



Center for Urban Initiatives and Research



Because There's No **One Way**  
To End Poverty

Community Relations - Social Development Commission:  
Community Services Block Grant Needs Assessment

*Chapter II.2:*  
*CR-SDC Board of Commissioners Focus*  
*Group*

Final Report

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## Introduction

This report presents the results of a focus group of the Board of Commissioners of the Community Relations- Social Development Commission (CR-SDC) related to a general perception and overview of poverty and associated needs in the community. This is one of six research components of a comprehensive needs assessment for the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) on behalf of the CR-SDC. The four goals of the CSBG Needs Assessment are to -

- (1) Identify and quantify the incidence or prevalence of individual need;
- (2) Identify gaps in human service provision;
- (3) Identify barriers to self-sufficiency; and
- (4) Identify strategies for overcoming barriers to self-sufficiency.

The purpose of this component was to gather in-depth, open-ended input from the current CR-SDC Board of Commissioners regarding the issue of poverty in Milwaukee County and ways CR-SDC can address it. The CR-SDC Board of Commissioners, which is a tripartite membership from the low-income community, public, and private sectors, are able to provide valuable input from a unique position. Input from this group is frequently cited in recent best practices research on community needs assessment for CSBG-related services and activities. This information will be used to advise and guide CR-SDC as they plan programming for low-income individuals.

Initially planned as individual interviews, the Center for Urban Initiatives and Research (CUIR) in coordination with CR-SDC managerial staff determined that using a group interview format would be more appropriate as it would promote an active dialogue among all Board of Commission members regarding this topic in addition to providing information for this report.

The focus group template was developed and designed by CUIR, a local applied research center at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and was based on the survey implemented with other community stakeholders. The discussion consisted of five open-ended questions addressing three<sup>1</sup> of the four project goals, with one additional area of interest to CR-SDC: Black male joblessness. In general, the facilitators provided participants with the results of the Community Stakeholder interviews as a way to inform and prompt responses prior to any question. A copy of the template can be found in Appendix A.

The focus group was conducted on May 20, 2010, at the CR-SDC offices during a regularly scheduled meeting of the Board of Commissioners. Twelve of the 18 Commissioners were in attendance, and 11 provided input (for a list of attendees, see Appendix B). CUIR facilitated the focus group, analyzed the results, and prepared this report. The following reflects the opinions of the Board Commissioners and these opinions were not “fact-checked” for the purposes of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> Project Goal 1: Prevalence and Incidence of Poverty, was not addressed with this component.

## **Project Goal 2: Gaps in Human Service Provision**

The following text was offered to the CR-SDC Board of Commissioners to help frame the first open-ended question: “We’d like to dig a little deeper into how poverty affects people. People in poverty are affected in areas like employment, education, housing, food and nutrition, transportation, health and healthcare, income, and family and relationships.” Participants were then asked, “What is the most serious problem affecting people in poverty?”

The most persistent theme related to employment and jobs. The general problems of high unemployment and paucity of jobs were discussed, and the current weak state of the US economy exacerbates the problems. In addition, a mismatch between available jobs and requisite skills was discussed. Requisite skills include job readiness and soft skills.

Insufficient education was also cited, which related to requisite skills. It was suggested that the expectation that everyone go to college is unrealistic and furthermore, not all jobs require a college education. More specifically, it was argued that Milwaukee Public Schools had gotten away from vocational training and in so doing, set up many students (the non-college bound) for failure.

Other problems cited by Commissioners included: racism and discrimination; access to health care; and financial illiteracy which, among other things, paves the way for predatory lending.

It was noted that people in poverty face many problems, many of which are inter-related. One Commissioner cited Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, saying many people in poverty must first meet basic and fundamental human needs.

## **Project Goal 3: Barriers to Self Sufficiency**

Regarding barriers that keep people in poverty, participants were asked: “In your opinion, what is the most serious barrier that keeps people in poverty?”

Education and educational issues were prominent in response to this question. Several problems with the “school system” were raised, including a lack of supportive and reinforcing relationships between and among teachers, parents, counselors, and a lack of communication in general. A lack of peer-to-peer support was also noted, as was the idea that peer pressure often precludes student achievement; achievers are often thought of as “nerds.”

It was suggested that in addition to formal education, students need soft skills/life skills that are often lacking. Many students lack basic communication, decision-making, and problem solving skills. These skills can be taught, but high schools may not provide the opportunities. As a consequence, many suffer from an inability to learn and recover from poor prior decisions. In sum, students need a combination of formal education and “street smarts.”

In defense of the education system, it was suggested that too much is expected of teachers, and that schools are drastically underfunded.

## **Project Goal 4: Strategies for Overcoming Barriers to Self-Sufficiency**

**Strategies to Reduce Poverty (General).** Participants were asked to provide general strategies to reducing poverty, using the open-ended question: “What is the most important thing that can be done to help reduce poverty in Milwaukee County?”

The first response to this question raised access to suitable employment, and much of the discussion revolved around economic development issues thereafter.

