Social Networks as an Anti-Poverty Strategy

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Crittenton Women’s Union transforms the course of low-income women’s lives so that they can attain economic independence and create better futures for themselves and their families.

We accomplish this by:

• Providing safe housing, caring supports, education, and training programs;

• Innovating new programmatic designs based on research and client experience;

• Using this knowledge and experience to shape public policy and achieve social change.
Introduction

Maria, an unemployed single mother, had been pursuing a career in the medical billing field for over a year. Despite having completed multiple professional certifications and trainings, Maria could not find a job. A case manager referred Maria to Crittenton Women's Union's (CWU) career development and computer training program. Over the course of the 12-week program, Maria interacted daily with other women who shared similar career objectives and met regularly with staff who advised her in pursuing her goals. She developed new relationships with peers and professionals who provided her with encouragement, skills, and career advice to further her job search.

Additionally, the program's mentoring component gave Maria access to a cadre of professionals from a variety of industries and life experiences. When a mentor contacted program staff with an internship opportunity at a local insurance company, staff quickly identified Maria as an ideal candidate, noting her interest in the field and their confidence in her skills and abilities. The internship eventually led to a full-time position in her desired field.

The organization and staff served as a nexus of connection for Maria (see illustration this page). She became embedded in an institutional network of staff, volunteer mentors, partner organizations, classmates, and other resources, resulting in the attainment of her goal—a job.

Maria's story illustrates the familiar phrase “it’s not what you know, but who you know,” referring to the power of social networks—our connections to other individuals, groups, and organizations (Wellman 1983). Social networks have been found to influence various aspects of our lives such as health, economic mobility, and status attainment (Granovetter 1973; Wellman 1983; Lin 1999; Putnam 2000; Briggs 2002). For example, the connections within a person’s social network can serve as a source of job leads and references that help job seekers find and secure employment (Granovetter 1983; Lin 2001; Putnam 2000).

Social networks that are comprised of a large number of people from a variety of different fields and backgrounds, particularly people of a higher socio-economic status, offer greater chances to learn of new opportunities and resources that can be used to advance economically and “get ahead” (Bourdieu 1986; Lin 1999 and 2000; Dominguez and Watkins 2003).

Nexus of Connection

By serving as a nexus of connection, social service organizations can help women living in poverty broaden their social networks by developing and fostering an institution-based network comprised of relationships with people associated with the institution, such as classmates, staff members, colleagues, and volunteers (Dominguez 2011; Small 2009; Dominguez and Watkins 2003). As in Maria’s case, these new relationships can be a source of support, encouragement, and new opportunities that can aid in advancement toward economic self-sufficiency.

This brief will 1) make a case for focusing attention on low-income women’s social networks, 2) present why an organizational strategy of social network development is an important component for anti-poverty programs, and 3) review CWU’s short-term impact on women’s social networks, the organization’s approach to strategically brokering social ties, and lessons learned throughout the process.
Social capital refers to the resources inherent within a person’s social network. These resources can include information, trust, and influence. Individuals embedded within a social network have access to the resources within it and can leverage them to their advantage. For example, being well connected to a large and diverse social network enables an individual to better access valuable information such as affordable housing opportunities, job leads, or scholarships. However, for those who aren’t well connected to a network that provides such information or for those who are unable to leverage the social capital within their network, access to opportunities and information may consequently be limited (Smith 2005; Elliott 1999; Kasinitz and Rosenberg 1996).

The story of Maria illustrates the power of social capital. Despite having the required skills and certifications for employment, Maria’s job search was ineffective until she connected to CWU’s institutional network of staff and mentors, which provided career advice and access to job leads. Increasingly, anti-poverty initiatives are recognizing the power of social capital. In fact, a recent report released by Ascend, the Family Economic Security Program at the Aspen Institute, identified social capital as a core component in a multi-generational approach to moving families out of poverty.

The social networks of women living in poverty tend to be smaller and more limited, strained, homogeneous, localized, and insular than those of their higher income counterparts (Briggs, 1998). Since this type of social network is primarily comprised of others in similar socio-economic positions, it is not a likely source for career or educational opportunities. Such networks often consist of strong relationships with family members, neighbors, and friends who may serve as an essential source of support in times of need. However, those within these limited networks are likely to have similar needs and require the same kinds of supports. As a result, a woman’s network may at times act as an emotional and financial drain on her already limited resources (Curley 2009; Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Menjivar 2000; Stack...
When favors are provided, the expectation of reciprocity may place a further strain on resources. Lastly, some women find they are unable to leverage the resources within their existing networks due to interpersonal relations characterized by mistrust, ambivalence, and suspicion (Smith 2007; Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Ross, Mirowsky, and Pribesh 2001; Rainwater 1970; Liebow 1967).

