



From the War on Poverty

To an Economy that Works for All

A Case Study for the
Women Donors Network

By Beth Shulman
March 2006



Women Donors Network

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Works for All*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Around the turn of the millennium, advocates focused on bettering the lives of America's poor people came to see that the prevailing frame of discussion was counter-productive. This "anti-poverty" frame spotlighted the hard lives of poor individuals and their compelling personal stories, generating compassion and support for programs to help them. Unfortunately, conservative critics had focused relentlessly on those programs' problems and occasional abuses. Their repetitive calls for "welfare reform" linked poverty, in the public mind, to "the welfare state," and aid recipients to "cheats" whose poor choices, low moral standards and irresponsible behavior created their own poverty. They ignored the key issue – that the root causes of poverty were to be found in the systemic failures of the U.S. economy to provide adequate wages, benefits or safety nets.

Dramatic personal stories tended to reinforce prevailing attitudes, legitimizing a "fix the person" response that emphasized counseling and education of individuals. But this approach blamed the victim and did nothing to change the way that the economy employs millions of Americans who work full-time yet remain below the poverty line. In contrast, academics, foundations, think tanks and other policy experts sought to "fix the system" that was creating so many poor people.

In 2001, the Ford Foundation funded an extensive research and framing effort to reach the public in different ways and to alter their perceptions about the working poor. An initial media analysis found the "fix the person" model to be prevalent: Individual failure was seen as the root of poverty. In focus groups, participants were skeptical about the government's capacity to combat poverty; participants tended to favor a "free market" economy, free of government intervention. Public opinion polls confirmed these findings.

The strongest alternative frame for issues was found to be one that showed poverty as an economic situation linked to the broad values of responsibility and planning for the future by all Americans. Implicit in the finding was the concept that businesses and civic organizations could help find ways that Americans could work together to create and invest in an economy that supports families and strengthens

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communities. The best frame shifted from a focus on the working poor to a focus on an “economy that works

for all” with an emphasis on low-wage work itself. It stressed that the economy is not a force of nature, but the product of past decisions and plans that can, and should, change.

A Web site for anti-poverty activists (www.EconomyThatWorks.org) featured these reports, and disseminated a toolkit for incorporating the new messages into organizations’ communications and policies. The research team made more than two dozen presentations to involved groups, trained spokespeople, held workshops and presented the new frame at journalism conferences. Meanwhile, a stagnant U.S. economy and recurrent corporate scandals provided a ready news hook for journalists seeking to highlight and explain the situation to their audiences.

In 2003, the Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work was launched. The goal was to change public policy to ensure that working Americans have the basics of a decent life – by generating public debate, educating the news media, improving and increasing news coverage, strengthening the capacity of advocacy groups to deliver the new messages, and moving policy objectives at the local, state and national levels. With support from the Ford Foundation and the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the team assembled a Media Strategies Group to reach out to the “Five As”: advocacy groups, authors, academics, activists and agenda-setters, including media representatives and elected officials. The objective was to nurture cooperation and partnership in promoting a new public understanding of low-wage work issues.

While advocacy groups and activists were trained to deliver the new messages through media briefings, op-ed pieces and ballot initiatives, agenda-setters were directed to the Initiative’s new Web site (www.lowwagework.org) for fact sheets, contacts, news releases and reviews of books by the collaborating authors. Academic participants held seminars and conferences on poverty and its systemic causes, which were echoed by columnists and pundits. Legislators found themselves pressed for action to raise the minimum wage and mandate family leave.

The results have been gratifying. In-depth media coverage of economic causes of poverty ballooned: the Associated Press coverage of low-wage work actually doubled from 2001 to 2005. The new frame is broadly evident, as illustrated in a Nov. 15, 2003, editorial in *The New York Times* entitled “The Wal-Martization of America,” which made clear that the problems of working Americans have resulted from changes in the U.S. economy, not from any failure of Wal-Mart employees. Policy change is also underway, amid continued press scrutiny, as demonstrated by two recent stories in *The New York Times*: “States Take Lead in Push to Raise Minimum Wages” (Jan. 1, 2006) and “Wal-Mart in Their Sights, States Press for Health Benefits” (Jan. 5, 2006). The role of the economic system in creating low-wage work and policies to change the situation are becoming the focus of the national discussion of what to do about poverty.

LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons of the Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work could be applied to any long-term campaign to reframe the debate on a major social-political issue:

- Engaging the “Five As” is a key step in success for both framing and adoption of the frames. The Five As are: advocacy groups, including grantees; authors, including Shulman; academics, especially at the Russell Sage Foundation; activists engaged politically nationwide; and agenda-setters, including media representatives and elected officials. All have crucial roles to play in achieving the goals.
- Shared values are at the heart of developing alternative frames and messages.
- State-of-the-art research and analysis are critical to understanding the relationship of an issue to larger trends and cultural values, so as to devise the most compelling approaches. Framing is a complex undertaking that must be carefully approached; without these fact-based steps, a frame is nothing more than marketing.
- The best frames are useful only if key groups, spokespeople and policymakers embrace and use the frames, and are involved in the process; there must be ownership of the process.

- Advocates and activists must be flexible and open-minded about evaluating the degree to which an approach is working or not working, if any change is to be made.
- A high-functioning coordinating body (such as the Media Strategies Group) is essential to conduct the meetings and discussions, over a year or so, that will be needed to forge a working and efficient collaboration. Such a body is needed to minimize overlap and conflict and to respond quickly to changing events.
- Many different news hooks must be found for the same message if it is to penetrate and change existing media and public mindsets. Links must be forged to breaking news and social trends in order to generate the desired buzz around the new approach.
- Success requires patience, time, perseverance and a continuous process of reaching out aggressively to the “Five As” to build on momentum generated in the early stages.

BACKGROUND

In 1964, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, in his first State of the Union address, launched the War on Poverty. Liberal activists, think tanks, academics and foundations joined up, and over the next three decades they created a system of assistance and subsidy programs aimed at helping the poor to help themselves. Conservatives labeled this system “the welfare state,” spotlighted the abuses and problems it encountered, and fostered a public attitude that stigmatized welfare recipients as lazy, irresponsible and undeserving.

In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA) rewrote the welfare system and sent millions of Americans into the workforce. In spite of the fact that most low-income Americans are now working, the notion of poverty is still connected in the public’s eye to welfare “cheats” and abuse. The public recognizes poverty as a “major” or “big” problem in poll after poll, and acknowledges that it has gotten worse, but still tends to believe that it is largely a personal problem, not a societal one – the result of bad choices people make, or of their low moral standards.

The fact that most of those left behind in the New Orleans flood were poor and black is being treated by the press as a stunning revelation – “A National Shame” is how a cover story in *Newsweek* described it. We don’t know yet if media coverage of Hurricane Katrina will help to change public attitudes toward poverty and government’s role in ending it. What we do know is that core American values are hard work and self-sufficiency. “It’s better to teach a man to fish than to give him a fish” is a deep-seated belief, along with “help people help themselves.” No matter how many facts people get about poverty and its larger social causes, they retain these frames of reference about its possible solutions.

Many people, particularly liberal Democrats, do understand the systemic connections, but even they often voice the view that most people are poor because they have made bad choices. There is genuine sympathy for the poor, but if personal decisions or stubbornness are viewed as the reasons for poverty (and the Bible says “the poor will always be with us”), then nothing that government does can cure it. Case closed.

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The argument is reinforced by widespread skepticism that government can do anything right in any field. It is little

wonder that public reaction is negative when advocates for the poor call for government programs to eliminate poverty.

Over the past 10 years, anti-poverty groups – and a multitude of them still have the word “poverty” in their names – have been slow to understand this connection. In fact, they have accidentally worked hard to reinforce the erroneous “personal responsibility” frame of poverty’s roots by offering and repeating dramatic and compelling personal stories about poor people and their horrible situations. This promotes a “fix the person” response, when what we really need to do is “fix the system” that is creating so many poor people.

Many advocates worked to end this communications form of “friendly fire.” They first tried to broaden the focus to the needs of “the working poor,” on the theory that if the public comes to understand the way that many hard-working people follow the rules toward the American Dream and are still struggling to get by, they would respond with a surge in concern and efforts to provide the necessary support system. But the term was not getting the lift needed to move an agenda. With real foresight, the Ford Foundation, spearheaded by Senior Program Officer Helen Neuborne, funded an extensive research and framing effort to determine how to mount a campaign to educate the public about the working poor.

MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT

Douglas Gould and Company (DG&C) and Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge were engaged to do extensive opinion research on how to best frame the issues facing low-income Americans so as to change public policy to respond to their needs. DG&C brought together a diverse advisory group of academics, activists and grantees who developed a list of possible public policies to help “working poor” families. DG&C and Bostrom used this list in focus groups.

