Arizona Community Action Association

The Changing Face of Poverty in Arizona:
A Summary of Conversations with Service Recipients

October 31, 2010

Prepared by:

Richard C. Knopf, Ph. D., Director
Andrée Brennan, Program Manager

Partnership for Community Development
School of Community Resources and Development
Arizona State University
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Executive Summary

The Arizona Community Action Association (ACAA) has a mission of “advocating, educating, and partnering to prevent and alleviate poverty.” To advance this mission, ACAA has created a “Changing Face of Poverty” initiative to respond to mobilize response to the new forms of poverty precipitated by the economic downturn. As one element of this initiative, ACAA led community forums across the state of Arizona in 2009 to create conversations among social service providers about the changing face of poverty in their communities. Ideas were sought on how to improve service delivery and build capacity for responding to the changing face of poverty in their communities.

In 2010, ACAA created community conversations in five communities across Arizona to gain similar insights from the perspectives of service recipients. Invited to the conversations were those who had formerly been in poverty, or are currently being successful in transitioning out of it. These participants were also asked how to improve service delivery and build capacity for responding to the changing face of poverty in their communities. This report summarizes the major insights provided by these service recipients.

Twenty-seven specific categories of feedback were generated, organized around five general themes. The suggestions pertain to the client-service provider interface; factors internal to clients; needed forms of information sharing; barriers to financial self-sufficiency; and, the structure of the service delivery system.

Also identified from the conversations are five core factors that serve as essential prerequisites to successful transformation out of poverty. These factors are: having sources of inspiration; experiencing a service environment that fosters dignity, respect, fairness and hope; having transitional or gradational assistance; creating mobilized communities; and having a prevalence of mentors, navigators and advocates.

Comparisons are made between themes that emerged from the 2009 service provider forums with themes that emerged from the 2010 service recipient forums. In general, there is strong convergence between themes emerging from these two venues. There were many mutual calls for system improvement: better community information and referral programs; the availability of “one-stop” service centers; increased support for housing and shelter; better youth services; better volunteer recruitment and management systems; multi-sector engagement; more community forums; more coordinated service delivery; and better
communication of the challenges of poverty within the community – and the pathways for solutions.

At the same time, service recipients in the 2010 conversations offered insights that were not prevalent in the 2009 service provider forums. Chief among them was the need for service provider workers to more deeply assess needs, engage in active listening, provide encouragement, and open doors to services and programs that would assist them in the migration out of poverty. They also called for an increase in the “human element”, positive affirmation, wiser counsel, elimination of unprofessional behavior, more preventive intervention, better navigation assistance, more information sharing, more process efficiency, fewer delays, more help with goal setting, greater assistance in overcoming fear, greater ethics, more collaboration among providers, and elimination of system abuse.

Other insights provided by service recipients centered on the imperativeness of having inspirational forces in their lives beyond service professionals. They underscored the need to be surrounded by individuals who could be source of mentors, door openers, and encouragers - and help to formulate the kind of “internal beacon” that is critical for achieving success. Yet other insights centered on the need for transitional assistance; reduction of financial waste associated with inflexible resource distribution requirements; increased training, education, tools and other mechanisms for job placement; and, greater legal aid assistance.

The report closes with an enumeration of “next steps” that might be taken by ACAA as follow up to this study, to ensure that the choices of service recipients will translate into effective action for improving services and building capacity for the amelioration of poverty. The ultimate goal is to serve Arizona communities by advancing ACAA’s mission of “advocating, educating, and partnering to prevent and alleviate poverty.”
Introduction

The Arizona Community Action Association (ACAA) has a mission of “advocating, educating, and partnering to prevent and alleviate poverty.” To advance this mission, ACAA has created a “Changing Face of Poverty” campaign to respond to mobilize response to the new forms of poverty precipitated by the economic downturn. Campaign goals include: raising awareness about the new face of poverty statewide; raising funds to support families in need; soliciting volunteers who want to help; and, conducting community forums to identify assets, opportunities, and action plans to address the burgeoning human services crisis.

As one element of this campaign, ACAA led community forums across the state of Arizona to create conversations among social service providers about the changing face of poverty in their communities. The forums were conducted in seven different counties: Apache, Coconino, Gila, Navajo, Pima, Pinal, and Yavapai. Participants in the forums represented a multiplicity of human service agencies in addition to government agencies, schools, law enforcement, or served as public officials (state, county, and municipal). The forums, averaging 40 participants each, had three primary goals: (1) to illuminate the changing character of poverty, and the forces that create it, within their local communities, (2) to discuss ways to improve services and add capacity to respond to these emerging forms of poverty in their communities, and (3) to discuss innovative processes to ensure that these improved services and capacity can be created. Full details are discussed in a report to ACAA prepared by the ASU Partnership for Community Development: The Changing Face of Poverty in Arizona: A Summary of Community Forums (Burk and Knopf 2009).

In general, five themes emerged during the conversations on ways to improve services and add capacity:

- Improve centralized state and local community information and referral
- Create one-stop human services “hubs” for efficient access to resources
- Improve access to food and shelter
- Improve or retain services for seniors and youth – transportation
- Improve use of volunteers to support human/social service agencies
When asked to reflect upon innovative processes to ensure that these suggestions could indeed be accomplished, four general themes emerged:

- Embrace a multi sector approach
- Convene community summits
- Coordinate service delivery
- Better communicate assets, need and potential to the community

To supplement the perspectives of Arizona service providers, ACAA also led a series of community forums to gain the perspectives of Arizona families who have been recipients of such services. In essence, there was interest in looking at existing services and processes through the lens of those for whom the services and processes were designed. The results of these forums are the focus of this report.

**Study Scope and Methods**

A “positive deviance” model was used to guide the methodology for creating the community forums, and guiding the character of the conversations (Pascale, Sternin, and Sternin 2010). In essence, the model suggests that some of the best insights on how to improve social service performance come from an analysis of those using the social services themselves. One aspect of the “positive deviance” model is to generate conversations with people who have successfully moved out of poverty, and have utilized social services as a basis for achieving this successful transformation. The conversations generally ask individuals to reflect on factors that created pathways toward success, and to offer suggestions on how to enhance system performance.

Following the “positive deviance” methodology, five community forums were conducted across Arizona during August and September of 2010. Individuals recruited by ACAA to participate in the forums had either been successful in transitioning out of poverty, or were well underway in making the transition. The forums were created in five Arizona counties: Coconino, Gila, Maricopa, Pinal, and Yuma.
The following table summarizes when and where the community conversations were held, and the gender of the participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>COUNTY</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>PARTICIPANTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 10, 2010</td>
<td>Pinal</td>
<td>Central Arizona College  540 North Camino Mercado, Casa Grande, AZ 85122</td>
<td>6 Women 2 Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 11, 2010</td>
<td>Maricopa</td>
<td>Disability Empowerment Center  5025 East Washington Street, Phoenix, AZ 85034</td>
<td>5 Women 4 Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 24, 2010</td>
<td>Gila</td>
<td>Gila County Cap Office  5515 South Apache Avenue, Globe, AZ 85501</td>
<td>5 Women 4 Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 15, 2010</td>
<td>Yuma</td>
<td>Yuma County Library  2951 South 21st Drive, Yuma, AZ 85364</td>
<td>16 Women 6 Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 22, 2010</td>
<td>Coconino</td>
<td>Coconino County Community Services  2625 N. King Street, Flagstaff, AZ 86004</td>
<td>10 Women 3 Men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The conversations were facilitated by staff of the Arizona State University Partnership for Community Development. The conversations were facilitated in a way that followed the spirit of the “positive deviance” discussion template described in Appendix A (Pascale, Sternin, and Sternin 2010). The typically lasted two hours. Participants were assured of confidentiality. Thus, names are not revealed in this report.

As the conversations began, the participants were informed that they were “untapped resources” in terms of their capacity for suggesting ways in which social programs and services might be improved for those experiencing poverty. They were informed that the overall goal of the conversation was to provide advice to service providers. They were encouraged to contribute anything that might come to mind as the conversation unfolded that might be helpful to service providers – without fearing judgment about the importance of the contribution, or how it might be received. To set the stage and provide a role model for subsequent conversation among the participants, an ACAA staff member who had personally journeyed out of poverty shared her story. The staff member provided some biographical information; the experience of being in poverty; the fears and struggles in the search for help; the programs and services that were utilized; the mentors in her life; what she felt was the most important driving force for her success; and what she would like to see improved in social service delivery based upon her own personal experiences. These moments of sharing provided the participants a frame of
reference for how that might shape their own contributions. It also established the climate of trust, honesty, and safety that was essential for open sharing among the participants.

Consent was secured from the participants to have the conversations recorded, for purposes of ensuring that all the impressions to be conveyed were adequately captured. These recordings were subsequently summarized, partially transcribed, and all major discussion points were documented and identified. A total of 342 discussion points were generated by the participants across all five conversations. Utilizing formal content analysis methodology, these discussion points were then categorized according to major themes and subthemes.

