Barriers to Leaving Poverty

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Barriers To Leaving Poverty

By

Aouie R. Rubio

A Capstone Project submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science in Behavioral Health

University of San Francisco

San Francisco, California

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Executive Summary

Rubicon Programs transformed its programs through recent strategic planning efforts to address the change in their mission that refocuses their goal on the eradication of poverty. The challenge for the design team was reimagining with fresh eyes the organization’s programs and service delivery model by examining what is needed from a holistic approach to move individuals out of poverty; becoming self-sufficient without recidivating back to poverty levels. This focus on moving people out of poverty and increasing sustainable self-sufficiency and not simply finding employment adds a complex level of program design aspects to consider. It is important for the participant to obtain an entry-level job as well as develop and implement an employment plan that leads to a job that provides with a living wage and the flexibility of employment benefits. In addition to job readiness programming, the whole person approach includes time during the program design planning process to apply Freire’s critical consciousness theory and self-reflection to tease out the root causes of the individual’s barriers to continuous positive employment. Rubicon Programs’ bold approach to addressing the issue of poverty through its collaborative and inclusive redesign approach to research and the development of programs demonstrates its commitment to leverage the strengths and voices of its team, program participants and community stakeholders. In addition to affirming many of the common barriers Rubicon’s team was all too familiar, the research findings created an awareness of the need to address learning disabilities as a barrier to employment and leaving poverty.
Agency Background

A nationally recognized nonprofit, Rubicon Programs was founded in 1973. Rubicon Programs served more than 3,000 people across Alameda County and Contra Costa County in 2013 and almost 4,000 in 2014. In 2014, over 674 people found employment as a participant with Rubicon Programs. Rubicon Programs serves the poor and underserved communities who have overcome serious obstacles. More than a third of Rubicon Programs participants were formerly incarcerated. One in five people in the East Bay live in poverty. Rubicon Programs offers job placement, housing, legal services, and financial literacy services to the individuals participating in its programs (Rubicon, 2014).

Rubicon Programs’ mission is to prepare low- to severely low-income people to achieve financial independence and to partner with people with mental illness on their journey of recovery. Rubicon provides services place low-income East Bay residents in jobs and housing. Rubicon Programs participants are also afforded access to legal services and mental health and wellness care. Rubicon serves targeted East Bay communities from offices located in Berkeley, Hayward, Richmond, Concord, and Antioch.

The reentry population, those released from prison or jail, may find themselves in poverty, homeless and struggling when they come back home and return to the community. Rubicon received federal grant funding to also include providing services to parents who were formerly incarcerated so that they can learn to provide for themselves and their families financially and emotionally. The idea is to help people become as self-sufficient as
possible that they will have the support, information and skills to stay out of the criminal justice system.

While Rubicon Programs had great success in serving the poor and having the program data to support the work they do, this success was not enough if the people helped get jobs, a place to live, mental health and legal services but remained living in poverty. Rubicon’s staff did not back away from the tall order called upon them by their new mission. Last year, Rubicon’s team of professional staff members reimagined how the organization could redesign its programs to focus on supporting people leaving poverty and become self sufficient.
In this paper, the role that employment plays in enabling people to leave poverty will be investigated. The research data points to a hypothesis that the barriers to self-sufficiency become increasingly complex for someone living in severe poverty. The six peer reviewed articles by Moffit (2015), DeNavas-Walt and Proctor (2014), Richard C. Fording, Schram and Soss (2013), Chandler (2011), Schmidt, Zabkiewicz, Henderson, Jacobs and Wiley (2011), and Gustafson (2009) reviewed in the following paragraphs support this hypothesis (Moffit, 2015); (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014); (Fording, Schram & Soss, 2013); (Chandler, 2011); (Schmidt, Zabkiewicz, Henderson, Jacobs & Wiley, 2011); and (Gustafson, 2009).

