Turning HOPE into Opportunity

The HOPE Program

1 INTRODUCTION

Hard-working individuals hoping to build richer lives for themselves and their families long have sought opportunities in New York City. This human desire for something better has powered the city's emergence as an engine of the global economy and as one of the world's most prosperous metropolises.

Prosperity, however, has largely bypassed the 1.5 million New Yorkers—one out of every five—who live in poverty. When they wish to better themselves, poor New Yorkers often find the road to opportunity littered with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Employment barriers not only increase an individual's chances of sinking deeper into poverty, but also deprive the larger community of valuable skills and contributions. Given current demographic and economic realities, no prosperous community can thrive for long if it overlooks the potential of so many residents.

For nearly 25 years, The HOPE Program has demonstrated that poor New Yorkers can turn their hopes into opportunities. By blending vocational, educational and social services with a lifelong commitment to a person's success, HOPE helps clients transcend the root causes of poverty and prepares them to find, keep and grow careers. The HOPE Program's research indicates that nearly 70 percent of the individuals who completed HOPE's training program between 2002 and 2005 found jobs and 85 percent of those who found jobs were still employed six months later. Such outcomes prove the power of HOPE's distinctive approach to equip poor New Yorkers to seize opportunities and propel the city toward higher levels of prosperity.

2 THE NEED:

A DIMINISHING POOL OF PRODUCTIVE WORKERS

An array of structural forces and personal factors often prevent poor New Yorkers from participating in the city's prosperity. Educational deficiencies, substance abuse, criminal convictions, homelessness, lack of work experience and mental illness—all of these barriers can trap individuals in a poverty characterized less by a lack of income than by, in the words of journalist David Shipler, "a sense of powerlessness, often a learned hopelessness in which choices seem absent."

Current economic and demographic trends suggest that New York can ill afford to permit a poverty of hopelessness to overwhelm the potential contributions of poor residents. In a global economy, prosperity favors cities that recognize and cultivate productive workers. Today, many New Yorkers are nearing retirement, and their replacements will come predominately from groups that traditionally have struggled with poverty, limited education and constrained opportunities. Without paying special attention to the needs of poor individuals, New York's supply of productive workers likely will decline at a time of rising demand—a development that would undermine the city's economic future.

3 THE SOLUTION:

DEVELOPING AN UNDERUTILIZED POPULATION

Despite their importance to New York's future, poor residents too frequently are dismissed as "hopeless" by public officials, employers and society at large. This stereotype is wrong. When offered the right support, poor New Yorkers determined to prosper can thrive.

Since 1984, The HOPE Program has helped individuals facing seemingly insurmountable barriers transcend them and become productive members of New York City's workforce. An intensive 12-week work readiness program that blends classroom instruction, work internships, adult basic education, personal counseling and mental health services forms the foundation of HOPE's approach. Because HOPE makes a lifelong commitment to a client's success, an individual's involvement with HOPE does not end upon successful completion of the training program. HOPE offers a variety of follow-up programs designed to support graduates in their efforts to find, keep and grow careers.

HOPE: Preparation for Prosperity

TYRON

I had a really good life until my mom got sick and I had to support my family. I tried working at odd jobs but the money wasn't enough. So I turned to the street.

I'd hustle after school, selling drugs. In no time I was making big bucks. Until I got caught. I was 14 years old and served 16 months as a youthful offender. When I got out I played for bigger stakes, for more money. Some nights I made as much as $3,000. Then I got caught, again.

This time when I got out I went to HOPE. I arrived straight-up hood, all attitude and full of street. But my teacher just got under my skin. She saw another person under all that. Resumes, interviews, computers—they were all things I thought I'd never learn. Everything was legit at HOPE—everybody was sincere.

I now have two jobs, working at a cabinetry shop and at an animal clinic. I have my own place, pay my bills, and want to start saving for my future. I have a lot of energy and don't want to be home watching TV. Who'd want to sit in a house when you can be out earning a living?

4

ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

An unwavering focus on the needs of every individual who comes to HOPE is the basis of the organization's success.