**Parenting Young Children Impacts Women’s Social Networks.**

In our society, child-rearing responsibilities are primarily viewed as a female activity. Not surprisingly then, child rearing impacts women’s social networks differently than men’s. Research has shown that having young children at home decreases employed women’s job-related contacts, but has no effect on the number of job-related contacts for employed men (Campbell 1988). Having a child, particularly a young child whose developmental stage requires increasing parental supervision, has a significantly negative impact on the size of women’s social networks, but has no significant effect on men’s network size (Munch et al. 1997).

Raising young children is associated with a reduction in the number of people with whom women interact and a reduction in the amount of time women spend interacting with others. As a result, women face reductions in social support and access to information. The effect is especially pronounced for single mothers who are sole caregivers (Ravanera and Rajulton 2010).

Given the higher rates of poverty for women and the likelihood that they have more limited and insular social networks, it is of heightened importance to ensure that they and their families are well connected to a broad social network that offers both support and leverage. A supportive social network that offers encouragement to stay motivated and provides small favors, such as child care and transportation, can help women get by. Additionally, being connected to leveraging ties that offer resources and opportunities, such as job leads and connections to educational scholarships, can help women get ahead. Connections to both supportive and leveraging ties are needed as a complementary strategy to aid women in their goal of becoming economically self-sufficient.

**Developing Social Networks as an Organizational Strategy**

Social service organizations have long been places for women to receive critical services and resources and connect naturally with others in the community. For many women living in poverty, social service providers can be an alternative means of support if their personal networks are limited in resources (Offer 2010) or a strategy to reduce the drain on their own resources that may arise through an obligation to reciprocate favors (Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Menjivar 2000). While organizations have always been a natural nexus of connection—a place for women to meet and come together—there is growing interest in the role organizations can play in intentionally creating connections for women as an anti-poverty strategy.

Organizations are well positioned to take a more intentional approach to implementing strategies that foster connections for women to support their advancement toward self-sufficiency goals. By strategically brokering social ties and creating a networked environment, organizations have the potential to create new opportunities and generate a flow of information and resources for the community they serve. If brokering is done in a way that results in the expansion and diversification of low-income women’s social networks, then opportunities for social mobility and leverage will increase (Lin 1982).

Uncovering which strategies foster the development of new social ties, as well as which factors inhibit formation, will present social service providers with a fuller understanding of how intentional brokering impacts the lives of women. This understanding will allow organizations to be more strategic and effective in the implementation of brokering strategies.

The idea that social networks matter has already influenced programming in nonprofits serving low-income communities. In fact, interviews conducted with a sample of nine nonprofit organizations, selected because they are recognized as innovative, demonstrate the prevalence of an intentional strategy to develop social networks. The interviews reveal that 100% of the organizations in the sample focus on network development, intentionally engaging in developing connections for their program participants.

However, the degree to which developing a social network is emphasized within each of the...
Typically, leverage networks are comprised of acquaintances often in more advanced positions with access to resources, information, opportunities, and networks outside of one’s own. Six organizations (67%) discussed brokering activities as primary to their mission and three organizations (33%) described these activities as ancillary, although supportive to their overall mission (see chart this page).

The main goal organizations identified for creating connections between people was to help individuals develop a “support network,” that is, a network of people that help them to get by each day. Typically, a support network is comprised of close relationships, such as friends, family members, neighbors, classmates, etc. It is the people in a support network that a woman might turn to for help with child care, a ride to work, emotional support, a small loan, or a personal favor. Eight of the organizations (89%) interviewed stated that they intentionally try to connect program participants to others to enhance their support network in an effort to improve health, well-being, educational aspirations, and stability.

As one education-focused organization explained, “We are trying to do quite a bit of connecting kids to other young people ... [based on] a lot of the research that’s been done on peer and near-peer relationships and what they do for educational success and beyond. ... So that they are all hearing that they are struggling with the same issues or that they can lean on other kids for help and assistance, etcetera.” Clearly, this organization recognizes the impact social networks can have on the educational success of students and, therefore, incorporates into their programming ways to develop and foster a support network among student peers.