Five major themes emerged through the content analysis. They represent the most significant and prevailing messages that the participants wished to communicate to service providers. These messages pertain to:

1. The Client-Service Provider Interface
2. Factors Internal to the Client
3. Needed Forms of Information Sharing
4. Barriers to Financial Self-Sufficiency
5. Structure of Service Delivery System

These major themes, and the sub-themes that define them, are described on the pages which follow.
Perspectives of Clients – Major Themes

Before reviewing the major themes and sub-themes of the community conversations, the groundswell of appreciation that was pervasive throughout the commentary offered by participants must be highlighted. Across the board, participants expressed gratitude for the positive impact of services offered by the provider community, and the people who were instrumental in guiding them to these services and encouraging them through the steps of the process to utilize them. There was frequent mention of the very real changes that were created by these services and service providers, and how they were essential in propelling forward on the path toward self-sufficiency. And, they were grateful for how these forms of assistance impacted not only themselves, but the lives of their families and children. It was common that participants wanted to express their deep appreciation for the system that has helped them, before they even began to offer observations on what might be improved.

With this important acknowledgement of the gratefulness for service providers, and indeed even empathy for the demands being placed upon them, as they provide essential services, the major themes and sub-themes of their suggestions for building capacity, responsiveness, and efficiency into service delivery system are summarized below:

Theme 1: The Client-Service Provider Interface

The most dominant theme emerging from the community conversations pertained to the nature of the interface between the participants and service providers. Just over one-half (51.1%) of the discussion points raised by the participants across the five conversations focused on this interface. A content analysis of these discussion points suggested that the concerns of the participants can be organized into fourteen sub-themes. These sub-themes are discussed below. They capture the range of specific insights about the client-service provider interface that the participants wanted to convey to service providers.

- **Human Element** – Participants noted that a primary factor in their success was contact with service providers that had taken time to fully engage with clients by learning their stories, understanding their individual needs, and providing follow up to ensure their progress toward goals. It is important to note that the participants...
expressed awareness of the economic strains service providers are under. At the same time, they point out to that this form of caring “human touch” was essential in the journey toward success.

- **Client Affirmation** – A critical element in success was exposure to a service provider that “believed” in them and their potential. They were recognized as an individual with unique needs and circumstances, and affirmed for their capacity to break through obstacles and reach their goals. Many comments were made about particular service providers that have encouraged them, and even have been a primary catalyst in helping them believe in themselves – often for the first time – and their capacity to create a changed life.

- **Wise Counsel** – Participants noted that greater levels of empathy and assistance came from service providers who have experienced a similar journey, have struggled with the same issues, and have found a way to move beyond them. Partly it was a matter of trust, partly it was a matter of authentic caring, and partly it was a matter of the kind of real wisdom that comes from “having been there before.” Comments were made about how having access to someone who has experienced a similar journey can instill trust in the system and hope in the client. It was also noted that gender plays a role in this dynamic of “wise counsel” in that clients could be best served by providers who have not only experienced the conditions of the participant, but are of the same gender.

- **Unprofessional Behavior** – It was clear that most of the participants understood that service providers must deal with “challenging,” even angry clients. At the same time, many felt that many service providers exhibited behaviors that not only were unprofessional, but damaging to the client’s desire to improve themselves. Comments were made about favoritism, rudeness, disdain, humiliation in front of others, prejudice, and general disrespect. Disproportionate mention was made of State of Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) service providers. Participants noted that such behaviors can “make or break” a client’s day when dealing with the stresses of their personal situation. Although participants understood what might cause such behaviors (work overload, lack of resources, increased client demand, hostile clients), their comments centered on the need for better performance appraisals, and customer service training for service providers.
• **Preventive Intervention** – It was commonly perceived that the system seems to force the client to “hit rock bottom” before assistance is provided. Many believed that their pathway toward success would have been significantly expedited with more strategic intervention during their downward spiral. They feel that there is a window of opportunity where only a fraction of the assistance ultimately provided could have prevented them from being entrenched “in the system.”

• **Eligibility Restrictions** - Some participants felt policies defining whether a client is eligible for assistance do not allow for response to drastic changes in a client’s situation -- such as a business closing or a flight from home with children due to domestic violence. In such cases, the participants noted, eligibility requirements based upon assets from the prior year is not a valid indicator of the gravity of the current need.

• **Navigation Issues** – Many participants felt that they did not receive specific services which they deserved. It is possible that part of this perception might be attributed to the fact that reasons for denying eligibility were not well explained. But more fundamentally, a prevailing theme was that getting answers to basic questions was difficult for the participants. Reasons for the difficulty varied. Many mentioned situations in which the phones are not answered. Others mentioned that providers were not offering suggestions on what services might be of help to them. Some commented that service providers expected the participants to know the answers themselves, when in fact they were looking to the service providers to provide information about options available to them. One participant described service providers as operating within a “pull” system, suggesting that clients too frequently had to “pull” information from service providers in order to get vital information. In retrospect, many of the participants realized that they did not know the right questions to ask of the providers, and therefore went through many false starts, actions that dead-ended, and they lost access to services for which they were eligible at a critical time. Some noted that they had lost assistance or were unaware of potential forms of assistance due to a service worker’s unwillingness to thoroughly assess their situation. Ultimately, many participants felt that they had lost access to needed services due to a provider neglecting to thoroughly assess their needs.
- **Transitions** - The participants expressed concern about the lack of support available for the transition between reliance on services and self-sustainability. Abrupt cut-offs from services complicated and exacerbated smooth transition into self-sustainability. It was noted that services typically ceased -- rather abruptly -- before they had the full capacity to maintain themselves. They wondered if reduced forms of assistance would be helpful during such transition periods.

- **Physical Access** – Many participants mentioned that physically accessing available services can be extremely difficult. Offices may be a long distance away, even in another community. Many of them found transportation barriers to be formidable. Others mentioned inconsistent hours at service provider locales and/or service hours that are not conducive to a client that has some form of employment.

- **Efficiency** – A prevailing concern was the lack of efficiency surrounding the processing of information about client backgrounds and needs. At times, they experienced records that were lost, or information provided at one point of a process not being forwarded to the next point of a process – even at the same office. They wondered why all application forms could not be consolidated into one form that is applicable to all services, and can be easily transported across all services. It was suggested that information be entered into a central database that all service providers can access. The participants felt that they needed better clarity on what exactly was needed in terms of paperwork in order to successfully file various applications for assistance. Providing basic information about what materials were needed in advance of a visit could save families hours of non-productive visits and processing routines. It was noted that some participants were proactive on this front in seeking such information, but phone calls were not answered. Quicker turnaround for scheduling follow-up appointments would have been helpful to them as they were attempting to navigate the system. Also, they shared frustration with the wait times required to submit completed applications to the service provider, when all that was needed was verification of the identity of the submitter.

- **Information Access** – A prevailing point of conversation was that a client’s success in gaining access to pertinent information was too often left to chance. Although many participants (especially those in smaller communities) were applauded for their helpfulness, it was noted that many service providers were not
knowledgeable about services beyond their own niche. In some communities, the absence of updated and available brochures, handouts, and pamphlets describing the range of services available was noted. Suggestions were made that, along with DES, churches and libraries would be places where those in need for the first time may think to go for information about services.

- **Internet Information** - Many participants wondered why an on-line resource does not exist with short descriptions of what forms of assistance are available, along with contact information. They noted that internet access is available at all libraries. One participant even suggested that those who have benefitted from services could create the website together – because of the unique perspectives they now hold. Another suggestion was that shelters and other locales with a focus on emergency response could be equipped with computers that only have access to service provider resources, internet job sites, and tools for attaining employment.

- **Financial Waste** – Some participants noted particular instances where bureaucratic approaches have created some forms of financial waste. As an example, there were reported instances of utility payments being made in full, when only a portion of the payment was requested by the client. As another, bus vouchers were distributed to some clients who did not need them, while others with great need for transportation went without.

- **Faith Communities** – Some participants noted that their faith communities were helpful in offering support, as well as in providing an avenue for them to personally “give back.” Yet, many noted that faith communities were unresponsive, or moved them along to other service providers in the community. Some reported that family members were turned away even when they asked if they could volunteer time for the support they would receive from the faith community. Others expressed awareness of the fact that some clients unethically misuse faith communities who are helpful to those in crisis. They hoped that faith communities would design assistance programs that were organized to prevent such misuse.
Theme 2: Factors Internal to the Client

The second most dominant theme emerging from the community conversations pertained to comments made about the role of personal attitude, disposition and perseverance as a motivating factor for change. Approximately twenty percent (20.2%) of the discussion points pertained to such internal factors. A content analysis of these discussion points suggested that they could be organized into four general sub-themes. They are:

- **Inspiration** – The participants made frequent mention of inspirational forces in their lives that were instrumental in their transformation. These inspirational forces provided encouragement, bolstered their confidence as challenges were confronted, and often were at the heart of the desire to better their life. Often, they served as the specific turning point that drove their decision to seek transformation in general and assistance from service providers in particular. The most frequently mentioned inspirational forces were their children, their larger family, faith in God, and the realization that they want to be a provider (and can take pride in doing so). Often, case managers, bosses, or a significant extended family member emerged as mentors in their pathway to change. A specific mentor who was able to offer empathy and wise council for their situation was profoundly important to their success. Many mentioned that they themselves would like to serve as a mentor for others who are facing conditions that they faced in the past. In fact, most participants expressed eagerness to do so, if they were given pathways to do so. Across the board, the participants clearly wanted to “give back” and serve as a role model for others.