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs suggests that if someone cannot make sure their food, clothing, shelter and other stabilizing needs are met, a person will not be able to increase their ability to develop the higher senses of self-sufficiency through their experiences of safety and belonging to achieve the type of esteem needed to emerge out of severe poverty. This theory is supported by the research articles by Moffit (2015), DeNavas-Walt and Proctor (2014), Fording, Schram and Soss (2013), Chandler (2011), Schmidt, Zabkiewicz, Henderson, Jacobs & Wiley (2011), and Gustafson (2009). The severely poor often have no time to propel themselves beyond their current state of poverty because their time is spent figuring out how to make their basic ends meet such as child care, transportation, elderly care, money for groceries, etc. These are often the challenges that get in the way of getting and/or maintaining a job (Moffit, 2015); (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014); (Fording, Schram & Soss, 2013); (Chandler, 2011); (Schmidt, et. al, 2011); and (Gustafson, 2009).
In Moffit's (2015) article, *The Deserving Poor, the Family, and the U.S. Welfare System*, Moffit discusses how the original target population for welfare aid shifted away from single mother families to individuals and families who are more elderly or disabled. While aid to the poor was a prominent issue during the 1930's Great Depression period, 1960's legislation defined much of the welfare programs today. The political ideology at the time was for these programs to help people get back on their feet through education, improving their skills and increase access to health programs while not reaching the welfare aid limits for support. Welfare legislation became less politically popular in more recent decades, as evidenced by those who receive aid are judged to not be deserving of the aid which has increasingly become the normal perception of people receiving welfare assistance (Moffit, 2015).

According to the Current Population Report on Income and Poverty in the United States for 2013, there was no substantial change in the poverty statistics from 2012 to 2013 other than a slight decline in 2013 of those living in poverty (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014). A collection of government agencies including the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services implemented the Supplemental Poverty Measure to attempt to get further insight into the issues and circumstances facing those living in poverty that relate to economic well-being (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014).

2013 did not indicate any significant change in poverty levels in the United States with DeNavas-Walt & Proctor (2014) citing a .5 percentage decrease keeping the number of people living in poverty at around 45.3 million. Single mothers are noted to have a five times higher likelihood to live in poverty than their married couple counterparts. About
one of every three children with a single mother as head of household is living in poverty. It is confusing to figure out whether someone technically falls within the income ranges of poverty because the ranges vary between national and state entities. People living in poverty struggle to earn up to $834 or less above their current monthly wages or $10,000 or less annually above their current year's wages. Resolving this income shortfall would keep them just above the poverty threshold (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014). According to the 2015 Department of Health and Human Services poverty thresholds, an individual earning $11,770 a year or less is considered to be living in poverty. A family of four earning $24,250 a year or less is considered to be living in poverty (Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 2015).

Fording, Schram & Soss (2013), discussed in their article how penalties to those living in poverty and receiving assistance may not decrease the number of welfare regulation violations that occur (Fording, Schram & Soss, 2013). As the distance between America's middle and lower class grows increasingly wider, those in severe poverty experience even greater and more complex challenges in finding and maintaining jobs that will enable them to leave the financial hardships of their dire economic lives. People living with the financial struggles of severe poverty also face the social hardships that limit one's ability to feel the self-efficacy of social and financial stability. Someone who makes less than two dollars a day is considered to be in severe poverty. The population of Americans living in poverty increased by sixty-one percent over the course of fifteen years from 1996 to 2011 (Fording, Schram, & Soss, 2013). The government responded with welfare and social programs that on the surface are supposed to help the most needy in America.
This aid has evolved into institutionalized social bias towards the poor to the point where monetary and procedural penalties get in the way of someone ever leaving poverty. The labels associated with people receiving government aid create a stigma that creates challenges in self-perception that can hold a person back from reaching the point of self-sufficiency. While self-sufficiency is the ideal goal and also the rhetoric of policy makers, the labels reinforce the negative assumptions that the poor are not deserving of the help because they are lazy. Many also place judgment on the person’s intent is simply to get free money; intentionally taking other people’s hard earned tax dollars is at the core of those seeking the support of welfare programs. These negative assumptions socially deteriorate the trust and confidence in the people living in severe poverty (Moffit, 2015), (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014), (Fording, Schram & Soss, 2013), (Schmidt, et. al, 2011), and (Gustafson, 2009).

