

Hoffman: Lower 48 offers lessons in welfare reform

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JUNEAU — Alaska is in the midst of revising its welfare system to meet new requirements set out by Congress in the Family Support Act of 1988.

Congress wants to encourage those who have become dependent on welfare to get off the public dole and become producing, independent members of society. As Alaska lawmakers and social service providers work through the state's welfare laws and regulations they would do well to look at some successful experiments in other states.

Recently I had the opportunity to visit Chicago for the annual conference of the Council of State Community Affairs Agencies. On the opening day we heard of the successes of a welfare reform pilot project operated by a nonprofit corporation in a West Chicago ghetto.

I was so impressed by the presentation that I drove out to the ghetto to get a first-hand look.

The Bethel New Life organization, a community development corporation affiliated with the Bethel Lutheran Church in West Chicago, is an excellent example of the "one-stop shop" coordinated approach to getting people off welfare.

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Child-care services, training, employment placement, chemical addiction services, nutrition, medical services, housing and other support services are coordinated by the one organization. People do not have to chase around to an alphabet soup of different state and city agencies to get the help they need.

The organization operates a special demonstration project primarily with federal funding. It was set up 10 years ago when church members realized that their church was dying because the community was dying.

Population in the one-square-mile neighborhood had dropped from 70,000 to 35,000 after riots in the late '60s. Banks "red-lined" the community, drying up sources of mortgage and commercial loans.

Beginning with a housing rehabilitation program, the corporation began breathing new life back into the community. It moved into new business developments and recycling before adding the whole range of self-sufficiency support services that are coordinated through the welfare reform demonstration project.

Bethel New Life currently manages 750 housing units and runs a job training program that provides 500 placements per year.

OPINION

The founder and current executive director of the corporation is Mary Nelson, an amazing iron-willed woman. She began as a committed church member and built a major organization through sheer will power.

She saw the problems of her community and went about doing something about it, first by winning the support of her small congregation. She tapped a fountain of volunteer spirit, a sense of "can-do," that has spread throughout the community.

Like West Chicago, the rural Mississippi towns of Metcalfe and Vicksburg are operating programs providing coordinated "one-stop" services to welfare recipients. But in addition to the services offered by the Chicago project, the Mississippi programs feature motivational talks, self-esteem training, nutrition training and even free eyeglasses to those who need them.

Many of the extra services come from local businesses as their contributions to the program.

They contributed because Mississippi used a competitive process much like the one the federal government did when it selected Alaska for the site of a new Job Corps Training Center. In Mississippi's case the "carrot" was a special \$1 million Community Development Block Grant set-aside that was used as "seed money" for the project.

The competitive nature of the process induced a great deal of local participation and volunteer effort, especially by local businesses which agreed to provide services and products — such as eyeglasses — to participants free of charge.

While we as Alaskans pride ourselves on doing things our way, "not giving a damn how they do it Outside," sometimes we need to take a step back and see what others are doing to get a fresh insight for solving our own problems.

Our unique challenges demand that we be innovative, but that doesn't mean we can't learn from others. The goal is to help move people from welfare-dependency to economic self-sufficiency.

From the Chicago and Mississippi examples we learn that the elements which make a program successful include:

- Programs must be in touch with the local community.

- They must be able to deliver a broad range of services with minimal bureaucracy.

- They must maintain a strong sense of commitment to their "customers," the welfare clients.

- Programs should encourage and solicit private sector participation.

Are there organizations in Alaska that can profit from the success stories in Chicago, Mississippi and elsewhere? I think so.

For starters, 12 Alaska Native nonprofit corporations have applied for the 37 percent of federal Job Training Partnership Act monies Congress has set aside. Perhaps they could build on that using the Outside success stories as models.

In Chicago and Mississippi, the key to success was that the government was willing to be innovative. Are we in Alaska willing to chart new ground? The answer, I believe, is simple; to meet the challenges now before us, we must.