- **Goal Setting** – The participants made it clear that the goal setting process was crucial for fostering change. At times, there was self-realization of the need to set goals, and taking small, systematic steps to move toward them. But more often than not, an external agent (family member, boss, or case worker) was critical in creating the will for establishing a specific set of goals, the encouragement to achieve them, and accountability if continued progress was not being made. In addition to the providing a mechanism for forward movement, the participants noted the tremendous amount of pride that emerged from the goal setting and accomplishment process. The pride itself became a clarifying agent for them, and its cleansing force swept into
all aspects of their lives – including child rearing and attitudes toward other people. The participants emphasized that the goals should be small and easily achievable at first, and must build upon one another to give a sense of clear forward movement. And moreover, goal accomplishment should be noted and celebrated.

- **Personal Readiness** – The participants felt that ultimately, successful transformation was dependent upon one’s willingness to make the changes in their lives to better their situation. Willingness includes the self-realization that change is needed, the openness to seeking help, the desire to accept the tools offered to them, and the motivation to remove their connections to (and dependency on) negative people and environments. While frequent mention of this need was made in the context of those seeking a life of sobriety from drugs and alcohol, it was clear that the necessity for a core internalization of such a desire for change was an essential for successful transformation.

- **Personal Fear** - The participants noted that personal fear is a challenge that must be overcome. Throughout their transition, fear became manifested in several ways. Many referred to the feelings of fear that surrounded the reality of not being self-sufficient. Many mentioned the fear of self-doubt, ridicule, and shame that they experienced as they sought help. Some pointed to the general fear of the unknown, of change, of moving away from familiar friends and circumstances. Fear was a formidable foe that acted to remove hope, increase self-doubt, and paralyze action.

**Theme 3: Needed Forms of Information Sharing**

The third most dominant theme emerging from the community conversations pertained to comments surrounding the need for sharing information about available services in non-traditional ways. Some of these discussion points are closely related to sub-themes in the above two sections, but the focus of these discussion points was squarely on the need for service providers to think differently about how to facilitate the spread of information within the broader community. Just over fifteen percent (16.7%) of the discussion points pertained to this
issue. A content analysis of these discussion points suggested that they could be organized into four general sub-themes. These sub-themes are discussed below:

- **Mentor Pool** – As noted above, many participants expressed a willingness to serve as mentors to those who are now experiencing circumstances similar to what they formerly experienced. Many participants pointed to the need for formalizing ways to do so. Other than volunteering at service provider offices, it was not clear how to become involved as a one-on-one or group mentor.

- **Information Delivery** – Participants suggested that information delivery be coordinated and synthesized across the system. They noted that forms of information were incomplete and unevenly distributed. Some were provided specific insights about available services from such places as utility companies, shelters, prisons, faith communities, niche non-profit organizations, citizen advocates, and even some businesses that were not readily available elsewhere.

- **Community Media** – Participants suggested that the public could have greater awareness of available services through greater use of local media. Some noted that services could be advertised in free local papers, at the schools, and via local radio and television for the benefit of those who cannot read. Many pointed to the desirability of providing information through readily available flyers, brochures or reference cards that could be passed on to others.

- **Informational Forums** – Among the noteworthy dynamics of these community conversations, was the number of occasions during which the participants shared information about available services, of which others in the room were not aware. This information was eagerly received by others, writing down information about the service, as well as a key contact for further information. It was remarkable that these participants, in many ways, had moved fairly significantly along in their journey and yet still seemed to be less than fully informed about available services. Another dynamic was that participants offered guidance to others in the room on how to navigate system processes and regulations, how to find caring service providers, who to turn to in the business community for assistance with such services as auto repair, and how to discover good mentors. The participants pointed to the need for such exchanges, possibly run by themselves, on regular occasions throughout the community. Some mentioned that service provider gatherings (forums or fairs) would have helped them
learn about the various programs and offered them a welcome opportunity to speak to representatives.

Theme 4: Barriers to Financial Self-Sufficiency

The fourth major theme emerging from the community conversations pertained to comments about the forces that undermine financial self-sufficiency. Just fewer than ten percent (8.5%) of the discussion points pertained to this issue. A content analysis of these discussion points suggested that they could be organized into five general sub-themes. They are:

- **Employment Challenges** – A pervasive theme across all conversations was the challenge of acquiring stable employment for those who are jobless, and the difficulty for acquiring more gainful employment for those who might already have employment. While certainly this is a perpetual challenge for many moving through transition, it is clear that the current recession has been particularly formidable as a roadblock to forward movement. In addition to these realities, participants have found their searches exacerbated by inadequate transportation, lack of child care, and employer stigmas and favoritism.

- **Housing** – The participants stated that adequate and affordable housing was essential for gaining financial self-sufficiency. Another option suggested was to offer assistance for low-income families that already own a home but need help with repairs. It was noted that drug charges from the past creates challenges in finding housing. One participant felt housing assistance for the mentally ill should be a priority. A number of the participants mentioned that due to the changes in the housing market, they perceived it could now be more affordable to own than rent in regards to a monthly budget and that a “rent-to-own” program be implemented which would be both feasible and beneficial.

- **Youth Development** – The inadequacy of employment opportunities for youth was frequently discussed. In addition to the need to offer pathways for youth to succeed financially, participants noted that many forms of extracurricular activities were needed to engage them in a productive life. The alternative, it was suggested, was to have youth turn to drugs and alcohol because they were not engaged and setting goals – and a spiral downward that ultimately leads to more poverty-related challenges in the
community. Financial barriers were manifested in other ways as well. Participants noted how the cost for youth sports programs and other extracurricular activities have become prohibitively high for low-income families. They noted the dwindling supply of recreation programs and other activities to nurture youth and keep them busy. Again, this leads to closed options for youth to engage their talents and set goals. For the youth, the need for more mentoring and tutoring programs was mentioned.

- **Valuing Education** – Participants noted that education and skill building is the best mechanism for attaining financial self-sufficiency. Those in transition need to be encouraged to pursue training and education, and assisted in their need to find workable ways as well as the resources to do it.

- **Legal Aid** – Participants suggested that more legal assistance programs be provided to assist in financial management, as well as for other matters that arise during transition. A common theme was the need for assistance in legal matters surrounding housing (e.g., rental contracts, mortgages, landlord issues). Another was the need for assistance in working through limitations imposed by past criminal records.

### Theme 5: Structure of Service Delivery System

The final theme emerging from the community conversations pertained to comments about the structure of the service delivery system, and how it might be reconfigured to better serve those in need of services. Less than five percent (3.5%) of the discussion points pertained to this issue. A content analysis of these discussion points suggested that they could be organized into three general sub-themes. They are:

- **Collaboration** – In certain cases, the participants sensed that service providers were more likely to compete with each other rather than collaborate with each other. At times they encountered a “you are our client” disposition that for the client led to the lack of awareness of options. Some participants suggested that communities brainstorm on how to build better coordination and collaboration among services, and to engage the community as a whole in assisting those in need.

- **Ethics** – Some participants suggested that certain non-profit organizations have lost sight of their mission to help others. It was noted that some service agencies seem
more interested in maximizing “billable services” than in responding to the best interests of the client.

- **Monitoring Abuse** – There was a call for better policing of service providers and clients that abuse the system, as has been perceived by some participants. It was suggested that service distribution systems be reviewed to ensure ethics that are beyond reproach. As an example, the participants noted that some representatives would assist friends and family members over others that they perceived to be of the same eligibility, either by offering a superior option or attending to their friends and family member’s requests first. The participants also reported that they are aware of others that take advantage of this phenomenon by abusing the system, even boasting about it. One participant suggested that clients be weeded out that do not wish to contribute through volunteering in return for the assistance.

**The Five Themes: An Integrative Summary**

The participants offered many suggestions for building the capacity of service providers to respond to the burgeoning need of those in poverty. Twenty-seven specific categories of feedback were generated, falling under five general themes.

From a broader perspective, many of the suggestions are inter-linked, and point to the need for general reform in the way service providers do business. Not inconsistent with the beliefs of many service providers and public policy makers, they have observed the need for greater coordination and collaboration among services and programs. And, they recognize the strained budgets and the realities of “compassion fatigue” faced by many service providers.

Yet, the participants have made it clear that there is room for enhancements of system performance even within the constraints of limited resources. The notion of improving system performance in surrounding clients with dignity, respect, clear information, wise counsel, effective navigation, needs monitoring, helpful feedback, and early intervention was a clear and resounding message from these community conversations. In many ways, the system failed them along these critically essential elements that defined “success” for them. The notion of having greater flexibility in eligibility requirements to allow for smoother, quicker transition out of poverty was underscored as well. The importance of being surrounded with mentors that could help set goals, fortify self-esteem, inspire to action, reduce fear, and create personal readiness
for success was a dominant message of these conversations. And, the participants stood ready
to help in mobilizing such mentors for those who were in circumstances just like they had
experienced. The participants pointed to the essentiality of removing the formidable barriers to
success, including inadequate transportation, child care, jobs, legal aid, and opportunities for
youth. They also pointed to the need for system review to ferret out system abuse and promote
high system ethics.