One thread of discussion pertained to the manufacturing sector, although some comments could be understood to generalize to the business community overall. It was suggested that Milwaukee is behind in recognizing the shift to global economy; manufacturing is not the wave of the future. Milwaukee still thinks the “Fonzie days” are going to come back, and that “Milwaukee is Gary, Indiana in the 1970s.” Milwaukee is always accommodating to manufacturing and in fact, the tax burden on manufacturers is relatively low. The implication was that taxes do not drive away manufacturers as much as an interest in paying lower wages. Resources for business are directed through the city, not in the city (i.e., government policies are geared toward business needs, not the needs of individual residents).

It was also suggested that one reason Milwaukee Public Schools is in its current state of poor academic achievement is that manufacturers expect public policy to address business needs at the expense of addressing MPS needs – scarce resources are diverted. Education has become about politics, not the kids. The educational mission has been lost. One Commissioner argued that the business community talks, but does nothing. The gravity of the poor MPS 4th grade reading results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress is not understood or appreciated. Finally, the argument was made that there is a misunderstanding between what business wants and what educators can provide.

The issue of racism was raised as well. It was argued that institutional racism keeps minorities out of certain positions. For example, with the range of ongoing construction projects in Milwaukee, a Commissioner asked, “why can’t blacks get jobs?” Another Commissioner acknowledged that there is racism in the trades, but the trades cannot solve the unemployment problem

**The Role of SDC in Reducing Poverty.** Participants were asked: “What else do you think CR-SDC could do to help reduce poverty in Milwaukee County?”

Much of the discussion coalesced around the notion that Milwaukee lacks leadership on poverty-related issues. It was suggested that there is a lack of political and business leadership. For example, the argument was made that the proposed mayoral takeover of MPS is not an “innovative idea.” Furthermore, among the NAACP, Chambers of Commerce, and legislators – no one is pinpointing the major issues and tasking action. There is passivity among elected officials and policymakers; they don’t know where to start. However, CR-SDC can provide direction.

CR-SDC can engage in advocacy and strategic thinking. CR-SDC can lead a different vision about poverty and articulate a new direction. CR-SDC has license to take the lead, and no one else is stepping up. CR-SDC should pick some things, take them to policymakers, and then hold them accountable. One Commissioner noted that CR-SDC is great at basic needs, and CR-SDC’s function is to provide for basic needs. Yet, CR-SDC needs to advocate, although it needs to get

better at it. It may be the case however, that CR-SDC doesn't have the resources to do it, especially the Board. It was suggested that there must be some best practice models for the CR-SDC board to review, and if CR-SDC doesn't take advantage of best practice models, "shame on us." The upcoming CR-SDC poverty symposium can set the stage for direction on advocacy.

Coordinated programming was suggested as an approach. Moreover, collaboration with non-profits is necessary, but so is collaboration with business.

### **SDC and Reducing Black Male Joblessness**

The last question asked of Commissioners was: "Black male joblessness is an area of particular interest for SDC. With this in mind, what do you think could be done to help reduce this problem?"

One Commissioner argued a need to increase cultural awareness, the lack of which leads to feelings of intimidation as well as double standards.

Another Commissioner cited a lack of knowledge about community resources. In fact, resources are available and could be combined into a "toolkit." For example, a resource toolkit could be provided to businesses to aid in training employees, if businesses were committed. Business should be challenged to do the right thing, and called out if they don't.

A macro/micro approach was suggested. The micro level pertains to programmatic initiatives like tangible skills and job readiness. The macro level pertains to leadership, like a leadership role on racism, and could include establishment of a civil rights commission. There are also policy issues and needed changes in law. Revocation of driver's licenses was cited as an example: License revocation and a shortage of suitable public transportation as an alternative are barriers to employment.

More generally, the need for an integrative approach was suggested, including the university (UWM), businesses, and policymakers. And, CR-SDC can convene these stakeholders.

In conclusion, one Commissioner asked why so much *was* invested in the prison system rather than investing in human capital?

### **Conclusions**

This discussion comprised a number of questions asked of other stakeholders in Milwaukee, and as with other stakeholders, themes relating to employment and education tended to predominate. However, the tenor of discussion perked up appreciably when questions were raised about strategies to reduce poverty in general, and CR-SDC's role in reducing poverty specifically. The idea of a "macro/micro" approach emerged as a strong theme from the discussion.

On a macro-level, the Commissioners reported that CR-SDC should take the role as a strong advocate and leader in the community regarding issues of poverty. According to one, it is incumbent upon CR-SDC to advocate for those in poverty with the entire community and across all sectors. CR-SDC should be actively engaging and challenging sectors such as the business

community and political entities in not only the dialogue regarding poverty, but actively working toward the solutions. Not only should CR-SDC provide education and awareness to various sectors, but also provide clear direction on what can and should be done. This includes clearly identifying the key issues and specific courses of action to take, such as best practice models. It is also about holding parties accountable.

On a micro-level, the Commissioners identified the need for CR-SDC to continue its role as a provider of services that meet the basic needs of those in poverty. These include food, shelter, and housing, among others. Related to this concept, the Commissioners indicated that CR-SDC should be actively coordinating and integrating services for those in poverty thus helping individuals get the various resources necessary for self-sufficiency. It was stated that only through close coordination and collaboration between organizations, services, and resources will poverty be adequately addressed.

