

**Testimony for House Committee on Agriculture  
Subcommittee on Nutrition**

**Pathways to Success for Recipients of SNAP**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This testimony will outline two steps necessary to support those SNAP beneficiaries who have a reasonable chance of utilizing community college education to access stable income sufficient to remove the need for receiving SNAP benefits. One step is traditional career training; the second step is mindset change. The two steps do not need be sequential. They are mutually supportive: traditional career training can help change mindset, and mindset change can help success in career training. These are not the only steps that could be taken, but they are options that community colleges can offer. In this testimony I will outline the methods we in the Department of Economic and Workforce Development at Onondaga Community College (OCC) employ to provide that training. Our recommendation is that the Committee do all it can to promote the structure we utilize for providing opportunities for some people to break their tethers to life in financial and health poverty.

## **Acknowledgements**

Much of how I see the paths for SNAP recipients is through the organizational framework developed by Michael Metzgar, currently Associate Vice President of Economic & Workforce Development at Onondaga Community College (OCC). In his three iterations of Workforce Development at community colleges – University of Advancing Technology in Arizona, Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey, and OCC in New York – he repeated the model that is outlined in this document. I would know little about Workforce Development without having spent years working for him. The committee would have benefitted had he been able to prepare and deliver testimony.

## **Local Context of Testimony: the Challenge**

The content of this testimony is limited to one person's opinion. It is based largely on personal experience of nearly three decades spent in social work, education, and business. It is not based on peer reviewed primary research. Part of that personal experience is all that I have gained from colleagues at two community colleges – one serving two counties in northwestern New Jersey, two of the wealthier counties in the country, and one serving five counties in Central New York, counties which are largely rural and are focused in some of the poorest urban zip codes in the country. Last year, the city of Syracuse, NY, was listed in local newspaper and tv as the US city with the highest rates of poverty for African Americans and Hispanics, the 28<sup>th</sup> overall poorest in the country.

### **Who our students are**

In the last two years here in Syracuse we have served approximately 450 students in our programs. From anecdotal knowledge, I would say that more than half of them, or someone in their immediate family, receive SNAP benefits, and more than that are eligible. The South Side of Syracuse – one of the primary locations from which we recruit, and perhaps the most challenged part of the city – has been a complete food desert up until earlier this summer when our first supermarket opened, a Price Right Supermarket. Before that, people used their food benefits at small corner stores which did not have much fresh food.

Syracuse is a refugee resettlement city. Refugees have been arriving for decades in Syracuse, and our North Side is home to populations from many different countries, including countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Many of our program participants are refugees or immigrants.

Our students – most of whom are first generation to attend college – also include many in third generation poverty. Among these students is a mix of those whose families have always worked and never or almost never taken benefits, families that have survived from a combination of work and public assistance. Some have grown up with the expectation that because their parents received benefits and lived in very poor conditions, they will too. *That's just how it is* is a mental framework that surrounds some of our students. Even the question, “What else can you do?” is not a question that residents of the poorer neighborhoods in Syracuse can ask themselves for long, since the options available to them – minimum wage jobs and slightly higher – are the only opportunities that they can see.

### **How we find our students**

Intentionally, we recruit for our programs primarily through the governmental workforce system of the Department of Labor. Our goal is specifically to provide employment opportunities for the long term unemployed, the serially unemployed, and the underemployed. We work with employment counselors at the One Stop (the operational arm of the Workforce Investment Board – WIB) and job coaches at “*JobsPlus!*” (the local organization that distributes Temporary Assistance from the DOL). Both organizations exist to channel the unemployed back into jobs. Our training programs are an option for their clients.

### **OUR PROGRAM**

Our programs currently cover three fields: Healthcare (Medical Billing, Certified Nurse’s Aide, Phlebotomy, soon to be Medical Assisting), Food Service (Restaurant entrepreneur, Line Cook), and Technician (Machine Operator, Warehouse Technician, and soon to be Natural Gas/Utilities Technician).

Our programs include several elements:

1. **Analysis of which industries are hiring** in Syracuse, in Onondaga County, and in the five surrounding counties within the next 18 months. We will not train people for jobs that may be the wave of the future but would still leave them out to sea upon graduation. For this we use the expensive but very good Burning Glass data.
2. **Living wage to sustainable wage.** We will not train for a job that will not produce a living wage (\$12.75/hr in Syracuse if employers usually provide insurance; \$15.25/hr if they do not) within the first 6 months of graduation. The entry level job must also lead to a path for obtaining better jobs within industry such that a person has a path beyond what United Way calls the ALICE level (Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed).
3. **Employer-driven curriculum.** We gather employers to tell us what they need from our students when they graduate in order for them to want to hire our students upon graduation. Everything they tell us is necessary then becomes a necessary component of our education; what they do not consider necessary we do not include. We have nice-to-have elements too where possible. The owners and supervisors create a name for the entry level job that we are discussing, and they tell us which soft skills are needed (more on soft skills in a section below). The expert workers in a subsequent panel tell us what all the tasks are that the employee must perform in order to accomplish all their duties. We use a Canadian process called DACUM – Developing a Curriculum. It is necessary

sometimes to slightly modify the multi-day process to fit employer availability. This is accomplished in half a day, then another full day. We take the data from the employer and expert worker panels and then utilize our own curriculum developers together with an industry partner or an instructor we have, and turn it into curriculum. The curriculum contains three elements:

- a. Academic Knowledge: creating a conceptual grasp of the industry, the job, its processes and language
  - b. Technical Ability: a person has to demonstrate that she or he can perform the tasks necessary. This differs from regular academic learning, but is in line with traditional vocational learning.
  - c. Soft Skill Ability: we teach employability skills, including both behavioral elements and also that which undergirds the behavior: beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, in short: mindset. A graduate must not only be able to understand the job and to do the job, but must have the transferable skills/soft skills/21<sup>st</sup> Century skills/non-cognitive abilities/employability skills to get and keep a job in a middle-class work environment.
4. **In-Program Retention Services.** Staff proactively engages students to discover barriers to their successful completion of our training programs. We are connected with 23 Community Based Organizations, plus college resources, to help provide resources such as bus passes, food, clothes, women's shelter, educational tutoring, counseling, transportation, and child care. We also act as cheerleaders, metaphorically speaking.

5. **Competency Based Education.** Most of our programs do not give letter grades. We believe that employers are not interested in what grades so much as whether they are prepared to do a good job. When a student learns the material, they finish. Some programs allow students to finish and to start at different times, and we continue to work in that direction.
  
6. **Practicum.** Our in-house teaching involves varying degrees of classroom and hands-on education. At the end of our program, when we believe we have trained them well, we send them to an employer for 100 hours of observation in a workplace situation. Sometimes the employer lets us know of poor employability skills; sometimes the employer hires the person on the spot; sometimes the employer approves but has no availability. If the person passes the employer approval in the practicum, they receive a certificate from OCC, and are moved to the next stage.
  
7. **Channel to Employment.** The same employers with whom we established relationships to gather the data for curriculum are those we return to offer them good employees. Sometimes the students find themselves jobs before we do. Sometimes they ask us for work before they finish the program and we help them secure part time work during the program. About 75% of our students reach the end of the in-house studies. About 85% of those attend a practicum. About 25% of those are offered jobs before the end or at the end of their practicum. About another 25% of those who finish practicums secure work, either through their own efforts or through our assistance by connecting them with employers with whom we are in contact, within the first three weeks of the end of the program. The other 50% tend to accept non-related jobs or do not find work, or we lose contact with

them and we do not know their situation. We are arranging to receive Unemployment Insurance (UI) Wage Data which will tell us everyone's status with a six-month data delay.

8. **Maintain Contact.** We maintain contact with the students once they graduate, especially if we are still helping them find employment. Once they find employment, we try to check their employment status at three months, six months, a year, and two years. We have found some difficulties with this segment of the process due to time/resource constraints/prioritization, and changing rapidly contact information of the graduates.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The recommendations are simply to help reproduce our program in one form or another. Training out of poverty is possible. It takes dedication and resources. There are enough dedicated people, and resources are being devoted too. The key difference is to help create public awareness, and an education system to support it, which accepts starting a career after high school as an honorable path. There is good work being done in South Carolina, in Vermont, in various places around the country. The point is that skills now must include not just the academic and technical, but the employability skills. According to Gallup-Lumina Foundation, employers consistently report that students are underprepared. Academic research also shows that the skills which employers value most highly tend to be soft skills such as communication, and characteristics such as integrity, honesty, and self-management.



To teach these things, we need to realize that there is a great chasm that a student who grew up in poverty has to jump. It is deep and it is scary. If I go out of my house and expect to be accosted by a gang member, and this is becoming more and more common; if the only way that I know to gain power and respect is to sell drugs, then I'll need to drop my veneer of bravado which covers my low self-efficacy. I'll need to be rather more reserved. I'll need to change my language, my gait, how I wear my clothes, how little or much I speak. I'll need to code-switch. And hardest of all, I'll need to believe that the system which failed my parents won't fail me. This takes time. The recommendation is that this type of employability education which is based on employer feedback, emphasizes soft skills, and connects people with employers, start in high schools. It's happening slowly; it just needs support in order that more people will be able to feed themselves and their families, and feed themselves well, and do it with a minimum of public assistance.

### **HERE'S WHY: AN ANECDOTE**

I was brought up with Talmudic expression: "Save one life and you've saved the whole world." Policies need to support people of course, and they always intend to; the question is just how. If you can build personal relationship into your policies, that would be huge.

I'll call her Samantha and I'll change just a few details for privacy sake. Samantha arrived to the US about a year and a half ago, and to our Food Service Manager program about 6 months ago. She arrived from a small city in Afghanistan as a refugee. She was raised Muslim, but at a certain point she and her family, and what would become her husband's family converted to Christianity. Death threats ensued, even two attempts on her life, including when her uncle tried to kill her. She and her husband and her husband's family went through the two-

year process and were awarded refugee status by the US government. Arriving in Syracuse it was not long before he was working as a delivery driver and she was working as a cashier in a supermarket. But then he was caught in a car accident, and she sustained a work accident. She soon heard about our program and before she finished recovering she joined us in order to promote her cooking with her own restaurant. Unfortunately, life happened again and without her family here, her husband's family frowned upon her moving forward into an independent career. Domestic violence ensued. Her instructor and the two Student Success Coordinators were able to guide her through a workman's compensation claim, the challenging law process, helped find her a woman's shelter, helped her improve her English, help her start her own food business, deal with an emotional divorce that she never had dreamed of, get set up in a new life situation. Through all this Samantha remained grateful and worked hard to move forward with her dreams. As we have nurtured her, she continues to nurture others. Not easy. But worth it.