Thus, while system delivery systems are suffering from the realities of restricted resources,
the participants offer insights on how to increase the efficiency and capacity of existing
structures. The consequence of misinformation, poor service, or compassion fatigue embedded
in the process is an unnecessary hindrance to system performance and can create a
deleterious environment on both sides of the system delivery ledger. Representatives and/or
mentors that can empathize with clients because they have “been there” -- and have prevailed –
can be sources of strength and effectiveness for those seeking transition out of poverty.
Disseminating up-to-date information, possibly via the Internet, and consolidating redundant
forms, are other ways to expedite the processes and allow the client and representatives more
time to find solutions. A better system of monitoring abuse and a means for clients to report
perceived corruption could be helpful, whether ensuring that providers are allocating resources
in an equitable manner or that clients are not using resources fraudulently. Policies that deny
assistance until the client is fully “in the system” and then cut the client’s services off in total
before the client is capable to sustain financially on their own are perceived to be the
unfortunate reason why the system can become a vicious cycle that is difficult to break. If help
was provided gradationally, families may well be able to improve their situation before becoming
fully dependent on assistance and those that were dependent have the time to better prepare
for independence and become accustomed to financial responsibility.

It is essential to once again note that much of the hope they had for migrating out of poverty,
and tools they utilized for doing so, were given by their providers. Their conversations stand as
powerful testimony to the good work being performed by service providers throughout Arizona.
They were passionate in their praise of the people that helped them through their struggles, and
were grateful for the role providers played in bettering their lives, as well as the lives of their
families and children.
Core Factors Facilitating the Migration out of Poverty

The five themes and 27 sub-themes illuminated above stand as fertile ground for shaping a service delivery system that would bring more responsiveness, efficiency and productivity for Arizona families in poverty. In a sense, these stand as 27 specific messages that the participants want to convey to service providers. Woven throughout these messages are some higher order perspectives on what conditions must necessarily be present – from the consumer’s point of view -- in order to facilitate the transition out of poverty.

While the forces surrounding successful migration out of poverty are complex, there were some pervasive threads that were revealed about the client’s perspective through these conversations. We have identified five essential conditions

**Factor 1: A Source of Inspiration**

A recurring theme was that if one was to be successful in migrating out of poverty, one had to believe in oneself and be ready to make the changes necessary for this to happen. The role and essentiality of having an inspiring force to help individuals set goals, or have a reason for setting goals, was underscored over and over again. Specific sources of inspiration identified included children, families, service workers, faith, the desire to secure housing, and an internal desire to succeed.

**Children**

Many respondents proudly pointed to their own children as their source of motivation to create change in their lives. They took great pride in having become good providers for their children and being able to offer them a better life. In many cases, their children were the catalyst for their own personal change and the driving force to stay the course as they suffered setbacks.
Participant A was formerly unemployed and incarcerated for involvement in drugs, and is currently employed and providing for his son. His words:

“I’m buying my son stuff. My son has clothes. My son and I, I take him to therapy once a week for his speech. Afterwards, we stop at McDonald’s and he gets a Happy Meal. And I know I can afford it!”

Participant B was formerly addicted to drugs, homeless, and had lost custody of her daughter. She is currently sober, has custody of and is providing for her daughter, and working as a social service case manager.

“I was a lost cause and now I’m actually doing great. We have a good life today. I’m a good mom. I provide for her… I can provide today and that’s a good thing.”

Other Family Members

In the same way, encouraging relationships with significant family members served as an inspirational force for many. These family members might be spouses, mothers, fathers or other members of the extended family.

Participant C relied on family for shelter after her divorce from her husband, and is now a home owner and employed full time. Her words regarding her mother:

"I'm a single mother of four. About 10 1/2 years ago, my husband started crystal meth and my mother gave me an ultimatum and said that my children didn't have a choice but I did. So, the choice was clear to get out."

Faith in God

It was common for participants to mention their belief in God as a significant inspirational force for their transition out of poverty. Their beliefs in a higher power gave many great strength and reassurance of their capacity to succeed.

Participant D was laid off and is currently seeking employment, hoping to become a sign language teacher. Her words:

“There are two things. God, my faith in God. And, my family. If you don't have God in the first place, you don't know about him, you don't look for him -- it's just like whatever situation you are going through it just feels like it is a whole earthquake, you name it. Things just bring you down so fast, so easy. God and your family. It is a balance. It has to be this way, (she balances her hands like scales) God and your family. If something goes down, either, the whole house is going to fall down.”
Participant E formerly found herself and her children homeless after escaping her abusive husband. She is currently an advocate for women who have suffered domestic violence, working in education, and is a new home owner. Her words:

“I always wondered, ‘Why did this happen to me? I’m a good person.’ But, I really believe that God said, ‘I told you to go this way and you didn’t listen, so I slammed the door in your face. I didn’t shut it; I slammed it on your face, because I want you to go this way. Don’t worry. I’ll carry you.’ He did and there are so many amazing people that have come into my life and helped me.”

Participant F grew up in poverty with a mother that was dependent on drugs and alcohol. Currently, he is actively involved in his church and a new home owner. His words:

“Personally, I think faith is number one. No matter what faith you are from... You can have friends but they can only take you so far.”

Service Workers

Many respondents pointed to a particular service worker, often a case worker, who believed in them, and became a source of inspiration. Typically, this was a service worker who was able to be with the participant over a significant length of time.

Participant G became homeless with her children after a separation from their father, and is currently employed in the education system. Her words about her service provider:

“I talk to (her) a lot. Anytime I have a question or any kind of help, or anything like that, she always tells me just come down and talk. She’s always been there for me to matter what. And, just kind of gave me advice. Pushed me in the right direction. Or, I just asked her question. And, she just helps me a lot. I think that’s awesome because she doesn’t have to do that. She’s going way over her job. She’s there just to give me good advice. I appreciate that a lot. Sometimes you just need someone to talk to. She’s always been there for me.”

Housing and Shelter

Most participants, in some fashion or another, talked about the importance of owning a home. The idea of having not only a shelter, but a safe place in the world for themselves and their family to flourish was a powerful and universal source of inspiration for the participants. The goal of home ownership was a strong motivational force for keeping the participants focused on successfully completing incremental steps toward home ownership and financial self-sufficiency.
Participant F grew up in poverty with a mother that was dependent on drugs and alcohol. Currently, he is actively involved in his church and a new home owner. His words:

“Every time I walk into my house, I just – I literally almost cry. You never think being someone who lives in the projects – you hear about all these nice, fancy houses or people just having something nice. As opposed to what you are used to – none of my family really has aspired to even have home ownership... I love my family. I’m in church, but a lot of family isn’t. So, I had to put up with people drinking. Now I don’t have to put up with people drinking. Now when I come home, it is peaceful. It’s nice.”

Participant E formerly found herself and her children homeless after escaping her abusive husband. She is currently an advocate for women who have suffered domestic violence, working in education, and is a new home owner. Her words:

“I told my kids, ‘Someday we will have a home. And we won’t be walking on eggshells.’ What I was so afraid of - to be homeless. I ended up homeless anyway. I ended up homeless twice. But, we learned that it was better to be there and together than to be in that house where you couldn’t live and couldn’t breathe. Having a home means everything. You don’t have to know what our home looks like. Even if we don’t have nothing in our home. We have shelter.”

Having an Internal Beacon

In general, the participants believed that the desire to improve or migrate out of difficult situations through self-empowerment is not a quality that can be created from outside forces. Rather, it must come from an internal decision to succeed. At the same time, it was resoundingly clear that this internal desire is extremely vulnerable and subject to erosion and defeatism due to outside forces – including, ironically, the very system that has been designed to provide services to them. Participants made it clear that this internal desire can be inspired and nurtured by a provider network that believes in them. They noted that service providers have tremendous capacity for creating the kind of environments necessary to fuel this internal desire to succeed.

Participant B was formerly addicted to drugs, homeless, and had lost custody of her daughter. She is currently sober, has custody of and is providing for her daughter, and working as a social service case manager.

Participant H was formerly unemployed, homeless and addicted to drugs. She is currently drug-free, providing for her family with her husband, employed, and plans to attain her GED.
Participant B:
“It was nice to have someone believe in me. Since then, I think that is what started the whole progression of good things that started happening in my life. I finally had someone that actually believed that I could do something and so I started to prove it.”

Participant H:
“I started trying to believe in myself after that. When you walk in there you have no kind of faith in yourself or what anyone can do to try to help you until things start changing.”

Participant B:
“And, you want to prove them right! So, it’s more not that you have faith in yourself but that you want to prove them right because they stuck their neck out on the line.”

Participant H:
“Yeah.”

Participant B:
“Then, somehow it just happens. I would never have imagined that I would be where I’m at today 4½ years ago. That is not where I would have thought I would be... I’m setting goals today and it is just because someone believed in me when I didn’t even believe in myself.”

Whatever the inspirational force might be, it was clear that the individuals first needed someone -- anyone -- to believe in them. Cultivating an environment that promotes the possibility for clients to be inspired to believe in themselves is essential for sustainable progression to occur in their lives. At its most fundamental level, there is a need to build environments within service provider networks that offer clients dignity, fairness, excellent service, and tools that support sustainable change for the betterment of their lives.

**Factor 2: A Service Environment Fostering Dignity, Respect, Fairness & Hope**

One of the most pervasive messages across all the community conversation was that success could only be accomplished when individuals encounter environments that treat them with dignity and offer them hope. As noted earlier in the report, the feeling was strong that many service providers do not adhere to even the most basic forms of customer service, can process clients without obvious signs of caring or empathy, and even can become abusive with clients.
The participants were quick to point out that such behavior is not representative of all workers and that clients can be inappropriate as well. However, creating a system of service delivery that results in a dignified environment may in fact mitigate the negative behaviors that desensitizes the service workers and frustrates (even angers) clients to the point where their own behavior creates barriers to advancement.