Analysis began with a review of poverty coverage by media outlets for the six-month period between February 1, 2001, and July 31, 2001. Articles and editorials were examined to determine attitudes toward low-wage work, low-wage workers and poverty. In its report, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place—An Analysis of the Portrayal of Low-Wage Workers in the Media*, DG&C found that radio and TV simply tuned out the working poor – they were invisible. When newspapers covered the story, it was generally in the metro news section, showing the working poor as sympathetic individuals stuck in a bad situation, falling behind and unable to climb the economic ladder. Media specialists speculated that this lack of coverage was because editors felt these issues were of little concern to their readers.

With this analysis in hand, DG&C and Bostrom looked at public opinion data on issues related to poverty and upward mobility, including perceptions of the poor. *Achieving the American Dream: A Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion Concerning Poverty, Upward Mobility and Related Issues* (2001) suggested that past efforts to address poverty have been hampered by the following core American beliefs:

- Each individual is responsible for his or her own success or failure.
- With hard work comes reward.
- The goal is equal opportunity, not equal outcome.
- Anyone can achieve the American Dream.

The report's key conclusion was that the dominant news frame in stories of working poor people and their problems underscores the belief that individual failures are at the root of poverty. This coverage does not help the public see the systemic causes of most poverty, the illusory nature of the American Dream, or the need for systemic solutions, and in fact tends to block any such vision.

The report also found that one of the biggest barriers to policy change is public skepticism about government's ability to address poverty, or that poverty can be eliminated. This indicated that messages offering specific solutions would be much more persuasive than vague calls for government to take more responsibility.

Advocates need to ask the public this question: How are we going to plan responsibly today, and make investments in society today, for an economy that works for all?

A third Ford report, *Responsibility and Opportunity* (2002), using 18 focus groups and one-on-one interviews, found that the issue of the work-

ing poor is best positioned within the broad category of the economy, capitalism and prosperity, rather than the category of poverty and the poor. The study also showed that most Americans' mental model of the economy is as a "free market" that should be unconstrained and free of government intervention. Policies to assist the working poor will always be subject to effective attack as inappropriate government intervention in business – unless an alternative model of the economy is put forward.

DG&C and Bostrom then designed a series of hypotheses to test ways to communicate effectively on behalf of policies to assist the working poor. Surveys looked at a variety of existing frames, communications approaches, and patterns of response across various scenarios, and also sought to determine the most effective messengers.

This analysis found that the strongest frame for issues related to poverty was as an economic issue linked to the broad values of responsibility and planning for the future. *Responsible Planning for the Future: An Analysis of Survey Research Regarding Communicating the Issues of Low-Wage Work* (2002), authored by DG&C and Bostrom and based on the findings of a national survey of registered voters, found that any successful message must describe ways that Americans can work together to create and invest in an economy that supports families and strengthens communities. Advocates need to ask the public this question: How are we going to plan responsibly today, and make investments in society today, for an economy that works for all?

More important were findings that the best frame shifted from a focus on the working poor to a focus on low-wage work – not workers. By putting the spotlight on the work itself, the frame avoids blaming the victims, many of whom have college degrees.

In sum, the DG&C and Bostrom analysis teaches us that we must:

- Start the discussion with a focus on values, not specific policies;
- Focus on work, not on individual workers or on “sympathy for the poor” stories;
- Stress that the economy is not a force of nature but the product of previous decisions, and that policymakers regularly make adjustments in our economy to benefit one group over another;
- Speak in terms of ways to plan our economy so that it works for all Americans;
- Focus on compelling stories that illuminate systemic problems and solutions; and
- Include grantees and activist organizations in the process for adopting frames.

A Web site was developed for activists featuring these reports and a toolkit for communications (described further on page 16). The researchers made more than two dozen presentations to key organizations nationwide, providing training for spokespersons and communications workshops to more than 500 community activists. While there was pushback from some organizations concerned that it would be counter-productive to move away from individual stories, most believed that a change in the frame was needed. To bring the message to journalists, the authors went to journalism conferences and showed reporters that framing issues differently brings the public to different conclusions.

The flaws of the economic system also were becoming more apparent as average Americans’ wages stagnated, more and more were without health insurance, everyone had greater difficulty balancing work and family, and fewer Americans had basic retirement security. This made it easier to focus media attention on the system itself rather than on individuals’ problems.

As the economy continued to worsen and corporate scandals appeared in the news, the Ford Foundation sought to update its research. The second phase was conducted in 2004 and resulted in two reports. The first, *Broken Communities: Planning for Tomorrow*, by Public Knowledge, found through focus groups that the current climate provides an

opportunity to educate the public about how the economy works and the role of low-wage workers.

The second report, *Together for Success*, also by Public Knowledge, gave the results of a “priming survey,” a unique and rigorous way to quantify the impact of various communications frames on the public’s understanding of the issues and their support for policies. This survey found that the economic planning frame was the most successful at building support for policy change among a range of target audiences.

