

# **People with Low-Incomes** **Constituent Meeting**

## **Public Involvement Task Force**

September 20, 2003, Midland Library

## **MEETING NOTES**

**Attendees:** 21 people. Kathleen j. Rabemacher, Laura A. Ward, Helen E. Ellisen, Sharon Nasset, Catherine Todd, J.C. Kizak, Julie Massa, Lisa Laurenaeau, Don MacGillivray, Melvin Hays, Kay L. Styles, Lonnie Roberts, Debra Kennedy, John Overman, Georgia McQueen, LeRoy R. Patton, Michelle Hassan, Sy Kornbrodt, Sabrina Riggi, Curtis Clink, Mikanda Mondaire.

**Host:** Multnomah County Citizen Involvement Committee and Commission on Children, Families and Community

## **Goal of Event**

Goal of event was to help inform the Public Involvement Task Force on issues and concerns from people with low-incomes. The task force is charged with developing recommendations for improving public involvement efforts within the City of Portland to be considered for approval by City Council.

Comments are summarized under each question. Raw comments are listed afterwards. Listings are not in order of priority.

## **Summary of Comments**

Below is a summary of key themes identified at the event.

### **Listen to the people**

Government agencies need to be more responsive to input that they receive from people and overcome perception that most decisions are made before public is invited to participate. Specifically, recognize the importance of hearing the stories, the "truth", directly from individuals experiencing economic hardship. Provide open forums for people with low-incomes only where issues and problems can be identified, people can share their ideas through story formats with broader time limits. Build self-confidence to overcome fear, intimidation.

### **Role of other government agencies**

Utilize government agencies that provide direct services to people with low-incomes. Federal and state agencies have a major presence in the lives of individuals and families dependent on assistance programs.

### **Role of community service agencies**

Utilize networks of non-profit service agencies that are the front line contact with many people with low-incomes. Intake positions at service agencies are perhaps the most constant contact point a government might have with an individual.

### **Role of community gathering places**

Utilize bulletin boards for posting of notices, distribution of information at locations where people with low-income visit often or meet with others including: service agencies, health clinics, housing community rooms and centers, grocery stores, churches.

### **Provide targeted leadership training for low-income peoples**

Provide education and training so those individuals who show leadership potential can become effective advocates for other peoples with low-incomes. Provide orientation on decision-making processes, that change can be slow. How to organize and partner with others in their self-identified communities, with community groups, neighborhood associations, churches, school PTA's, etc.

### **One-on-one outreach most effective**

Recognize the importance of advocates that individuals have relationships with and trust. Those who can help explain the red tape are the same people who can get the word out on public involvement efforts. Utilize one-on-one and door-to-door outreach through as one of the most effective means for connecting with an individual. Use fliers or postcards that people can take home.

### **Role of 211 Information and Referral Line**

Utilize emerging 211 I&R line that will go live in 2004. This will be a metro-wide information and referral line for connecting the public with the broad range of community services for people with low-incomes. Consider how to connect opportunities for public input when people are calling in on related topics.

### **Input at Council, Board, and Commission hearings**

Recognize the controlled nature of giving testimony limits ability of many people to participate. Time limits are too short, one-way conversation – no pro/con discussion.

### **Provide awareness training and education for public officials**

Policy makers need to learn directly from people with low-incomes about what it means to live in poverty. "Walk a Mile" program is perfect model where elected officials attempt to live on welfare family income for a month.

### **Role of Neighborhood Associations**

To become meaningful organizations for people with low-incomes, neighborhood associations need to show a willingness to get involved with low-income issues

and deal with class biases. Vice-versa, need to encourage people with low-incomes that they have a right to work within neighborhood associations.

### **Representation on Boards and Commissions**

Actively recruit and train people with low-incomes to serve on City Boards, Commissions, and Advisory Committees. Work with bureaus to set goals to have percentage of representatives from low-income constituency. Provide orientation so they have the tools to effectively participate.

### **Help individuals understand impact on their lives**

Public involvement efforts need to describe how the issue, regulations, etc. affect the people they will most impact. Be clear about what will be the responsibility of and consequences for people with low-incomes and their neighborhoods.

### **Provide earlier notification with ample time to respond**

Information needs to get out into the community early to provide ample time for individuals to consider the issues, schedule their lives to participate, organize their responses.

### **Provide information in an easy to understand, wide range of formats**

Utilize a diverse range of communication styles including radio, fliers, newsletters, one-on-one conversation so that individuals are receiving the message in multiple formats, both orally and visually. Do not use acronyms.

### **Outreach events need to be accessible**

There are many barriers that exist that limit the ability of people with low-incomes to participate in public involvement efforts. For starters, organize public events that are accessible on public transportation lines and have childcare available.