Some simple things were suggested to promote an environment of respect at service provider offices, particularly at DES offices. Examples included using ticketing machines so clients could sit, creating an express line for clients who are only there to drop off documents, and having a process for fielding unanswered calls.

- Participant I is a veteran and formerly had a successful career working on oil rigs, but a knee injury left him under-employed as his skills depended on his physical ability. He is currently studying nursing. His words:

  “Equal treatment would be nice. The more affluent areas or neighborhoods, the treatment is completely different. The one I go to, people are lined up outside the door an hour before it opens up. When it opens up, they let you look at the chairs, but they don’t let you sit in the chairs. You have to stand in a line running outside the door. They are herding you like cattle and they talk to you like crap. You get to the windows and I’d say a third of the people, at least a third of the people, immediately leave at this point. The others end up taking a seat, to leave later… I notice the treatment just walking in the door and what you have to go through. Dignity is an important word. You take that from someone. How can you do that and say that I helped you... It is just a different thing that they are trying to project. That they don’t need you, you need them. That is not the case. When I was working, my tax dollars paid for their salaries. That is why they are in the job that they are in, is to be able to help me, or my family member, or my friends when they need the help.”

The participants often commented that they felt the services or referrals provided (or not provided) were dependent upon the service workers’ personal prejudices. New forms of evaluation and training on how service workers might both overtly and covertly engage in differentiating behaviors that lead to uneven distribution of services could send the message that fairness is expected.

- Participant J was formerly a victim of predatory lending and struggled to sustain as a single mother after her divorce. She is currently providing for her daughter and is a new home owner. Her words:

  “I think that cultural diversity is something that all social workers should be trained on. I think it is the lack of training, sometimes. As you see in this room, this whole room is culturally diversified. You are talking about Iraqis, Africans, African-American, Hispanics, Mexicans, White… Just to be able to deal with the different people – and for the lack of training – I think that is why some people walk away hopeless and feel helpless because of that.”
The subject of compassion fatigue arose across all forums, particularly when discussing DES workers. Perhaps service workers could be surveyed to gain insights on how to address the stresses of their positions. Training representatives on diversity, stress relief practices, or even offering counseling could be helpful. Rotating the representatives that are at the window to shorter time spans could reduce fatigue. One participant, knowledgeable about performance review practices, suggested that service providers be evaluated regularly on empathetic listening skills and customer service performance.

- **Participant K** is currently unemployed for the first time in 30 years and staying at a women’s shelter. Her words:

  “Just changing the hearts and minds of the people who are actually working at these front desks would make such a difference... You can actually kill a person’s day or make them go whole hog and get it all done. You make all the difference in the world to somebody who is already down.”

- **Participant L** formerly had a successful career in business. He is currently seeking employment and has returned to school through the assistance of grants. His words:

  “I didn’t like being talked down to, but I also didn’t like being treated like --you look around the waiting room and see me in a starched white shirt, pant and shoes carrying everything in the world that needs to be done -- and then being treated differently because of that.”

When participants asked where they went when they first needed help, the majority of participants replied churches and DES offices. Since the DES office may be the first contact for those seeking assistance, the front desk representatives should be trained, encouraged, and even incentivized to connect their clients to other service providers where they might be able to find additional assistance. Based upon comments made during these community conversations, it seems that such “door opening” roles are not prevalent among many elements of the service provider community.

- **Participant M** became homeless after an estrangement with her daughter. She is currently staying at a women’s shelter. Her words:

  “When it comes to who is on the desk - that is very important. I went in to social services and I was told to go there and see what services they have to help. I told him the situation. And he said, ‘Well, what program do you want?’ I said, ‘I don’t know. What can you help me with?’ ‘Well, until you can tell me what program you want, I cannot help you.’ So, I mean, I’m out of there in tears.”
Participant N, his wife, and children have recently experienced unemployment and homelessness for the first time. He is seeking employment, but his wife has recently found permanent employment. They are scheduled to leave the shelter in the near future. His words:

“To clarify what I think we are all saying. We have to pull the information out of the service. It is not pushed to us. It is a pull technique. That is kind of the clearest way I think I can put it. It is a pull method, not a push. And if you could put it at least somewhere in between there, they are pushing a little bit and we are pulling a little bit, you’ll get the services, you’ll get the information, and I think it will make everybody happy.”

Factor 3: Availability of Transitional or Gradational Assistance

It seemed clear that abrupt disconnection from support services as the client’s eligibility status changed severely impeded continued progress out of poverty. Across the board, participants noted the deleterious effects of the lack of a “grace period” as successful transitions are made. It appears that lack of appropriate transition support is counterproductive to the long range goal of self-sufficiency – and indeed is the key reason individuals and families cycle through phases of dependence upon assistance again and again.

Participant O was formerly incarcerated for crimes secondary to a 30-year drug addiction. He is now a teacher and mentor to young veterans and is raising his grandson while his own sons are serving in the military. His words:

“You either have assistance because you make this amount of money and you can’t get the assistance is you got this, but there are a lot of people in between there that need that grace period, that transition period. Once you get a job, they take it all from you. I’ve been on this assistance 9 months, 2 years, however long it takes, and now all of a sudden you rip it away. I’ve got to make that transition, so there has got to be a grace period in there somewhere. Sometimes, I think there has to be some consideration given – we want to help these people, we want these people to help themselves, that is what the premise is, ‘Help these people help themselves.’ – but then when you help yourself, they snap the rug out from under you. Now, we are in a dilemma, now I wiped out all my savings, I’ve wiped out this, I’ve got a kid starting school. Where do I get assistance for this? It is not there, it’s not there. So, if there was some type of grace period where they give you 90 days or whatever to keep what you have and just let you go from there. That is a big help right there. But, to snatch the carpet out from somebody, which inevitably what will probably happen is that they will end up right back -- the same -- where they were before. Or, they end up quitting their job because it’s like, ‘I can get better benefits if I quit the job and that’s the only way I am going to get help.’ It is a Catch-22.”
Participant K is currently unemployed for the first time in 30 years and staying at a women’s shelter. Her words:

“If those are the two answers, increased earnings or more affordable housing, the other stuff is a band-aid fix. So, now you are stuck in the system... The only way to do it is to get away from the band-aid fixes and really do something for these people. Get them into school. Get them mentors. Quit teaching them to dress for success when they don’t have a skill that will get them a job.”

Partial assistance, or some form of gradation of support, may also address issues that the participants have experienced with eligibility for assistance. Some noted that they become ineligible for help because they made less than a dollar a day more than the cutoff. Some were evaluated based on previous income when their circumstances had significantly changed such as leaving an abusive relationship or the close of a business. Partial assistance may also help service providers more efficiently distribute resources by minimizing the odds for re-entering the service support system.

Participant L formerly had a successful career in business. He is currently seeking employment and has returned to school through the assistance of grants. His words:

“I had paid some of a bill that was outstanding. They would only pay it if it was the entire bill. So I said, ‘Are you sure about this, because I’ve already paid half of it?’ They paid it and I had a credit. That did help me stay on the 30-day payment... At the same time, as a business person, I think, “You just paid me twice the money I asked for because of a policy?””

In a related way, the participants also noted the lack of available services at critical times during their early downward spiral into poverty. The “all or nothing” approach to eligibility effectively forced them to “hit rock bottom” before they could attain any form of assistance. They believe that there were certain “windows of time” where even partial assistance would have interrupted the downward spiral – and thus preclude the need for full assistance over long periods of time.

Participant N, his wife, and children have recently experienced unemployment and homelessness for the first time. He is seeking employment, but his wife has recently found permanent employment. They are scheduled to leave the shelter in the near future. His words:

“The way we got help – the best advice I got was go into the shelters and this was the worst thing possible. Go into the shelters. You will not get help unless you are in the system. That is literally what we had to do. We tried every program... we tried a desperate amount of effort to not be in the system, but we couldn’t get help. We literally had to go into the homeless shelters... we literally had to have a traumatic story for anyone to listen to. We had to hit rock bottom

Prepared by ASU’s Partnership for Community Development  
For Arizona Community Action Association
completely. And there was like a month that we could have been -- avoided a lot of that. Avoided trauma for our children, avoid a lot of trauma for all of us in general. It would have been an easy transition. It would have been simpler, but we had to hit bottom to get any help.”

**Factor 4: Communities That Are Mobilized**

It is clear from the conversations that the participants’ transition out of poverty would have been expedited if the assets of the entire community were more effectively mobilized. In particular, these assets include faith communities and local businesses.

While a key element in successful transition for many was belief in a higher power, as a whole, their interaction with faith communities was somewhat problematic. Many found great support networks and helpful services in faith communities, others did not. It seems clear that the assets, expertise, willingness to serve, and non-financial resources within faith communities can be mobilized to a much greater degree to respond to the issues raised by the participants through these conversations, and listed in this report. Many best practices for this kind of mobilization exist, and they can be infused into local faith communities to bring more resources and more strategic action to problems of poverty.

