CASE STUDIES

Welfare Reform Liaison Project, Inc.—Maximizing Partnerships to Create “Green” Job Opportunities
We recycle lives by providing jobs skills and by giving the people we serve one of the most important things they want in life—dignity.

— Rev. Odell Cleveland, President/CEO Welfare Reform

ALBA creates opportunities for beginning and minority organic farmers through education and demonstration projects on agricultural production, business and finance, water and soil conservation, habitat restoration, whole farm planning and policy and advocacy.

MISSION

The mission of the Welfare Reform Liaison Project is to provide services that will enable economically disadvantaged individuals and families to move toward self-sufficiency through collaboration with the federal and state agencies, the faith community, corporations, other agencies from both [the] public and private sector, as well as the local citizenry. Exemplary Practices Described in this Case Study.

Field Tested Best Practices Described in this Case Study

• Establishing strategic partnerships with major local and national corporations, education institutions and government entities, to provide job opportunities for low-income people.
• Sustaining organizational funds by creating a social enterprise that is innovative and based on providing stable living-wage jobs.
• Pre-screening and training applicants before referring them to employers.

UNIQUE TO THIS CASE STUDY

• The diversification of green job placement by including administrative, hospitality and warehouse positions.
• Leveraging human and capital resources offered through its partnerships to expand opportunities in “green” fields.
• Incorporating personal empowerment and self-motivation into its training curriculum.

KEY SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

Workforce development, training and job placement services in:

• Digital Imaging
• Paper Reduction
• Hospitality
• Mattress Recycling
• Clothing and Damaged/Return Goods Preservation
• School Supply Distribution for County Teachers

WHAT MAKES THE PROJECT GREEN?

• According to the EPA Office of Solid Waste, Americans throw away more than 68 pounds of clothing and textiles per person per year. Clothing and other textiles represent about 4% of all municipal solid waste. Refurbishing damaged goods from retailers and diverting them into the hands of low-income families reduces waste that would end up in landfills.

• Partnering with the only LEED Platinum hotel in the United States to provide education on eco-friendly building design and living wage jobs in a stable field.

• Partnering with a local eco-sustainable mattress recycling company who processes hundreds of mattresses each year, thus preventing them from ending up in landfills. Mattresses take up 23 cubic feet in landfills and take decades to decompose.

• Contributing to the reduction of paper production providing paper scanning services to state government departments who then recycle the shredded paper.

CHALLENGES

• How does a Community Action Agency partner with Wal-Mart, The Men’s Warehouse and Mattress-Go-Round to create jobs for low-income people and ex-offenders?

• How do you get low-income people interested in the “green” economy and preserving their environment?

• How do you sustain organizational programs that are losing government and private funding?

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Founding President and CEO, Reverend Odell Cleveland built Welfare Reform Liaison Project (WRLP) Community Action Agency on four basic principles: 1) All efforts would be supported by data. 2) All efforts would revolve around building partnerships with a range of community institutions and 4) All efforts would rest on the principle that the organization’s faith would be expressed through the staff’s commitment to its work. The organization’s motto is based on going the “extra mile” in helping people develop new attitudes and concrete skills. Rev. Cleveland can often be heard proclaiming, “poor people have plenty of religion. They need skills!” Even though staff represent a range of religions and beliefs, as the only faith-based Community Action Agency in the Network, it is part of the agency’s organizational culture to start each day with prayer before the doors open for business.

WRLP, located in Greensboro, North Carolina, began in 1996, with a challenge from Bishop George W. Brooks, Cleveland’s pastor of the Mt Zion Baptist Church in Southeast Greensboro, NC. Cleveland was completing his thesis at Hood Seminary and had written on the response of the Black church to the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. Bishop Brooks challenged Cleveland to make it happen, and the Welfare Reform Liaison Project (WRLP) began. “We like to refer to WRLP as the hands and the feet of God,” said Rev. Cleveland, “out in the community, making a difference.”

