



A Call to Action

Poverty Reduction in Berrien County

**Dr. Betty Dennis, Marian
Triplett**
Western Michigan University

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Student-led, Faculty-guided Community and Economic Development Project Report

Dr. Betty Dennis, Primary Investigator,
WMU Extended University Programs and
Western Michigan University – Community Empowerment Center

Marian Tripplett, M.Ed., LLMW, Secondary
Faculty Specialist I
Western Michigan University/College of Health and Human Services
School of Social Work/WMU Southwest Regional Campus

Background:

Poverty and its impact is a social and economic justice issue that challenges individuals, families and communities worldwide. Throughout Michigan, no community has been untouched by the economic downturn and in lower Southwestern Michigan, the community of Benton Harbor and the ongoing struggle to reduce poverty while increasing opportunities has been witness to numerous initiatives focused solely on different activities. Little effort has been put into examining the systemic and institutional factors of poverty and almost no effort has been directed to hearing first hand, the ideas and insights of those individuals that are often most marginalized and affected by poverty and sporadic economic development initiatives.

The social work profession has as its primary mission to

“enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature is the profession’s focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.”

A collaborative idea developed between the following Western Michigan University

Departments:

- School of Social Work, MSW Extended-study program, WMU Southwest Regional Campus
- School of Nursing, RN-to-BSN, WMU Southwest Regional Campus
- College of Health and Human Services, WMU
- WMU Community Empowerment Center
- WMU Extended University Programs (EUP)

Spearheaded by the School of Social Work at Southwest and the Community Empowerment Center, proposed to facilitate a series of community conversations, entitled “A Call To Action: Poverty Reduction in Berrien County.”

Master of Social Work students enrolled in the Summer I course, SWRK 6620, Social Work Practice with Groups and Organizations were enlisted as part of the interdisciplinary project to study processes, identify specific populations and facilitate community discussions on poverty reduction, seeking the perspectives and insights of “in-residence” community residents. The goal was to engage residents and front-line workers of human service agencies in the 49022 community in consecutive community-wide discussions on a range of social and economic justice issues which impact community development, quality-of-life and present-future opportunities for the larger community. Social Work and RN-BSN student met in joint sessions to study the course material and then worked in small group to design discussion sessions that would demonstrate the ability to apply theory to actual practice. The overarching theme of poverty reduction through community and economic development had breakout topics focused on:

- Education and Lifelong Learning
- Income Security and Employment
- Affordable Housing and Homelessness
- Mental and Physical Health and Wellness
- Legal Issues, Criminal Justice and Community Safety

The range of topics offered a platform for the interdisciplinary participation in this student-led, faculty-guided project.

The five sessions took place on the following dates and locations:

August 4, 2014 and August 6, 2014	Emergency Shelter Services	(19 & 26 participants)
August 7, 2014	Re-entry Transitional Housing sites	(11 & 13 participants)
August 11, 2014	Community Ministry Outreach	(32 participants)
August 13, 2014	Lighthouse Ministries	(16 participants)

Individuals and populations represented in the sessions included: single females and mothers with minor children, fathers with minor children, non-custodial parents involved with Children's Protective Services, male and female parolees placed in transitional housing sites, LGBTQA youth and adults, individuals residing in adult-foster care due to mental illness; middle and high school students from public and private schools throughout Berrien County, senior participants from a senior center, front-line staff (resource manager, case manager, housing assistance worker, literacy paraprofessional, accountability officer, neighborhood watch captain, food bank aide, community residents).

In the course of their studies, the students identified populations who are often represented at the decision-making table by others (agency and organizational staff), but not usually included, invited or able to attend in-person. Some of the barriers include time of

meeting, meeting location, security issues at meeting location, curfew and other probation restrictions, program requirements of placements, representation by agency administrator, lack of coverage for job duties, lack of transportation and lack of childcare.

Contrary to the many articles on where the community rates or the standards not met, these participants on the community conversations hold a positive attitude and high regard for the 49022 area, specifically the communities of Benton Harbor City and the Benton Charter Township. The community was described as “a community of people trying to support and help one another”, “a place where there are no strangers and you feel right at home”, “a people who want to be friendly if you want friends, genuine friendship”, “an undiscovered gem waiting to be appreciated and treated better – the people who live here and the area where they live.”

Affordable Housing and Homelessness:

Positive changes in the community include the improved parks with new, safe equipment for the children, new HUD homes being built, the changes by the Emergency Financial Manager in fixing the bookkeeping in the City of Benton Harbor and making offices in the City more accountable by enforcing rules about property management.

This was also viewed as a challenge as many rental property owners sold or abandoned properties which reduces the number of available rental options in the city, which forces people to sleep on the streets, hang out all night in Meijer’s Grocery Store or live wherever they can get into. Other housing challenges that impact community and economic development include boarded up houses that need demolition, long wait lists for Section 8 housing or approval for subsidized housing vouchers, lack of housing for disabled females with criminal records (sex crimes, drug crimes or violent criminal histories in the past); lack of housing for older, able-

bodied adults; unclear dispute resolution with the City of Benton Harbor with water bills, taxes, light/gas shutoffs and no representation locally – all business conducted on the phone or through Western Union.