ESTABLISHING THE FAIRNESS INITIATIVE ON LOW-WAGE WORK

Drawing on work already done by the Ford Foundation, the Communications Consortium Media Center (CCMC), in collaboration with author Beth Shulman, launched the Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work in 2003. The goal was to change public policy to ensure that working Americans have the basics of a decent life.

In concert with the “Five As” – advocates, authors, academics, activists and agenda-setters – the initiative focused on adoption of the new frame, dissemination of information to mainstream media, and collaboration on key policy objectives. In furtherance of these goals, it aimed:

1. To generate and engage the public in debate about the failure of low-wage work to provide more than 30 million Americans with a living wage, health care, time off to be with their families and other basic necessities;
2. To educate the news media to change the way the public thinks and talks about our economy, from seeing it as a “force of nature” or “invisible hand” upon which the public has no influence, to recognizing it as something we can shape to reflect our national values of fairness and access to equal opportunity for all working families;

3. To increase the quantity and quality of coverage about low-wage work in print, broadcast and radio news outlets, and to shift the focus of the coverage away from individuals in low-wage jobs to the ways in which the U.S. economic system has failed these people;
4. To strengthen the communications capacity of campaign spokespeople, academic experts and advocacy organizations to increase public support for workers in low-wage jobs over the long term, and to develop collaboration among advocacy groups on messages and media outreach; and
5. To develop a strategic campaign focused on targeted policy objectives, identified in collaboration with the Media Strategies Group. These policy objectives include increasing the minimum wage and requiring paid family leave, starting with paid sick leave.

The team began by listing advocacy groups, interest groups, activists, researchers, media and U.S. policymakers involved in this issue. It then assembled a Media Strategies Group for the Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work, composed of leaders from key organizations, advocates for workers in low-wage jobs, and social scientists who study the issue. Members of the group also understood the importance of media in changing public policy. Both the Ford Foundation and the Nathan Cummings Foundation provided significant support for this project.

THE FIVE As: Advocacy Groups, Authors, Academics, Activists and Agenda-Setters

ADVOCACY GROUPS (including grantees)

One of the most important factors in our success in reframing poverty issues into a discussion of low-wage work has been outreach to advocacy groups around the country.

The Media Strategies Group

Understanding that everyone benefits when an issue becomes salient for the media and the public, the team wanted to guide key advocacy groups to the table and keep them there over the long haul, encouraging them to view each other as partners, not competitors. This approach nurtures cooperation and a common communications agenda that advances everyone's interests, making the most of collective resources, building skills and multiplying impact. The process also leaves each participating organization stronger, with its own independent strategic communications capacity.

The first meeting of the Media Strategies Group was held in the fall of 2003: a half-day session among nine nonprofit groups working on low-wage issues. Since then, the group has met nine more times and has expanded to more than 20 organizations (see page 28 for a list of participants). Each meeting has featured a discussion of appropriate and effective low-wage work messages and dissemination strategies, drawing upon social science research, public opinion polling and media analyses.

Throughout this project, CCMC partnered with the framers at Douglas Gould and Company. The team brought to the Media Strategies Group the most current research on messaging around low-wage issues, and nurtured the group into a working collaboration. The group was provided with all Ford Foundation-sponsored reports and all materials developed by DG&C, with in-depth presentations on those materials. Other important policy data also was provided, including the work

of Peter D. Hart Research Associates on low-wage work issues for Corporate Voices for Working Families.

A second media analysis was conducted of news coverage of low-wage work issues from August 1, 2001, through September 30, 2003. A total of 411 articles from eight major newspapers were evaluated on ways the media frame the issue of low-wage work, and where opportunities might arise to reframe the debate. The analysis also tracked which non-profit organizations and policy/research organizations were most often quoted on the issue.

This analysis concluded that while many articles showed sensitivity to the variety of workforce supports that workers in low-wage jobs would need in order to provide the basics for themselves and their families, little reporting on low-wage work focused on the economic system rather than the individual worker. Since then, regular monitoring of news coverage has used this information as a baseline for further analysis.

Members also use each meeting to review their own initiatives over the preceding few months and to highlight upcoming activities on low-wage work that might provide news hooks for use by other group members. For example, at the July 2004 meeting, the Economic Policy Institute previewed its *State of Working America* report that was set for release on Labor Day 2004. This led to an energetic discussion of media outreach strategies that could promote news coverage at appropriate times for any study, in this case near Labor Day weekend.