### **Utilize food distribution services**

Hunger is a top priority issue for people with low-incomes. Work more effectively with organizations addressing this issue. Oregon Food Bank, soup kitchens.

### **Engage people on issues that are most important to them**

While its beyond the scope of this effort, improving effectiveness of key services and access to them for people with low-incomes would improve likelihood individuals would want to engage in dialogue with government services. Suggestions of programs people might care most about include: food stamp and food commodity distribution programs, community policing, housing programs, etc.

# Raw Comments

Below are comments as they were recorded at the event.

## **Question 1: What are the best ways to make sure low-income people find out about government decisions before they are made so that they can provide their ideas and input?**

- Policy makers need to come to the people to become educated about what it means to live in poverty. (5 votes)
- Government agency needs to be responsive to input. (5 votes)
- Meet basic needs – people can learn about services. (5 votes)
- Ask the question: What are the barriers to getting low-income citizens involved? Fear, trust, intimidation... (5 votes)
- Ask citizens to get involved and volunteer where they are – neighborhoods, schools, churches, Laundromats, etc. (4 votes)
- Include low-income clients on Boards, Committees, etc. (3 votes)
- Educate public officials and remind them about who elected them. (3 votes)
- Citizen input at Board of City Commission meetings (2 votes) Time limits on speakers are limiting; Not true open forum; Can only speak once, no pro/con discussion; Change public testimony guidelines; Issue/Problem outreach.
- Involve low-income communities to get at their “truths.” (2 votes)
- Politicians need to walk the talk. (2 votes)
- Federal funding drives low-income programs in our community.
- Outreach stores/community bulletin boards.
- Work with networks of helping organizations (fewer now).
- Work on system that connects all services and information.
- #211 Information Line – I&R.
- Address hunger needs.
- Very little physical access for people in need.
- One-to-one outreach, cards and flyers.
- Intake positions with agencies.
- Use gathering places; agencies, clinics, housing, grocery stores, churches.
- Hold meetings so they can share their ideas. (1 vote)
- Go door-to-door and talk to the low-income families and give them information before the meeting. Prepare them first. (1 vote)
- Provide transportation, child care. (1 vote)
- How do we change the hopeless attitude to action. (1 vote)
- How the rules accommodate the people they are trying to serve.
- Networking to bring an awareness of resources.
- Information needs to get to the community with time to get educated AND the information needs to include the consequences. (1 vote)
- Put information in different formats – written, visual, oral (3 votes)
- Educate about the timelines of the process...change is slow.
- Partnerships with community groups.
- Mailings.
- Outreach to impact .

- ❑ Neighborhood Associations to help.
- ❑ Flyers at offices/agencies.
- ❑ People go door-to-door.

**Question 2: What are the best ways for government to get in put from low-income people about its decisions? What things that would make involvement by low-income people easier and more likely?**

- ❑ Really get involved, i.e. Community Policing.
- ❑ Settlement House Model – Beacon Schools.
- ❑ Neighborhood Associations involved in low-income issues.
- ❑ Work with youth/education.
- ❑ Enfranchise people.
- ❑ Increase tax options – state/county financial arrangements.
- ❑ Grant administration.
- ❑ Increase access to services.
- ❑ Fully fund food programs, soup kitchens, and pantries.
- ❑ Food commodity distribution directly to people.
- ❑ Food Day ads for soup kitchens – (Street Roots list)
- ❑ Merchants donate food to O.F.B. instead of discounting food.
- ❑ Oregon Trail Card hard for neighborhood stores to deal with.
- ❑ Take care of barriers before low-income people participate. (5 votes)
- ❑ Grassroots efforts will help.
- ❑ People at agencies should know how to help.
- ❑ Decisions are made before the hearings.
- ❑ How do we figure out how to help people find out about programs?
- ❑ Have an advocate to show people where they can go for help.
- ❑ Go through the Neighborhood Associations.
- ❑ People need to be clear about programs and policies.
- ❑ Advance notices to meet peoples' schedules, better communications.
- ❑ Different agencies working together.
- ❑ More help and respect of all people.
- ❑ City/county government listens to groups.
- ❑ X amount of community involvement before decisions are made.
- ❑ Identify people.

**Other Comments:**

- ❑ Don't use acronyms or big words. Be understandable.
- ❑ Be family friendly.
- ❑ Help one-on-one to explain red tape. (1 vote)
- ❑ Early notice, lots of time to act. (2 votes)
- ❑ Have flyers for caseworkers to give out.
- ❑ All people do the outreach. (1 vote)
- ❑ Find loudmouths in the community. Bring them.