“Do Welfare Sanctions Help or Hurt the Poor? Estimating the Causal Effect of Sanctioning on Client Earnings,” looks at the consequences individuals face when they fail to comply with the regulations imposed for receiving aid (Fording, Schram & Soss, 2013). This article drives home the findings from the first article where persons in circumstances of severe poverty are often addressing multiple social and health problems that inhibit their ability to comply with the rules for being on welfare. Fording, Schram & Soss (2013) posit that welfare sanctions take the stick approach in thinking that penalties, specifically monetary penalties, will force aid recipients to modify their behavior to follow the rules. Alternatively, a carrot approach works to develop the aid recipients’ ability to become self-sufficient (Fording, Schram & Soss, 2013).
According to Richard C. Fording, Sanford F. Schram & Joe Soss (2013), the assumptions of why formal penalties will work to modify behaviors of welfare recipients’ who fail to follow the rules don’t work. The main assumption is that a penalty for lack of compliance to the rules will yield a change in behavior that will comply with the rules. This approach takes a parent-child relationship that presupposes the person in the child-role doesn’t have any other limiting issues holding him or her back from changing his or her behavior. The person receiving aid may face the dilemma of getting a job or entering a job program and having to deal with the most common challenges that include one or more of the following: physical or mental illness, physical or mental disability, lack of transportation and child care (Fording, Schram & Soss, 2013).

These challenges are often characteristics of the groups most likely to face extreme poverty. For example, single mothers without a support system or income to cover childcare may have more difficulty leaving the home to go to work or participate in an employment program to get a job. Men or individuals who have mental illness or were formerly incarcerated may have disabilities and added social stigma that create self-efficacy challenges in their ability to adhere to the welfare regulations and employment. Many may lack transportation even when public transportation is available. Public transportation requires money to pay for ride fare. Those in severely poor circumstances, making less than two-dollars a day, may not have the money to purchase a round trip ride-fare. This multi-layered appearance of the lack of contributing to the social economy by this demographic may lead to bias towards people experiencing poverty and specifically those not working that they need to be told what to do (Fording, Schram & Soss, 2013).
Chandler (2011) investigated how California’s welfare recipients experience as challenges to getting jobs in the article “Work Therapy: Welfare Reform and Mental Health in California”. Chandler discussed three key assumptions in getting people into sustainable jobs:

1. Mental health problems are just as high if not more than people receiving aid than those in the general population;

2. Mental health disorders create significant challenges for successful and continuous employment; and,

3. Getting mental health treatment and support can increase one’s ability to get a job.

Welfare recipients experience major depression within any given year. About one out of every three individuals who are treated for depression will have lasting symptoms or relapses of depression. 25% of those getting treated for depression are found to give up on treatment and stop seeking treatment (Chandler, 2011).

Schmidt, Zabkiewicz, Henderson, Jacobs & Wiley (2011) looked at the increasing health issues amongst the very poor, its impact on this demographics and their seemingly long-term circumstance of poverty and the obstacles they created for sustainable employment (Schmidt, et. al, 2011). This population who remained on welfare over time has multiple challenges facing them all at once. The article explained that the approach of getting someone into a job as fast as possible might not improve the person’s ability to earn a living wage to cover the costs of their daily life.

This approach, referred to as the “work first” approach in literature, does not help to address the other issues people face in order to get themselves to an employment program.
Men, single mothers, those who have exhausted their aid time period and those with no recent work history have a higher likelihood of having these more complex life circumstances where they are dealing with more than one health or social problem. These problems may include drug and alcohol use, psychiatric distress, violent victimization, literal homelessness, criminal justice encounters, poor health and mental illness (Schmidt, et. al, 2011).

According to Gustafson’s study on “The Criminalization of Poverty,” the issues and challenges created by the main assumption that penalizing the person receiving aid for non-compliance will result in behaviors that conform to abiding by the rules and regulations are exacerbated in her article. The multiple challenges that face welfare recipients and those experiencing severe poverty directly impact their ability to meet the demands of complying with the governing agencies that provide services intended to promote self-sufficiency. Gustafson (2009) draws the connection of how the language of welfare transformed from providing aid to those in need to criminalized behavior for not being able to meet certain regulatory requirements for receiving aid (Gustafson, 2009).

Gustafson (2009) describes how the potential negative bias regarding people experiencing extreme poverty in the second article has become socially accepted and institutionalized in enforcing welfare regulations. The shift from the idea that someone can change his or her circumstance to the judgment that someone chooses to be poor is reflected in labels like being a criminal, a thief, or a “welfare queen.” These negative stereotypes transcend neighborhood opinions to the enforcement of welfare regulations. If someone does not comply with one of the agreements to receive aid, welfare agencies launch investigations to determine if the aid recipient fraudulent activities. The person
under investigation is subject to background checks, property searches and other investigative activities that resemble the type of activities probationers and parolees are subjected to as a part of their post-jail or post-prison release conditions (Gustafson, 2009).

