

## **UNIT 7.**

# ***VOLUNTEER TRAINING***

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### Introduction

Experience has shown that most churches need volunteer training in order to get started. Following the training, almost all volunteers express confidence to begin working with a family. Using the following information and facilitator notes, any capable facilitator can take volunteers through the two-hour training session. It is highly recommended that the entire volunteer team take the training, but at a minimum, one person on the team should be trained and thus able to guide the team through the first three meetings with the participant welfare family. A capable facilitator is someone who has experience in leading group discussions, has read the Church Training Manual, and, preferably, has attended a training session on Faith-Based Welfare Reform.

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***Facilitator:** The progress report on welfare reform provided below is to help volunteers understand both the success of welfare reform and the need for their involvement to help people get off welfare. Some knowledge of state policies will provide useful background information for volunteers as they begin working with a family. Volunteers should view themselves as partners with the family and the state caseworker in order to be effective.*

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### Welfare Reform Progress at the National and State Levels

National welfare reform legislation was passed by Congress in 1996. Prior to that time welfare was an entitlement with no time limits or work requirements for recipients. The new legislation requires people to seek employment and limits welfare to a lifetime maximum of five years. Nationwide, the welfare rolls have declined by about 35 percent in the first three years.

Washington State passed its welfare reform law, WorkFirst, in 1997. It largely mirrors the federal law, but is less strict than most other states—there is a “soft landing” for welfare recipients. Washington’s welfare caseload has declined by about one-third in the last two years. Many states have a two-year limit while this state has a five-year limit. WorkFirst is designed to immediately link welfare recipients with a job. For the most part, this emphasis on immediate employment excludes attending college, unless the recipient maintains employment at the same time. This is a basic overview of the system:

- Applicants are first screened by state officials for possible diversion assistance: up to \$1500 for child care, housing assistance, transportation, health care, etc. About 10 percent of new applicants receive diversion assistance.
- There are 1,300 new welfare applicants each month in Washington State. If eligible for welfare, the applicant enrolls in a twelve-week job search program, starting with a one-week job search workshop followed by eleven weeks of job search.
- Once an applicant is employed, assistance is available to help the person identify skills needed to move up the career ladder.

Washington State welfare recipients who have obtained jobs receive the highest average wages in the nation—just over \$8.00 per hour. When a recipient begins receiving wages, welfare payments are reduced by a formula which allows half the wages to be disregarded but reduces the assistance, dollar for dollar, with the remaining half. The rule of thumb is that once the recipient doubles her monthly welfare grant (\$546 for a family of three) through wages (\$1092), she is no longer eligible for *cash* assistance. However, food stamps, medical care for one year, and subsidized child care continue. *Many recipients do not understand that they remain eligible for these benefits.* In addition, the state continues to help collect child support. Often the child support itself can eliminate the need for a significant portion of the cash grant.

The only statewide exemption from work at this point is the twelve-month exemption for new mothers which will change to a three-month exemption in July 1999 (3,800 mothers are exempt currently). Teen mothers must be living in an approved home and attend school. The state will not determine exemptions for others until the fifty-second month of the total sixty months of eligibility is reached. Exemptions are now determined on a case-by-case basis, and federal law requires no more than 20 percent exemption of the total caseload.

*If for no other reason than self-interest, churches should get involved **now** in helping families get off welfare. Otherwise they will be overwhelmed when the five-year limitation kicks in and families begin to appear at the church door in 2002, no longer eligible for any welfare assistance.*

What happens if the recipient refuses to cooperate? For non-compliance, generally failing to meet work requirements, the first penalty is elimination of the parent's share of the cash grant; in the second month a protective payee is established and the grant reduction continues; in the third month the recipient faces loss of 40 percent of the total cash grant. About 9 percent of the caseload is under sanctions—most comply by the end of the fourth month (two weeks of compliance required) and the full grant is restored. But about 1 percent of the caseload do not respond to the sanctions.

The big question, of course, is whether people can stay off welfare. About 20 percent return after six months and another 17 percent return after twelve months. This percentage has been declining, although it's too early to indicate a trend. Returning to welfare means the clock again begins ticking on the five-year limit.