Just one year after the agency officially began; the agency received a grant from the United Way for $20,000 to assess how the religious community was responding to Welfare Reform. The grant opened the door for a relationship to begin with the United Way to manage their Gifts-in-Kind program. The program distributes new and discarded consumer goods from corporations to nonprofit organizations. Little did the agency know that this partnership would expand from its less than 5,000
square foot location to a 16,000 foot warehouse in just one short year. The Gifts-in-Kind operation was the beginning of the agency’s job training and recycling operation. WRLP could now provide and train more of its Welfare-to-Work Program participants and provide jobs to place them in.

Welfare Reform provides services to people who reside in Guilford County, who are seeking jobs and support services. The United Way program was a stepping stone to other waste reduction and recycling programs the agency manages. Its warehouse it now operates mattress recycling for Mattress Go Round, a much more expanded donation operation from its start-up phase, where it now receives donations from Wal-Mart, Men’s Warehouse and Kayser-Roth. This case study is about WRLP’s outstanding ability to create a social enterprise by partnering with major, socially responsible corporations. Its efforts reduced its operational costs, increased its capacity and most importantly, it provides a conglomerate of living-wage “green” jobs for low-income people.

WHAT WELFARE REFORM DOES: LIAISON DISTRIBUTION JOB TRAINING CENTER

Over the past five years, Guilford County, North Carolina has lost 11,000 jobs, which had a significant effect on Welfare Reform’s request for employment services. Unlike the typical Community Action Agency, rather than operate several different types of human and community development services, Welfare Reform focuses all its efforts on one solid program—Workforce Training and Development. Odell Cleveland had the vision and faith to carry out the company’s mission to move people out of poverty, yet the mission was further strengthened by Cleveland’s skilled staff and a partnership with the research of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro-Economic Development Department. Cleveland and Dr. Robert Wineburg a Jefferson Pilot Excellence Professor at UNC-Greensboro , who would eventually co-write a book with Cleveland(Pracademics and Community Change–A True Story of Nonprofit Development and Social Entrepreneurship During Welfare Reform), developed the WRLP model with an outcome driven approach.

Long before the agency opened its doors, it completed an assessment of what poor residents of Greensboro needed to quickly move out of poverty—for good. With its workforce development focus, it operates several sub-programs that are all connected to its primary operation, which is to help people get jobs. “When we started our green job initiatives programs, said Odell Cleveland on the history of the agency’s business venture. “We wanted to develop an entrepreneurial venture that would help dislocated workers who had the behaviors and work ethic that were valuable, but needed a new skill in the current economic environment, which is how our Mattress Go Round operation started.” Mattress Go Round developed a uniquely designed process for recycling old mattresses. The company has a contract with colleges and universities to remove their old mattresses. After removing the used mattresses, the company uses its specialized patented process to strip the mattress of all microorganisms and insects, then recycles portions that it does not use to reconstruct the sustainable mattress. Fresh, new, hygienic mattresses are then delivered back to college campuses. Without the help of skilled staff, like those employed at WRLP, Mattress Go Round would not be able to preserve the nearly 3,000 mattresses they refurbish per year. When Founder and President of Mattress Go Round, Robert Savino opened his Greensboro mattress recycling operation, he and his business partner Andrew Brod, never thought they’d be employing ex-offenders.

As part of the WRLP’s workforce training they provide second chance opportunities to men and women in the prison system. “To tell you what the [WRLP employee participants] have grown into and how we believe in them and how we trust them since working with WRLP, is really a big deal,” said Savino about the ex-offenders he’s hired through the venture. The morning of the interview with Robert and Andrew had marked a monumental occurrence for the two owners. Neither had trusted any staff member in over 35 years, let alone, two employees who had less than perfect pasts,
to load a vehicle with product, give them the keys, cash and their company credit card, then have them drive across state lines. Because of the stellar job training and development that WRLP offers, which not only teaches its participants tangible skills, but teaches them the value of integrity and good character, the two employees were trusted without question.