While Gustafson (2009) doesn’t provide any recommendations to formally correct the systemic problems that reinforce the challenges for people in severe poverty to get out of poverty, she supports changing the use of language that criminalizes the behavior and penalties imposed on those receiving aid that are unable to maintain their adherence to the requirements to receive aid. Continued use of language commonly found in the criminal justice system unjustly becomes applied to the individual who becomes labeled a criminal (Gustafson, 2009).

This complexity of personal, health, social, educational and economic challenges become obstacles organizations providing welfare-to-work or programs for employment must critically analyze. The social acceptance of the negative characterization of poverty described in Gustafson’s article (2009) increases the stigma experienced by the person living in poverty. Individuals living in poverty have been documented to have higher amounts of chronic stress and health problems than their counterparts not in poverty. “Chronic stress exposure and risky coping responses may be a potential mechanism in the creation and perpetuation of health disparities (Windsor, Jemal & Benoit, 2014).
Target Population

The target population will focus on five San Francisco East Bay cities - Richmond, Berkeley, Oakland, Hayward and Antioch - where Rubicon Programs currently provides existing services. Richmond serves as its central office location. In the new program redesign, participants will focus on adult men and women twenty-four years old and above living in extremely low poverty income levels as defined by the national Housing and Urban Development agency. Included in this population are subpopulations such as formerly incarcerated individuals, individuals with varying degrees of mental illness, homeless, etc. This demographic is also comprised of a higher rate of African Americans and Non-white Hispanics in this specific socio-economic status category.

While there were 20,000 new jobs created in the San Francisco East Bay regions in the last year, the difficulty to get hired for those in poverty to obtain sustainable employment as they compete with others for professional services, business services and construction jobs which comprised more than half of the new jobs.

Table 1: Unemployment Rates as of June 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Unemployment Rate/ %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alameda County</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contra Costa County</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Sugrue, C., 2015)
According to Haveman & Massaro (2015), "Alternative measures (to the federal poverty statistics) indicate significantly higher proportions of the population as impoverished (Haveman & Massaro, 2015). The Bay Area’s reputation for being the center for technology and innovation may project lower rates of perceived poverty rates in the area because the Bay Area is the home of Silicon Valley. In actuality, there are more than 11.3% of the Bay Area’s population living in poverty. Attention, education and support services for the Bay Area’s poor are still key to helping communities improve their quality of life despite the Bay Area’s poverty rate being lower than the 16.8% of California and 15.8% of the nation’s poverty rates.

Table 2: 2015 Poverty Guidelines for the 48 Contiguous States and the District of Columbia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persons in family/household</th>
<th>Poverty guideline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$11,770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>15,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>20,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>24,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>28,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>32,570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>36,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>40,890</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For families/households with more than 8 persons, add $4,160 for each additional person.

(Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 2015)
Figure 1: Poverty Rates in the Bay Area, California and the United States, 2003-2013

(Haveman, J. & Massaro, R., 2015)
BARRIERS TO LEAVING POVERTY

SWOT Analysis

Rubicon Programs is well positioned to manage the changes needed to design their new programs. Started in 1973, the organization’s long-standing service and familiarity with the communities in which it serves enables Rubicon Programs to evaluate the success outcomes of its current programs and people they serve. The committed front-line staff and other team members have long-standing experience working with the community. In some cases, graduates from Rubicon Programs have been hired as staff to aid in delivering programs and providing sympathetic support to current participants. Their service quality and organizational leadership in addressing the issue of poverty is recognized by awards from FastCompany four years in a row from 2004-2007 and with Rubicon programs featured in local newspapers like the San Francisco Chronicle for the impact Rubicon Programs has on the communities it serves.

A change any organization’s mission means potential and some inevitable changes at each level of the company’s resources and priorities. Existing staff may be challenged with having a fresh perspective or a beginner’s eye when conducting strategic planning efforts to evaluate, research and design new programs. The change in mission also influences how Rubicon Programs selects and determines who staffs and participates in the newly designed programs. The newness of integrating behavior health practices into the new program design without falling back into old and outdated program routines will require monitoring and correction to stay on tract.

The change in Rubicon’s mission creates opportunities that will increase the potential for long term funding. Rubicon then has the potential to create new partnerships by the need to develop referral agency relationships with other services in the Bay Area.
The opportunity to also lead in the area of helping people get out of poverty allows Rubicon Programs to significantly increase its positive impact in the community.

