

**HOPE COMMUNITY**  
**2101 PORTLAND AVENUE SOUTH, MINNEAPOLIS, MN 55404**  
**JOBS AND EDUCATION LISTENING PROJECT 1997**

**WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO**

**OUR ROOTS**

Hope Community has a 21 year history at Portland and Franklin Avenues in South Minneapolis. We began with an emergency shelter for women and children - one of the first in the Twin Cities. Over the past several years we have grown and changed in major ways. The change began when:

- Most of the houses on the block where we began were devastated by drugs, violence and absentee landlords.
- We saw hope and possibility undermined as neighborhood residents became more isolated and fearful while outsiders labeled whole neighborhoods with negative stereotypes.

Hope Community is responding in two ways:

- Reclaiming our block -- creating a safe environment and a visible sign of HOPE.
- Creating a strategy that fights isolation and hopelessness as people learn and act together.

**RECLAIMING A BLOCK FOR HOPE**

We now own most of the buildings on our block, including low income rentals for 13 families, a transition residence for homeless women, meeting rooms, a community room, a parent-child room, outdoor community spaces including a picnic pavilion and a children's playground.

**ORGANIZING -- LEARNING AND ACTING TOGETHER**

The greatest strength in the neighborhoods surrounding Hope is the people who live there and the potential they offer. We reach out far beyond our block to meet people and bring them together.

- Individuals and families working together to make a difference in the life of the community, their own lives, and the lives of their children.
- Acting on a belief in the potential of all people; strength comes from diversity.
- People learn together to act with strategy for change.

**Hope Community 1997 LISTENING PROJECT ABOUT JOBS AND EDUCATION:**

With the cooperation of 15 inner city housing, educational and social service organizations, we met with 364 people in more than 30 small groups. The groups met for one to two hours each from January to June 1997, with some experimental meetings before that. (See end of the report for list of organizations and details.) In each of the meetings we asked the same question, "When you try to get a job, get a better job, or go to school, what are the things that make it hard." As people talked, their words were recorded.

*The people represented in this report (and others like them) are an enormous resource. It is in the interest of employers, schools, and communities to invest in the future by listening to the voices that speak here and responding with them to the challenges.*

*The Listening Project created several opportunities:*

- We met many organizations and people from the neighborhoods surrounding Hope Community and similar neighborhoods.
- We focused on jobs and education because they are crucial concerns for those who live in inner city neighborhoods. Assumptions about low income families are being discussed daily in debates about welfare, employment, and other issues. Our project gave people an opportunity to speak out of the experience in their own lives.
- The project is leading to important next steps (see end of this report).

In every meeting we found that people were willing to talk and were open about their experience. However, the groups were often surprised that we actually wanted to listen. We focused on common experience, not individual stories. We found that people in the groups listened to and learned from each other.

We did not set out to do a scientific study or a scientific report. So in this report we do our best to communicate the voices of those who participated as they talked to us.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

We recorded what people said in each listening session. Hope Community staff and some people who were involved in the sessions identified and summarized several specific areas where concerns were raised -- employment, education, housing, transportation, child care and language. We also found that there were several themes that cut across all of those specific areas of concern. Because those themes were raised so consistently, we discuss them here. Following that is a summary of the specific concerns.

## WHAT WE HEARD WHEN WE LISTENED COMMON THEMES

### INFORMATION -- ACCESS AND UNDERSTANDING

There are two different problems related to information, people said. Sometimes not having enough information is the problem, but other times too much information is just as difficult. Large amounts of paper with little explanation seems to silence more than inform. "I'm still in a bubble...I feel even worse now," one woman said after she had received a stack of information about a problem she had. "There is too much, I get lost in it, overwhelmed, get bogged down." Many told us they needed someone who would take time to listen to their specific needs and respond.

Others talked about how limited information limits possibility. For example, when employment wants ads use technical or confusing language, some people eliminate them as possibilities without understanding the job. In other cases limited and conflicting information can build fear and rumors. That was happening with welfare reform during the time we were meeting with groups.