Legal Issues, Criminal Justice and Community Safety:

Dissatisfaction with the police force for the City of Benton Harbor and Benton Charter Township. Comments include “police officers are not motivated to develop meaningful relationships with citizens and lack a supportive role in the community”, “police officers fail to enforce warrants and restraining orders, even when provided information on a person’s whereabouts with a warrant for violent acts”. The court system was perceived in a negative manner with comments of “courts too often impose or order house arrest when they know the individual doesn’t have a job or way to pay the high fees and the charges just keep growing”, “failure of the City to address infrastructure problems such as water leaks, potholes, faulty water meters and improper street drainage and water stagnation.” Participants noted positive opportunities with neighborhood block groups, grants for joint projects between neighborhood block clubs and community police officers, the community gardening project and landscaping efforts to improve safety, citizens who report suspicious and/or criminal activity, and opportunities to acknowledge community “heroes and sheroes”.

Mental and Physical Health and Wellness:

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the 49022 area provides many opportunities for healthy lifestyles. However, sections of the community and the lack of transportation affect the ability for many low-income individuals to use the area to improve or support mental and

physical health and wellbeing. Participants also believe there are attitudes that shape the delivery of health care for poor people in the community. Comments include: “the medical community believe that most patients with Medicaid are lazy, drug-seeking and solely responsible for their poor health conditions and poor health outcomes”; “patients are regularly treated disrespectfully, made to wait long hours for appointments and only told about certain treatments, not given the whole spectrum of choices for care”; “lack of assistance with exploring choices for health plan enrollment”; “lack of safe sidewalks and adequate lighting for walkers in the community”; “broken-down houses and buildings are depressing”; “no grocery store in the City of Benton Harbor, corner stores sell cigarettes, alcohol and junk food” ,”poor parents are unfairly targeted by Children’s Protective Services and other services”; “failure by workers in agencies to inform clients of all rights or services to provide a better lifestyle”; “agencies that are supposed to help are hyped up on power over people and making poor people feel bad about their circumstance”; “more recruitment and support of culturally diverse foster homes and more accountability – some homes are very punitive to foster children”, “very little diversity in the workers in agencies”, “local respite care and services for youth who run away”.

Education and Lifelong Learning:

Participants expressed a strong belief that the community values an education and the opportunities a college degree brings with it. Participants comments include: “lack of outreach and services for homeless youth”; lack of culturally competent teachers”; overcrowded classrooms”; lack of extracurricular activities or exposure to activities beyond recreation or clubs”; “lack of access of arts and creativity throughout the community”; “lack of afterschool tutoring”; lack of educational opportunities for people trying to better themselves”; “no options

for involvement for working and/or poor parents”; “lack of transportation to take advantage of different opportunities”, “too much competition and backbiting between different schools and educational services”, “open access to information on summer camps and other opportunities, rather than agencies selecting only those youth who they deem appropriate”, “test preparedness for persons who’ve completed training for entry level jobs”. Participants noted a community network of lay education opportunities offering gardening and plants, soul food cooking, quilting, hair braiding, parenting, doing taxes, advocacy and mediation. Participants stated confidence that regular community offerings would be met with support and attended provided the planning incorporated community members in selecting topics, locations, times and partnering of respected community residents with professionals.

Income Security and Employment:

Participants had a wide-range of perspectives in this area but a common viewpoint was that recruiting employers who sincerely want to create employment opportunities for the least skilled/least experienced or with troubled pasts should be a priority of the City of Benton Harbor, Benton Charter Township and the County of Berrien. Other comments include: “a range of wages, salaries and benefits should be available to the residents of this community, not just low wage jobs with no benefits”, “someone needs to do spot checks on discrimination in the workplace on race, gender and age”, “host activities outside the job so employers and residents can get to know each other”, “highlight employers who support, hire and retain residents from the local community”, “have employers mentor each other for those who have success with hiring and retaining workers”, “more summer youth jobs”.

Individual/Community Responsibility:

This unplanned topic came up in the first session and was added to subsequent sessions. Participants were clear that there is a role for individual and community responsibility in quality of life issues – on a personal level and in relation to the larger community. Participants responses in this area include: “Citizens of all ages need to demonstrate respect for self and others, the property of others and be willing to speak up and speak out when necessary”, “landlords and property owners should be conscientious about maintaining lawns and homes”, “unkempt property should be eligible for mediation services and withholding rent”, “reward or acknowledge owners and renters who keep up property”, “partner with Lowes or Home Depot to offer classes on simple issues”, “teach courses in advocacy and mediation to students so they have skills to solve problems without fighting or arguing or disrespecting each other”, “offer refresher courses in problem-solving to parents and citizens through the parks or summer programs or senior centers”,

The Miracle Question: “If you woke up tomorrow and could have one thing be different, what would that be and how would you be able to tell that the greater 49022 community was economically viable and that quality of life was positive?”

