

# **Providing Life Skills to Undereducated Communities to Facilitate Escaping Concentrated Poverty**

A White Paper by Civil Survival

“Help people get an education and you’ll help people get better jobs, reduce substance abuse, lessen the drain on public housing stock, and reduce crime.”

- Circuit Judge Lynn Tepper

Education alone is not enough; successful and permanent escape from concentrated poverty requires proficiency in basic life skills. Life skills require not only basic education but also the ability to integrate and synthesize information and to interact with new and changing circumstances. For those living and in concentrated poverty, access to transformative life skills is limited if not non-existent. From the young who struggle from lack of basic education to the workforce who struggle with obtaining the skill necessary to pursue a meaningful career, basic life skills are necessary to create the drive to pursue education, the ability to interact in the workplace, the desire to contribute to the community. Access to programs that foster meaningful interaction in the community provides the necessary access to life skill education that can transform not only an individual but also a community.

For ESL communities, language education is not enough to provide the necessary integration skills to foster successful integration. Improved literacy and life skills correspond with improved ability to manage the challenges faced on a daily basis by households and integrated society members. For example, literacy skills are required to read a contract, to interact with employers, to fill out complicated forms, to understand the terms of a lease, to sign up for basic utilities and services, to understand the requirements of the workplace, and to responsibly handle marital and child custody matters.

The stories of success are the rare exceptions; the reality for most is the continued spiral of debilitating poverty. Even if education were reliable in poverty stricken communities, which it is not, education alone is not enough. Community support is paramount. As HUD recognizes, “the connections between education and community are inseparable. [And, C]hildren who are surrounded by adults with little hope for securing a job will

find it nearly impossible to believe that they can go to college.” HUD, Choice Neighborhoods Overview, can be found at <http://www.suffolkrha.org/documents/CNIBrochure.pdf>. Thus, community programs offering complements to traditional education are essential resources for communities seeking to end the cycle of concentrated poverty.

## **The Problem – The Failure to Obtain the Life Skills Necessary Results in the Inability to Escape Concentrated Poverty**

It is axiomatic that children raised in concentrated poverty face nearly insurmountable odds. See e.g. Margery Austin Turner & Lynette A. Rawlings, Overcoming Concentrated Poverty and Isolation – Lessons from Three HUD Demonstration Initiatives (July 2005, The Urban Institute), found at [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311205\\_Poverty\\_FR.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311205_Poverty_FR.pdf). But improving the chances of children through education or outreach is not enough; addressing the challenges of the adults with whom children interact is essential. Social science research confirms that “living in a distressed, high-poverty neighborhood undermines the long-term life chances of families and children – cutting off access to mainstream social and economic opportunities.” Id. Both children and adults are effected by concentrated poverty: “children who grow up in distressed neighborhoods and attend high-poverty, poor-performing schools are less likely to succeed[;] [y]oung people who are surrounded by drug dealing and crime ... are more likely to become caught up in dangerous or criminal activities[; a]nd adults who live in neighborhoods that are isolated from job opportunities ... are less likely to work steadily.” Id. Further, those that manage to escape concentrated poverty communities face additional hurdles that they are unprepared for. Research reveals “that for many families, mental and physical health challenges as well as poor education and limited work experience make it difficult to adjust to [new living circumstances], cope with the demands of a private landlord, or take advantage of new opportunities.” Id.

Those from concentrated poverty communities attempting to improve social and economic circumstances by joining mainstream society face the challenge of lacking the skills necessary to obtain permanent and fulfilling careers, to interact with private landlords, to contract for child care and other social agreements. This lack of basic life skills can derail what would seem like simple steps for improved circumstances. Community programs that incorporate civic education with hypothetical opportunities

to practice basic life skills can provide concentrated poverty communities essential skills for success. To combat concentrated poverty, programs and education that integrate concrete learning with integrated life skills is essential. Programs that allow community members to practice interacting successfully with mainstream experiences will help prepare to successfully navigate the escape from concentrated poverty.

