

**A Letter Calling For
A Peer Group Organizing Project
With Social Service Agencies
To End Chronic Poverty in Arizona**

Leadership to End Poverty Coming from People Living in the Condition

January 2011

This letter is a call for the creation and support of a Peer Group Organizing Project with Social Service Agencies in Arizona designed to bring about the end of chronic poverty and homelessness. The letter is sponsored by the following community leaders:

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- Terry Araman, Madison Street Veterans Assoc
- Dr. Kelly Bender, Sr. Minister Paradise Valley United Methodist Church
- Bill Black, Arizona Organizing Project
- Donna Bouse
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- Bishop Minerva Carcano, Desert Southwest Conference of the United Methodist Church
- Theresa Cordova, New Leaf America
- Susan Cordts, CEO, Adaptive Technologies
- Kit Danley
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- Nancy Gerlach, New Arid Club
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Organizing for the End of Chronic Poverty in Arizona

The recent formation and activities of peer groups* of homeless people associated with the Human Services Campus in downtown Phoenix, while still very young, has begun to shed light on the vitality of the human spirit and the opportunity for involving people living in chronic poverty to be the key actor and resource to ending poverty, rather than the problem to be managed.

This letter is directed to leaders of Arizona, primarily but not limited to the social service institutions and charitable foundations. The purpose of this letter is to expand a community organizing and popular education project that furthers the creation and development of peer groups of people currently living in or at risk of chronic poverty. This letter is supported by leaders within our community who see that the time to act is now. We believe this approach to be essential in building the strength and resilience of our community as we work together to implement effective solutions to long standing and increasingly challenging problems.

We propose that a different relationship and dynamic is needed between social service providers and people living in chronic poverty. We suggest that bringing people living in chronic poverty into a balanced partnership and interactive relationship with the social service providers is fundamental to causing a breakthrough in bringing an end to the cycles of chronic poverty.

Before an agency's funding, staff and community volunteers reach their breaking point, something new must be added to the equation to catalyze workability and prosperity. New energy, new strengths, new voices, experience, and additional leadership must come from the people currently living in chronic poverty within our community, so that they are meaningful partners who participate actively in the transformation of our community to sustainable prosperity.

The organized voices and actions of those living in chronic poverty are necessary to create the skills and virtues that will develop the public and private conditions that create and sustain prosperity. We propose that chronic poverty can only be ended by re-organizing people who are most affected by the conditions of poverty so they may act on, and partner with, the institutions that can address resources to end those conditions.

** – see attachment for a short description about the peer groups formed near the Human Services Campus.*

We propose that, to the fullest extent possible, each person living in or at risk of chronic poverty be developed and encouraged to express their creativity and value in solving the challenges that face their lives, the success of the non profit organization, and the communities well being. We assert that this is best done, and perhaps can only be sustained, when a person takes an active role in a community and participates in a shared creative process. Community organizing and popular education practices based on peer groups associated with social service providers are the most direct means to accomplish this.

Current Condition:

People living in chronic poverty generally lack the resources, skills and reflective experiences that could end the conditions of their poverty. They may be socially isolated or dysfunctional. They may be burdened by the conditions of poor health and nutrition, physical and mental disabilities, substance abuse, criminal background, domestic and social violence, an inadequate education, past traumatic experience, predatory economic practices, compounded at times by indifferent institutional treatment. The chronically poor have often lost hope and belief that they can create a better life; this resignation of the spirit assures that they will continue to live in poverty.

Lacking meaningful social and civic ability to affect their condition, the chronically poor relate to institutions positioned to serve them as someone with no option except to please the institutional authority. The authority figure is often represented by a well intended person who performs the function of assuring a program's integrity and the participant's compliance.

The chronically poor assume the roles of client, program participant, entitled person, or victim; these roles often sustain the condition of chronic poverty by preventing any meaningful action that would create a new sense of self, which would enable their ability to gain prosperity.

Though social service agencies dominate much of the lives of people living in chronic poverty, they are not accountable to them; rather these institutions are often only accountable to funding interests. While well intentioned, these agencies often see the poor as a burden, a risk, having a diminished capacity to gain self sufficiency and being incapable of participating as effective partners.

For a party to be accountable there must be consequences; there must be means for one party to bring action on the other party. Social service providers are accountable to governmental agencies and foundations. These funders have the means to act – bring consequence – by providing or denying funding. The chronically poor are accountable to the social service agency, which have the means to act – bring consequence – by providing or denying service.