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**Facilitator:** *Churches have various reasons for wanting to help the poor. Volunteers should discuss both their own and their church's motives. For many churches, this will be their first intensive relational ministry. A certain amount of risk is involved—the following section should encourage churches and volunteers that the risk of trying a new ministry is worthwhile.*

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## The Church's Response to Welfare Reform

There are over four hundred Scriptures about helping the poor. Amy Sherman's book, *Restorers of Hope*, is the best book on faith-based welfare reform and is recommended reading to learn about the church's high calling with regard to welfare reform. Each church volunteer team should discuss what God is saying to their church about helping people in need and how their church is responding.

Amy Sherman describes the Sixteenth Century Christians who ministered to those with the black plague, and thus a Christian became known as “one who takes a risk.” That is what God is calling the Church to do today—“take a risk.” Courage, like cowardice, is contagious; it takes just a few courageous people to incite others.

For volunteers involved in this training we say, “Burn bridges behind you.” Never burn up relationships, but set a fire behind you as you step out on the bridge of your calling. That way you will keep your focus on what lies ahead and not turn back. Burn up the fear of starting something new, the fear of failure, of perfectionism, that someone else can do it better. Relational ministry probably won’t happen if you don’t do it. You’re here, so it’s very likely that this is what God is speaking to you, your church, and the people in your church to do.

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**Facilitator:** *In the following sections, volunteers will learn how to work with a family. The first three meetings with a family are covered in detail. We begin by looking at the basic model for faith-based welfare reform and what it means.*

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## Basic Model

*Four church volunteers work with one needy family for one year to help the family achieve self-sufficiency. What exactly does this mean? Let’s take the sentence apart to find out.*

**Four** is not a magic number. Your team may consist of three to five volunteers. Fewer than three means probable burnout and inadequate resources. With more than five, the logistics become overwhelming. One person should be assigned to be the team coordinator.

**Church volunteers** mean people who have been screened by the church and meet the church’s qualifications. In addition, each volunteer should complete the Volunteer Application and Confidentiality Agreement (*see pages 28 and 29 of the Church Training Manual*) and attend the Volunteer Training.

**Work** with a needy family means the volunteers not only befriend the family, but purposefully set goals to help them achieve self-sufficiency. (The first three meetings are discussed below.)

**Family** means people who are on welfare or experiencing financial difficulty. The family must want to work with a church volunteer team and be willing to make changes to help themselves become self-sufficient within a year. For beginning teams the family should have no serious substance abuse, mental health or domestic violence problems. To find a family, look inside the church first—check with the pastor or whoever is assigned to interview people who request help. The singles ministry is a good source as is a church outreach program to the community. Outside the church, good sources are parachurch organizations in the community, including Salvation Army and Union Gospel Mission.

**Self-sufficiency** does *not* mean that everything is wonderful and there are no problems. It does mean that, after one year of working with the volunteers, the family’s income should be adequate to meet basic needs. The family should be having more

success than failure using a budget and should be off cash assistance for a majority of the year that the team works with the family. Thus, employment is a major goal of the team. There should be an emergency plan in place to deal with sickness, child care, and a financial crisis. *Make sure the family has a support system in place.* The volunteers will serve as the support system early on, but should also help the family develop other support systems including extended family, the church and church programs, and neighbors.

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**Facilitator:** *Prior to setting the first meeting with a family, volunteers should explore all aspects of the impact the team approach will have on them and the participant family. After this discussion, compare the volunteers' responses with the ones listed here.*

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## Before Meeting With a Family

What does a four-to-one ratio of volunteers to a family imply for all those involved?

- **Scheduling conflicts:** Team members cannot expect to attend every meeting, but try to schedule meetings when a majority of the team can attend.
- **Logistics of meetings:** Consider transportation and child care needs of the participant.
- **Teamwork:** A team member who is a lone ranger will either have to make a big adjustment or find a lone-ranger job. It's essential that each team member be allowed to give input and use their gifts and skills in working with the family.
- **Intimidation:** It will be a rare participant family that does not feel intimidated or overwhelmed by having four strangers come into their lives. Be very careful to respect the participant family's right to make choices (even bad ones), and to work together, instead of "fixing" things for them. For example, participants may blow their first paycheck because they continue to receive their welfare check and feel they have money to "burn." Discuss wise use of the money in advance, but if the participant blows it, allow her to make that decision (and also suffer the consequences).