The threats to this project are inherent in changing the focus of any organization. The program design must focus on mitigating the barriers to employment in order to move its participants out of poverty. The availability of funds and winning grant-funding awards is always a threat to secure the money needed to implement programs.
Problem Statement

The article “On the Declining Health Status of Welfare Caseloads: Emerging Dilemmas for Serving the Poor” discusses how the existing co-morbid health factors among the poor and extremely poor are significant factors in a person’s employability and ability to move out of poverty. The degree of mental health issues may affect a person’s ability to gain and maintain employment. Additionally, increased occurrences of health issues like diabetes also affect one’s level of employability. Formerly incarcerated individuals also face potential symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder due to long terms of imprisonment or jail time that creates barriers to employment on top of the stigma related to incarceration. According to Table 1 on the Characteristics of Welfare Recipients, Before and After Welfare Reform, Blacks and other people of color seemed to disproportionately increase their participation in welfare benefits compared to their White counterparts after the 2001 welfare reform. Welfare is often the word used to refer to support received from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) (Schmidt, Zabkiewicz, Henderson, Jacobs & Wiley, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic and human capital characteristics</th>
<th>TANF before reform 1989</th>
<th>TANF after reform 2001</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35+</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This project for Rubicon Programs focused on researching what makes employment programs successful that target poverty level populations. More specifically, these individuals will be assessed for their level of employment readiness. Individuals who are not ready to participate in the employment programs will be referred to the necessary services provided by outside agencies for specific help in the required areas of need.

These considerations are important to the project outcomes because Rubicon Programs’ new mission is hinged on designing a program that can effectively address significant barriers to employment in order to have their participants leave poverty. While there are many employment programs in place, it is unclear what percentage of participants actually leaves and stays out of poverty.

According to Chandler’s (2011) study on welfare reform, “less than a third of (welfare) participants are found to achieve positive life changes or to approach the goal of leaving poverty. Improving those outcomes may require greater integration of treatments with enhanced measures to help participants overcome multiple barriers (Chandler, 2011). The project is focused on researching and identifying what the barriers may be. The information and data gathered will affirm existing design approaches. It may also uncover

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other minority</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married or cohabitating</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child younger than 4 at home</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior history of AFDC/TANF</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school education</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed during the prior year</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unweighted N</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>691</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Schmidt, Zabkiewicz, Henderson, Jacobs & Wiley, 2011)
areas that may not currently be considered in the redesign of Rubicon Programs and provide the opportunity to incorporate these missing areas.
Goals & Objectives

In order to figure out how to best contribute to the current process Rubicon Programs was implementing for their strategic changes in the organization, three goals emerged for this capstone project.

Goal #1: Assess what makes employability program models successful or challenging for severely low to low-income constituents.

Objectives:

- By end of first month (Oct), identify scope of research with project supervisor
- Spend three months (Oct, Nov, Dec) conducting research to learn and understand
  - What the definitions of poverty and those in severe low income thresholds are;
  - What make characteristics make up models of employability programs; and,
  - What potential challenges create obstacles to moving individuals out of poverty?
- In fourth month (Jan), participate in focus group to gather information from Rubicon Programs participants on what helps and hinders successful employment and participation in programs.
- By end of fourth month (Jan), deliver presentation to project site on research findings.

Goal #2: Research how learning disabilities support strategies may contribute to Rubicon’s new program design
Objectives:
- By the fifth month (Feb, Mar), research how to incorporate strategies for learning disabilities
- By Mar, present findings to Behavioral Health work group on learning disabilities

Goal #3: Develop simple ways to incorporate supporting participants with learning disabilities by the end of the project term

Objectives:
- Provide a set of universal strategies easy to implement by Rubicon staff and constituents
- Provide a short video tutorial for Rubicon staff for examples of how to use strategies
- Provide a list of providers for learning disability assessments, diagnosis and services
Methodology

The project employed a discovery approach where the data researched guided the direction of the project. The data researched was shared and discussed with the site supervisor who had insight into the organization's directions in relation to the new program design. The strategy we agreed to was to research broadly the topic of poverty and employment programs using the databases available through the University's library and the internet web-search tools. Each research report identified and narrowed the topics for continued research. After a few rounds of meetings and research, several commonly known barriers to employment were identified from the research conducted.

Research findings were then presented with the team of professionals in the organization responsible for redesigning the program. Two significant presentations refined the direction for conducting research. The first presentation shared and discussed the initial list of barriers to employment with approximately twenty Rubicon Programs staff members from various program departments. Learning disabilities emerged as the barrier that front line staff shared anecdotal stories about and that the new design did not incorporate. The second presentation shared and discussed how information on learning
disabilities may be incorporated into the new program redesign with the Behavioral Health team of five staff members.

