

Interview with Julie Kerksick, Director, New Hope Project January 2007

Julie Kerksick was one of New Hope's original organizers and played several management roles in the demonstration project. Kerksick has spent her entire professional career, spanning three decades, working with and on behalf of unemployed and low-income workers. She has helped design public policy, but also has shared in the responsibility of translating those policies to operating programs and procedures. Kerksick was an Atlantic Fellow in Public Policy, has served on the Board of Directors for the Transitional Work Corporation in Philadelphia, and on the Policy Council of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM). Kerksick currently serves on the Steering Committee of the National Transitional Jobs Network and the Board of Directors for First Service Credit Union.

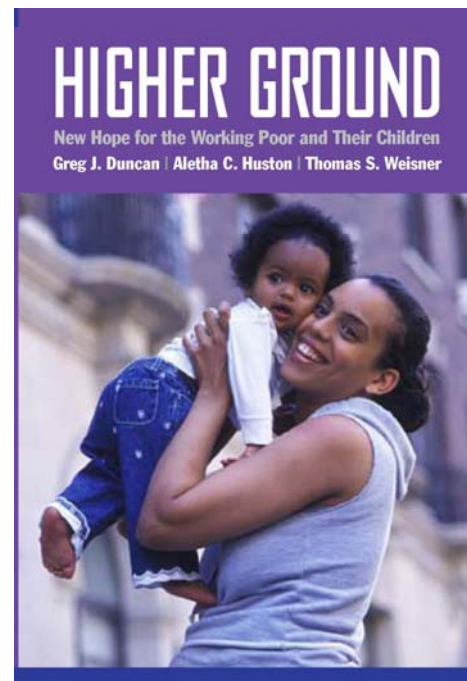
INTERVIEWER: In the book, *New Hope* is referred to as a “social contract,” not simply a welfare program. What do you mean by that?

KERKSICK: The social contract in New Hope attempts to balance rights and responsibilities. Participants came to us because they needed help in finding a job, or maybe they had jobs but weren't making enough to pay for health insurance or child care. We had a contract: if you are able and willing to work at least 30 hours per week, we will ensure that you will have an income above poverty and access to affordable health insurance or child care.

We are a highly individualistic country; America was founded on the basis of individual liberties. However, Americans are also concerned about fairness. Our society expects that if you can work, you will work, but we also recognize that work is not always available, and work alone is not always sufficient to be able to support oneself and a family. Government can play a productive role in filling that gap. A good example is the Earned Income Tax Credit. The EITC builds on individual work effort, it doesn't replace it.

INTERVIEWER: *New Hope* had very encouraging results. Poverty rates declined dramatically for participants. Employment and earnings increased among those who were not initially working full-time. Employment gains lasted years for those who had faced just one significant barrier to employment (such as a lack of access to child care or a spotty employment history). Children in these families also benefited. School performance improved, especially for boys, and behavior problems declined. Enrollment in child care centers increased, as did participation in out-of-school activities. Why did NH work so well?

KERKSICK: First of all, we started from a positive premise—that most people can and want to work in order to have a decent life and take care of their families. Even though some people said they wanted to work and didn't always follow through, we



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didn't start off the relationship on a note of negative assumptions. You had to prove to us that you weren't willing or able to work; not the other way around. Participants noticed that. And while it didn't always pan out as we'd hoped, it set the stage for a mutually accountable relationship—which was more likely to result in productive exchanges than the usual one of programs telling the individual all the things they had to change.

Second, we offered them something that they recognized as valuable: economic supports and individualized attention to help them figure out how to use those supports.

Third, we offered a guaranteed job of last-resort—and that was extremely important for those participants who lacked work history or skills. It's very discouraging for individuals with little work history or low skills to look for work and be turned away from even entry-level jobs. Project representatives could always remind participants that if they wanted to work, they could work—even if it was in a time-limited job that only paid the minimum wage, what we call in the book a community service job, or “transitional” jobs. But once they were working, they qualified for the other economic benefits. So even though some participants said they didn't want to work in the transitional job, the fact that it was there was a powerful tool for the project rep to use in building a good working relationship.

So many programs attempt to alter individual behavior, and while New Hope certainly understood that sometimes people have to change some things in their lives if they're going to make progress, we started from a basic premise that respected their autonomy.

INTERVIEWER: It's not all good news certainly? What didn't work in the program?

KERKSICK: First, we found that some people said they wanted to work, but weren't actually prepared to follow through on that. Even in a voluntary program, we encountered people who didn't follow through. That was discouraging, but we couldn't let such disappointments affect our work with the next person coming through the door.