Six of the organizations (67%) deliberately attempt to develop a leverage network by connecting program participants to people who will help them get ahead, such as employers, mentors, etc. Typically, leverage networks are comprised of acquaintances often in more advanced positions with access to resources, information, opportunities, and networks outside of one’s own. These organizations identified wanting to help participants expand their leverage networks to create opportunities for career and educational advancement. Strategies to develop leverage networks include introducing participants to successful professionals or mentors, providing internship opportunities, and referring to employers.

One organization working with youth to develop career paths shared, “Everything about [the organization] is built around the idea that the young people that we serve lack the social capital and social networks they need to move into jobs that are career path jobs... in the industry. ... Our work is successful in connecting young people with successful adults in the field. It is really the cornerstone of what we do.” Intentionally building the social capital of the young people they serve to help them advance economically is integral to the programming. This organization serves as a bridge between the young people they serve and employers in the organization’s own network.

**Organizational Strategy in Action**

The findings presented reinforce the need to gain a better understanding of what programmatic approaches develop and foster social ties for program participants. To learn more about what works and why, a research lens was trained on CWU programs to uncover how brokering ties impacts the size and composition of women’s social networks, to identify the brokering strategies implemented, and to reveal the dynamics involved in engineering the creation of social ties.

The following section will highlight CWU as one example of a social service organization that intentionally develops social networks as a strategy to help women advance toward economic self-sufficiency. The section will also present CWU’s impact, approach, best practices, and lessons learned along the way.

**IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL BROKERING**

To assess whether changes actually occur in women’s social network composition as a result of intentional brokering, pre- and post-surveys were administered to 23 participants in two cohorts of Woman to Woman (WTW), CWU’s 12-week computer training, career development, and life skills training
An analysis of the pre- and post-surveys reveals that the number of people in participants’ social networks increased in all four areas. The increases ranged from 17% to 52%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career Advice</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/Training Guidance</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Favors</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
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This graduate recognized she now had people within her social network she could go to for education advice and guidance. As a result of reaching out to her network and activating her social capital, she received assistance in completing applications for student financial aid and now has an academic and financial plan for attending college next semester, advancing her a step closer toward her self-sufficiency goals.

Smaller, yet still meaningful, gains were also reported in the number of people participants could turn to for small favors (an increase of 38%) and for emotional support (an increase of 17%). A small portion of this increase can be attributed to their involvement in the WTW program. Participants identified CWU-brokered connections as 11% of their small favor contacts and 12% of their emotional support contacts.

The CWU connections in both these areas were primarily classmates and WTW staff. One participant shared the potential power a web of support can have in helping women achieve their goals: “We [classmates] opened our eyes at the same time and instead of just having one person encourage each other, it’s like we all encourage each other. It’s like you can do it, I’m gonna do it, we’re gonna do it!”.

The social ties formed within an organizational setting can serve as an alternative or supplemental social network for women. These new ties are distinct from stronger ties with family or friends and, as a result, are less likely to be a source of emotional or financial drain.
CWU’s theory of change places a high value on social networks as a key component to achieving economic self-sufficiency.

**STRATEGICALLY BROKERING SOCIAL TIES**

CWU’s mission is to transform the course of low-income women’s lives so that they can attain economic independence and create better futures for themselves and their families. The journey from poverty to economic independence is complex and requires a variety of strategies. To address this, CWU developed its Bridge to Self-Sufficiency™ theory of change (see illustration this page).

The Bridge to Self-Sufficiency views a person’s advancement from poverty to economic self-sufficiency as a journey across a bridge supported by five critical pillars. In order to successfully cross this bridge and arrive at the ultimate goal of economic self-sufficiency, the traveler must attain explicitly defined objectives in five areas: family stability, well-being, education and training, financial management, and employment and career management.

A target objective in the well-being category (see table next page) is a strong social network, within which a person is serving as an advocate, networker, and support to others. Individuals who are isolated or who have limited social support systems need to develop robust social networks from which they can draw support and gain leverage and provide the same to others. Advancement along the other areas of the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency could be compromised if a social network is limited.

For example, if a person is facing eviction from her apartment and if she is socially isolated from family and friends, her severely diminished social network may mean that she has no one to turn to for an emergency loan or a place to stay. Consequently, she is more likely to become homeless than if she had a social network in which to seek support and help.

CWU’s theory of change places a high value on social networks as a key component to achieving economic self-sufficiency. To support women in advancing along the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency, CWU intentionally creates and fosters social connections in an attempt to expand and develop the social networks for the women it serves. The following are strategies CWU uses to incorporate social networking into programming.

