

Prof. Fran Ansley and Dr. Helen Lewis
Spring 1997

Community Development: Implications of Welfare Reform Potential Field Work Sites/Opportunities

As you know, field work will be an important part of your work in this course. Please refer to other course documents for how the field requirement fits into your other responsibilities and for how it will be assessed. The purpose of this document is to give you some concrete ideas about specific opportunities we know about that we believe would be appropriate collaborations. In some instances, the groups have already been contacted and exploratory conversations have begun. In other cases, you would be starting pretty much at the beginning of defining the project. In any event, the community partner group will have final say, of course, as to whether a particular student or particular project will work out for this spring.

All of you should begin thinking and working right away to choose a field placement and get started with your projects. Year after year students say that they wish they had started field projects sooner. It is very common to run into delays and small problems that are not at all insurmountable, but that take precious time to work out. If you try to load all your work into the later parts of the semester, you may hit frustrating roadblocks that reduce the quality of your project only because time has run out. Anyhow, here are the possibilities we have identified.

Consolidated Needs Standard

Families First employs a "consolidated needs standard" to determine when participants' income is in excess of what is allowed for them to continue to receive various program benefits. The Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network is a local coalition of labor unions, church organizations, and community groups concerned about the impact of de-industrialization and economic restructuring on blue-collar and low-income people and communities. It is interested in developing an analysis of this consolidated needs standard and of other "standards" that affect low-income people, such as the minimum wage and the official definition of the poverty level. Are these varying standards reasonable measures of poverty? Of a living wage? Of a level at which a family should be cut off of assistance? How might one go about defining such a level for a particular community like Knoxville? How does all this relate to the realities of welfare reform? Students interested in designing a program around this issue, and documenting experiences of Families First participants who begin work and exceed the consolidated needs standard, should contact TIRN.

Hispanic Ministry of Knoxville Catholic Diocese

The local Hispanic Ministry, which serves the growing Latino and Latina population of East Tennessee, has expressed interest in working with a class member to look at the special impacts of welfare reform on immigrant groups. The new federal welfare law declared that non-citizens are ineligible to receive welfare benefits, even those who are "legal permanent residents" of the U.S. One member of the class is already interested in pursuing this project. Specifics have not yet been worked out, but one likely activity will be preparing educational materials, in both English and Spanish, to explain the change in the law for legal immigrants. Speak with Lisa Lewis if you are interested in joining her on this project.

Hospitality Food Pantry

This East Knoxville food pantry is part of a network of Hospitality Pantries around the city. They are unique in Knoxville in their philosophy, which is to let people decide for themselves whether they need food, rather than instituting screening or rationing devices. The organization emerged from the vision of one particular person, and is presently working to make a transition toward a democratic governance structure at the level of the local pantries. This organization already does some documentation of its own. Workers have been tracking the number of families served since the pantry opened several years ago, and have found dramatic ways of displaying the increase in demand. They say that they are already seeing the effects of welfare cuts and Families First requirements. HFP does not have a particular project in mind, but is open to exploring options for a project that would develop quantitative and qualitative documentation about welfare and hunger. People working with this group would need to be ready to watch, listen and learn for a while before trying to come up with a concrete plan.

Knoxville Home Child Care Association

This group of local women has a dual goal: first, promoting small business development as a way of creating jobs and income for owners and employees, and second, providing low-income working mothers with a much-needed service. The Department of Human Services is attempting to better identify the kinds of child care needs that exist in different areas of the city. A study of this question might be of great benefit to the Home Child Care Association if it confirms what they believe to be the case, that there is a real need in many areas of the city for additional affordable home-based day care. This group can be contacted through the Knoxville Legal Aid Society. (KLAS represents this group, but only in matters that do not require legislative or administrative advocacy, due to the new restrictions that have recently been imposed by Congress on programs that receive funds from the Legal Services Corporation.)

Lay Advocacy Projects

Two different Legal Services offices in our area are working to develop training for "Lay Advocates" who can accompany Families First participants to the meetings where they are to agree to the "Personal Responsibility Plan" that will be a central feature of the new welfare program. The idea is to make sure that participants are aware of their rights, know good questions to ask, are fully informed about implications of their choices, etc. Knoxville Legal Aid Society has already scheduled a training session for Feb. 27, and Rural Legal Services of Tennessee is also moving forward. Both believe that there might be productive roles for students from this class in planning these training events and following up on the lay advocates program. A local group called Solutions to Issues of Concern to Knoxvilleians that does advocacy and organizing around issues relevant for low-income people in inner-city Knoxville will also be working on this training event.

Microloan Peer Group on Transportation

The Knoxville Community Microloan Program, affiliated with Inner City Knoxville Community Investment Corporation, has a number of "peer lending groups" made up of micro-entrepreneurs who work together in developing their businesses, accessing credit, and managing their business debts. One of these groups is focused on transportation, and its members may be able to play a role in supplementing Knoxville's woefully inadequate bus system in ways that could benefit Families First

participants who are seeking to make the transition to waged labor. Contact Knoxville Community Microloan or Knoxville Legal Aid Society.

Neighborhood Surveys Project

The Partnership for Neighborhood Improvement (PNI) is an umbrella group involving local banks, city officials, and inner city community leaders in efforts to revitalize some of Knoxville's low-income communities. The Center for Neighborhood Development (CND) is a part of PNI that is devoted to strengthening the capacity of local organizations to work effectively on community development efforts. Several neighborhood groups that are part of the CND network currently have VISTA workers assigned to them, and a number of these VISTAs are carrying out neighborhood surveys and needs assessments. This process is likely to encounter effects of Families First, and two of the VISTAs have expressed an interest in working with members of the class to explore ways that their outreach work and needs assessment process might relate to our interest in tracking and evaluating good and bad effects of Families First.

Teen Mother Program

A social worker at John Tarleton Homes is working with teen mothers, many of whom have some present or potential relationship to Families First, and she is open to having students from this class involved in that work. The program includes classes in parenting and other life skills. Helping these low-income teen mothers understand some of the programs that might be available to them -- including Families First -- would be a good addition to their life skills class. The young women in those classes should also be able to share with us some of the needs, perspectives and aspirations of young mothers who are some of the most important intended beneficiaries of welfare assistance, as well as some of the barriers they face to economic independence.

* * *

In addition to the opportunities set out above, all of which we believe would be suitable for collaborative work, there are almost certainly others that could also provide a fruitful relationship for a field project. If you want to suggest something, feel free to do so.

Don't forget that each of you is also to find one individual person who is a past or present welfare recipient and who is willing to grant you an interview to share something of her experiences and views. A number of people in the community have expressed willingness to help you identify Families First recipients who might be good people to interview in this regard. If you want contacts for this purpose, let us know.