Second, we hoped for greater advancement in wages and benefits than we saw. We knew that entry-level jobs often didn't connect to living wages, but we did expect that people would make more progress on their own. We had always understood that entry-level workers would need more training or education, or need to make lateral moves. However, we didn't appreciate how much effort would be needed to engage people once they had lost regular contact with us.

Third, we had an overly simplistic idea about how easy it would be to deliver the services. We didn't fully understand how to get people information when they were ready to use it. For example, New Hope participants had access to a wage supplement, which was tied to earnings and the EITC. That meant the supplement

fluctuated from month to month. That was confusing for many. Sometimes people would just walk away instead of figuring out how to make it work for them.

Another thing that didn't work so well was that families often had more distractions or crises than we had anticipated. When a crisis would hit, they might leave their job or other distractions in their lives might interfere. And people assumed, incorrectly, that if they left the program, that was it. They couldn't come back. The good news was that we were often able to get in touch with them and tell them that when they were ready to take up the offer, we would still be there. They weren't used to that. Most programs have a limited number of slots and if you walk away, you're done. New Hope services were available for three years. They could walk back in. Participation was based on whether you were working, not on the assumption that you were deserving or not. That was unheard of to most folks.

INTERVIEWER: What did you learn, after all these years on the front lines of antipoverty programs, that you didn't know or realize before?

KERKSICK: I'll underline that it was a lot easier to describe the program than to deliver it. You really have to dig in to the level of detail, and make sure the staff understands the policy intent so they can communicate it. At the same time, you have to keep listening to what participants are hearing and how they're responding. It's continually trying to refine how you communicate.

I don't know how many times I heard staff say, "but I told them they could get that." Well, that's fine...but this isn't a game of tennis, where we can say we did our job because we told people some information. Our goal is to have a positive outcome, and that means looking for multiple ways to deliver information so that when the individual is ready to use it, we can get the information to him or her.

I'm not saying that all the responsibility for communication is on the side of the program; that wouldn't be sensible. But one of the strongest lessons for me was to keep looking for ways to get information and give information. That's how progress is made.

Another thing I've learned is that while you can make work pay in the short-term, it's harder to continue to make work pay farther down the road. As participants worked more hours, they might lose certain benefits—as their incomes rose, certain benefits phased out. Sometimes they felt that they'd lost more ground than they'd gained.

Finally, you don't have to be perfect. We didn't implement New Hope in a perfect manner, but we could still accomplish a lot. You have to stop and recognize all the things that you're doing right. I'd get so frustrated by looking at what we hadn't done right, but ultimately I realized that we're not in control of what others do. Participants take the program elements and make something of them, and it may not be just what we expected or wanted, but that's ok. That, in fact, is what is so right about New Hope. It's flexible and fits their lives.

INTERVIEWER: How should government alter current antipoverty policy?

KERKSICK: First, it's very important that we create work-based programs that are available to *all* low-income adults, not just single custodial parents. That's important because we need to engage all adults in productive ways. Of course kids need safety nets, and focusing on a custodial parent is one way to ensure that. On the other hand, if the programs focus only on custodial parents, we miss the opportunity to help the noncustodial parent take responsibility for the family.

I'll never forget one of the New Hope participants, a 19-year-old young woman saying to us, "I'm so glad you have a program that doesn't require me to have a baby to participate." That's a huge current lesson for antipoverty policy.

Also, while our current antipoverty policies should build on the success of supporting work, we must look at the issue of how to make work *continue* to pay—making sure that if you earn \$1 more you don't lose hundreds. There's some good examples out there. Minnesota does a good job, and I'm sure there's others. We should build on those examples.

Finally, guaranteed jobs-of-last resort, or transitional jobs as we call them, are critical elements to the overall set of policies.

INTERVIEWER: What's the take-home message of New Hope for today's policymakers?

KERKSICK: I think the biggest message is that government can and does make a positive difference in people's lives. Don't be afraid to have the debates on how to make a work-based social program available to *all* low-income adults. It raises the conversation above those who pay taxes helping those who don't. Raising that debate brings different parts of our communities together at the table, and that's a good thing. Having that debate can also pay off in terms of workforce productivity, in terms of more people engaged in the formal labor market, even higher levels of child support compliance. Debating fairness is ultimately a good thing.

INTERVIEWER: What's the future of New Hope?

KERKSICK: We are continuing to promote the lessons learned, from original demonstration and current employment program. We're continuing to advocate on behalf of low-income workers for a higher minimum wage, access to good training programs for advancement, and refundable tax credits for all low-income adults. Finally, we are participating in a new random assignment research demonstration that is testing how well transitional jobs help men just coming out of prison stay out of jail, and work on a consistent basis.

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