This discussion took place shortly before a scheduled Board of Commissioners retreat, and it was suggested that CR-SDC leadership on issues relating to poverty could be a prime topic of conversation. It was further suggested that the CR-SDC Symposium on Poverty, scheduled for November 2010, could set the stage for staking policy advocacy positions on half of the community's low-income residents.

## Appendix A: CR-SDC Board of Commissioners Focus Group Template

### Results from Community Stakeholder Interviews/Surveys

- 514 stakeholders were identified by both CR-SDC and CUIR staff.
- Fifty “VIP” stakeholders were identified by CR-SDC for in-person interviews
- Interviews/surveys were conducted in January and February of 2010.
- 182 interviews/surveys were completed
  - 35 in-person
  - 34 mail
  - 113 online
- 35% response rate

**Community Stakeholders by Sector**

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Non-profit	82	46%
Government	27	15%
Education	22	12%
Business / For-profit	16	9%
Foundation / Philanthropy	12	7%
Legal / Judiciary	9	5%
Health	5	3%
Media	4	2%
Faith-based	3	2%
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b><i>180</i></b>	<b><i>100%</i></b>

**PROMPT:**

We'd like to dig a little deeper into how poverty affects people. People in poverty are affected in areas like employment, education, housing, food and nutrition, transportation, health and healthcare, income, and family and relationships.

**QUESTION 1:**

What is the most serious problem affecting people in poverty?

**Community Stakeholders: Problems Most Affecting People in Poverty**

Theme	Number	Percentage
Employment	75	44%
Education	49	29%
Health and healthcare	40	24%
Many problems/inter-related problems	38	22%
Personal	32	19%
Housing	31	18%
Inadequate income/resources	30	18%
Family and relationships	29	17%
Food and nutrition	18	11%
Community issues	8	5%
Transportation	6	4%
Other	9	5%

**QUESTION 2:**

In your opinion, what is the most serious barrier that keeps people in poverty?

**Community Stakeholders: Barriers Keeping People in Poverty**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Families and relationships	47	27%
Education	41	23%
Employment	37	21%
Hopelessness or character issues	24	14%
Government policies	23	13%
Systemic/institutionalized poverty	19	11%
Drugs and alcohol	18	10%
Neighborhood issues	15	8%
Prejudices	14	8%
Community programs	13	7%
Health and health care	4	2%
Other	4	2%

**QUESTION 3:**

What is the most important thing that can be done to help reduce poverty in Milwaukee County?

**Community Stakeholders: Solutions for Reducing Poverty**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Education	99	58%
Employment	67	39%
Job Training	37	22%
Additional Resources/Programs	34	20%
Family and Relationships	24	14%
Comprehensive/Coordinated Efforts	17	10%
Government Policies/Actions	16	9%
Community/Societal Strategies	11	6%
Housing	7	4%
Transportation	6	4%
Character/Attitudes	6	4%
Health and Healthcare	6	4%
Income/Money Management	4	2%
Food and Nutrition	2	1%

**QUESTION 4:**

What else do you think SDC could do to help reduce poverty in Milwaukee County?

(NOTE: 41 Stakeholders did not answer this question)

**Community Stakeholders: Recommendations for how SDC can Help Reduce Poverty**

Theme	Number	Percentage
Education	29	21%
Advocacy/Leadership	24	17%
Comprehensive/strategic/coordinated programming	22	16%
Outreach	20	14%
Family supports/parenting/child care	19	14%
Collaboration with nonprofits	17	12%
Jobs/employment	15	11%
Update anti-poverty mission/goals	14	10%
Job training/skills	13	9%
Youth programming	11	8%

**QUESTION 5:** Black male joblessness is an area of particular interest for SDC. With this in mind, what do you think could be done to help reduce this problem?

**Community Stakeholders: Recommendations about how to Reduce Black Male Joblessness**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Job training/skills	58	36%
Education	54	34%
Jobs/employment	39	25%
More private sector involvement	29	18%
Change character/attitudes	20	13%
Reentry/felon programming/criminal justice system	20	13%
Transportation/transit	15	9%
Youth programming/outreach	13	8%
Reduce discrimination/racism or improve diversity	13	8%
Focus efforts (city of Milwaukee, neighborhoods, concentrated areas of poverty)	12	8%

**Appendix B: CR-SDC Board of Commissioners Focus Group Attendees**

***Dr. Patricia Arredondo***

UW-Milwaukee

***Avery Goodrich***

African American Chamber of Commerce

***Bruce Bultman***

SDC Commissioner/Dist. VI

***Karlton Jones***

SDC Commissioner/Dist. IV

***John Busby***

Greater Milwaukee Committee

***Fred Royal, Jr.*** - Chairperson  
M.A.T.C.

***Don Cohen*** - Treasurer

Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

***Annie Wacker***

AFL-CIO

***Reid Engstrom***

United Way of Greater Milwaukee

***Roy L. Williams*** – Vice Chairperson  
Milwaukee County

***Jennifer Gonda***

City of Milwaukee

***Virgie Wynn***

SDC Commissioner/Dist. II