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**Crittenton Women’s Union Bridge to Self-Sufficiency™**

She is spending less than 30% of her after-tax income on housing.
Her children’s needs are being met and do not prevent her from pursuing schooling or work.
She is fully engaged in her work and her family, and no health or behavioral issues prevent her from pursuing schooling or employment.
She is a part of a strong social network, serving as an advocate, networker, and support to others.
She has achieved a level of post-secondary education and/or training that has prepared her for a job paying enough to support her family.
She has savings equal to three months’ worth of living expenses.
She has good credit and is managing her debts in balance with her income.
Her earnings from her job are greater than the real costs of basic living expenses for her family, as determined by CWU’s Massachusetts Economic Independence Index.

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Foster peer connections within a cohort model.

A sense of camaraderie, inter-connectedness, and bonding often develops within groups of students or program participants who begin and move through a program together. For example, in the WTW program participants begin the program at the same time and spend six hours a day, five days a week together over a 12-week period. This high level of interface among participants and staff contributes to the natural development of social ties.

During their intensive time together, the program purposively incorporates formal exercises that encourage participants to get to know each other, share goals, and develop skills together. The workshops are designed to be highly interactive and engaging. Participants are encouraged to share, discuss, and apply lessons learned. In doing so, the learning environment creates an opportunity for participants to get to know each other and connect with one another.

As one participant shared, “I built … relationships with people just through the classwork and hearing some of their interests and areas where they wanted to work.” These frequent opportunities to share thoughts and ideas expose participants to the interests and goals of their peers, with whom they often discover they share commonalities and natural points of connection.

As the program progresses, regular classroom interaction leads to deeper engagement as participants begin to relate to staff, their peers, and mentors. One participant shared how this level of engagement allowed her to begin to relate to her peers and ultimately develop a web of support: “I guess we all had different things that were going on in our lives, some of them similar, and we could relate to each other in a lot of different ways. We looked out for each other a lot. Like, a lot.” It is these closer relationships that develop over time that participants identify as part of their support network, which provides emotional support, encouragement, and personal favors.

Participants shared examples of assisting each other with transportation to and from class, sharing lunch with those who didn’t have enough to eat, and helping each other catch up on missed classwork. In some instances, participants identified people in their network who provide both support and leverage. For example, one program graduate interested in pursuing an administrative career expressed how sharing her career goals with her classmates resulted in a potential job lead: “[She] actually brought a friend to the graduation that does computer work … She connected me to her, and she’s going to work with me to try to get me a job.”

This graduate identified her classmates as supportive ties in her new social network, people she could go to for emotional support and encouragement. In addition, one of her classmates also served as a leveraging tie by introducing her to a job lead. As a result of the deep level of engagement in a professional environment with the same group of women over the 12-week program, participants felt comfortable in readily identifying and sharing resources and people within their own networks to help each other get by and get ahead.

Bonding Exercise

As students move through the 12-week Woman to Woman career development program, they begin to see themselves as a cohesive unit with a common goal: program graduation in the short term and ultimately economic self-sufficiency for their families. This shared experience is represented in a cohort-naming exercise.

Each semester students are tasked with collectively creating a name for their cohort, one that reflects the attributes that best describe their group and their shared goals. Past cohort names include “Women Unlimited,” “Women on the Rise,” and “Ladies Determined to Achieve.”
Bringing together people around shared goals exposes them to a network of others traveling a similar path.

CREATE SMALL SUB-GROUPS AROUND SHARED INTERESTS.

Smaller sub-groups provide a way for participants to formally come together over shared goals or interests. CWU’s groundbreaking pilot program, Career Family Opportunity (CFO), is a five-year initiative that helps single parents achieve economic self-sufficiency. The CFO program model includes avenues for participants to build positive consistent social supports. One way to achieve this is through Bridge Groups, smaller subsets of participants that form around common goals and interests. The goals and interests fall within the categories of CWU’s Bridge to Self-Sufficiency; hence the name Bridge Groups.

Bridge Groups meet at least monthly to form a peer network to share resources, encourage one another, support each other through challenges, and celebrate successes. For example, several participants who share a goal of improving their physical and emotional health formed a Bridge Group focused on well-being. A well-being Bridge Group member explained that “someone could join us if they are interested in getting a pedometer and walking with us or if anyone is interested in yoga classes or in getting a bike, you know?” This group now takes weekly walks together for exercise and stress relief. Some recent accomplishments group members have achieved include losing weight and quitting smoking.

A similar theme of coming together around shared goals arose throughout interviews with graduates of the WTW program. Graduates frequently remarked on the importance of being surrounded by others who shared their goal of self-sufficiency, including their fellow participants, staff, and mentors.