The only means the chronic poor have to bring consequence to a social service agency are:

- 1) **Legal Action or Bureaucratic Complaint Process** – Adversarial and typically only used in the most egregious situations or in response to a problem.
- 2) **Media Appeal/Public Demonstration** –Typically sensational, short term and plays to the agenda of the media. By itself, does not create systemic change to address the challenges.
- 3) **Partnership** – Partnerships create mutual benefits to all parties; they are created in conversations, live in actions and are sustained in mutual accountability. The partnership role is best suited for developing the ability of the poor to act in a responsible manner that informs and develops both the social service agency and the chronically poor. The peer group organizing practices are the best means to develop a partnership between the chronically poor and the social service agencies.

A major barrier for social service agencies to form true partnerships with the people they serve is not seeing the many strengths and talents of the chronically poor. In spite of the details that brought the person to the shelter, food bank, or medical center, this person still has the capacity to act, that when exercised, can restore self sufficiency and self respect. Their actions can also help create a strength and resilience within our community, and their self reliance can contribute to the financial balance of our public coffers.

Thus, our Vision is to recognize the chronically poor as a capable, effective and necessary voice and partner for a transformative life experience and the necessary partner in the ultimate success of a social service agency. The chronically poor as the principle actor in their own development, must be developed as a resource to both inform and help guide the social service institution's concerns and actions. Who better knows what a suffering abused mother needs than one living it? When we draw on the strengths of those who seek help and those who serve; we are transformed as we work in partnership.

This direction requires a transformation of the common viewpoint held by non profit social service institutions authorities, and those to whom those institutions are accountable, of those to whom this letter is written.

Why there is a New Urgency:

It is clear that the people of Arizona are experiencing declining health in the areas of foreclosures, homelessness, joblessness, loss of medical care, and plummeting tax revenue of both state and local governments. The Governor has reported that matters are expected to worsen substantially in 2011. In addition to the maintenance of those who have chronically flowed in and out of poverty, we now confront many more people out of work and homeless. In a time of less revenue, more families and individuals will need help.

Social Service Agency authorities must further this dialogue quickly, so that they can implement cooperative programs in partnership with the poor. Peer groups of people living in chronic poverty associated with specific social service providers need to form and work together with the providers to become a new effective interactive community. We assert that a peer group organizing project is called for.

We can only create a healthy and safe community when the leaders in our social service organizations take the responsibility to lead as well as manage, to develop new ways and skills as well as continue established best practices, for a more humane as well as utilitarian approach that engages and empowers the damaged and at risk. We believe that every social service agency authority has the obligation to develop the means for how their organization can partner with the people whom they serve; and so recognize the inherent desire and ability of every person to participate in the decisions and matters that affect their lives.

Summary of the Principles and Assertions

1. **Chronic poverty and homelessness is a denial of selfhood** - The chronically poor have often lost hope and belief that they can create a better life; this resignation of the spirit assures that they will continue to live in poverty.
2. **Nurturing the human spirit is essential to thriving.** Approaches that treat people living in poverty and homelessness as passive beneficiaries crush human dignity and undermine the most precious resource for ending poverty and homelessness – the self-reliance, creativity and resourcefulness of the people themselves.
3. **The end of chronic poverty can only be achieved and sustained through strategies that empower people to reclaim their selfhood and become the authors of their own development.**
4. **The organized voices and actions of those living in chronic poverty are necessary to create the skills and virtues that will develop the public and private conditions that create and sustain prosperity.** Community organizing and popular education practices based on peer groups associated with social service providers are the most direct means to accomplish this.
5. **Social service agencies and institutions currently dominate the lives of people living in chronic poverty** - The chronically poor assume the roles of client, program participant, entitled person, or victim; these roles often sustain the condition of chronic poverty by preventing any meaningful action that would create a new sense of the self, which would enable their ability to gain prosperity.
6. **A new relationship and dynamic is needed between social service providers and people living in chronic poverty.** When people living in chronic poverty enter into active participation based on a balanced partnership and interactive relationship with the social service providers, there is a fundamental breakthrough created that is essential in bringing about sustained prosperity and leads to the ultimate success of the social service provider's mission.

Near Term Action and Requests:

The Arizona Organizing Project (AZOP) has been formally established as a program under the umbrella of the Atwood Health Foundation, a 501c3. Atwood Health Foundation is associated with the St. Luke's Health Initiative. AZOP has partnered with the Community Housing Partnership and is operating an intern residence and office space at 125 N. 11th Avenue in downtown Phoenix. We are walking distance from City Hall, the State Capitol and the Human Services Campus. We have a 5 person staff, 4 interns and we are working with 4 different peer groups.

As we launch this project in our community, we are asking for your support by signing onto this letter as a supporter and exploring with the organizing team how you can contribute to this vital work. This could include providing funding support, connecting us with other key community leaders and any other way that you see would move this project forward.

Thank you for taking the time to review this letter. By having this letter in your possession, you are recognized as a vital person in helping end chronic poverty and homelessness in Arizona. As you digest the call to action in this letter's contents, we ask you to give great importance to your role in the transformation of human and community potential.

