

The Vermont Women's Fund
2010 LISTENING TOUR FINDINGS

Issues / Themes / Approaches:

- Engaging women and girls during the pivotal and transitional phases of their life creates great opportunities for change and is a key element to breaking the cycle of poverty.
 - For girls – middle school is a critical age because they are moving into the phase where they're starting to make important choices that will either keep them in their current circumstances or put them on a path for change. However, start to "empower" girls as early as elementary and pre-school is not too young.
 - For young adult and adult women, the critical points are pregnancy/motherhood, divorce, release from incarceration, treatment for substance abuse, homelessness, death of spouse, etc.

- Exposure to a wider array of people, professions, options and lifestyles is necessary.
 - Important to both girls and adult women, though it is particularly important to start with girls as young as possible.
 - "Visioning" – help them envision new possibilities for their lives, and see themselves in a new way.
 - Positive role models

- Education / Job training / Skill Building:
 - Encouragement and support for young girls to develop and pursue educational goals; low-income children in particular often receive no positive reinforcement at home for going to school and pursuing education.
 - Job readiness programs for young and adult women – including soft skills, and priority and goal setting work
 - Vocational and non-traditional career training for adult women – more programs and opportunities are needed.
 - Non-traditional adult learners need continued direction and career guidance after they've received their GED.
 - Self-advocacy skills – Lack of self esteem, marginalization, and lack of empowerment are all root causes of how people end up in, and stay in, poverty.
 - Life skills training for children and adults – how not to make bad choices with their lives, what healthy relationships look like, what behavior is unacceptable, basic communication skills, etc.
 - Financial literacy education.
 - Job training programs that engage business partners and other nonprofits in the community; they have the ability to bring community understanding to a deeper level.
 - Flexible continuing and higher education programs that work to find alternatives and solutions for women who are trying to balance education with family issues, job, single-parenting, etc.
 - Community and regional workforce development initiatives need to focus realistically on where the future of Vermont lies and what types of jobs will exist here. Women from lower-income backgrounds, women with families, etc, they are far less likely to be willing to leave the state to find employment.

- Intensive/immersive programs have a big impact:
 - Programs that meet regularly and span a long period of time.
 - Programs with a holistic approach that identifies root causes and addresses the circumstances and needs of an individual.
 - Small group programs with dedicated staff – again, the relationship component is key, both among participants and between participants and staff.
 - Collaborative efforts among agencies and nonprofits to meet a community need.

- Strong relationships are essential for success.
 - With a mentor, program staff, or case worker
 - Necessary for all age levels – a dedicated friend and confidant; exposure to a wider circle of people, resources, experiences; increased connection with, and interest in, the community; someone to help you envision your life a different way, someone to validate your self worth.
 - Peer mentoring, at any age, is particularly effective – being able to relate to the person sitting across from you and not feel marginalized by them, but see that they've changed their life. Mentors modeling healthy behaviors, new career and lifestyle choices.
 - Long-term commitment is key – from a mentor or case worker, or else through the coordinated efforts of multiple resources/agencies.

- Safe forums for women and girls to come together, talk, share experiences and fears, learn.

- Youth programs – after school and summer, not just for younger girls but needed for high school age as well; programs that don't exclude kids from low-income families or specifically target at-risk youth; programs that expose kids to new experiences.

- Domestic violence:
 - Providing comprehensive violence awareness and prevention programs in schools starting at young age – middle school.
 - Providing alternate role models for young boys as well as young women.
 - For adult women, domestic violence and recovery from abusive environments can have an impact on employability – need flexible and understanding employers and work environments, employers who are willing to grant leave for them to attend counseling, court hearings, etc.

- Mental health and addiction:
 - Difficult to find resources and help in rural areas.
 - Often the basis for discrimination by employers, community members, etc.
 - Lack of programs available for low-income parents where a mother can retain her parental rights and keep the family together while going through treatment.

- Pregnancy and parenting:
 - Classes for young mothers and incarcerated mothers.
 - Learning effective parenting – a new reality from the environment they grew up in.
 - Learning to advocate for and get involved with their children's education, which is often difficult if they did not finish school themselves or had bad experiences.
 - Teen pregnancy – girls need disincentives to becoming pregnant; particularly from low-income families, their often encouraged to do it, they know they'll receive state aid, they believe they'll feel important and valued as a mother.

- Childcare – Affordable and accessible; a key component for women to attain successful employment or higher education and training.
- Access to Legal Services – Not enough resources for low-income women to have adequate legal representation.
- Rural isolation:
 - Friends and support networks for women and girls are limited or often nonexistent.
 - The reality and “world view” of women/girls in isolated, rural settings is very narrow. Often they never leave the immediate geographic area they grew up in. “Burlington is like another country.”
 - Limited support systems, services, training programs, etc, for women in rural areas.
- Raising awareness around poverty:
 - The average person doesn’t understand how things are interconnected
 - Engage donors and community members, help them to understand the issues and realize the benefits for the community.
 - Build partnerships with businesses as a way teach skills, mentor, provide project support.
 - Give someone the chance to really see into another person’s life.
 - People need to gain a better understanding of the particulars of “rural poverty” so they can better support their neighbors.
 - Often a simple lack of knowledge or exposure on the community, state or federal level can be the reason for roadblocks when trying to establish new programs and services.
 - People don’t like talking about class and recognizing the disparities, but poverty goes hand in hand with class.
 - Needs to be both a social and political movement and the message needs to be marketable and “popular” in such a way that everyone wants to own it, talk about it, and pass it on.
- Student aggression / girl on girl violence / bullying:
 - Incidence if this is on the rise, both inside and outside of the school.
 - Most often related to socio-economic difference between kids, and also gender issues.
 - Contributes to negative self-image and self-esteem on the part of the victim.