Between Media Strategies Group gatherings, CCMC Vice President Phil Sparks and Beth Shulman meet with participants individually to inform them of other members' activities and to foster collaboration on joint press releases, respond to reports on low-wage work and develop other ways to promote low-wage issues. They also give technical communications assistance where needed to help each participant carry out organizational goals with respect to low-wage work.

Most groups have now shifted to talking about the economy and low-wage work and about the need to plan for an economy that works for all Americans.

By the end of the second year of project work, the Media Strategies Group had coalesced enough to choose some policy

targets: an increase in the minimum wage and a required paid family leave, starting with paid sick leave.

To further disseminate the new message frame, Shulman gave a series of speeches to key advocacy groups throughout the country on the need to reframe the issue of poverty as a systemic economic problem that could be changed by policy shifts. The goal was to persuade these groups to change their approach, and in the process to create a consistent message for the media that would be helpful in moving a policy agenda. While some groups felt they had to stick to the “individual sympathy” stories, most groups have now shifted to talking about the economy and low-wage work and about the need to plan for an economy that works for all Americans.

Training Sessions and Workshops

In addition to spreading the message, advocates have participated in a series of media-readiness training sessions on how best to deliver the message to key spokespeople. Additionally, DG&C conducted a half-day media training session for eight key spokespersons from the Media Strategies Group. The session included mock interviews and tips on how to prepare for a media interview.

Web Site: www.EconomyThatWorks.org

As part of its outreach to the advocacy community, Douglas Gould and Company designed a Web site, EconomyThatWorks.org, which includes, among other tools, a communications toolkit and reports about messaging. The site is targeted to the nonprofit community, and its information now includes electronic “how-to” sections on media strategies for nonprofits. The objective is to spread understanding of techniques that can “get the message out” to advocates and individuals

especially those beyond Washington and New York City. Topics include organizing a media event, writing an op-ed piece for a local newspaper, and seeking and holding a meeting with an editorial board. The online tips are available to the Media Strategies Group and their affiliates who may not be able to connect to the larger group or attend the technical assistance workshops. (A second Web site for the media is described on page 21.)

Press Lists

To further support advocacy groups, a state-by-state list was compiled of hundreds of reporters who cover low-wage issues across the country. The list includes about 1,400 reporters, editorial writers and columnists, assignment editors and news directors. It is available to any nonprofit group working on these issues and already has been used by a dozen or more organizations for their own media outreach. The list also has been combined with others developed by Media Strategies Group members.

Media Coverage Monitoring

News coverage is continually monitored to ascertain trends in reporting and in opinion columns on this issue, and to see what impact our message dissemination and media outreach has over time. News clips demonstrate the effectiveness of the initiative: they show an ever-deeper level of analysis of the issues related to low-wage work and their interconnectedness.

Each business day, the project searches LexisNexis and Google News for stories relating to low-wage work. On a twice-weekly basis, it distributes the top 10 to 15 “must-read” stories, columns, editorials and op-eds to a growing listserv that now includes about 120 key nonprofit advocacy groups, research organizations and foundations.

This service keeps interested organizations and individuals up-to-date on recent news coverage and also serves as a rapid-response mechanism when necessary. Through it, subscribers are encouraged to send a letter to an editor or submit an op-ed in response to an inaccurate or poorly framed piece. For example, when former Federal Reserve Chairman

Alan Greenspan asserted in July 2004 that growing U.S. income inequality largely reflects differences in workers' education and job skills, not an underlying problem with the economy, Beth Shulman penned an op-ed in response that ran in *The Washington Post* on Sept. 26, 2004.

Advocates also receive a bi-weekly one- to three-page analysis of the key low-wage press clips, summarizing media trends on these issues and spotlighting both positive and negative trends. This facilitates a coordinated response to negative coverage and assists partner organizations in maximizing opportunities created by positive trends.

Ad hoc media outreach advice also has been given to nonprofits releasing their own reports or holding press events on low-wage work issues. Assistance included drafting op-eds and preparing press conferences. Six audio news conferences were conducted for reporters covering low-wage work issues nationally and in California, Massachusetts and Michigan.

AUTHORS

In 2001, Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* focused on the degrading conditions of low-wage work and became a best seller. However, it offered no policy alternatives, although its success illuminated possible ways to use books to generate interest around ideas.

When CCMC and Beth Shulman joined forces in 2003, Shulman's book, *The Betrayal of Work: How Low-Wage Jobs Fail 30 Million Americans* was set to be published in September 2003. It did offer new ideas on policies to change the situation. The book became the natural focal point for engaging the media in a discussion of low-wage work and for helping to reframe the issue.