### ISOLATION and LIMITED NETWORKS

Isolation is a fact of life for large numbers of people who talked to us. "You need to be with others to build strength together," someone said in a discussion about networks. Over and over people talked about how hard it is to make that happen. There are the pressures of parenting with very low incomes, time pressures, moving often to try to find affordable and decent housing, lack of transportation and money for social outings, and not knowing who to trust in unfamiliar neighborhoods. Isolation grows and networks are limited.

One mother told a group about the enormous burden isolation is for her. She has so few people to count on for day to day support, she said, "I wear my network out."

### LABELS and STEREOTYPES

This was raised in every listening session. Experiences included direct racism as well as negative assumptions made about low income people or those receiving welfare. The stories related to housing, jobs and education.

### EXPECTING TOO MUCH CHANGE TOO FAST

There are interrelationships between all those things that add pressure to people's lives -- decent housing, health, transportation, child care, the need for education and experience to get a good paying job. The pressure can be unbearable when changes happen and people lose subsidized housing or child care, health insurance, etc. while trying to survive on a very low income.

## SUMMARY OF ISSUES THAT WERE RAISED

### Employment/Jobs

- *Getting* a job is *not* the problem. Most people in the listening sessions had had many jobs. Getting a long term job with benefits and moving up the job ladder are the big challenges.
- *People often see themselves in limited ways.* For example, people said they look in the want ads only for jobs they have done before and know they can do. One person explained, "I don't want to face more rejection than necessary."
- *Little or no verifiable work experience is a problem.* "How can I get experience," one woman said, "I really want to try, and I think I can do the job ... if I could get a chance to show them."
- *There is an overwhelming feeling among low income people that most employers don't respect or invest in entry level workers.* The perception among most of those we talked to is that employers assume that workers at this level are easy to replace and therefore expendable. One result, people told us, is that often only limited training is available, not training designed to help people move up the job ladder.

- *Assumptions made by employers and communication on the job are often problems.* People talked about unprofessional and rude treatment, some that they interpreted as discrimination. They also told many stories about ineffective training, increasing responsibility without increasing pay, and dealing with supervisors who struggle with their roles. "I have to communicate with them (employers); they don't communicate with me."
- *Poor treatment from certain temporary agencies was raised in many meetings.* Problems are very low pay and deductions from paychecks for transportation and other costs, constantly moving from one very short term job to the next with no chance of a permanent job and sometimes unsafe working conditions. People can work long hours for years and end up with no real work history. These kind of jobs, "use people up," one man said.

## Housing

- *Issues related to renting and the rental qualification system are overwhelming.* These include non-refundable application fees required by landlords. Some people pay hundreds of dollars in fees, still don't get a place to live and never know why. Many, many people told stories about a system designed to identify "problem" tenants catching "good" tenants in it's net. Many landlords pay private companies for information about applicants rental and credit history and criminal background -- but do not disclose that information to the prospective tenants. It is very difficult for people to get access to that information or correct errors. And it is even more difficult to rebuild credentials when mistakes have been made in the past.
- *There is not enough decent, affordable housing.* Safe and solid housing is a priority which allows a person to look for jobs and education. Families suffer from major disruption that comes with fighting bad housing conditions and constant relocation.
- *Many people reported experiencing discrimination.* "Landlords don't even check references before they say the unit is rented," one Latino man said.

## Education

- *Trying to get an education can be a circular process.* As one person explained, "I don't have enough education to start with, you need education to do almost anything that is going to pay good. We can't pay the rent and the bills, and we end up homeless or worse doing something illegal ... and losing it all."
- *Education is expensive.* Finding and competing for scarce funding resources, qualifying for those resources as a non-traditional student, and affording non-resident tuition rates as an immigrant present serious challenges to affording an education.
- *Currently many people are pressured into short term training that leads only to entry level jobs.* Welfare reform policy pushes people into very short-term training. Going back to school part-time while working at entry level wages and raising a family is almost impossible for most people in the current system.
- *Our higher education system is not designed for, and does not offer alternatives to, entry level workers.* Useful educational alternatives must be low cost, offer a part time schedule of classes or be available on the job site, and provide affordable, quality child care.
- *Although getting a GED is a major goal for many people, they often find that it means very little in the world of employment.*
- *It is very difficult for many people to know where to attend school, often people respond to advertising and know little about other opportunities.* "It is difficult to know how to make the right choice about a school to attend... You don't always have someone to ask that has been through it. You can't trust the information people give you."

