



Promoting Job Opportunities

*Strategies for Community-Based
Organizations*



Rainbow Research Inc.



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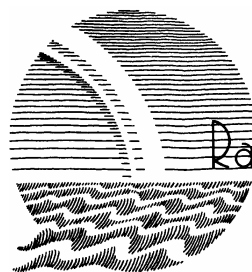
Promoting Job Opportunity:

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When residents and merchants in Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood formed the Fifth Avenue Committee in the late 1970's to "do something" about their increasingly rubble-strewn neighborhood, they focused first on housing and commercial redevelopment. Through an anti-redlining campaign they won a commitment from Aetna insurance company to finance 170 units of affordable housing and develop a supermarket. FAC helped from housing co-ops, developed housing, manages over 100 housing units, and helps over 20 tenant associations per year.

However, with an overall goal to preserve and strengthen the ethnic and economic diversity of their neighborhood, in the 1990s they have increasingly added jobs and economic opportunity to their agenda. Jobs, training opportunities, entrepreneurial activity and retention of existing businesses are all crucial to allowing people to stay in the neighborhood and shape their own future, in the Committee's view. Among their efforts: an environmentally sound Eco-mat dry-cleaning franchise; an auto repair training business called South Brooklyn CARS (Community Automotive Repair Services); youth and adult entrepreneurship programs which have led to several business starts including a painting business, a beverages vending firm, and a café; technical assistance for small housing contractors; and helping organize a union for workfare participants so they can fix unsafe working conditions and keep pressure on to help workers access permanent jobs.

Fifth Avenue Committee's experience represents an important trend in community-based development. The landscape of community development is changing to include more than housing and physical redevelopment. On the one hand, community-based organization are paying increasing attention to the social fabric of their communities—building and using informal social networks; incorporating child care, elder care, wellness and drug abuse prevention strategies into redevelopment plans; bridging diversity and building trust among races, economic groups and multiple institutions. On the other hand, we're remembering that community development must pay attention to jobs and wealth generation: economic development that will truly improve people's economic prospects through family-wage jobs and opportunities to build up equity to enable ongoing economic growth and innovation.



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The geographical dimensions of community-based development are also changing. While defined geographical neighborhoods are still an important basis for organizing constituencies and strategies, we're recognizing that "community" and "economy" are found both within and beyond neighborhoods. Neighborhood assets shouldn't be overlooked but neither should the ways in which people find and create meaningful community, and job and economic opportunity, outside their neighborhoods. And to have the greatest impact on people's economic prospects, it's important to improve their access to the regional and global economy—to markets and job opportunities beyond as well as within their neighborhoods.

Community activists face some formidable obstacles in the effort to promote job opportunities for people of low income and limited skills. Job growth is increasingly concentrated in low-wage occupations, and in suburban locations at a distance from the central city neighborhoods where people of low income increasingly are concentrated. Jobs that pay enough to support a family require more specialized skills than in the past, and job requirements are evolving more quickly than they used to, which means training programs are more often obsolete. At the same time, the logic of jobs work is obvious. For example, successful housing development generates its own demand for property management, maintenance and security—jobs that can be performed by local residents. And residential stability, a cornerstone of healthy community, depends on people finding adequate economic opportunity close to home.

In a 18-month investigation into what works for helping people get jobs, keep them and advance to better ones, we found several examples of projects and organizations making progress in this arena. The most impressive efforts seems to be pursuing some combination of four major paths, guided by four key principles.

Major Paths

1. **Develop human capital** — Help people develop their job skills, life skills, and entrepreneurial abilities so that they can qualify for available jobs and contribute to the start-up and growth of firms. Reframe "schooling" and "education" for stronger school-to-work transitions. Center for Employment Training, which started in San Jose and is now involved in numerous sites around the country, has demonstrated the effectiveness of approaches that emphasize hands-on job skills training supplemented by basic skills training oriented to workplace vocabulary and tasks, and attention to child care, housing, chemical health and other life skills and networks.
2. **Connect workers and employers** – Help people who need better (or better-paying) jobs find the firms and fields where they'll have hiring and advancement opportunities. Help firms and institutions that do hiring successfully and access prospective employees in lower-income communities and neighborhoods. The importance of strong connections to local employers cannot be overemphasized. The mediocrity of most employment and training programs is due largely to their disconnection from real employers and real jobs in the community. Workplace requirements are changing too fast, and are too skilled in the livable-wage jobs, for any training or brokerage service to be effective without close and continuing contact with workplace supervisors and managers.

3. **Create jobs** – Support the formation or growth of enterprises likely to hire from your priority population. This involves getting acquainted with existing firms in your area, as they do most of the hiring. Analyzing the regional economy to identify sectors with strong growth or stability, as well as ventures that tap the strengths of inner-city locations, is also important. Finally, target assistance to those firms most likely to provide livable wage opportunities to your constituency. Micro-enterprise and self-employment programs can fill niches especially in rural areas and can develop participants' abilities and networks. But Tim Bates, author of *Banking on Black Enterprise*, and others argue persuasively that aid to mid-sized, minority-owned firms – especially firms started by the mushrooming new generation of well-trained engineers and executives who are leaving mainstream corporations after bumping into glass ceilings – offers the best prospects for quality, larger-scale job creation and hiring for people of color.
4. **Continue local organizing** – Build the power that can hold institutions and policymakers accountable, and the informal networks through which people find out about job openings, adjust to new workplaces, and cope with child care and transportation demands. With affirmative action under attack, NAFTA and GATT tempting corporations and banks to ignore local community responsibilities, and devolution shrinking the federal role in community economic development, strong citizen advocacy is more important than ever. And internal organizing is crucial when crime is increasing fear and when families, schools, religious institutions and other traditional connective tissues are eroding. Too often local organizing has been jettisoned as groups move into economic development. It is important to see organizing as a means of increasing the effectiveness of economic development efforts, as well as a means of increasing accountability.