A nationwide campaign was developed to promote Shulman as a spokesperson on this issue, with the book as a news hook. The campaign was successful. Shulman appeared on numerous television and radio news and talk shows, including CNN's "Lou Dobbs Tonight," ABC news, "NOW with Bill Moyers," PBS' "To the Contrary," and several NPR programs. And, in early 2006, she appeared on the "Oprah

Winfrey Show.” Her book was reviewed in *Business Week* and *USA Today*, among other places. It provided a reason to reach out to editorial boards and hundreds of reporters to talk about poverty and reframe it as a problem of our economy and its rules surrounding work, not a problem of individual failure. Thus, the book itself became a vehicle to attract media attention and ensure message discipline.

ACADEMICS

Two Russell Sage academic forums were held in 2004 to provide advocates and media with current social science research on low-wage work. The academic emphasis helps give credibility to the messages that go to media and decision-makers. The first forum, “Is it Time for a New War on Poverty?” took place at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on January 8, 2004 – the 40th anniversary of the State of the Union address in which Lyndon Johnson announced the War on Poverty. The forum featured Russell Sage Foundation (RSF) Future of Work scholars Sheldon Danziger of the University of Michigan and Rosemary Batt of Cornell University.

PBS and NPR economics reporter Sheilah Kast moderated the discussion, which addressed such questions as “What happened to the ‘war on poverty’?” “What progress was made in fighting poverty in the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s?” and “What must we do today to reignite a new war on poverty aimed at ensuring that everyone who works earns a livable income?”

The second forum, “Beyond the Unemployment Figures,” was held May 27, 2004, also in Washington, D.C. Featured speakers included Frank Levy, RSF Future of Work Scholar and the Daniel Rose Professor of Urban Economics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, along with Sheldon Danziger and Beth Shulman, discussing the types of new jobs created in recent months. Many are low-wage positions with few benefits and little prospect for advancement. The forum was recorded and a copy of the transcript was disseminated to more than 500 reporters via e-mail, with a cover note encouraging reporters to go to the Fairness Initiative Web site for additional information and resources (the Web site is described on page 21).

Spearheaded by activist groups like ACORN, using many of the messages developed through this campaign, several ballot initiatives to increase the state minimum wage were approved by voters.

In addition to the forums, other academic work that focuses on the deficiencies of low-wage work and our ability to change

the economy has been featured on the Web site.

ACTIVISTS

As many critical activities begin at state and local levels, outreach to activist groups has been essential. One of the first involved media strategy workshops. These were designed to help grassroots activists and organizations deliver the low-wage work messages effectively at the local level. They explained the basics of local and state-based strategic communications, emphasizing press initiatives that are doable at minimum expense and staff effort. Subjects included media briefings, news conferences, editorial board meetings, letters to the editor, op-ed pieces and one-on-one press contacts. How-to sessions covered setting up audio news conferences for reporters across the country, and issuing radio news releases in a region where research data is being published.

Efforts to reframe the issues of poverty have been successful at the local level. Spearheaded by activist groups like ACORN, using many of the messages developed through this campaign, several ballot initiatives to increase the state minimum wage were approved by voters. Florida and Nevada, two states that went heavily for George W. Bush in the 2004 election, passed state minimum wage laws by referendum at the same time. Campaigns are now underway in Arizona, Michigan and Ohio. Similar success is evident in state campaigns to provide paid sick leave and family leave.

As part of its outreach to the activist community, activists were encouraged to use the Web site, EconomyThatWorks.org. CCMC and Shulman help activists to better use these tools by helping to draft op-eds and assisting in press conferences, outreach to media, and message delivery.

AGENDA-SETTERS

Media

The Fairness Initiative Web Site and E-mobilizing

Beginning in the fall of 2003, input was sought from Media Strategies Group members and others about information to post on the Fairness Initiative Web site (www.lowwagework.org). Since its launch in April 2004, the site has been a one-stop resource for media seeking information on low-wage work and access to the experts and organizations that focus on this issue.

A notice launching the site generated requests for additional information from reporters at more than a dozen outlets, ranging from the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *USA Today* to *The Washington Post*. During its first two months, the Web site received more than 10,000 unique visitors.