Lastly, co-facilitating one of the many focus groups conducted by the Behavioral Health team provided insightful feedback. The participants confirmed the research and staff's experiential knowledge about the most common barriers to employment. Transportation, housing and childcare were the barriers addressed by the participants of the focus group as their own challenges to employment.

Research methods primarily included Internet searches and the University of San Francisco’s Library search tools for peer-reviewed papers published between 2010 and 2015. Key website tools provided key data available on various government and organizational sites like U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Data Sets and Community Commons.

Identification of how to narrow the research was based on discussing the findings and identifying where Rubicon Program’s planning process was at that time. This approach allowed the research to provide relevant support to the strategic planning process as the Rubicon Team continued their design efforts in parallel. The use of peer-reviewed papers provided a wider range of coverage of the topics and often included research data to support the findings. This also posed limitations to finding current program delivery models that have not been the focus of recent research publications. The challenge of coordinating schedules and keeping pace with Rubicon Program’s planning schedule limited the realistic in-person face time with constituents and staff of the current programs.
Findings

Services used by leavers, those who successfully moved out of poverty were:

- Readiness assessments and plans
- Support and education for special needs
  - Learning disabilities
  - Domestic/intimate partner violence
  - Partner control
  - Mental health issues
  - Substance abuse
- Actively working on a plan to remove barriers to employment
- Work first services
  - Job club
  - Job search and networking
  - Clothing programs
- Post-employment services
  - Continuing skills development and education
  - Support groups and services

Co-occurring problems manifest themselves into specific areas of learning and development of skills that will aid in job preparation, application and maintenance of employment. Many individuals in this population require basic and life skills coaching where they learn how to make their own appointments, how to manage and keep track of their important documents, resume writing, interviewing skills and etiquette, time
management, self esteem building, healthy eating, anger control, and seeking out health services (Schmidt, et. al, 2011).

Schmidt’s article concludes that services need to offer an integrated approach to dealing with the whole person when focused providing services that assist someone in severe poverty in obtaining employment. In order for the person to begin to visualize his or her own self-sufficiency, the person must figure out how to gain the self-efficacy to get through all the red tape (Schmidt, et. al, 2011).

According to Speiglman, R., Brown, H., M. Bos, J. M., Li, Y. & Ortiz, L. (2011), they found the top barriers to employment amongst TANF recipients in their study are (Speiglman, Brown, Bos, Li & Ortiz, 2011):

1. Lack of recent full-time work experience
2. Child care problems
3. Transportation problems
4. Alcohol or other drug problems
5. Mental health problems
6. Residential instability
7. Educational level less than that of a high school diploma/GED
8. Physical health problems

The first presentation of research findings to Rubicon staff illuminated the need to conduct further research about learning disabilities and employment. The staff confirmed that they work with the first eight barriers above on a regular basis. These barriers were not new to the staff present. The staff shared their anecdotal experiences of working with
individuals on their employment or mental health caseloads where they dealt with learning disability issues.

The second presentation of research findings specifically on learning disabilities resulted in the agreement of the Behavioral Team that it is important to find ways to address learning disabilities. The group also agreed that there needs to be further discussion within the organization regarding what point in the person’s participation in Rubicon Programs would a formal assessment of potential learning disabilities occur if at all.

The proposed plan for addressing learning disabilities is to develop a practical toolkit using universal design for learning. The toolkit would include common principles of how to help someone with cognitive learning disabilities. Learning disabilities may manifest themselves are not limited:

- Memory loss
- Reading challenges
- Complex thinking challenges
- Difficulty to focus
- Organization and time management skills

The toolkit of information and strategies will be presented as a workshop for the Rubicon staff. In addition to the toolkit, a list of local providers who conduct learning disability assessments will be gathered and provided to Rubicon. Rubicon would then have someone reach out to the local providers to identify a few in each city where Rubicon runs programs that will be amenable to receiving referrals and potentially offering sliding scale options for payment.
Discussion

Why is it important for society to focus on the issue of poverty? While the images of economically depressed parts of cities around the Bay Area and across the country may observationally indicate areas of poverty, the rules describing who falls at or below the poverty threshold may be confusing to understand. Furthermore, understanding who is living in poverty and their challenges to leaving poverty are complicated by the array of individual, interpersonal, environmental, societal and governmental barriers present and at work. The integration of behavioral health knowledge and interventions provides insight to the context about how to support individuals to help themselves rise out of living in poverty.