Fifth Avenue Committee, for example, draws from all four paths as it creates training businesses, places apprentices with existing businesses, supports entrepreneurial efforts, and pursues labor, tenant and community organizing.

How communities and organizations put these elements together depends largely on local circumstances. The numerous impressive examples we have seen around the country, such as Jane Addams Resource Center in Chicago, Project Quest in San Antonio, Esperanza Unida in Milwaukee and Valley Care Cooperative in Waterbury CT, have grown organically from local ambitions, talents and barriers – informed by examples from other places, but rooted in local contexts.

Common Principles

These locally distinctive strategies and combinations are undergirded by some common principles, however:

1. **Focus** – The most effective projects don't try to be all things to all people. They are clear about who they serve – which job-seekers, which employers. Young African-American men face different challenges and have different resources than do displaced homemakers. Hospitals have different job requirements and industry pressures than do microchip makers or auto repair

shops. Effective job creation and placement depends on accurate understanding of real job and industry requirements and opportunities. This is why some of the most exciting jobs projects take a **sectoral** approach – focusing on a specific, regionally-strong industry where they can build expertise about the particular business and labor-force issues relevant there.

2. **Flexibility** – Smart projects and coalitions are innovative and adjust their tactics as resources and opportunities change, even as their focus stays clear. On-the-job technology is changing rapidly; so must job training. If local firms are no longer hiring fork-lift operators, it's time to discontinue the fork-lift operator training program. If the real constraint to job creation is a lack of expansion capital for area firms, somebody should work on policy change and financial institutional innovation to increase that capital flow. If jobs are available but they don't pay enough to lift a family out of poverty, then maybe some broad-based organizing to change the framework for regional economic development is required.
3. **Cross boundaries** – One of the most formidable barriers to effective job opportunities work is people's tendency to stay within their own little worlds and the boxes they create. All too often, economic development officials don't talk to poor people; community organizations don't understand businesses; community colleges aren't in regular communication with either grassroots leaders or business operators. Yet the most effective jobs initiatives we have seen break out of these boxes and build strong working relationships across at least some of these divides. Their leadership circulates continuously in diverse networks – staying informed, seeking openings to be useful, following up to make sure earlier gains aren't lost. They also cross boundaries conceptually: they offer life-skills training as well as job-skills training and help folks build their social support networks as well as their career networks. Or they work with neighborhood businesses on safety and crime concerns as well as hiring and management concerns. The key boundary to cross is the one dividing employers from other community actors. Employers are the ones who hire people, and it's tough to do much on job opportunities unless they're in the picture early enough to help design the plan.
4. **Build relationships** – Because job-centered economic development is a multi-dimensional challenge, it's crucial to work with others whose strengths complement yours. Because different players typically have such diverse perspectives, as noted above, it's important to be intentional about building relationships where over time you can understand one another better and work together more productively. Trust must be earned – through demonstrating practical usefulness, as well as through communicating honestly and following through on your commitments. But ultimately it's the information flow, the stretching and ingenuity that happens when there's mutual respect and an ongoing appreciation for what each party brings to the table that will make the difference between real gains and frustrated hopes. Again, the key relationships to build are those with real employers – to learn of real job openings, and the real requirements for filling those jobs successfully, and the real issues involved in retaining and increasing the number of quality jobs in a community.

Fifth Avenue's Brad Landers observes that the jobs arena is open-ended and complex in comparison to housing development. And many community-based organizations are so turf-focused and loyal

to their own neighborhood that they resist thinking regionally, even if that's where economic opportunities will be found.

Nonetheless, the Fifth Avenue Committee recognizes that livable wage jobs and the opportunity to generate retained wealth are key elements of the vision that South Brooklyn residents hold. As a community-based organization, the Committee sees its role as a bridge through which these dreams, along with the more-concrete concerns of adequate housing and services, can be pursued. And through its evolving mix of enterprise development, training and entrepreneurship, business relations and organizing, the Committee is finding ways to connect need to opportunity, assets to markets, economy to community. As such, it is among the growing number of activists and organizations across the country building bridges to better job opportunity for low and moderate income people.

Our mission is to help increase the effectiveness and impact of socially concerned organizations in responding to social problems. We work in support of organizations and communities to help them achieve their goals.

Your organization and community can experience these results from participation in Rainbow Research activities – tailored studies, workshops, and partnerships – and use of our tools and publications.

We can help you to:

Improve your understanding of key program elements that contribute to program effectiveness.

Improve program impact through integrating principles of program effectiveness into day-to-day operations.

Improve management of resources to achieve program purposes.

Improve the fit between your organization's activities and your community's needs and opportunities.

Improve commitment of staff and Board to your organization's mission.

Improve communication between your organization and its various stakeholders and publics.

Improve linkages between your organization and other like-minded organizations.

Improve access to tools and support services that strengthen program performance.

