

Focus Group Results Underscore Women's Summit Actions

To obtain in-depth information on the impact of the “new poverty” on working women in Mecklenburg County, the Women and New Poverty Task Force conducted 14 focus group discussions in the fall of 2007. More than 100 women volunteered through nine community agencies and six departments of Mecklenburg County Government. One group was held with Spanish-speaking women. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Community Relations Committee facilitated the sessions.

For the most part, participants did not meet federal poverty thresholds for public assistance. Yet, they said that they could not maintain a “bare-bones lifestyle” for their families, based on the North Carolina Budget and Tax Center’s minimum “living income standard” for a family of four in Mecklenburg County.

By and large, focus group findings reinforced and substantiated quantitative Women’s Summit data collected by volunteer and professional research staff during the summer and fall of 2007. Because of the relatively small sample size and nonrandom selection of participants, conclusions or analysis drawn from this study must be viewed with caution. Although focus group findings cannot be generalized, they do offer insight and put a human face on more quantitative research. They have the power to move people and influence policymakers. They reinforce and validate participants.

Key Findings

Women need more money.

Many women identified a need for better jobs, better pay, more job security and employment opportunities. They worried about losing their jobs and “living paycheck to paycheck.”

Many cited the crucial link between education and financial security and expressed regret that they had not reached higher levels of educational attainment before having children.

Even when education was not a factor, many women felt “passed over” or at a disadvantage with men having comparable skill sets and education.

Family caregiving falls mainly on women in three areas: child care, after-school care and care for aging parents.

Family care issues were perceived as the biggest single obstacle to job flexibility and advancement for working women. Many found they could not advance at the same pace as men or had to make tough choices between income/career opportunities and family demands.

Many working mothers expressed a need for flexible, affordable child care, especially when a child is sick or has special needs. They felt pressed for time, given the demands of balancing full-time jobs with taking care of young children, transporting them, helping with homework and attending

parent-teacher conferences and events involving their children. Women who had a support network fared better, but still had to rely on their own time-management and coping skills to juggle multiple responsibilities, including more than one job in some cases.

Women with older children identified the high cost and unavailability of after-school programs. The alternative—“latch-key” children or leaving them with unreliable caregivers—was either unacceptable or a major source of worry.

Women responsible for aging parents expressed a need for respite, a reliable support network, siblings/other family members who pull their weight and relief from the daily pressure of the caregiving role. Needs varied from help with shopping, housekeeping and administering medication, to researching and accessing assistance and advice on insurance, living wills, nursing homes, and legal, financial and health care costs and alternatives.

Women need more emotional support and better ways to balance work-life responsibilities.

As suggested above, family responsibilities may seem overwhelming, especially for women trying to balance work-life responsibilities, aging parents or inflexible child care/after-school programs while juggling one or more jobs. Focus group participants felt conflicted about money, safety and making ends meet. They regularly blamed themselves for poor parenting and angry outbursts, which held them back professionally and negatively impacted their health and families.

Caregivers said they did not get enough support from other family members, especially siblings. Women who appeared more hopeful had support from an exceptional friend, loving family mem-

ber, important role model or mentor who “got me through.”

Women are likely to neglect themselves, their health and other personal needs for the sake of work or family.

Many women talked about longing for “small things” to feel good about themselves: a bubble bath, a trip to the hairdresser, a massage, some pampering, relaxing, and new clothes (“not from Goodwill”).

Women need more access to community services and affordable health care. They either do not know about such services or do not qualify for them. Or, even if they do qualify, they cannot access needed services.

Many women did not know how to access community services or resources for help. They may not qualify for services because the legal/eligibility thresholds are set too low and do not reflect the relatively high standard of living in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, which is more than double the national poverty level. Even when women and families qualified for public housing or child care subsidies, they may have found themselves on waiting lists due to the limits of local resources.

Many women identified a need for more accessible and affordable health care, medications and health insurance; doctors who care; and more mental health and preventive services, including substance abuse prevention and treatment programs.

Women have concerns about the related issues of housing, safety and transportation.

Many women identified the scarcity of safe, affordable housing as a serious problem, especially for women in domestic violence situations. Similar to child care, women encounter long waiting lists for public or subsidized housing, much of which is substandard, subject to landlord indifference or neglect, and/or located in unsafe neighborhoods.

Safety loomed large for women in shelters, women in domestic violence situations and Latinas, many of whom feared their “unsafe neighborhoods” but were afraid to seek protection from police.

Many women felt isolated, dependent and unable to access higher paying jobs because they lacked access to reliable public or private transportation, including better bus service, bus passes and/or affordable car purchase and repair programs. Some participants were dissatisfied with inadequate and inefficient bus service as well as “disrespectful” bus drivers.

Targeted Populations

Latinas: Latinas share many of the same concerns as other women and also face cultural and language barriers, as well as fears about safety and deportation.

Latinas faced many of the same issues as other women in the focus groups. Like them, Latinas expressed concern about personal and family safety, both at home and in their neighborhoods. They mentioned poor housing conditions and limited access to and knowledge of needed services, such as health care, transportation, education and employment opportunities. Many worried about their children and their health, education and welfare. They “did not trust” legal or government authorities.

Latinas, like their counterparts, were reluctant to report domestic violence or school incidents affecting their children or exploitation by unscrupulous employers or landlords.

These issues are exacerbated by cultural and language barriers. Many Latinas were either expected to or required to stay home to look after dependent children. In their own countries, they may have relied on a social or family network to provide needed assistance and support. Here, they may be dependent on male providers whom they are not likely to leave even when family relationships are strained. The two major reasons for this reluctance: either they would not leave their children and/or they may have no other place to go. Indeed, some women said that there are not enough shelters, especially ones where Spanish is spoken or where Latinas are made to feel welcome and comfortable.

“Not knowing the language is a daily challenge,” one Latina participant said. The language barrier keeps women dependent and isolated and impedes growth and self-realization. Added to these difficulties are fears of deportation for the women themselves or for other family members.

Working Women: Women in the workplace struggle with life-work balance and financial security, especially with regard to health care.

Focus group participants working in the public sector had the same concerns as other participants, especially those with moderate incomes, dependent children and/or other family care responsibilities. These concerns included life-work balance and financial security, especially in the face of escalating health care costs.

Working women said they need the following support:

- **Economic security, rewards for hard work:** Many women felt overwhelmed, unappreciated and undercompensated.
- **Life-work balance:** Many women said they are forced to make difficult choices between promotions and overtime and family needs. Many also expressed concerns about parenting, bringing “negative energy” home and needing more “recovery time” and more time for themselves.
- **A more female-friendly workplace:** Women would like a workplace that recognizes family responsibilities from child care to care for elderly parents fall disproportionately on women.
- **Flexible and reliable child care:** The need is particularly acute for shift workers, who cannot attend parent-teacher conferences or simply be home to supervise children after school or spend “quality time” with them and other family members;
- **Help with health-insurance premiums:** Even though employers may offer generous family health care benefits, many women found they could not pay health insurance premiums and make ends meet.