

Single Mother Needs Assessment Study Final Summary of Phases I, II, and III

Background and Methodology

At the request of the S & R Pieper Family Foundation, The Dieringer Research Group designed a research study regarding the needs of single parent families. The purpose of this study was to explore how individuals, living at or below a poverty existence, feel about the services that are available and whether or not the available services are meeting their needs. The study was 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.

In order to meet the study objectives, three separate, but inter-related, studies were conducted.

- **Phase One:** Qualitative focus groups with single mothers (*one group currently using W-2 and one group who qualified but not currently using W-2*). This phase was conducted to initially uncover and discuss the needs of single mothers who were using W-2 compared to those who were not, as well as understand why single mothers eligible for W-2 benefits were not utilizing the program. Opinions on the success of the W-2 program were also discussed.
- **Phase Two:** Quantitative telephone interviews with 400 single mothers (*200 currently using W-2 and 200 who qualify for W-2 but not currently using W-2*). This phase was conducted to test the issues and concerns uncovered in the first phase among a larger sample of the single mother population.
- **Phase Three:** A mail survey of 654 social service agencies in Milwaukee County, with 102 qualified organizations that returned a completed questionnaire. This final phase was designed to inventory and profile social services agencies operating in Milwaukee County and determine the gaps in the services needed versus available to single parent families.

Summary of Phase One: Qualitative Focus Groups

- Respondents in both focus groups responded similarly to a question regarding 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 can cause people to apply for assistance programs and services, such as 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.
- A major difference between single mothers on W-2 and those who were not on W-2 was that those who were not on W-2 consisted of the "working poor" sometimes working two to three jobs and still could not make ends meet. Although proud of themselves, the "working poor" were still frustrated about their chances of improving their lives, properly raising their children, and acquiring benefits that would provide them with a sense of security.
- There seemed to be a realization that family and friends can make a difference in the lives of low income single mothers, either providing financial or emotional support. Several respondents said that coming from a family culture encouraging hard work and persistence also contributed to self-empowerment.
- Not everyone was aware of the services available to them or how to access them. And those who were aware of available services said that it can be a "hassle" to apply for them.
- One concern from participants was the quality of day care available. They expressed both concern and fear about their options as well as concern on how to handle days when their children were sick.
- Several respondents, especially those not on W-2, felt that the abuses of past assistance created W-2. The haste to make people work, at any job, created another set of problems. A program that stressed working without offering higher education or job skills/training was considered a limited way of empowering individuals.

Summary of Phase One: Qualitative Focus Groups (continued)

- According to some respondents, W-2 is creating another type of "slave" or caste system made up of people who are prepared to work only in minimum wage jobs. Although respondents understood the basic concept of job training and working instead of "receiving welfare," they said the jobs and job training available were keeping them in dead-end situations.
- 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.
- Respondents believe that under W-2, there should be a plan tailored to meet the needs of each individual, rather than a cookie-cutter approach treating each person, with different circumstances, the same.
- Participants expressed that one of the major problems with the W-2 system was the Financial Employment Planners (FEPS) they work with. There were reports that W-2 workers looked down upon participants, were rude, lazy, overly aggressive in "sanctioning" participants for "perceived violations," and even purposefully sabotaged their opportunities for success. A few individuals suggested more training for the FEPs on "working with the public."

Summary of Phase Two: 400 Quantitative Interviews

- Similar to the results of the focus groups, these single mothers mentioned the same needs. It became clear the needs were inter-related, in that they need money to live on, a decent job, and health care benefits to afford child care, more education, education, food, and shelter.
- A variety of circumstances were said to cause a need for assistance, such as unemployment, lack of child care, lack of education, medical problems, and lack of a support system.
- As in the focus groups, not all women were aware of the services available, with almost 20% unable to name even one service or program to assist single mothers with financial needs. And again, many (39%) said it was difficult to access the services, either due to a lack of information or the hassle involved in applying for the assistance.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents, both users and non-users of W-2, thought there was a problem with the W-2 system, including the quality of job training, an uncaring staff, slow services, and low pay.
- The majority (79%) agreed¹ W-2 should have a plan to address the specific needs of the individual, another issue uncovered in the focus group results.
- In terms of job training, the respondents claimed that inadequate job training or "just any job" were not solutions to make them financially independent. The majority of respondents agreed² affordable day care (94%), job training (91%), employer sponsored programs to try out a job (89%), centralized services in their neighborhood (89%), and affordable health care (88%) were solutions to help single mothers get off assistance programs.
- A large percentage of respondents felt that education on how to handle money and birth control education could be used as a way to get people off financial assistance programs, with 84% and 76% of the response, respectively.