As part of HOPE's intake process, each client undergoes a comprehensive assessment that identifies employment barriers, educational levels, unmet social service needs, psychological issues and personal objectives. The findings of the assessment become the basis for an individualized development plan that ensures that clients receive the services they need to become stable and work-ready. Assessment does not end at intake. While enrolled in the work readiness program, HOPE clients undergo additional evaluations designed to identify new or emerging issues. Just as important, clients who complete the training program receive continuing assessments and support services that help them maintain and advance in employment.

Besides providing clients with the assistance needed to succeed, HOPE also holds clients strictly accountable for their actions. This combination of high expectations and intensive, ongoing services leads to HOPE's impressive completion, placement and retention outcomes. By focusing on individuals, HOPE offers poor New Yorkers and the larger city a successful and replicable way to work and grow.

5

PROGRAM ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH

In 2006, HOPE conducted a rigorous analysis of the demographic characteristics, employment barriers and program outcomes of the clients enrolled between 2002 and 2005. The resulting report found that the average client faced multiple employment barriers at the time of enrollment in the work readiness program.

During the study period, HOPE served 668 individuals in its work readiness program. African-American and Hispanic clients accounted for more than nine out of every ten enrollments. Nearly 40 percent of those clients had a history of substance abuse and over half lacked a high school diploma or GED. Almost one-third had a criminal record and some 40 percent had not worked for at least two years. By 2005, the incidence of some of these barriers had increased substantially; almost 60 percent had a history of substance abuse and almost half had a criminal record. Furthermore, an estimated 80

SHIRLEY

When I came to HOPE I had nothing. I couldn't read very well because I dropped out of school and did nothing but drugs for 31 years. At HOPE, I found a new direction. I learned skills such as how to talk in a professional manner, how to sit in an interview, how to connect with people.

I have a wonderful job cleaning in a health club. I do my job very well and learned how to act around all sorts of people. When I got my first paycheck, I paid off some bills. When I got my second paycheck, I opened a direct deposit at a bank. This is the first bank account I have ever had. I now have my own apartment. HOPE is special. Because of HOPE I got back my self esteem and learned that it is never too late to get your life back on track.

percent of clients had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and/or anxiety disorders.

Such complex obstacles, if left unaddressed, typically will prevent an individual from overcoming poverty. Moreover, each obstacle must be addressed at the right moment. HOPE's rigorous assessment process enables clients to receive the correct supports when most needed. Issues like homelessness and active substance abuse, for example, are confronted before an individual pursues employment. Other barriers such as low levels of formal education, however, can be approached alongside training and work. Finally, seemingly permanent barriers such as a criminal conviction can be neutralized by preparing a person to be a productive employee and by educating prospective employers.

Though the barriers confronting its clients are severe, HOPE consistently prepares poor New Yorkers for work, places clients into positions that pay fair wages and helps clients retain those jobs. Between 2002 and 2005, HOPE graduated 421 individuals from its work readiness program. Nearly 70 percent of those graduates found jobs that paid, on average, a starting wage of $9.50 per hour. Once employed, HOPE clients tended to keep those jobs and become loyal, productive workers. In fact, 85 percent of the individuals placed into jobs were still working six months later.

HOPE has continued to post impressive outcomes despite the increasing severity of the employment barriers facing clients. Between 1999–2001 and 2002–2005, the average number of employment barriers confronting a HOPE client rose 67%, from 2.1 to 3.5. Yet HOPE's completion, wage and retention rates remained stable or improved.

A variety of intertwined forces influence poor individuals' chances of turning their desire for a better life into success in the labor market. HOPE's analysis found that educational attainment and work history were powerful predictors of success. HOPE graduates with better work histories were more apt than their peers to find jobs and those with better educations earned more and kept their jobs longer.

Perhaps the most interesting result of this evaluation is what it did not find. Much of the popular debate about issues of poverty focuses on the factors that supposedly bar individuals from opportunities—factors such as criminal convictions and the receipt of public benefits. Yet these serious obstacles did not constitute statistically significant employment barriers for HOPE clients. Graduates of HOPE's work readiness program managed to find and keep jobs even if they confronted obstacles commonly perceived as insurmountable. This demonstrates the effectiveness of an intense, highly personalized, lifelong training model that supports individuals in every aspect of their lives. It is hardly surprising, then, that HOPE's model has been replicated nationally, singled out for recognition, studied by academics and policymakers and featured in publications such as *The New York Times.*

6

A WIN-WIN-WIN STRATEGY

Though the work is often difficult, The HOPE Program proves that determined individuals, no matter how poor, can build better lives for themselves and their families. What such individuals typically need is access to the comprehensive, personalized services needed to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. When offered those supports, poor individuals and the larger community can achieve higher levels of prosperity.