In a similar spirit, the participants offered many useful ideas for engaging the business community. Examples included: having coalitions of service providers negotiate with businesses for reduced rates for products and services for those in poverty; donation of surplus goods, such as computers and office equipment; donation of expertise such as information technology; and more community-wide, integrated employee recruitment programs that better align business needs with the talents of those migrating out of poverty. Witnessing these examples, it is clear that more strategic alignment of resources within the business community with the needs of those in poverty is important. And the source of ideas for how to create this alignment may well rest in the perspectives of those who have migrated out of poverty themselves.

- Participant L formerly had a successful career in business. He is currently seeking employment and has returned to school through the assistance of grants.

- Participant N, his wife, and children have recently experienced unemployment and homelessness for the first time. He is seeking employment, but his wife has recently found permanent employment. They are scheduled to leave the shelter in the near future.
Participant J:
“He said, ‘We’ll give you a 50-dollar gas pass’ to the most expensive gas station in town...”

Participant N:
“I just want to add to what he was saying... Nobody is coming together in the agencies and saying, ‘This is what we are running into. We are all spending our money. We are spending all our money out.’ There is always a period when they don't have money... There has got to be someone else than the most expensive guy in town who wants to make money off of gas vouchers. There has got to be someone else that will do that, too. There has got to be a way to talk to the bosses. The businesses in town, I don't want to say they make a profit off of it, but in a way they kind of do. There is a way for the agencies to come together and I'll say form an organization or something of that level that would absolutely be able to talk to the businesses to actually help the community that is homeless and the businesses themselves, so it feeds back into itself. That is what I really see. That's what I really run across with all this homelessness that I've gone through. Nobody is talking to each other, nobody is organizing because of spending going out the back door, and when you come in the front door, they are like, ‘Oh, I can't help you.’”

Factor 5: Prevalence of Mentors, Navigators & Advocates

As noted in many ways throughout this report, it is essential that those seeking assistance be exposed to service providers who are empathic, encouraging, and provide clear direction. A major theme emerging from the conversations was that service providers need to spend time with clients – quality time in a non-judgmental, active listening manner -- to discover the unique challenges and goals of the client.

The significance of being provided with an empathetic listener was one of the strongest themes throughout the conversations. Many participants stated that they began to believe their situation changed for the better only after they were encouraged by someone who had struggled with the same issues as themselves - and prevailed.

Participant P stayed at a women’s shelter with her child after her divorce. Her words:

“She told me, ‘You know why I ended up a counselor?’ I thought that must be what you wanted to be. She goes, ‘Because what you went through, I went through it, too.’ When she told me her story, I thought mine was bad. Hers was even worse. ‘That is why I’m doing this – to help those young ones or the mothers.’ I guess that helped me to open more up to her.”
Participant O was formerly incarcerated for crimes secondary to a 30-year drug addiction. He is now a teacher and mentor to young veterans and is raising his grandson while his own sons are serving in the military. His words:

"I could not have listened to a counselor and really meant it, unless that person had been through something. It was more important – I mean you get people that have done book work and stuff like that -- but if I had a counselor that had been addicted to coke. That would hear a fireplace cracking and all of a sudden start thinking about crack, and felt that emotion. It meant more to me for them to say, ‘You can overcome this. You can do this.’ Those women that have been in relationships that are abusive. They need to talk to another woman that is going through abuse and they made it, it makes more sense. ‘I can make it.’ So, what I’m saying is you can relate. It is much more powerful. You get a client that is coming through the doors, ‘I got this problem and it is hopeless.’ I know somebody that just went through that, (snaps finger) network them.”

In its truest manifestation, the need for more empathy, encouragement, and clear direction begs for more of a case worker approach to service delivery. While at first blush, such a notion has profound budgetary implications, the participants offered many creative pathways on how to make this happen with alternative ways for achieving this goal.

One of the most frequently expressed suggestions was to mobilize successful individuals like themselves to become mentors and navigators for those in need. This can help on a number of levels: helping shoulder the burden that service providers are currently facing; offering opportunities to successful clients to give back to their community and acquire new skills; and mobilizing the very people that have the experience and the enthusiasm to offer an empathetic ear. They could serve as an invaluable mentor and navigator for those seeking pathways out of poverty. They understand the journey, and can believe in the people who need assurance that they can once again believe in themselves. Having learned from their experiences, they can offer much needed mentoring on what programs and services are available at different stages of the journey – and how to access them efficiently. Such mentoring and navigational assistance can be the very source of inspiration that is an essential element on the pathway to success.

Participant F grew up in poverty with a mother that was dependent on drugs and alcohol. He is currently actively involved in his church and a new home owner. His words:

“If there was a (magic) wand, the wand would be to take time with people. Impart whatever knowledge, whatever wisdom, whatever help – you think it may not be anything to you, but it makes a world of difference for that person.”

Not only can the power of those who have successfully migrated out of poverty be harnessed, but they stand willing to serve. Provider networks could develop a formalized
process for harnessing this willingness to serve to create a system of mentor peers that can speak to those in poverty about the real possibilities of breaking the cycle of domestic violence, drug addiction, alcohol addiction, homelessness, and other circumstances. In addition, mentors that are able to identify with that person along other dimensions such as race, religion, gender, being a parent, or having served in the military can establish a level of trust that may inspire an individual’s first step toward seeking help and beginning a journey to change their life. Finally, mentors can work with the clients in ways that help them know what questions to ask as they engage with service providers – an area of difficulty frequently cited by the participants that serves as a significant roadblock to success.

- Participant Q required assistance during her pregnancy while attending college. She is currently a social worker. Her words:
  
  “I feel that if you are benefiting from a service from the community, you should give back to the community.”

- Participant R was always a good provider for his family, but after illness became unemployed and homeless. He and his wife stayed in a shelter, are currently seeking employment, and have attained housing through social services. His words:
  
  “Don’t just feed them for a day, teach them. That is the way it is supposed to be. You are not going to get anywhere by just feeding the person and feeding the person. They are just going to come back and stand in that same line. There is always a place where you have to stand in that line to receive. But then, you have to give as well.”

- Participant O was formerly incarcerated for crimes secondary to a 30-year drug addiction. He is now a teacher and mentor to young veterans and is raising his grandson while his own sons are serving in the military.
  
  “I’m so grateful to be able to tell my story. Not that I’m proud of what I’ve done, but that I use it to encourage... I’m not ashamed of what I’ve done. I’m not proud of what I’ve done, but I’m not going to hide it. If it can help one person, if it can help your sons, your daughters, grandkids... I’ll tell them, ‘Don’t let anybody tell you what you cannot do. You are in control of your own destiny.’”

Throughout all the community conversations, we were struck by the amount of spontaneous information sharing among the participants about provider resources, services, and formal and informal touch points within the community. And, we were equally struck by the eagerness of others to receive this information. This bears witness to two realities. First, even those who have successfully migrated out of poverty lack full awareness of available services. Second, once again it becomes clear that individuals such as these participants are an untapped resource in the goal of creating navigational success for those in poverty. Such individuals
could be tapped to lead community forums, serve in strategically managed volunteer networks, and even be mobilized to serve as one-on-one advocates for individuals assigned to them.

- **Participant S** was formerly a self-described “punk,” involved in gang activity, homeless and unemployed. He is now providing for his family, has sustained employment and wishes to mentor young men that are facing the challenges he has overcome.

- **Participant A** was formerly unemployed and incarcerated for involvement in drugs, and is currently employed and providing for his son.

  **Participant S:**
  
  "What I was thinking awhile back is that there are a lot of guys out there like me without a shot in the world to do better for their family. To give them that hope... If it was a man that went through the same thing that I went through and understood, and sat there beside me, I think it would have been a bigger effect in my life... I think it would make it easier for him (noting Participant A), me and a couple of other guys. That is why you see more women right now than men."

  **Participant A:**
  
  "There is always like two or three guys at the meetings."

  **Participant S:**
  
  "Maybe two out of ten will come out to be successful. It’s the way I see it. If you have a man spokesmen going out there with the women, and helping the men to provide for their family so that way their wives won’t go through the trouble they are going through... And, I'd like to be that man!"

During the community conversations, many participants noted that they were honored to hear one another’s stories. Some connected with each other because they each faced similar challenges and overcame them. Some were deeply inspired by the stories of what others had overcome in their lives. Others were reminded of their own worth as a human being, even though they had known despair and in many ways continue to work on issues that continue to surround their continuing pathway out of poverty.

Having forums such as these provide opportunities for those migrating out of poverty to share, support, and inform one another would be a powerful tool for ensuring continued success. They can serve as a source of inspiration, expanded information, and helpful perspective. Yet, the scope of such facilitated community forums should not be limited to this most worthwhile outcome. The richness of stories shared during such conversations can be captured and communicated to other community members, including those in policy-making roles who carry the capacity to initiate system change. The stories shared during these conversations shatter prevailing images about the poor, and demonstrate the results of investments made in those who have been able to move toward self-sufficiency. These
individuals have overcome formidable obstacles. They not only desire to be productive members of their communities, but are willing to give back out of gratitude for the assistance that they themselves have received. They stand as powerful sources of insight on how to improve our service provider systems and processes. And they stand as powerful testimony to how services designed to attack poverty can build the very citizenry that creates a healthy community.
Some Messaging Implications

The community conversations were not designed to glean insight that might be helpful for the design of public advocacy campaigns, a few insights nonetheless can be extracted that might be useful for this purpose.

The participants engaged in plentiful discussion about the negative stigmas often imputed to them as they experienced poverty and sought assistance. Many personal stories were shared about the debilitating effects of such stigmatization, and how it operated as a corrosive force to making progress during the transition.