The Web site has a number of separate “compartments” of information:

- The “story of low-wage work,” with a focus on the messages developed by DG&C;
- Fact sheets that offer data on low-wage workers and low-wage work;
- News clips that are updated every week, keeping coverage current;
- Lists of organizations and experts that offer reporters sources to interview on low-wage work;
- Reviews of books that cover all aspects of low-wage work, with information on how to contact book authors;
- New reports and background papers on low-wage work issues, both national and state-based;
- News releases on studies and reports;
- Electronic transcripts of two “Future of Work” forums sponsored by the Fairness Initiative with the Russell Sage Foundation;

- Upcoming events that signal coverage opportunities; and
- Materials beyond those supplied by the Media Strategies Group, such as those from other national groups and state-based groups doing substantial research.

A media tracking service was created for interested individuals and organizations on this issue, based on the successful model of the PUSH (Periodic Updates on Sexual and Reproductive Health) Journal (www.pushjournal.org) that CCMC maintains for its work on global population. This service provides regular news clips by e-mail to interested reporters and researchers on a variety of subjects of the users' choosing. In this case, options include minimum wage/living wage, child care, housing, health insurance, sick leave, budget cuts, etc. More than 100 key reporters, advocates and researchers receive regular full-text stories via e-mail on topics they select.

The source of the articles is LexisNexis, which draws from more than 36,000 publications. The journal allows reporters to see what other reporters have written on low-wage work issues in a unique format: the full unedited text, provided without commentary. These clips are an easy and valuable way for reporters to keep up-to-date on low-wage issues, and they can inspire story ideas and new angles. For example, clips were circulated to journalists on the 40th anniversary of the War on Poverty in spring 2005, and stories ran in several newspapers as a result. A half-dozen other newspapers ran local-angle stories on the same concept.

The media tracking service encourages additional newspaper coverage of low-wage issues because of the subtle “copycat” or “pack” element in media work. No reporter or outlet wants to miss an important story. Reporters often decide on items for their own markets by reading what has been published elsewhere. The service simply capitalizes on this trend.

Legislators

Many advocate groups and activists work continually with federal and state legislators to pass legislation to improve the lives of low-wage workers. Their reports and legislative advocacy have been instrumental

in focusing the message around low-wage work. With journalists and the public growing more and more receptive to these new

Many more stories now are not just simple ones about individual workers but focus on the economic context and the quality of jobs in the economy.

frames, the consistent drumbeat that is growing around these issues resonates with legislators. The frame has moved off the sympathy stories and on to a more productive frame, in which legislators are considering ways to plan an economy that works for all Americans. Legislators are more comfortable with this approach because it responds to the perceived needs of all their constituents, not just the poor.

RESULTS

Evidence abounds that major mainstream media outlets are beginning to “get” the story of low-wage work. It shows in weekly press clips gathered over the past few years, such as the in-depth articles in *Business Week*, *The Washington Post* and *USA Today*, and in the series of articles about class in America in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Los Angeles Times*. The change was captured in *The New York Times* editorial on November 15, 2003, entitled “The Wal-Martization of America.” The editorial understood that the problems facing working Americans result from a change in the economy, not from any failure of the individuals who work at Wal-Mart.

In January 2006, *The New York Times Magazine* featured the fairness issue on the cover with a piece titled, “What is a Living Wage?” In this in-depth piece the author explains how minimum wage/living wage proposals are being won across the country by positioning it as a moral-values issue. Late in January, “The Oprah Winfrey Show” invited Beth Shulman to appear as part of a show profiling low-wage work issues. Shulman’s book and the project’s Web site. The show is expected to air in March 2006.

Many more stories today are more than just simple ones about individual workers, and focus on the economic context and the quality of jobs in the economy. And now, more often than not, value-laden descriptions

such as “working poor” or “low-income workers” are replaced by terms like “low-wage work” that indicate a shift in attitude toward a more systemic analysis of the issues.

The latest DG&C media tracking count found that the Associated Press coverage of low-wage work issues actually doubled from 2001 to 2005, reflecting greater activity around core issues such as minimum wage, family/work issues and health care. While improvement is still needed in reporters’ use of the broader economic frame, the report showed that advocates are on the right track. Op-eds and letters to the editor now frame issues more effectively. This indicates the success of recent efforts to build capacity of progressive advocacy groups and activists and train them in message delivery.

These signs of progress have not resulted by accident. First, the low-wage work community generally accepted the messages developed from materials formulated by DG&C and Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge, through Ford Foundation support. Advocates, spokespersons, and activists at the national, state and local levels responded positively to survey research and message points raised through coordinated workshops, briefings, Russell Sage Foundation Forums and the Web sites. The messages are now being seen in advocates’ reports, speeches and interactions with policymakers, and therefore they are echoed in the media. Our messages about low-wage work are becoming the terms of the national discussion of what to do about poverty.