## Child Care

- *Finding conveniently located, quality child care is difficult.* The practical problem of location (for example, on the bus line) is one that is difficult, but issues of trust are even more challenging. One woman told us (echoing the sentiments of many others), "I'm not going to trust just anyone with my kids."
- *Child care is very expensive.* For those who are employed, it is not affordable without sliding fees. Often the fees increase beyond what people can pay when they have low income jobs.
- *Child care services often lack flexibility.* One place may not take, or have space for, children of different ages. This means that people are forced to distribute their children around the city and coordinate a schedule which balances the demands of job, the limits of transportation, and the policies and hours of the various care child care providers.

### **Problems When English is a Second Language**

- *The jobs that are available for non-English speakers don't pay enough to support a family.* This means that it is often necessary to get a second job when it is difficult to get even one job. Often work history from another country is not recognized in the US.
- *Often there is little time left to learn English.* "It is difficult to find the time to fit everything in -- school, work, and learning English."
- *There is a need for more free intensive ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. English classes at community colleges cost too much; scholarships are needed.*
- *People take advantage of you when you don't understand.* "When you don't speak English, things can be hidden or you get charged more for things or don't get the same quality of service and goods."

### **Transportation**

*All transportation is expensive, especially for those with a low wage job. The current public transportation system doesn't serve the needs of people who rely on it to access jobs over the entire metropolitan area.*

- Many of the jobs are in areas with limited bus service, limited both by times and where the bus routes go or don't go. "You can always find a job, but they are way out there (in the suburbs)."
- Transportation is expensive. One woman talked about, "...it's the \$10.00 I don't have to get a bus card."
- It is hard to find a car you can afford that you can trust, but you need a car to get to the good jobs.
- Employers want to know how you will get to work.

### **ORGANIZATIONS AND PEOPLE WHO PARTICIPATED**

Thank you to those organizations that helped organize the listening sessions and made this project possible: American Indian OIC, Bridge for Success, Cabrini House, Central Community Housing Trust, Chicanos Latinos Unidos En Servicio (CLUES), Early Childhood Family Education, Eden Programs for Women, Genesis II, Holy Rosary Church, Lehman Adult Education Center, Lutheran Social Services Transition Housing, Parents in Community Action, Phillips TLC, Project for Pride in Living, and Seton Center - Catholic Charities.

Most of the 364 people who participated gave us the voluntary demographic information we asked for, and of those, 78% earn less than \$20,000/year (more than half of those make under \$10,000), and three-quarters are people of color.

### **NEXT STEPS AND OPPORTUNITIES AT HOPE COMMUNITY**

#### **CONTINUE LISTENING**

We will continue to gather information directly from those who can speak out of their own experience. We want to learn both about problems and those things that are working.

#### **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

We continue to develop opportunities at Hope Community for people to work together with others who have similar interests and learn things like:

- ⇒ Understanding how power works and the positive possibilities of power
  - ⇒ Learning how "public" places like jobs, education, and government work differently than private lives and how you can make them work more effectively for you
  - ⇒ Understanding strategy and making things happen
  - ⇒ How to figure out what you want to know and get the right information
- Those who participate contribute by bringing their own experience and ideas.

#### **ACTION GROUPS**

- ⇒ Working together for change
- ⇒ Opportunities to meet new people and build bigger networks
- ⇒ Focusing strategy on specific challenges, for example, thinking strategically about issues on the job or how to work effectively with the school you or your children attend.

#### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Call Mary Keefe or Rebecca Rojas at 874-8867.