One implication for messaging to funders is to convey stories such as those shared during these conversations that run interference with the conception of stigmas, and convey the amazing stories of success that defy these conceptions. Some poignant examples include:

- The horrific and painful experiences of a refugee in her native country, and her unwavering desire to find freedom in this country, and fervent desire to give back;
- The mother that was staying with friends in secret to avoid an abusive husband, who now is self-sufficient and serves as an advocate for victims of domestic abuse;
- The veteran who has served our country, has overcome 30 years of addiction and incarceration, and who now “pays it forward” every day by teaching and mentoring others;
- The hard working and skilled employee whose future prospects were devastated due to injury, and their families now suffer;
- The mother that became sober out of love for her unborn child, and now enjoys a healthy, vibrant and self-sustainable family;
- The self-described “punk” that learned how to be a “man” by providing for his family;
- An addict who had no self-esteem being lifted out of addictions and poverty by a helpful service provider, and who now is not only a good mother, but a service provider herself; and
- A loving family now in poverty desperately clinging to each other during a time of need.

Another implication for messaging emerges from the many stories of inspirational forces that were shared freely by the participants. These stories of inspirational forces are themselves inspirational. They are stories that reveal the humanness of individuals in poverty, their hope for
brighter futures, and their relentless desire to become self-sufficient. If these stories were to be shared, those in need of assistance would less likely to be viewed as an unworthy statistic, and more likely to be viewed as individuals with honor and worth. Important motivational forces were their faith, the prospect of being able to personally provide for their families, and their deep love for their children. A common theme was that these individuals want to ensure that their children would not repeat the circumstances that they found themselves in. They want to provide their children with opportunities they did not have.

The messages that could be extracted from these community conversations, and others like them, are powerful. They represent the potential that has been achieved by individuals needing assistance during a critical time of their lives. They stand as testimony to the successes that can be achieved by appropriate investment in the service provider network. They can inspire those who are in position to make these investments – whether they are public policy makers, the business community, foundations, or the general public.
Comparisons with 2009 Service Provider Community Forums

As noted earlier, a series of community forums were conducted in 2009 to create conversations among social service providers about the changing face of poverty in their communities. These forums had three primary goals: (1) to illuminate the changing character of poverty, and the forces that create it, within their local communities, (2) to discuss ways to improve services and add capacity to respond to these emerging forms of poverty in their communities, and (3) to discuss innovative processes to ensure that these improved services and capacity can be created (see Introduction). The results are summarized in The Changing Face of Poverty in Arizona: A Summary of Community Forums (Burk and Knopf 2009).

The 2010 community conversations with service recipients that are summarized in this report provide a unique opportunity to compare and contrast recommendations made by service providers during the 2009 forums. In essence, we now have the opportunity to view through both the lenses of service providers and those for whom the services were designed.

In the discussion that follows, we will outline the major recommendations of the 2009 service provider forums, and explore whether the insights from the service recipients (2010) are aligned with those recommendations. The analysis that follows will first explore possible communalities between the 2009 and 2010 discussions, interpreted through the major findings of the 2009 service provider forums (Burk and Knopf 2009). Then, we will explore insights and perspectives from the 2010 service recipient forums that were not reflected prevalently in the 2009 service provider forums.

Part 1 - Suggestions for System Improvement

Five general themes emerged during the 2009 service provider discussions on how to improved services and increase community capacity to bring solutions to poverty (Burk and Knopf 2010). The discussion below lists these themes, and each listed theme is followed by an analysis of the communalities of that theme with insights of service recipients participating in the 2010 conversations.
i. Improve Centralized State and Local Community Information and Referral

The 2009 service provider forums recognized that an array of community resources exist in the counties, but better coordination and referral of resources needs to happen to keep pace with increasing demand for human services. Service providers expressed the need for a common information source so that individuals needing services could access services quickly through websites, 24-hour hotlines, directories, etc., without being routed through several agencies and not finding the assets they need. They also noted that directories often exist, but are not shared broadly or do not include all of the counties’ assets such as faith-based resources, other non-profits (not directly human services related), or community service organizations that provide help to individuals and families.

Participants in the 2010 service recipient conversations precisely echoed these sentiments. Many participants felt that they did not receive specific services they needed because they were not adequately informed of available services as they moved through transition. A common theme was that their success in gaining access to pertinent information was left to chance. Many service workers were judged to be inadequately informed themselves, and/or reluctant to offer full information. Suggestions were made to have churches, libraries, and other publicly accessible places to have more information about services. The internet was viewed as a welcomed and potentially powerful tool for providing information on services. It was noted that clients have ready access to libraries that offer access to the internet, and that computers could be provided to access service information web-sites at churches, public agencies, and non-profit organizations in their communities.

From a client perspective, the gap between needed information about services and available information about services is massive. It runs interference with the client’s efficient transition out of poverty. From a service provider perspective, the imperativeness of closing this gap is strong. On this point, there is strong agreement between service providers and service recipients.
ii. Create One-Stop Human Services “Hubs” for Efficient Access to Resources

The 2009 service provider forums called for the creation of centralized human services “hubs” that will better share, coordinate, and distribute services to clients. The vision was to develop centers that would be inclusive of all services and organizations that can provide human/social services programs to improve efficient and effective access to services by those in need, and end the “run-around” many families face when seeking assistance. To facilitate this process, the 2009 forums called for a lead agency or coalition of umbrella organizations that would create the coordination necessary to ensure community resources are shared seamlessly, effectively, and efficiently to those in need.

While the 2010 service recipient forums did not call specifically for a coordinating agency or a one-stop “Hub”, the urgency of creating a more integrated service distribution system to maximize access and efficiency was clear. From the recipient’s perspective, there are many forces that fuel this need. Part of the issue is having inadequate information about all the service options and providers that might be relevant to their needs. Another part of the issue is having poor access to distributed services due to mobility challenges caused by inadequate transportation and child care. Yet another part of the issue has to do with the frustration of migrating through many different forms of service bureaucracy across many locales and the inevitable “dead ends” and “false starts.” And finally, another part of the issue is because they have to “start all over again” with records and documentation at each geographic locale they visit. A centralized “hub” would not only assist in access, but would provide the vehicle for a “one-stop” mechanism for entering records and other forms of documentation to reduce redundant data collection processes and otherwise improve efficiency in the processing of client information. Built on a progressive software platform, a “one-stop” process of client profile construction at a “one-stop” center could build a computer generated profile of services and programs that would be beneficial to each client. And, given current circumstances surrounding the inefficiencies of record keeping for each client, such a process would build efficiencies for service providers as well.
iii. Access to Food and Shelter

Another theme of the 2009 service provider forums was to bolster the capacity of safety net services such as food and shelter. Service providers suggested that creative partnerships could be created with property managers, hotels, and others to add temporary shelter space to those who have recently lost their homes to foreclosure. They also suggested that their communities would benefit from better coordination and communication of local food drives to provide for better flow of resources into food banks. And, they suggested that local grocery stores be enlisted to make it easier for shoppers to make donations at point of purchase.

Having an adequate base of support for housing and shelter during the transition period was a dominant theme of the 2010 service recipient conversations. They noted that adequate and affordable housing was an essential base for gaining financial self-sufficiency. In terms of the present housing market, participants noted that it could now be more affordable to own than rent in regards to a monthly budget, and that a “rent-to-own” support program would be both feasible and beneficial. Transitional support for housing as the participants made progress in their transition, but then consequently became ineligible for core assistance programs seems imperative to guarantee continuing forward movement.

Challenges surrounding the matter of food sufficiency were not a dominant theme of the service recipient conversations, but there was frequent mention of the limited ceilings of assistance available from the SNAP program.

With respect to safety net services, service recipients exhibited great resolve to achieve self-sufficiency. One of the greatest challenges expressed was the harsh reality of the current economic climate, and the accompanying difficulty of securing stable employment. Participants discussed the formidable barriers to employment for the jobless, and to attaining more gainful employment for those who do have employment. In addition to these realities, participants carry the burdens of inadequate transportation, lack of child care, and employer stigmas and favoritism. Increased jobs training programs, mentor programs from the business community, transportation networks, and child care assistance may at least partially remove key impediments to successful job placement.
iv. Improve or Retain Services for Seniors and Youth – Transportation

Service providers in the 2009 forums noted that senior and youth programs are being disproportionately reduced when the need for each has increased under the current economic downfall. They suggested that the problem is particularly acute in rural communities, and that enhanced transportation networks are essential in enabling youth and seniors to access the programs which do exist. They also suggested that the solutions to these challenges may rest in innovative partnerships with the business community, and adding capacity to Dial-A-Ride services. Lack of transportation also was seen as a major impediment to accessing healthcare for youth and seniors – with the challenge again being particularly magnified in rural counties.

