

Saturday, July 2, 2011

La Mejor Herramienta Para Salir de la Pobreza “The Best Tool To Get Out of Poverty”

By Annabel Palma

A little more than twenty years ago I was forced to leave high school because I was pregnant. In my first few years as a Mother, I experienced homelessness, domestic violence and under-employment. But I was determined to overcome the odds, and help others less fortunate than myself. After I earned my GED I found a job as a nurse’s assistant, and later as a union delegate. The rest is history.

My story is not unlike that of Amanda Camacho, one of the many young people who wind up at City Job Centers seeking public assistance. Homeless and living in a shelter with her young daughter, Amanda was an 18-year-old high school dropout in a state of crisis last year when she entered a New York City Human Resources Administration job center at 125th Street looking for help and a path out of a life of poverty.

During an interview to determine her eligibility for cash assistance, Amanda told counselors she wanted to obtain her GED and eventually attend college: “I want to go to John Jay to study law and work in the criminal justice system” she said.

Despite expressing an interest in completing her education, Amanda was referred to HRA’s Back to Work (BTW) job search program, rather than a GED program, to satisfy the work requirement public assistance recipients must fulfill to receive benefits. Few would argue against public policy that requires individuals to participate in a job-assistance and training program as a condition for receiving cash assistance. However, for someone like Amanda who has never held a job and lacks basic skills, the emphasis should be enrolled educational and workforce development programs tailored to the individual.

With more than 173,000 disconnected youth in the city – 17 to 24 year olds who are neither in school or the labor force – HRA job centers represent one of our best hopes of engaging young people in education and meaningful services that can help them get out of poverty and embark on successful careers.

The sad truth is BTW is simply not designed to assess, much less respond to, the unique educational and employment needs of young people. A report by the Community Services Center of New York and the Resilience Advocacy Project illuminates the problems with the program and recommends practical reforms, including re-directing resources from the \$54 million dollar BTW program to existing City-developed models that have been effective in connecting low-income youth to education and jobs.

Some may dismiss Amanda’s aspirations as unrealistic, but I for one do not. We can help Amanda and others escape poverty, fulfill their goals in life, and become contributing members of society. The first step is making sure programs intended to help them do just that.

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