POOR NEW YORKERS are one of the beneficiaries of HOPE's approach. Clients typically arrive at HOPE tired from struggles with economic and social obstacles—struggles that rob them of a belief in their ability to control their own lives. Participating in HOPE's program teaches clients how to overcome their fears, address personal problems and succeed in the labor market. Once employed, the financial rewards associated with work allow individuals to improve their standard of living. Even more important, they see that they have choices in their lives. The result: full self-sufficiency.

BUSINESSES also benefit from The HOPE Program. During a typical year, some 150 companies of all sizes and in all industries employ HOPE clients in internships or permanent positions. These firms benefit from the addition of loyal, productive and determined workers who, as an added bonus, have access to a rich support network through HOPE's follow-up services, which mirror corporate Employee Assistance Programs. Furthermore, HOPE actively works with employers to tailor services to meet their needs.

Finally, NEW YORK CITY as a whole benefits from the transformation of poor individuals into a productive part of the workforce. Not only does HOPE produce workers capable of participating in their local economy and contributing to the city's economic growth, but it does so at a much lower cost than direct public spending. It costs the city, for example, more than $20,000 per year to house a single person in a homeless shelter. For the same amount of money, HOPE can enroll three clients in its work readiness program and provide them with a lifetime of follow-up services. Similarly, HOPE can serve eight people for the $60,000 New York City spends to incarcerate one person for one year.

7

TRANSCENDING POVERTY:

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Over the past 25 years, Congress, state legislatures, opinion writers and academics have waged a long-running battle over the causes of, and potential responses to, poverty in America. One side of the debate attributes poverty to individual choices without any regard for larger social forces, while the other side focuses on social forces to the exclusion of individual choices.

Regardless of which side has been "winning" the debate at any given moment, for nearly 25 years The HOPE Program has maintained a focus on providing comprehensive, highly personalized services to poor New Yorkers. In the process, HOPE has developed extensive knowledge about poverty, rehabilitation and economic self-sufficiency. Four insights in particular are relevant to the broader public debate about poverty in America.

First, given the increasing number of complex employment barriers facing poor New Yorkers, *comprehensive client assessments and highly personalized service plans are essential to an individual's success.* Until and unless individuals can confront the root causes of their poverty, they will not be able to succeed in the labor market.

Second, *education was the single most important predictor of success.* For poor New Yorkers to move out of poverty, they should be assisted in their efforts to study for their GED's and encouraged to earn postsecondary credentials.

Third, while entry-level jobs represented an important step in an individual's path to self-sufficiency, these jobs typically do not pay a living wage. To meet basic needs, individuals need *meaningful work supports* that supplement their wages and help with housing, child care, food, transportation and health costs.

Finally, the steady growth in individuals with criminal records highlights the need for *comprehensive reentry services.* While society encourages former offenders to find jobs, the actual opportunities available to ex-offenders are curtailed by current laws and policies. Many HOPE clients with conviction histories, nevertheless, do find jobs but do not retain them at the same rate as other clients. This suggests that former offenders need special supports if they are to secure long-term employment.

HOPE is using these important findings to strengthen its service delivery model and to educate policy makers at all levels of government.

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HOPE works day in and day out to fight poverty in New York by getting people ready to work and back into the workforce —it truly changes people’s lives—I have seen it happen.

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Paul Rossi, North American Publisher
The Economist Group
Employer of HOPE graduates

IN SUMMARY,

HOPE works. By blending vocational, educational and social services with a life-long commitment to an individual's success, HOPE has helped poor New Yorkers transcend the complex factors that push people into a poverty of hopelessness. Through HOPE's unique approach, people typically seen as "hopeless" are able to seize opportunities and propel themselves and New York City toward new levels of prosperity.

HOPE works.

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THE HOPE PROGRAM

A Way to Work. A Way to Grow.

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