One graduate shared how the connection she made with her classmate transcended the classroom: “…[We] connected. We realized we all talked about different things. The connection was there. On more than just a school level, because after class we called each other because we all wanted that same goal. We just wanted a job …The connection of being in the same boat. We’re all after the same things, you know, trying to get a job, trying to get a career.”

Bringing together people around shared goals exposes them to a network of others traveling a similar path. This can provide a web of motivation, inspiration, and perhaps even resources that will move them closer to their goals. By providing emotional support that acts as a catalyst to get ahead, such ties can become a hybrid of support and leverage.

Further, a network comprised of others with shared goals can buffer the negative effects of unsupportive family or friends who can dampen a person’s drive and spirit. Social ties that are draining present a negative pull on emotional resources, such as motivation and focus, as well as a drain on material resources. Draining ties can prevent women from getting ahead (Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Stack 1974). One program graduate highlighted the value of supportive ties to counter drain: “You need to surround yourself with people who are trying to do the same thing that you’re trying to do. Because if you don’t, then they can bring you down.”

Research has demonstrated that low-income women are often suspicious or hesitant to rely on their existing network of friends and family for fear of inconsistent support, manipulation, or disruption of routines (Dominguez and Watkins 2003). Organizations can help create a supplemental network of people who encourage each other toward a common goal, thereby creating an emotional safeguard against negative messages and distracting dramas.

Evolving Model

In an effort to formalize peer support, CWU’s Woman to Woman program has supplemented the individual goal-advising model with peer group advising. In this new model, a small group of students who share an adviser meet once every few weeks with program staff.

Group advising focuses on communicating individual goals, discussing strategies, and sharing challenges and available resources. This model integrates into the existing program structure a formal opportunity for peers to create a culture of support by sharing resources and encouraging each other to stay on track toward their self-sufficiency goals.
As reflected in this experience, social network research has shown that child rearing reduces the amount of time mothers have available to interact with others. As a result, this participant wasn’t able to develop a lasting connection with her mentor—a potential resource for her self-sufficiency goals.

CWU has evolved its volunteer mentoring model as a result of a new appreciation for the potential strain placed on participants by programmatic expectations outside classroom time. This appreciation has resulted in a new mentoring model that emphasizes classroom-based group mentoring activities over individual mentoring meetings held outside the classroom. In this way, CWU is striving to continue to provide participants access to a network that includes leveraging ties that will help them advance in their self-sufficiency goals.

Cultivate an Organizational Network.

CWU staff members actively cultivate their own professional networks to better connect program participants with employers, social service providers, health care professionals, mentors, program participants, and others. For example, staff have developed relationships with hiring managers at local companies to connect program participants to internships. In some cases, successful internship placements have led to employment and have opened the door for other program participants to intern.

One WTW participant recalls how a CWU staff member connected her to a volunteer opportunity at a local social service organization. The participant shared that staff “said that someone called looking for people, and [the position is] administrative, so I'll be doing that. Yeah, isn't it awesome?!” Just as it is important for individuals to develop their social networks, it is equally important for an organization to develop a rich institutional network to better access and offer resources and opportunities for their community.

Create a Supportive Environment.

Infusing a sincere and encouraging tone throughout programs is essential for participants to feel comfortable seeking support from staff as well as from their peers. On several occasions, participants commented on the high degree of sincerity in the relationships they made while at CWU. One participant shares how this supportive tone radiated from staff to participants: “It was just like contagious, the ... attitude [of] really trying to get along and really

Volunteers offer career and education advice, guidance, and support to women who are striving to become professionals, but who may face significant challenges in their lives.
help one another out… At this point I think people are just so tired of struggling and feeling like they’re never getting anywhere.” As this participant points out, the staff attitude of guidance and support set the tone and was perpetuated by participants, creating a culture of support.

For the WTW program in particular, there is a gendered aspect to the creation of supportive ties. As reflected in the program name, WTW is a female-focused program specifically designed to address the needs of women living in poverty. For many participants, connecting with other women experiencing similar issues creates a safe environment for them to open up: “You’re coming together with a bunch of women who are going through issues, like housing, you know. And they understand that. And the fact that you’re dealing with women too, you know?”

For this program, the deliberate strategy of serving women exclusively promotes an added layer of shared experience, safety, and understanding. This enhances the participants’ ability to build a strong, committed community quickly and to motivate each other around shared goals.