In Partnership,

Supporters for an Arizona Organizing Project:

Appendix A

Description of Homeless Peer Groups Formed Near the Maricopa County Human Services Campus, Phoenix

Peer Group - group of equals: a social group consisting of people who are equal in such respects as age, education, social class or life experiences; people with equal power and standing as members of a group, with a voice in the governance and actions of the group.

The **Madison Street Veterans' Association (MSVA)** is a grassroots organization of homeless and formerly homeless veterans. Their members are former soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen who have served our flag and nation, and have come back to a homeland with no home. Their organization develops the civic leadership of their members to support community, family and work traditions. They are veterans who speak and act for employment, housing, transportation and social justice.

MSVA is the first grassroots homeless veterans' organization in the country. Formed in the parking lot of the CASS Men's Overflow Shelter by five homeless veterans in the middle of 2008, they now operate a peer driven transitional shelter and veteran's outreach service center. The MSVA assists social service agencies to help homeless veterans and advocates on issues that affect their constituency. The MSVA Outreach Center is open 6 days per week and serves approximately 60 homeless veterans a day. The MSVA is a member organization of the Maricopa County Human Services Campus Leadership League, and is affiliated with Lodestar Day Resource Center.

The **Jefferson Street Gentlemen's Association (JSGA)** is a grassroots civic organization of senior men within the homeless community near the state capitol. Its members develop the leadership skills that enable them to speak from their life's experience and wisdom so they may contribute to people who are homeless as well as the larger community. The JSGA is a member organization of the Maricopa County Human Services Campus Leadership League.

The **New Arid Club (NAC)** is a Peer Group of current and formerly homeless recovering addicts who provide access to 12 step programs for those in need. The purpose of the NAC is to provide a safe and hospitable space where recovering people can practice new ways to love, live and flourish in the world. NAC leaders staff a recovery center on the Maricopa County Human Services Campus which provides over 30 meetings per week for hundreds of homeless men and women and recovering addicts in Downtown Phoenix. Recently, the New Arid Club has launched a social enterprise that manufactures and sells a line of soaps, lotions and perfumes under the trade name "Just B B Just". The NAC is a member organization of the Maricopa County Human Services Campus Leadership League, and is affiliated with Lodestar Day Resource Center.

The **Women of Wealth** (WOW) is a new grassroots civic organization of women within the homeless community in Downtown Phoenix. The Women of Wealth is a member organization of the Maricopa County Human Services Campus Leadership League.

The **Capitol Mall Fellows** (CMF) is a peer driven grassroots civic and service organization whose members are mostly former penitentiary inmates, and men who are or have been homeless. The CMF was formed to help build a safe and healthy environment by performing redemptive acts of service for local communities and those in need; and to act on public issues, policies and budgets that affect the lives of its members in the matters of employment, housing, education and social justice concerns.

The Capitol Mall Fellows is working with social service agencies and organizations to help end homelessness in the Capitol Mall and central city area. In the past year, members of the CMF have volunteered at Bicycle Saviors repairing used bicycles for employment, outreach and community service events, supported Arizona Interfaith Movement's "Golden Rule in Action", Valley of the Sun United Way's "Project Homeless Connect", Central Arizona Shelter Services "Mens Outreach Shelter", Lodestar Day Resource Center. CMF Members have participated in legislative advocacy actions with Protecting Arizona's Families Coalition (PAFCO), and meetings with state and local social service agencies. Several members of the CMF have completed a five week "Peer Support Specialist Certification" course conducted by Recovery Empowerment Network. The Capitol Mall Fellows is a member organization of the Maricopa County Human Services Campus Leadership League.

Appendix B

Observations of Peer Group Activities in an Urban Low Demand Shelter Serving 350-500 Chronically Homeless Men per Night, Located in Phoenix, Arizona, 2008-2009.

- 1. Peer group participation brought people who had been deemed “service resistant” and “non-compliant” into meaningful participation in matters affecting their lives.**
- 2. The client’s participation in peer group activities led to a positive transformation in how they viewed themselves and the world.**
- 3. Active membership in a peer group created a personal investment, a sense of belonging and encumbrance for the participants**
- 4. Peer groups provided the platforms from which participants could speak and act powerfully**
- 5. Peer groups created the environment for participants to develop their public and private virtues**
- 6. Leadership roles in peer groups provided the practice for participants to discover or rediscover their own natural leadership abilities**
- 7. There needed to be room to experiment and fail**
- 8. There was a shift in the relationship between the operating agency authority, and the peer group leaders; with a mixed reaction from staff of embracing to hostile**
- 9. Peer group activities brought hope, imagination and creativity in the face of despair and dire circumstances**
- 10. The strategies, skills and practices of experienced community organizers are essential in the creation and sustainability of effective peer groups.**