Healthy People 2020 focuses on five key areas of social determinants of health (SDOH) to identify the areas in which people may improve the quality of life for those living in the United States. The Healthy People 2020 initiative punctuates the need to addressing the issue of poverty by including it in the list of social determinants under Economic Stability. The issue of poverty is listed as the third issue from the top of issues to address by decreasing the number of people living in poverty by the year 2020. These
improvements may only be achieved through efforts at all levels of society including government and community service organizations such as Rubicon Programs around the issue of poverty and outcomes that effect the lives of as many people as possible (Healthy People 2020, 2015).

When the 1960s welfare acts were enacted, present-day cost of living factors for Americans have changed. Today’s 14.5 percent of American’s living in poverty must factor in additional costs of living than their 1960’s counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). These additional costs are due to the changes in and reliance of new technologies. Current technology and transportation increased the mobility of many Americans while also increasing overall expenses to the individual. Communication technology evolved from the delivery by horse, courier and the mailman to the telegraph to the telephone to the cellular phone. People rely less and less on analog or digitally wired home phones as the primary means to contact others. Mobile cellular phones are the primary technology tool to make calls but are not the only types of technology used for communication. Computer technology and its advancements have further advanced communication technology to video calls, instant messaging, text messaging, video messaging and the assortment of social media portals created to connect people to one another. Communication costs alone require at least a cellular phone contract that may cost as low as $40 a month or more. The $480 or more annual cost increases dramatically if data and text messaging are not included to use the other modes of internet communication now available. Television broadcast services have also advanced from analog to digital subscription services with required minimum fees for very basic local channels by some providers. Home entertainment went from radio, black and white television, Technicolor television, to
digitally delivered shows through cable and satellite cable providers to flatter and now curved high definition television sets that can also access the internet. Access to television entertainment also evolved with faster internet based technology through products like Apple TV, Roku, and SlingBox and on demand services like Netflix and other services. Netflix shows streamed over the internet and viewed on a mobile smart phone will add another $72 per year and potential increases in data charges. Even without these entertainment conveniences, there continues to be people living in poverty who go hungry because more than 30% of their annual income goes to paying for housing as rental costs continue to increase in the Bay Area.

For example, a single person is considered to be living in poverty if s/he is making $11,770 or less a year. 30% of $11,770 is $3,531. A person is left with $7,687 a year or less after paying rent, cell phone bill and Netflix forgoing having a cable service. $640 per month or less must now be split between transportation costs to and from work, food, clothing and other incidentals. The cost of public transit, while it may seem less expensive than having a car, increases the amount of time it takes to get from one place to another because of the number of stops fundamentally exists with taking a bus or train. The consequence of being late to a job site for someone striving to become self-sufficient may result in losing that job. Owning a car may be just as cost prohibitive with insurance, registration, gas and maintenance fees and only $640 to cover other expenses in the month. Even more daunting is that the U.S. Census Bureau found that in 2010 one out of five kids seventeen years old or younger lives below the poverty level. If nothing was done to change the trajectory of their lives, there is a high likelihood that the fifteen-, sixteen- and seventeen-year old youth continued on to live in poverty into adulthood today (U.S. Census
BARRIERS TO LEAVING POVERTY

More importantly, in a 2008 study done on San Francisco Bay Area CalWORKS program, a state funded welfare to work, found that about thirty percent of the program participants left poverty (Demarco, Austin & Chow, 2008).

Rubicon Programs’ shift to eradicate poverty makes a strong statement about the organization’s values of uplifting persons in need in positive sustainable ways. The organization deliberately looked at what more can be done to increase the rate of people leaving poverty in spite of their participant, programmatic and organizational success. The creative strategic planning approach already underway when this project started focused on how to integrate the strengths of Rubicon’s programs with the needs of the people they served and their connection to others and groups within their communities. The Social Ecological Model supports this approach on the interrelationships of individuals, groups and society to observe and analyze poverty in a way that informs how Rubicon Programs provides services to those living in severe poverty in five Bay Area cities.