**Facilitate Reciprocity Opportunities.**

Reciprocity is an important element in women’s social networks (Dominguez and Watkins 2003). Being able to reciprocate by returning favors or assistance helps to maintain a more balanced relationship between people and fosters a sense of trust. However, expectations or demands of reciprocity can place an undue resource strain on people and create a burden if unmet. An organizational strategy should create opportunities to reciprocate in ways that don’t burden participants and communicates clearly that there is no expectation from the organization. This allows participants the chance to re-balance the relationship if they desire.

CWU presents opportunities for reciprocity using different avenues. Some opportunities benefit the organization, such as requests for participants to share their stories as part of a marketing or fundraising campaign, or requests to speak at advocacy events. For example, one participant who received assistance from a CWU partner organization shared her enthusiasm to reciprocate: “[When the National Consumer Law Center attorney] interviewed me for my [student loan] default, she said, ‘If we need you to advocate for this, would you?’ and I said, ‘Hell yeah!’” Other opportunities directly benefit peers, such as donating clothes or returning to speak at program graduations to inspire new graduates to achieve their goals.

**Commit to Ongoing Support.**

While cultivating a large, diverse social network is important, unless the social ties within it are activated and leveraged, the network itself has little or no value. To encourage participants to continue to activate their new network after program completion, CWU staff continually remind participants to stay connected for additional resources and support as they pursue their education and career goals.

In several interviews, participants discussed how important it was for them to know that there was always an open door: “[Staff] gave me the confidence to come back and ask for help. [They] are always here for me, not to give up, you know, keep coming. Every time I call [a staff member] she’s available for me. Every time I call [another staff member] she’s available for me. They always return my calls; they never just throw me away.” As this participant suggests, she trusts her new social ties to support her in the future. She knows they are invested in her for the long term. She is not temporary or disposable; her new social ties will not “throw [her] away.”

Her words suggest that trust in the long term is new and hence that much more powerful. If a person has not had people she could rely on before, finding them is extremely significant. Another participant echoes this theme: “[I feel like I can always come back. I can use the computer, I can come back to talk if I’m bothered, I can come back for anything. There’s always someone here to listen…. So, this is the only place I got the computer, got the job search, and got the support.”

**Maintain a High Level of Trust and Confidentiality.**

Securing a level of trust in staff’s competency and professionalism contributes to an environment where participants actively seek staff out for information and advice. As one participant stated, “[Staff member] knows what she’s doing, which is a good thing. … I appreciate professionalism.” Professionalism also includes creating a space where information shared is kept confidential among staff and participants. Research has shown that trust, particularly trust in maintaining confidentiality, can impact whether or not people feel they can turn to social service organizations for support or include
them in their social support network (Dominguez and Watkins 2003).

Another participant articulated the importance this way, “...it's the confidentiality in the classrooms and in the building... If it wasn't for the confidentiality and the openness, I don't think a lot of the women would have felt that open...The confidentiality piece I think is huge, it's huge.” Without this level of trust that confidentiality will be respected, participants would be reluctant to share their goals, aspirations and challenges with each other and with staff.

Final Thoughts

“We know that our students would not be working or going to school where they are without the networks that we created for them.” – executive director of a youth workforce development program

Social service organizations are a nexus of connection for people, whether intentionally or unintentionally. They are places in the community where people come together and can often find support, new opportunities, and resources that they may otherwise not be able to access. For people who have limited or draining social networks, social service organizations can help to supplement and expand their network by brokering connections to others outside their current social circle.

In Maria’s example described in the introduction, the institutional network within which she was embedded led to full-time employment in her desired career field. Investing in the development of social networks can be a powerful anti-poverty strategy as people are connected to employers, academic institutions, and supportive, encouraging peers.

For organizations that want to be intentional in aiding those they serve in developing their social networks, the strategies identified in this brief, such as connecting peers with shared goals, making introductions to employers and mentors, and creating an encouraging environment, are provided to help organizations increase their effectiveness. Ultimately, as organizations and their staffs develop and nurture their own professional networks, they will be better positioned to broker ties for program participants. Strategically implementing ways to help women develop social networks that offer both leverage and support will help them move closer to their goals.
Endnotes

1. Names have been changed for confidentiality.

2. Organizations sampled for this research were identified by Root Cause as a Social Innovator, a nonprofit identified as having a promising new approach to a social problem. The programmatic focus of all organizations interviewed is either workforce development, education, or increased economic self-sufficiency. All organizations interviewed serve low-income communities.


4. Interview is from Boston College Career Family Opportunity program evaluation for 2011.

References


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