On a typical day of training, you’ll find president, Odell Cleveland, personally empowering the trainees, using the bestselling book, Who Moved My Cheese, by Spenser Johnson and The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, by Stephen Covey. He teaches the students to embrace change and adopt successful habits. “We recycle lives by providing job skills and giving people one of the most important characteristics they will need in life, which is their dignity,” said Odell. “We want our participants to feel valued, so that they take that to their jobs, their families and wherever they go in the community.”

WRLP leases a 16,000 square foot warehouse which Mattress to Go Round uses to process mattress recycling business. The company employs WRLP’s trained program participants and provides full company benefits for them and a living wage salary averaging $9.00 per hour. Mattress Go Round’s processing plant is across the street from WRLP’s warehouse. Companies such as Wal-Mart, Kayser-Roth and Men’s Warehouse provide returned, damaged or slow moving merchandise to WRLP, with the understanding that WRLP processes the product according to the standards provided by the donor and distributes this product only to organizations and individuals that meet defined needs. WRLP averages about two semi-trailer loads of merchandise from Wal-Mart each week and four to five semi-trailer loads a year from Men’s Warehouse. This is just the kind of partnership the agency needed to grow its operation WRLP was already processing for the Men’s Warehouse, so it had some experience to discuss in its negotiations. The business agreement with Wal-Mart came about when Cleveland took a bold step of contacting Wal-Mart to find out if they wanted to have his team process their damaged goods. With a little faith and determination, Odell travelled to their headquarters in Arkansas and Wal-Mart said ‘yes’ to his proposal.

The WRLP warehouse is fully stocked with tons of boxes of merchandise including anything from toiletries to men and women’s clothing. Through its processing and distribution partnerships, these items remain useful and no longer go into landfills. WRLP also uses the processing and distribution system to develop job skills and work ethic for its participants. WRLP even provides jobs for developmentally disabled adults, who work at the warehouse under close supervision, repackaging and sorting merchandise. Additionally, WRLP recycles materials through other partnerships. Through its management of the Guilford County Teacher Supply Warehouse (TSW), in partnership with the Guilford Education Alliance and the County School system, corporate merchandise donations benefit over 1,000 teachers a year. Many of these items would be in a landfill if not for the TSW program. The WRLP Liaison Distribution Job Center is a unique example of how Community Action agencies can leverage their resources to provide jobs for low-income people and develop unrestricted operational funds.


Welfare Reforms “green” jobs operations evolved from its donor distribution center, to digital imaging with a nationally recognized leader in the field, the HF Group and paper reduction services for the Greensboro, Department of Human Services. The WRLP training offers a comprehensive classroom course prior to an off-site each internship. The course reviews all aspects of digital imaging, document preparation, and the actual scanning process, indexing information into a database and performing a quality control check at the conclusion of the process. The HF Group has gained such notoriety in its trade that it does conservation work for the U.S. Supreme Court, The
National Archives and The Library of Congress. The HF Group is so skilled at its operation that it has scanned highly classified historic documents like, General, Omar Bradley’s D-Day Evasion Plans.

WRLP is very proactive about recruiting local businesses for developing job opportunities. The company’s Workforce Development Job Specialist was attending a meeting held by the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce, where the HF Group Production Manager, Dan Bolden was displaying a scanner. She approached the company about her pre-screened trainees. Dan agreed to set up a group interview with the candidates. After Dan interviewed the job training participants from WRLP he was so impressed by them, that he hired some of the applicants on the spot and the others within 24 hours. When Dan described his experience with WRLP job placement program, he said, “The applicants come to me pre-vetted, I get to interview them all at the same time, the people know what they’re doing; it’s like going to a temp agency to get pre-trained, pre-qualified people and not having to pay the placement fee, you just can’t beat that”. Because of its great experience with the WRLP staff, the company has committed to hiring from WRLP through its continued expansion. Fred Newman, Vice President of WRLP described the “vetting” processes as follows, “We tend to be very flexible about understanding the needs of the company we are working with, so we closely evaluate every potential referral. If we find one that is not ready after the training, we don’t make the referral.” This partnership is just one example of the many small businesses that WRLP has sought out to provide jobs for people like Winnie and Theresa. “Theresa was one of the applicants hired at the HF Group. “I was close to giving up on finding a job, until I found out about the Welfare Reform training program. I’m happy I didn’t give up.” The HF Group turns books, reports, records and art work into a digital format, using very highly technical equipment. Winnie, who was hired from WRLP said she was ready to learn new skills and is very pleased to be working at the HF Group because “it’s where the future is going”, she said. As part of her training at WRLP, Winnie and Theresa learn what is required in the digital imaging field and the environmental benefit the field provides.

