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**STANFORD** SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

## What Works

### **Let Them Make Fish** **Matching unused resources with unmet needs**

By Victor Wishna

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## PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

### Let Them Make Fish

Matching unused resources with unmet needs by Victor Wishna



Goldman (left), Rogers, and Pearce enjoy a meal prepared by culinary program graduates.

As Kathy Goldman stood in the community kitchen on 116th Street, she realized that something wasn't right. The empty soup kitchen was gleaming. In just a few hours, it would open its doors and serve dinner to some 700 hungry New York City residents, as it had every weeknight for nearly 15 years. But to be sure, something definitely wasn't right.

The kitchen was empty and unused much of the day, but there were plenty of needy people in the neighborhood. How, she wondered, could she best match available resources with community needs?

That was two years ago. Today, the once idle kitchen houses the Community Culinary Training Program, an 11-week course that prepares adults – many of whom live on public assistance – for foodservice jobs with stable salaries and benefits.

"It's all about maximizing," says Goldman, who founded the Community Food Resource Center (CFRC) in New York

City nearly a quarter century ago. "[It's] about paying attention to what can be done with what you already have. You can always think of something else to do."

The CFRC began in 1980 as a small child-nutrition advocacy organization. It has swelled into a far-reaching non-profit with a \$6 million annual budget and 105 full-time staff supporting more than a dozen direct-service programs aimed at feeding the hungry. Each year, CFRC serves more than 250,000 meals to children, adults, and senior citizens through its "Meals on Heels" program. Offices in Manhattan and the Bronx also give 2,100 families a year the legal advice they need to stave off eviction. CFRC annually helps people in more than 35,000 households access government benefits such as food stamps.

Goldman's vision for the culinary training program was a



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Strategies, Approaches, Developments



completely new venture for CFRC. She knew, therefore, that she needed to start off by educating herself.

“We wanted to make sure that it was needed,” Goldman said. “I didn’t want to find that there were three other [culinary training programs] on the same block.”

Goldman and her staff conducted an informal study of other neighborhood services, and spoke with other culinary training advocates in the city. Nothing like it existed for miles.

The next step, Goldman said, was to verify that the training program would be useful. She had plenty of anecdotal evidence indicating that it could be: Many of those who ate dinner at the kitchen each night expressed interest in a training program. But Goldman knew she couldn’t raise money on anecdotes alone. So CFRC began collecting data from Infoshare, an urban census project developed by City University of New York faculty members.

Goldman drew up a budget, determining that the annual cost of the program would be about \$200,000 – about \$6,000 per graduate, or less than 4 percent of CFRC’s total budget. She first approached the Robin Hood Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit that funds poverty fighting, with whom CFRC had worked for more than a decade. She presented a conceptual plan for the culinary training program, carefully detailing how it would work, who would be served, and how it would capitalize on existing resources like the community kitchen.

Goldman made the case that access to available resources would actually make the training more effective. The kitchen would provide trainees with hands-on cooking experience. Other programs, she noted, often relied on catering assignments; if business was slow, training stopped. Furthermore, she said, those who already ate at the kitchen were a ready, willing, and able pool of potential trainees.

“We were really impressed with the efficiency of combining the programs,” said Suzi Epstein, Robin Hood’s managing director for job training grants. “They showed that they could also provide follow-up ... they knew their job didn’t end with placement.”

Robin Hood offered CFRC enough to get started – a \$100,000 grant in 2000, which it has renewed each year since.

Rather than sit back and wait for the rest of the money to come in, Goldman plowed ahead with her plans, hiring a staff person to launch the program.

“I have this feeling,” she said, “if you start something that is desperately needed by people and make a whole lot of noise if you don’t get funded, then something good *will* happen.”

In this case, her persistence paid off. CFRC raised another \$125,000 from the Tiger and Clark foundations, and the culinary training program was off.

The early numbers were not encouraging. Only four of 15 trainees made it all the way through the first session, which ended in the spring of 2001. The program’s Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. schedule left no leeway if a student lost day care for a child or a family member fell ill. CFRC responded by toughening the screening process and leaving a longer lead

time between selection and start date, so that students could make necessary arrangements.

After the first session, CFRC added a full-time staff member to help students with life skills training. Kym Pearce, who leads life skills workshops, encourages students to talk about their domestic problems, and sometimes intercedes in a crisis. When one trainee’s home burned down, Pearce helped her win a federal Section 8 housing subsidy, enabling her to get an apartment. She also found affordable care for another trainee’s sick daughter.

“That’s an essential element to any training program for a population like this,” says Calvin Rogers, the institute’s job

developer, who cultivates contacts among potential employers. “If you don’t help take care of those issues, you’re not going to keep the student.”

At the end of its second year, the culinary program is starting to live up to Goldman’s vision. It has produced 56 graduates, 39 of whom are employed full time – mainly in hotel and corporate foodservice jobs. The youngest graduate is 18; the oldest is 63. They earn anywhere from minimum wage to \$18 an hour, and they graduate with life skills that include money management and interviewing techniques.

This fall, on the course’s last day, nine trainees showed their flair for salmon steaks. Family members came to celebrate at a lunch that also included Greek salad, rosemary chicken, roasted potatoes, and marinated vegetables.

As Alcide Santana, a recent graduate, stood to accept her certificate, she was overcome with emotion.

“This,” she said, standing in the kitchen that had been silent just two years before, “is the place to start.” □

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