## The First Three Meetings

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**Facilitator:** *The following are guidelines for the first three meetings with a participant family. It is suggested that the facilitator state the goal of each meeting, ask the volunteers to design the meeting, and then compare their responses to the recommendations provided. This method provides volunteers with an opportunity to share ideas and to build confidence for meeting with the participant. Volunteers already know how to do these things; they simply need to learn to apply what they know to a new situation. Each volunteer should be given a copy of Unit 5 of the Church Training Manual.*

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### The First Meeting (Goal: To get acquainted)

Because of the intimidation factor involved with a participant meeting with four strangers for the first time, this meeting should be social in nature, allowing people to get to know each other in a relaxed atmosphere. A good place to meet is someone's home for

a potluck dinner. You can learn a lot about the participant family by meeting in their home, and this will also solve any child care and transportation needs of the participant. Both the participant's children and the volunteer's children can be included. Do not meet in the volunteers' church unless the participant is attending that church. By the end of the first meeting it is usually apparent that both the participant and the volunteers want to proceed. If there are any doubts, the team coordinator should talk to the participant at another time. Be very careful not to do anything that makes the participant feel rejected.

### The Second Meeting *(Goal: To listen and learn)*

Let the participant tell her story at this time; don't offer solutions or fixes or long-term goals. Deal with immediate, urgent problems, such as transportation, child care, and basic needs.

By the end of this meeting, volunteers should understand the basic concerns of the participant, and may work on some immediate needs. However, setting goals should be deferred until the third meeting.

*Please ask the participant to complete the Participant Survey.* (See pages 36–37 of the manual.) This information is essential to chart the participant's progress over the next twelve months. Go over the questions with the participant to make sure she understands what is being asked and how to complete the survey. The participant will also be asked to complete the form at six months and at twelve months. The volunteers and participants should compare each completed survey with the previous one and discuss where changes have occurred and still need to be made. Please mail a copy of the completed form (only the name of the church is needed, not the participant's name) to Faith-Based Welfare Reform, Evergreen Freedom Foundation, P.O. Box 552, Olympia, WA 98507. The data will be compiled and shared with all participating churches to help determine the overall effectiveness of this model.

### The Third Meeting *(Goal: To set achievable goals)*

Hand out copies of Unit 5 of the manual. Ask one of the volunteers to read aloud "The Unbearable Life" on page 18. Discuss your responses to this story and begin to set goals based on Mary's concerns and needs. After allowing ample opportunity for everyone to participate, disagree, and revise the goals, compare the volunteers' goals with those listed on page 20. Note how the goals have been prioritized—it's impossible to deal with every problem at once.

The final section will deal with what to do when progress stops, the participant and the volunteers become frustrated, and no one knows what to do next.

## When Progress Comes to a Halt

The first thing to do when progress comes to a halt (around the third or fourth month of working together) is to review the goals. *The original goals may need to be revised or changed completely.* Sometimes reality intervenes and it becomes apparent that goals are

not achievable or will not help the family become self-sufficient. Another factor which halts progress is ignoring problems. Almost everyone hates confrontation, but it will likely be necessary on one or more occasions. (See “*Confronting in Love*” on page 21 of the manual.) Volunteers should prepare in advance to handle confrontation in a kind and positive way. This type of confrontation encourages the recipient to respond appropriately and to move to the next level.

## **Last Word**

Remember, even though you are volunteers, you probably know the participant family better than any professional. Thus, you are in the best position to assess the family’s strengths and weaknesses and to help them become self-sufficient. Sometimes, even though it looks as though the family is not making progress, changes are taking place inside which will be apparent at some future time. Your investment in this family’s life is priceless and irreplaceable. Be encouraged to finish the work that you have begun, even if you will not see all of the benefits of what you have accomplished.