Myra Thompson, Division Director for the Guilford County Department of Social Services explained that her department was selected as the primary department by the county to begin digitizing its records. Prior to contracting with WRLP, the agency was losing client documents and was so overloaded with paper that the Fire Marshall had fined them for unsafe practices. Thanks to their partnership with WRLP, over one million sheets of paper have been scanned and cataloged. Initially twenty of their trainees were working at the agency under an internship agreement. “After the internship ended,” Myra explained, “I used the department’s budget to keep many of them as permanent employees.” This agreement is yet another exemplary practice of Welfare Reform’s job training program. The agency provides thorough training that not only gets the participants jobs, but helps them keep the jobs as well. Other job opportunities that preserve environmental resources are WRLP’s contract with Guilford County. WRLP has provided internships and instructors to the County Manager’s Office, the County Commissioners office, the County Health Department and the County Department of Social Services. Hundreds of thousands of records have been digitized, providing a public benefit, while the WRLP students obtain practical experience. Over the past 12 months, 9 individuals have secured employment in the area of digital imaging, including five with Guilford County.

“Green” Hospitality Training

WRLP partnered with Quaintance-Weaver Hotels who owns the first Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum Hotel in the United States – The Proximity Hotel in Greensboro, NC. Proximity uses 41% less energy than a conventional hotel and implements over seventy different sustainable practices. The average guest of the hotel would have no clue that water they use to shower with is all heated by energy from sunlight, nor would they know that the elevators store energy when it descends and uses it to reduce power needed to lift the elevator up.
again. This is the first North American Otis Gen 2 elevator installation thus far. WRLP students learn the value of working in an eco-sustainable hotel that has obtained world recognition and was recently visited by President Obama. The hotel and food service industry is expected to increase by 10% through 2017 (DOL, 2011). The agency’s partnership with Proximity came about by the pioneering leader, Cleveland, making a connection with the company’s executives. Odell and his team examined the potential of the hotel and hospitality industry and thought it would be a great opportunity to expose its job trainees to an environment that would remove them from their comfort zones, give them job training in a stable field and teach them about sustainable building design. Students from WRLP receive on-site hands on training and an orientation that includes a full overview of the hotel and are trained and treated in the same manner as non-WRLP full-time employees. “It’s a great opportunity for the trainees to get the training in Housekeeping which is an entry level position, but offers an opportunity for them to work their way up at a great company”, said Ivey Ghee, Executive Housekeeper for Proximity. Ghee teaches the on-site training of the 12-week classes in Housekeeping.

WRLP has received documentation from over 200 graduates who have obtained employment, totaling over $9,057,000 in income. As of June 2011 Welfare Reform has helped forty-two families increase their income above poverty, directly as a result of their participation in WRLP’s job training program. Thirty-five of the families participated in WRLP’s traditional job training program, while seven families participated in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funded job training programs that ended in September 2010. Fifty-five traditional job training program participants secured employment during the year, at an average wage of $9.18 per hour. An additional 92 individual’s secured employment through ARRA funded job training efforts during the 13 month funding period. During the year, 23 program participants were able to upgrade their housing situation due to increased income.

Welfare Reform Liaison Project’s work training programs and enterprises are easily replicable. The key to its success is in its training approach which anticipates and addresses the possibility of job attrition due to the multiple setbacks many low-income job-seekers face. WRLP invests more time in ensuring that the trainees keep the jobs they acquire, by providing solid holistic training. The agency has proven that this approach is effective as it has yielded broad outcomes.

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