The Alameda County Public Health Department (2013) presented information that inferred a person might increase his/her lifespan by seven fold per each significant improvement in their economic status based on the current poverty thresholds. If this relationship between positive step increases in a person’s economic status and one’s lifespan, then Rubicon Programs’ new mission gives hope that the new program design may have a more direct impact towards helping people become sustainably self-sufficient, rise out of living in severe poverty and live longer. Poverty not only affects those living in its reality, it affects the greater community by affecting the over all quality of life of all who live there.
The results of the research conducted for the Behavioral Health Team affirmed the commonly known barriers to employment like transportation, childcare and housing. These findings confirmed what the staff already understood and experienced through Rubicon Programs’ current program design. The participants of the focus group also voiced their affirmation of these barriers to their own employment. Program design elements addressing these issues, including time and money management skills, are woven throughout the program activities and curriculum.

Through project’s research and further discussion with the Rubicon Programs staff, addressing learning disabilities rose to the top of the list of barriers to be incorporated by the new program design. Using a universal learning design approach to develop strategies that address learning disabilities takes into consideration the potential for increasing someone’s experience of stigma about or incorrectly labeling someone with a learning disability. Selecting intentional strategies that may work for anyone helps to normalize actually applying the strategy.
The final deliverable, facilitating a workshop with Rubicon Programs staff, on the learning disabilities findings will discuss strategies for observing potential learning disability issues and commonly used tools for time management and other skills. The workshop will encourage the use of key adult learning theory considerations that enable participants to learn at their own pace and have opportunities to share what they know with others. Providing templates for how participants can manage their calendar or complete other tasks may increase participants’ self-efficacy to master the new skills.

The project was limited to research of information and discussions with the Behavioral Health Team and project supervisor with the exception of the focus group that included a handful of participants. After the staff workshop on learning disabilities is conducted, it may be beneficial to continue survey the participants or conduct a pre-/post-test for further assessment of how the different tools aimed at learning disabilities have helped participants navigate getting and maintaining a job. Additionally, formalizing relationships with providers who provide learning disability assessments and support may also increase the capacity to refer participants to specialists if needed.

This project provided research and information to support the efforts of the Behavioral Health Team’s charge to develop a new program design that supports Rubicon Programs’ mission. The barriers to employment research proved valuable by upholding the organization’s existing knowledge in this area and clarifying the need to intentionally incorporate learning disabilities support tools to increase their participants’ likelihood to raise their economic status.
References


What were the major changes from Aid to Families with Dependant Children (AFDC) to TANF? (n.d.). Retrieved August 10, 2015, from http://www.networklobby.org/faq/what-were-major-changes-aid-families-dependant-children-afdc-tanf


Appendices
Appendix 1: SWOT Analysis Chart

SWOT Analysis: Rubicon Programs Research Project
Employment Preparation Models for Extremely Low Income Adults

Submitted by: Aouie Rubio

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Internal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Organization’s track record of successful job placements</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Organization’s long standing service in the communities where they serve</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Committed front-line staff serving constituents</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Provides significant services in Richmond, Berkeley, Oakland, Hayward and Antioch</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Strategic opportunities to align new mission towards long term funding</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Potential to move people out of the poverty threshold</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Potential to create new community partnerships through referral process</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Low competition: Main job programs are run by the respective Cities</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Change in strategic direction displaces significant number of mental health clinical staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Change in strategic direction will directly affect current client-base with severe mental illness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Newness of</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Threats</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Potential for people not moving out of poverty because of low wages, below living wage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diversification and availability of funding sources for new strategic focus</td>
<td></td>
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Appendix 2: Project GANTT Chart

MSBH GANTT - Capstone
Submitted by: Aouie Rubio

Exported on June 2, 2015 12:49:43 PM PDT
Appendix 3: Map of East Bay Family Households Living Below Poverty

Source:
http://maps.communitycommons.org/viewer/?action=link_map&ids=ve,graybase,5246,water,MSA,zctas,schSec,schEL,st_hou,st_sen,us_cong,tracts,placebnd,counties,State,roads,places&vm=5246&vr=graybase,water,places&bbox=-10056804.58606324,4161353.4071241273,-9976927.891505338,4207979.994378022
Appendix 4: Map of Antioch Family Households Living Below Poverty

Source:
http://maps.communitycommons.org/viewer/?action=link_map&ids=ve,graybase,5246,water,MSA,zctas,schSec,schEL,st_hou,st_sen,us_cong,tracts,placebnd,counties,State,roads,places&vm=5246&vr=graybase,water,places&bbox=-10056804.58606324,4161353.4071241273,-9976927.891505338,4207979.994378022