Evidence of the Welfare Reform Liaison Project’s (WRLP) success is that Cleveland and Wineburg recently did a presentation at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. They told how their program trains and employs low-income individuals who often find it nearly impossible to enter and succeed in today’s labor market.

The authors straightforwardly describe the challenges, difficulties, and lessons learned from its 1996 start-up. This is not a pretend, feel-good-only story that downplays the day-to-day issues of creating a quality, high-performing Community Action Agency. It is the story of how persistence, patience, flexibility, and resiliency are necessary aspects of leadership. Reverend Cleveland’s charismatic style that continues to be an important element of WRLP’s effectiveness—while necessary—is not sufficient.

Pracademics reaffirms the mission and values of Community Action with the righteousness of the human spirit to tackle a community’s toughest economic challenges. The book also shows how a faith-based agency can operate effectively in the publicly-funded sector. This is a moving case study of community and race relations, culminating in aspiration and achievement.

Great by Choice
Uncertainty, Chaos, and Luck—Why Some Thrive Despite Them All
by Jim Collins & Morten T. Hansen
Harper Business

Great By Choice continues the truly groundbreaking work by Jim Collins in the areas of leadership, organizational excellence, and research on what makes companies (including nonprofits) be the best they can be. If you’re not familiar with Collins’ earlier Built to Last, Good to Great, or Good to Great and the Social Sectors, please add those to your “immediate read” list.

Given the funding uncertainty and economic vulnerability that Community Action and all human services agencies face, the lessons from Collins and co-author Hansen are especially relevant. Their method includes long-term (nine years research for this book) comparative analysis of which characteristics and practices the most successful organizations and leaders use, as opposed to those of failing and poorly-performing agencies/leaders.

The authors use detailed research and sophisticated data analysis to reach their conclusions. This is not feel-good, intuitive, psycho-babble.

Collins and Hansen dispel some widely held beliefs about excellence. For example, successful leaders are not bold, risk-taking visionaries. They’re more disciplined, more empirical, and more paranoid. The authors also expose the myth of blind faith in innovation. Innovation alone does not bring success; it’s the ability to pursue innovation blended with creativity and discipline.

Let me whet your appetite to get this very readable book. Collins and Hansen validate and discuss three core behaviors of the best organizations and leaders; fanatic discipline, empirical creativity, and productive paranoia. Great By Choice is loaded with valuable insights, useful strategies and lessons learned.