## **The Solution - Incorporate Real World Experience and Complex Skills into Neighborhood Renewal Efforts**

Interacting with mainstream society requires basic skills, each requiring the ability to process information and interact confidently with a complex system of behavior, paperwork, forms, and contracts. Many living in concentrated poverty, however, are not equipped with these life skills. Community outreach programs need to integrate models that teach skills that will help individuals interact effectively when facing mainstream circumstances. Life skills require literacy; literacy requires the ability to process information and incorporate it into a new situation.

Programs that incorporate real world experience and complex skills can provide invaluable opportunities to practice and thereby gain experience with mainstream interactions. Learning opportunities that teach civic responsibility as well as basic rights while providing hypothetical opportunities to practice basic life skills can be instrumental in concentrated poverty communities where such experience is lacking. And, “[w]hen families are offered real opportunities and meaningful choices about how to improve their futures, they will participate.” *Id.* Thus, the solution is to provide life skills in community outreach programs; provide meaningful opportunities to learn the practical skills that make interaction with mainstream society possible.

Studies demonstrate that communities participate in such learning opportunities and gain effective experience that can make the difference in a successful interview or a productive interaction with a private landlord. These basic life skills and practical application of civil responsibility can be integrated in to a curriculum of basic rights and responsibilities and provide both substantive information about the legal rights and responsibilities of productive citizenship and practice interacting with mainstream society in an effective manner.

Programs that hope to facilitate escaping concentrated poverty must provide the tools necessary to interact with mainstream society: the ability to interact with employers, landlords, childcare providers, utility companies, spouses, among others. Studies demonstrate that poor education and the experiences of concentrated poverty do not provide these essential skills.

The National Center for Educational Statistics concluded that incorporating documents and teaching that requires synthesizing information is necessary to improve literacy. The National Center for Educational Statistics highlights the importance of providing materials that expose undereducated populations to the information required to be a responsible employee, to handle legal challenges around parenthood, to understand housing issues, to manage a household, to achieve an education, and to understand documents with legal implications.

Educational programs will improve literacy and effectively teach life skills by using hypothetical real-life circumstances that teach participants how to interact successfully with mainstream society. Allowing students the opportunity to practice using, reading, and understanding the documents and situations they will experience on a regular basis will provide them experience and confidence to interact effectively. Educational programs that focus on skills have proven to be effective; and communities voluntarily participate in these programs.

Case study teaching is used regularly in legal education to teach law students practical skills. The model successfully prepares law students and allows them to practice legal skills and gain confidence participating in a legal environment. Using a similar technique to engage and teach undereducated communities will provide the life skills necessary to successfully escape concentrated poverty.

## **Materials that Incorporate Experiential Learning and Complex Skills**

Civil Survival creates educational materials and develops curricula that teach basic legal concepts while developing complex life skills. The Civil Survival content provides the communities with the opportunity not only to understand legal principles but also to apply those principles to issues that an average citizen might face. Civil Survival asks students to engage in hypothetical circumstances including negotiating a lease, dealing

with family law issues such as child custody and divorce, and properly handling workplace issues. Students of Civil Survival will not only understand their basic legal rights and responsibilities, but will also gain invaluable practice applying those legal concepts to real life circumstances.

The content is easy to understand for low-literacy populations and ESL learners and incorporates reading comprehension with literacy while teaching every-day legal skills. The models and exercises require students to go beyond the reading and apply the learning to circumstances an individual might face in mainstream life. The substantive content teaches basic civics and an understanding of not only the rights but the responsibilities of being a United States citizen. Students learn the importance of meaningful participation as a citizen through understanding of basic legal rights at the same time as they are learning complex literacy skills by applying the substantive content in case studies crafted to model real world situations.

The Civil Survival series provides texts and content that prepares undereducated populations with the life skills necessary to successfully interact with mainstream life. The hypothetical case studies require regular contact with forms, contracts, instructions, and interactions. The Civil Survival material teaches basic legal principles and applies them to real life scenarios to prepare participants to enter the work force, find a home, maintain healthy relationships with spouses and children, and navigate difficult circumstances like accidents. The curriculum incorporates educational substance while teaching basic coping and life skills.