The challenges surrounding inadequate services for seniors was not a particularly dominant theme in the 2010 service recipient forums, but the challenges of inadequate services for youth was a recurring theme. There was frequent mention of the inadequacy of recreation, sports, and other extracurricular activities to keep youth busy, engaged and nurtured. And, lack of employment opportunities for youth was seen as a serious threat to engaging youth in the kind of productive life that strengthens the community as a whole. Inadequate programs and jobs for youth were seen as a direct pathway for involvement with drugs and alcohol, and fuel for a downward spiral – creating even more poverty-related challenges in the community. The service recipients called for more community investments in youth programs, and more mentoring and tutoring programs in the schools and throughout the larger community. Thus, on the matter of developing capacity for youth development and engagement, the opinions of service providers and service recipients were also perfectly aligned.

v. Improve Use of Volunteers to Support Human/Social Service Agencies

All of the 2009 service provider forums discussed the need for increasing the number of volunteers to augment agencies’ staff that provide support for individuals in need. They called for the creation of clearinghouses for volunteer training and placement – and clearinghouses that would direct these volunteers to service organizations with the greatest need. They noted that volunteers could serve as an effective workforce for the service provider community. They also noted that while many volunteer organizations might exist in their communities, few are coordinated to provide support in a timely fashion where they are most needed.
Participants in the 2010 service recipient conversations also called for increased use of volunteers, but they offered a different perspective on how to mobilize and manage an effective system of volunteers. A prevailing theme was to mobilize individuals like themselves (who have successfully transitioned out of poverty) to serve as mentors and navigators for those in need of assistance. Recognizing the burden that service workers are currently carrying -- as well as the need for a system of service providers who are empathetic, encouraging, door openers for clients -- these service participants stand ready to serve. They were emphatic in expressing their desire to “give back” and assist others seeking pathways out of poverty. They noted that they could work with clients as helpful navigators, and serve as a source of needed inspiration. The service recipients noted that a mechanism was needed to harness - and give direction to - their willingness to serve.

**Part 2 Suggestions for Innovation**

Four general themes emerged during the 2009 service provider forums as innovative solutions to the changing face of poverty (Burk and Knopf 2010). The discussion that follows lists these themes, and each listed theme is followed by an analysis of the communalities of that theme with insights of service recipients participating in the 2010 conversations.

**i. Embrace a Multi Sector Approach**

In the 2009 service provider forums, much conversation centered on who was not present at the forums that should have been. Upon reflection, it became clear that most of the participants in the forums were those already engaged in poverty amelioration efforts. There was recognition that the entire fabric of the community has a stake in the dealing with the changing face of poverty, and that all sectors in the community would benefit from processes that address the root causes of poverty. The service providers emphasized the need to build new forms of collaborative structures to promote engagement by the business community, chambers of commerce, the media, educators, service clubs and groups, and faith communities.

This need for multi-sector engagement was echoed by the service recipients in the 2010 conversations. In fact, every sector listed above was noted by the service recipients as a sector that could add capacity in the community for change. They pointed to the untapped expertise
within the business community, as well as untapped resources. They suggested that service providers build coalitions for reduced rates for products and services offered by the business community for those in poverty. They noted the power of local media, and how it can be engaged to promote awareness of available services in the community. They suggested that the media could be enlisted to better disseminate information about available forms of assistance.

They also noted the value of education, including job training, as an important vehicle for attaining self-sufficiency. Moreover, they recognized the importance of local service clubs and groups, and were quick to exchange information among each other about what they were contributing to the community. And finally, they also identified that engaged faith communities are vital in providing spiritual strength and added support for assistance programs.

**ii. Convene Community Summits**

Those participating in the 2009 service provider forums suggested that powerful synergy could be achieved among providers by continuing a regular rhythm of community summits. They called for the emergence of community leadership to convene such summits dedicated to creating a strategy for community coordination and resource sharing. The hope was to develop strategies for engaging components of the community that historically have been absent from the process of responding to poverty.

Service recipients in the 2010 conversations also expressed a vision for a regular rhythm of community forums, but for a different purpose. They pointed to the need for community forums to provide opportunities for community members seeking transition out of poverty to encourage each other, to share ideas, and to share information about what forms of assistance are available. The participants recognized the power of information sharing among peers, and recognized that such community forums could be tremendously effective in reducing barriers that many face. They also pointed to the need for community forums hosted by service providers themselves. Then, those in need of assistance would be able to understand the total landscape of services available, and would be able to have one on one conversations with a variety of service providers all in one setting.

Thus, both service providers and service recipients all point to the need for increased community forums. Yet, they had different perspectives on how these conversations should be managed, and what the desired outcomes might be. Both perspectives are to be valued, and
the manifestation of both would enhance the community fabric, and build effective vehicles for responding to the needs of those seeking assistance.

iii. Coordinate Service Delivery

Participants in the 2009 service provider forums made it clear that a more coordinated approach to service delivery is needed, and the purpose of the coordination was to minimize redundancy, maximize efficiency, and provide strategic focus on the most dire needs emerging at any given time and place. There was a strong sense that the process for distributing goods, services and resources needs to be analyzed and improved so they flow efficiently and effectively to those in need.

As noted above, a recurring theme for the service recipients in the 2010 conversations was that programs and services were not fully coordinated among service providers, and they even perceived instances of agency competitiveness that impeded full access to services. Once again, there was strong concurrence between participants in the 2009 and 2010 community conversations that better coordination among programs and services was necessary to reduce inefficiency and maximize access to those in need.

iv. Better Communicate Assets, Need and Potential to the Community

Participants in the 2009 service provider forums focused on the need to better communicate the success stories emanating from the work of community organizations, advocates, and everyday citizens working in the poverty arena. They also felt that the chronic pain and corrosive consequences of poverty was not being communicated to the community as a whole. They noted the need to communicate stories about individuals who have broken the cycle of poverty by being provided support. The service providers called for communication plans in each community that, if implemented, would tell the story of the challenges of poverty in local communities well. They also pointed to the need to engage the community, and create pathways for action.

As noted above, the service recipients in the 2010 conversations also noted the need for greater communication to the general public. But from their perspective, the need was to provide greater awareness of available services and service provider options.
Part 3 - Themes Unique to the 2010 Service Recipient Conversations

Many themes emerged during the service recipient conversations that were not prevalent during the 2009 service provider forums. Most of the suggestions related to the character of the client-service provider interface, and the fundamental need for service providers to treat clients with dignity, respect, and fairness. They also pointed to the need for service providers workers to more deeply assess needs, engage in active listening, provide encouragement, and open doors to services and programs that would assist them in the migration out of poverty. To the service recipients, these suggestions carried great import. They are viewed as performance factors that could make or break successful migration out of poverty.

There were many dimensions to this expressed need for better performance by service providers in interactions with client. They called for an increase in the “human element”, positive affirmation, wiser counsel, elimination of unprofessional behavior, more preventive intervention, better navigation assistance, more information sharing, more process efficiency, fewer delays, more help with goal setting, greater assistance in overcoming fear, greater ethics, more collaboration among providers, and elimination of system abuse. From the perspectives of service recipients, all of these reflections point to the essentiality of grooming service providers who understand the importance of their roles in creating transformation. And, from the perspectives of service recipients, the system, more often than not, fails in providing these essential components of performance.

Service recipients contributed other themes that were not prevalent in the 2009 service provider forums. They noted the imperativeness of having inspirational forces in their lives. They noted the need to be surrounded by individuals who could offer mentorship, be “door openers”, and encouragers - and help them create the kind of “internal beacon” that is critical for achieving success. It seems clear that community processes should be developed to surround individuals and families in poverty with such inspirational forces, by developing mechanisms for mentoring and encouragement from arenas in addition to that provided by service providers.

Another theme unique to service recipients was the expressed need for better transitional or gradational support services to buoy those in transition as they lose eligibility for assistance. A recurring theme was the abrupt vulnerability and instability encountered as they became ineligible for specific forms of assistance because they were making progress toward self-
sufficiency. They suggested that strategic investments for support during these transition periods would ultimately result in lower costs over the long term. They also suggested that greater flexibility in eligibility requirements might interrupt the fall of individuals spiraling downward, when in many cases they felt that people had to hit “rock bottom” before they became eligible for assistance.

Some other unique themes were: reduction of financial waste (associated with inflexible resource distribution requirements); increased training, education, tools and other support services for job placement; and, greater legal aid assistance.

Taken together, insights from both the service provider forums and the service recipient conversations form a powerful platform for responding to the changing face of poverty in Arizona communities. Ultimately, providers and recipients alike will be the beneficiaries of focused action to fundamentally restructure service delivery systems in ways that reflect the recommendations emerging from these community forums.
Next Steps

There are many possible next steps for ACAA as an outgrowth from this study. Some of the most important include:

- Communicating results of this study with service providers, and illuminate how the reflections of these participants can point to the need for specific and broad changes in the way communities respond to the changing face of poverty.
- Providing pathways for harnessing the expressed desire of the participants to give back to their community.
- Convening community leaders to share participant stories and suggestions, and ask for new ideas, support, and engagement. They could be asked to identify desired outcomes and for the commitment to building systems that will strengthen community services.
- Facilitating continuing education and training opportunities in client-oriented arenas such as active listening, customer service and case management.
- Re-convening service providers who gathered in the 2009 service provider forums to compare their ideas for fostering system responsiveness with those expressed by those who have been through the system.
- Working with appropriate media consultants to develop messaging strategies to advance investments in the changing face of poverty campaign.

These efforts, and many more, will ensure that the voices of these community conversations will translate into effective action that will ultimately advance ACAA’s mission. Outcome data of each community will be analyzed and the results of this and the powerful stories of the participants will be shared with community leaders, policy makers and those in the position to support future efforts toward ACAA’s mission of “advocating, educating, and partnering to prevent and alleviate poverty.”
Literature Cited
