANK AND TERMINATE)**

6. Do you or does anyone in your immediate family currently work for the local county, city, state or federal government?

Yes **(THANK AND TERMINATE)**

No **(PROCEED TO #7.)**

7. Which of the following statements best describes your feelings regarding assistance programs?
(READ LIST.)

The present assistance programs provide a valuable service to the community

The present assistance programs do not provide a valuable service to the community

7.1. Why do you say that? **(RECORD VERBATIM RESPONSE.)**

(INTERVIEWER NOTE: WE ARE LOOKING FOR RESPONDENTS WHO ARE ARTICULATE AND CAPABLE OF EXPLAINING THEIR ATTITUDE.)

8. I have one more OPTIONAL question. What is your race?

African-American/Black

Asian

Caucasian/White

Hispanic

Indian

Other (specify) _____

(DO NOT READ) Refused

(INTERVIEWER NOTE: TRY TO GET A MIX OF RACES. NO MORE THAN 50% “AFRICAN-AMERICAN/BLACK”)

Appendix – Recruiting Screener

9. We are inviting a small group of people like yourself to participate in a research discussion regarding how organizations can best provide support and assistance to individuals in the community. We would like to hear from different people in the community who represent different viewpoints. Again, we are an independent research company and not connected in any way with the County, State or any other governmental agency.

The discussion will consist of approximately 8 to 10 people, and will last approximately 1½ hours to two hours. A trained moderator will lead the group. You will be paid \$45.00 in cash for your valuable opinions. This discussion does not involve sales of any kind and no special preparation is necessary. The discussion will take place at our offices - The Dieringer Research Group. The address is 3064 North 78th Street in Milwaukee. The group is on:

Group I: **USERS** – Wednesday, August 30, 2000 – 5:45 p.m.
Group II: **NON-USERS** – Wednesday, August 30, 2000 – 8:00 p.m.

Would you be willing to participate?

_____ Yes
_____ No **(THANK AND TERMINATE)**

Group Number _____

PLEASE CLARIFY SPELLING ON FIRST AND LAST NAME.

Name (Mr. - Mrs. - Ms. - Dr.) [circle one] _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Telephone (_____) _____

E-mail _____

We will send you a letter of confirmation and directions to The Dieringer Research Group, which should arrive within the next few days. You will be paid \$45.00 following the group discussion. We will be calling you again with a reminder a day or two before the group. Thank you very much. We look forward to meeting you.

Rescreened by: _____ Date: _____

If **QUALIFIED REFUSAL**, why are you unable to attend? _____



APPENDIX – DISCUSSION GUIDE

**FOCUS GROUP
DISCUSSION GUIDELINE - SINGLE PARENTS**

I. WELCOME/EXPLANATION OF GROUP PROCESS:

- Explain purpose of group - needs of single parents
- Explain tape recording, one way mirror - Pam will write a report (no names used)
- Stress no right or wrong answers; all opinions welcome

II. INTRODUCTIONS:

- Name
- Family/Children
- Employment, Interests

III. UNDERSTANDING OF ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS:

1. What services are you aware of that exist for single parents in need?
2. What kinds of needs do you think single parents have?
3. What is your understanding of who is eligible for any of these services?
4. (IF NOT MENTIONED, ASK:) What do you know about W-2?
5. What do you think are some of the personal circumstances that cause people to apply for assistance programs or services?
6. Has there ever been a time in your life when circumstances made it necessary for you to look into assistance programs or services? Explain.
7. What services have you used in the past?
8. What services are you presently using?
9. What services did you find helpful? Not helpful?
10. How easy/difficult is it to find the services you need? (Ease/difficulty of accessing)
11. Have you ever been denied a service? Please explain.
12. How do you think people feel about receiving help -- what is the range of emotions?
13. What do you think are some of the common stereotypes of people receiving assistance?
14. Let's say that two people have the same size family, personal circumstances and same income. However, one chooses to seek assistance and services and one does not. What do you think is the difference between the two? What about them may be different?

Appendix – Discussion Guide

IV. EXPERIENCE WITH W-2:

1. We would like to spend a few minutes talking specifically about W-2. How long have you been on W-2?
2. What options did you consider at the time of applying for W-2? (Finding a job on your own? Getting additional education?) What obstacles were in your way of accomplishing these goals?
3. What are the things you like or think work in the present W-2 program? What do you dislike, or think does not work? (IF NOT MENTIONED, ASK ABOUT:)
 - The eligibility requirements
 - The benefits
 - The ease/difficulty of applying
 - Timeliness of receiving your check
 - Responsiveness to your needs and questions
 - The job training
 - Child care
 - Health insurance
4. (BOTH GROUPS) What do you consider to be the positives and negatives of the W-2 program for single parents?
5. (BOTH GROUPS) What, if anything, about the current program seems unfair?
6. How could the program better meet the needs of single parents? What could be improved or what services should be added?
7. How long do you think you will need W-2? Explain how long you think you will need the services.
8. (IF APPLICABLE:) How did you work yourself off of the W-2 program?
9. (THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER USED W-2:) Did you ever consider applying for assistance under the W-2 program? Why or why not?

V. CURRENT NEEDS:

1. What are your current needs for services?
2. What, if anything are you doing to protect yourself against a possible future economic hardship?
3. What are the biggest obstacles in the way of managing your family in the way you would like to?
4. What are your observations about how people become less dependent on outside services and as single parents, become more able to stand on their own and take care of their family?