



Shelterforce Online

Urban Horizons: Fostering Economic Independence in the Face of Welfare Reform

By Karen Ceraso
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Scents drifted from a kiosk in the lobby of the Urban Horizons Center for Food Production and Entrepreneur Support, which trains low-income women in culinary arts and serves gourmet and ethnic foods to area residents and businesses for take out or delivery. A group of visitors passed through the lobby and arrived in a meeting room where freshly prepared trays of sandwiches – mozzarella, sundried tomatoes, and fragrant pesto on crusty French bread – awaited them. People eagerly went for seconds and even thirds, and some stood puzzling over three tempting dessert choices. Housed in a restored community landmark, the former Morrisania Hospital, the center is a bit of an anomaly in the South Bronx, but its creators calculate that it can carve out a market in New York City's booming gourmet food industry. The center made an impressive case to the visitors that day.

"We want to bring four stars to the Bronx," said Nancy Biberman, co-founder and President of the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDCO), which created Urban Horizons, a multi-service center for low-income women and their families. "We're not interested in sending hamburger flippers out into the world."

Yet while offering a high-quality product may be an important part of business development, many entrepreneurs learn that making a business profitable requires more. "We believe microenterprise works for some people but not all," Biberman said. "Our job is to weed those people out. If they don't have the drive to market their business, if you can't be tough and work hard, it's not for you."

Individualized Approaches

WHEDCO helps women determine what occupation to pursue during a three-month career assessment and job readiness program. This program also feeds into the organization's vocational training in four tracks: family daycare, the food and hospitality industries, and fitness, along with the entrepreneurship training and support in the food sector. Some who would like to become entrepreneurs but need more experience figuring the costs or marketing to their niche are encouraged to get a job in the industry while they perhaps begin developing their own business on the side. Some are woven back into the culinary arts program. "The overarching philosophy," said Biberman, "is that there's not a one-size-fits-all approach. People are different."

Conceptualized in the pre-welfare reform era, Urban Horizons has now become a deliberate laboratory for economic development and economic independence, Biberman said. WHEDCO's mission is to: recognize women's often competing roles as sole breadwinners and primary caregivers of children; address the multiple barriers to women's access to, and success in, the employment mainstream; enable women to make [educated] choices about their lives and the lives of their families; include low-income women in program planning and public policy advocacy; and provide models for realistic and effective welfare-to-work and family-friendly workplace efforts.

"We are trying to provide to low-income women the kind of supports and services middle class women can pay for and have access to in their communities," Biberman explained. "People understand – women who work and have families – all this requires focus and money. We're trying to do as much as possible with what's available to us. The only difference is that the people we work with don't have the money."

Striving for the Black

That's a big difference, though, when it comes to getting businesses off the ground, and WHEDCO has yet to see overwhelming results from either the microbusinesses created by its trainees or its own business ventures, which include the prepared foods for take out and delivery, gourmet catering, a wholesale baking division, and rental of its 4,000-square-foot commercial kitchen.

"The businesses – it's a whole minefield. It's sort of an oxymoron," Biberman said. "We know how to explain what we're doing. We're using unskilled people to try to operate businesses. It's our job to create a network of relationships in the industry to help businesses succeed. I'm hoping our businesses will break even some day, though so far they're real bleeders."

WHEDCO would like these businesses to subsidize its comprehensive range of programs. Along with the employment programs, services available at Urban Horizons include 132 housing units for low-income and formerly homeless families, a fitness center, a family support program, a Head Start and Universal Pre-kindergarten Program, and substance abuse treatment. Other agencies also offer programs at Urban Horizons. For example, WHEDCO works with the HELP initiative to place homeless families in internships and jobs.

Urban Horizons' economic development programs have no geographic boundaries. "We don't turn people away," Biberman said. "People walk in here, and on some level, whatever issues they're dealing with can be addressed." But she noted that WHEDCO does all its social work with the goal of economic development and economic independence for women.

WHEDCO, formed in 1991, completed construction of Urban Horizons in 1997, with \$23 million in state, federal, and private construction funds, along with program support from over 35 foundations, and it began many of its programs in 1998. Biberman admits some of the programs came about because the organization got categorical funding for them.

Watching for Results

"When we started Urban Horizons, a lot of people said 'Aren't you biting off too much?'" Biberman continued. "But we felt, why not do as much as we possibly can, in the environment we're in. Whatever drawbacks there are to being comprehensive, they're all outweighed by the benefits. Here at least, there's some greater likelihood that if people need a certain service, they'll get it. These are things that have very deep ripple effects not only in families but in communities."

To document this, WHEDCO has invested in software to help track participants, so the organization can say after five years what kind of programs seem to correlate to job retention. For example, those enrolled in WHEDCO's substance abuse counseling and culinary arts programs are required to use the fitness center, and all others are encouraged. While requiring this may seem somewhat paternalistic, Biberman sees it as necessary in helping prepare people for work. "We don't want to mislead people into thinking where they're going is going to be easy, so it's incumbent on us to get people ready," she said. "We don't view the people we're working with any differently than we view ourselves. If we know feeling healthy and fit help with depression, chronic illnesses, absenteeism...why should it be any different for poor

people?" She added that participant tracking will be able to measure whether this truly made a difference.

So far, WHEDCO has placed over 350 people in jobs outside the organization – "good jobs," Biberman added – and has helped begin 65 licensed family daycare businesses. Another major sign of progress will be WHEDCO's own businesses starting to break even, she said. "When the losses are on a downward trend, that would be just wonderful for us – to be able to show that social ventures can work, that they can create jobs and generate revenue for a parent nonprofit." She added that Urban Horizons is more likely to succeed in this now that it has assembled the right people and expertise – a marketing consultant, better management, and a network of friends in the food industry.

Taking on the Systems

But she noted that moving large numbers of low-income people into jobs that will allow them to become self sufficient requires "an environment that understands that people are where they are because a lot of systems have failed them." In promoting "realistic and humane" policies for women seeking economic independence, WHEDCO is also tracking and analyzing local, state, and federal welfare reform. "It's remarkable that we're achieving what we are," Biberman said, "when New York State has received hardly any of its welfare reform block grant money. We fight for every dollar we get, and we shouldn't have to." WHEDCO is taking an active stance on policy issues, as it works with other welfare advocates and policy makers to ensure that welfare recipients subject to New York City's workfare rules are allowed to continue participating in approved vocational training programs and receive assistance with child care expenses.

"It would be nice if people didn't think we were going to be a quick fix," Biberman said. "We can't make up for years of failure of the public education system. Many people in the community have language problems, and many are not literate in their own language. I wish people would be realistic in their expectations – and give us more money."