¹ Combined "4" and "5" ratings on a 1 to 5 scale, with "1" meaning "Strongly Disagree" and "5" meaning "Strongly Agree."

² Combined "4" and "5" ratings on a 1 to 5 scale, with "1" meaning "Strongly Disagree" and "5" meaning "Strongly Agree."



Phase Three: Inventory of 102 Social Service Agencies³

- Responding organizations more frequently offered services for children/youth (47%), child care/day care (35%), food/clothing assistance (29%), programs on self-esteem (27%) or transportation (25%).
- Not many of the responding organizations offered educational services and job related services, identified as key components to financial independence. Only about one-fifth of organizations offered these type of services, with 20% offering job search training (resume writing, want ads, interviewing skills), 19% offering job training, and 18% offering career counseling (determine interest and skills for a job). Fifteen percent of responding organizations offered employment search services, providing help in locating a job. Only 9% of responding organizations offered educational services, either high school, technical or college, less than one-tenth of the responding organizations.
- Twenty percent of organizations offered financial counseling or assistance, a low percent considering 84% percent of the 400 single mothers agreed that education on handling money was a solution to getting off assistance and 26% needed money to live on.
- One of the circumstances that caused women to apply for assistance were medical problems and lack of a support system, yet just about one-fifth of the organizations offered services targeting the physical and mental well-being of individuals. As mentioned previously, 27% of organizations offered programs on self-esteem. Less than one-fourth of responding organizations offered mental/behavioral health counseling (23%), individual counseling (22%), or family counseling (21%). Even fewer organizations offered other related types of services - alcohol/drug counseling (17%), assertiveness training (15%), and marriage counseling (12%). Only 9% offered medical care.
- As uncovered in the qualitative interviews, birth control education could be used as a way to get people off financial assistance, however only 13% of the responding organizations offered this service.
- Some organizations offered services for individuals in a crisis situation, including spouse/child abuse counseling or prevention (18%), transitional housing (15%), and a crisis shelter (12%).

Conclusions

- Single mothers have very basic needs for survival, including financial assistance, employment, food, clothing, health care benefits, and affordable housing. Quality child care and quality job training are also important to helping them gain independence. Although programs do exist to help them in these basic areas, based on the responding organizations, the incidence of agencies providing these services is low throughout the entire Milwaukee County.
- In addition, single mothers are not always aware of where to go for help or what programs are available. Increased awareness of other sources of assistance, other than those through state or county programs, is important so that quality programs and services are accessible and available to everyone. This may also reduce the burden on state and county programs that are carrying the major load.
- More attention should be focused on the issue of single mothers securing their *future* success, not just their *day-to-day* existence. Based on this research, it appears single mothers want increased educational opportunities, quality job training, quality jobs, and quality child care (affordable); they want to move beyond satisfying their immediate needs for food, clothing, and housing. They stressed the path to lasting financial independence is not secured by just "any job." Low income single mothers understand financial independence is directly related to a higher level of education and training that will help them succeed at higher level jobs.
- Single mothers claimed a satisfying and challenging job (versus a dead-end, minimum wage job without health insurance) would improve their self-esteem and confidence, improve their family life ("be a positive role model for my kids") and allow for quality time with their family (rather than working three jobs to provide a bare existence). This self-supporting attitude may also trickle down to future generations, communicating that self-empowerment is the key to opportunities and success in life.

³ This summary is based on the information provided by the responding organizations. Perhaps if more organizations had responded, the results would be different. The fact that many did not respond has implications not only for this study, but also for low income single mothers, who already have challenges accessing "the system."