- *Sense of community would be demonstrated and visible in both actions and words.*
- *Respect would be demonstrated for oneself and others.*
- *Programs and services would reflect the diversity of the community in staffing/administrative personnel and would provide culturally appropriate services as needed by the citizens.*
- *Safe, affordable and quality childcare would be accessible and available to families of all income levels in all parts of the community.*

- *Citizens would speak with confidence and trust in law enforcement personnel and law enforcement would speak similarly of citizens.*
- *Governmental units in greater 49022 would cater to the issues, needs and desires of the citizens as much or more than the focused interests of a few large entities.*
- *People would be motivated to seek out information to better their lives and to share that knowledge/experience with others.*
- *School systems would be on track and students would be on target.*
- *General feelings of self-efficacy and accomplishment and the knowledge that if you do not know an answer, you will be able to find an answer and no one will think less of you for needing the information.*

Summary:

It is clear that from the perspective and viewpoints of residents and front-line workers in agencies and organizations, their voices have been excluded or overlooked in the processes to identify and support economic and community development in the greater 49022 communities. Some of the challenges and strengths identified in the “community conversations” align with those expressed through surveys or other focus group activities; yet, many of the comments shared should be valued for the insight provided on the direct experience of citizens and community residents whose presence is often lacking or invisible at community meetings.

The social work and nursing students were challenged to serve as advocates and facilitators for the unheard voices and invisible faces. What had originally started as a plan to host the “typical” community-style meeting transformed into an opportunity for social justice by providing a forum for those least heard from directly, to voice their opinions, ideas and vision for the greater 49022 communities. As one student put it, “How many times have I been in a

community meeting or focus group seeking my input and ideas on making things better?” The answer is many times. But, how many times has the seatmate next to me or across from me or also in the room, stood up to identify him or herself and said, “Hello, my name is _____, and I am a newly released sex offender who’d like to share my experience with finding a job – are you interested?” Alternatively, “I am a single mother of four who is homeless because my three jobs don’t make enough to maintain housing, let me share my views.” Or even this one – “I’m a front line resource worker for a human service agency and all my manager tells me is it’s not in the budget, do the best I can even knowing it won’t help, but that doesn’t get on the agenda at the meeting of agency administrators.” So the answer to these questions is probably never or at least highly unlikely.

There were three goals for the students. The first goal was to strengthen their ability to identify, analyze, and engage different stakeholders representing different factions of the larger community under the scope and lens of social and economic justice for community and economic development. The second goal was to offer opportunities for students to demonstrate awareness, knowledge and skill in-group, organizational and community processes through co-facilitation of community meetings with diverse participants. The third and final goal was for students to examine the importance and role of engagement and inclusiveness in community practice through leadership during the interplay of policy, social justice and economic development with individuals, groups and organizations. The resulting comments identify potential collaborative opportunities for community and economic development initiatives to enhance the quality of life and the reduction of poverty for the communities within the greater 49022 zip code.

Most importantly, this project offered an interdisciplinary array of students and opportunity for interprofessional experiences. At the same time, the students were able to identify, acknowledge and engage members of the community – the residents, youth, elderly, sometimes marginalized citizens and front-line employees who are often seen but not heard, whose faces and circumstances are fleeting images among data and statistics that “tell a big story” but often at the exclusion of the person whose life is the story.

Beyond the comments, viewpoints, ideas, criticisms and critiques, how can this project aide future community and economic development initiatives? By proving once again, there is not one approach to development; and agency and organizational staff do not have all the necessary insight or perspectives needed to make a community strong. Tapping the strata of the community that is comfortable and easy to access may only provide a small portion of what is needed to develop plans and projects that everyone can find a place to join in on or feel included in.

This project highlights the benefit of collaborating with human service skilled community workers. This time in the form of undergraduate nursing and graduate social work students who are in training and have experience helping to bring the voice to the vision of those in need, those on the outside looking in and those who might not know they matter. The participants of these focus group meetings may not ever want to come to large public events where they’d be expected to share not only who they are, but why and sometimes the ability to experience a level of confidentiality within a group of others with similarity, offers the process a wider forum to share and having the facilitator be a person trained in the trust and care of confidential client circumstances offered the participants of this project an opportunity to join in.

It is hoped that the insights gained from this project can be incorporated or considered within current and future community and economic development initiatives for and around the greater 49022 communities.

In the absence of Dr. Betty Dennis, questions/comments regarding this project report should be submitted to:

Marian Tripplett, M.Ed., LLMSW
Faculty Specialist I
School of Social Work
Western Michigan University, Southwest Regional Campus
2785 E. Napier Avenue, Benton Harbor, MI 49022
County of Berrien/State of Michigan
Marian.L.Tripplett@wmich.edu
269.934.1512 or 269.325.8084

This project aimed to facilitate discussion and meaningful conversation about the negative externalities of poverty and to identify strategies that can be used to reduce poverty in Berrien County, MI. Some of Western Michigan University's nursing and social work students will be the facilitators of such a discussion in Berrien County throughout the course of the project.



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