Challenges for service providers and nonprofits:

- The general public’s awareness and understanding of poverty issues is low.
- Long-term, one on one mentoring connections are very powerful, but impediments to that are mental illness, drug abuse and domestic violence.
- Persistent recruitment of women in poverty is necessary, you can not wait for them to come to you.
- Families in poverty can be very transient, so as a program/service provider you never know how long you’ll have to work with the kids.
- Success is not a straight line, and success is defined in many ways. You have to meet people where they are and accept them for who they are. We often impose our values on others and then criticize them for not making the “right” choice, yet we all know what it means to take two steps forward and one step back.

- Successful programs are “Messy Programs”. It’s a messy process and agencies need to be willing to hang in there with the mess; programs need to be flexible.
- Having staff and case managers dedicated to intensive one-on-one or small group services is much more expensive than less in-depth programs and services that work with broader groups and service a larger number of women. For the same amount of money as the broader programs you service far fewer women in a year through the intensive, relationship-based focus, however the work with them is much more holistic, transformative and effective. Torn between serving more or less. And related to that, funders are often disinclined to support work that impacts only a small number of people.
- The higher a level of education a woman has, the more she’ll earn. However so often women pursuing continuing ed drop out because they see their family/home/job responsibilities as taking precedence over their education. They get pulled in too many directions and burned out; and either can’t find a school or program that is flexible enough or are afraid to ask.
- Women are much more likely than men to drop out of a program, (any type of program), to establish or re-establish a relationship, or to deal with their family. Choices women make for their family and relationships (that feeling of being loved) will always come first, before treatment and change.
- People aren’t envisioning employment as a path out of poverty. They’re seeing state aid, childbirth/DCF, etc, as the path. If you don’t have a positive view of work, how DO you lift yourself out of poverty?
- The “Cliff” is always a huge issue. Because of the way benefit and state aid programs are set up it is a disincentive for people to become self-sufficient.
- Our society has a tendency to blame and punish the victim rather than treating the root causes that got them where they are today.
- The media still does a poor job of portraying, endorsing and reporting on nontraditional roles for women and minorities.
- Media and public opinion does a poor job of recognizing that the work of nonprofits plays a large role in affecting the economic future of our state.
- More strong male advocates for women and women’s issues are needed.
- It’s often easy to marginalize issues when they’re labeled as “women’s issues”; there is a tendency to want to apologize for them and not recognize the positive and vital impact that strong women and girls have on communities.
- When quantifying impact, in small communities/regions the percentage of the population that’s served is more important than the actual number of people served, but funders are often overlook that statistic and are more interested in the head count.
- Too many nonprofits – this is not good for the end user because there’s too much fragmentation of services and no standardization of practices; and not good for the organizations because too much competition for funding, too many executive directors, too much admin, etc. Consolidation would be good but there is no real market incentive for doing that in nonprofit sector.

Ways that small philanthropic dollars and orgs like the VWF can help:

- Provide a mix of small competitive grants and larger strategic ones. Small grants are a moral boost and bring visibility and credibility to small organizations; often they can leverage that support to obtain funding from other sources.
- Facilitate collaboration and convening – it allows ideas and best practices to spread to new communities; informal gathering are good, and also nice to include funders, business

providers, and orgs that may be outside the service provider realm but are still interested and would like to have a voice.

- Fund pilot projects and encourage experimentation, but with tight evaluation criteria and due diligence.
- Coordinate challenge grants with local companies or other funders.
- Support community collaboration and long-term collaborative work.
- Support program replication – Identify successful models and provide encouragement and funding for that model to be tailored for other communities and then brought their in collaboration with local orgs.
- Provide ongoing support for organizations that are well established with a history of success and vital work.
- Advocate for important issues and work; tell the legislature that you've been hearing of a specific need and don't have enough funds to impact it but you support it.
- Be a conduit for shared stories.
- Help organizations, particularly small ones, get the word about successful programs and the good work they do.
- Support groups who are working are working collaboratively to become advocates for certain issues.
- Help with vetting proposals for other funders who don't have the time to effectively do that work.
- Identify innovative ideas and then select groups to bring together to do the work.
- Streamline the application process as much as possible.
- Fund a "continuum of services" across different agencies that are coordinating to provide the long-term aspect to successful programmatic work without one specific organization being involved with participants for the entire time.
- Encourage and help facilitate shared resources and services between nonprofits in local communities such as office space, back office support, food/child care for program participants, etc.
- Help organizations identify and apply for federal resources or other out of state foundation funding that could be brought into the Vermont.
- Help facilitate a "social entrepreneurship" model of giving within the state.
- Provide scholarships for nonprofit staff to attend conferences and learn new ideas and best practices from other regions or parts of the country.