At the same time, the Media Strategies Group has matured in its operations and cohesion. Participants with no history of working together show much greater mutual trust and coordination. The group is now working on specific policy goals related to increasing the minimum wage and easing work/family conflicts, and in 2006 added children’s health insurance as an issue of concern. At the state level, we have seen successes with both minimum wage and paid leave initiatives.

But many challenges still confront the efforts to sustain and expand low-wage work messages among critical spokespeople and organizations. We must ensure that the media continue to view these points as appropriate for their stories and articles. The task is to turn more stories and articles from simple articulation of the problems of low-wage work

into deeper looks at systemic problems and at the changes needed to solve those problems.

If we are ultimately to win in the public policy arena and create lasting change for Americans in low-wage jobs, we must use the media to get our messages out and to keep the messages resonating over time with the public. At the same time we need to deepen the coordination among Media Strategies Group participants. We have achieved significant victories in state-level minimum wage and paid family leave initiatives; through greater coordination those successes will multiply.

FACTORS IN SUCCESS AT REFRAMING

1. Engaging the “Five As” – advocates, authors, academics, activists and agenda-setters – was crucial to this campaign.
2. CCMC and DG&C brought leaders together who were flexible in approaching the issue and were not wedded to the defunct frame of personal stories.
3. State-of-the-art research and analysis of media and public perceptions of poverty and of hypothetical frames tied the issue to larger trends, leading to the most compelling way to talk about the issue to a wide range of target audiences.
4. A coordinated and energetic effort brought the reframed messages to advocates and activists in persuasive ways, changing their approaches to the issue. The fact that many were failing to bring public support to low-income Americans helped them focus on the need for change. Reminding them that talking about an issue differently did not violate any sacred oath but would help accomplish their goals brought many groups around to the reframed message.
5. A high-functioning Media Strategies Group was essential in disseminating information at the national and state levels and producing the coordination needed to begin to change public policy. About a year of meetings and discussion were required before successful joint activities could be undertaken. Further, one-on-one discussions were still needed to expedite the process and assure collaboration.

6. Aggressive use of Beth Shulman's book *The Betrayal of Work: How Low-Wage Jobs Fail 30 Million Americans* helped jump-start the campaign and get the reframed message out quickly to advocacy groups and the media. Continual use of different news hooks let advocates continue to talk with the media about this issue and helped deepen the level of coverage.
7. Campaign timing coincided with the "reform" movement from welfare to work that allowed a focus on the poor as working people rather than as non-working "welfare recipients." Work has a very positive value in the minds of Americans and helped move the debate to the subject of ensuring a fair economy of opportunities for all, rather than requiring rebuttal of negative attitudes toward the poor and misperceptions of individuals on welfare.
8. The flaws of the economic system became more apparent in this period, as average Americans' wages stagnated, more and more were without health insurance, employees had greater difficulty balancing work and family, and fewer Americans had basic retirement security. This made it easier to focus media attention on the system itself rather than on individuals' problems.
9. The value of patience and perseverance in working with advocacy groups and the media was a major lesson from this campaign. Success requires a continual process of reaching out aggressively to advocacy groups and the media to continue momentum in reframing the debate to change public policy.

LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons of the Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work could be applied to any long-term campaign to reframe the debate on a major social-political issue:

- Engaging the “Five As” is a key step in success for both framing and adoption of the frames. The Five As are: advocacy groups, including grantees; authors, including Shulman; academics, especially at the Russell Sage Foundation; activists engaged politically nationwide; and agenda-setters, including media representatives and elected officials. All have crucial roles to play in achieving the goals.
- Shared values are at the heart of developing alternative frames and messages.
- State-of-the-art research and analysis are critical to understanding the relationship of an issue to larger trends and cultural values, so as to devise the most compelling approaches. Framing is a complex undertaking that must be carefully approached; without these fact-based steps, a frame is nothing more than marketing.
- The best frames are useful only if key groups, spokespeople and policymakers embrace and use the frames, and are involved in the process; there must be ownership of the process.
- Advocates and activists must be flexible and open-minded about evaluating the degree to which an approach is working or not working, if any change is to be made.
- A high-functioning coordinating body (such as the Media Strategies Group) is essential to conduct the meetings and discussions, over a year or so, that will be needed to forge a working and efficient collaboration. Such a body is needed to minimize overlap and conflict and to respond quickly to changing events.
- Many different news hooks must be found for the same message if it is to penetrate and change existing media and public mind-sets. Links must be forged to breaking news and social trends in order to generate the desired buzz around the new approach.
- Success requires patience, time, perseverance and a continuous process of reaching out aggressively to the “Five As” to build on momentum generated in the early stages.

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