

# Community Impact in Action

## Working Bridges Employer Workgroup Project

**Initiative Name and Year Established:** Working Bridges Employer Workgroup Project, March 2007

### Issue or Problem Being Addressed by Initiative

Community and individual economic stability both require job stability. Employers with economically diverse workforces often experience special management and retention challenges among their lower-wage workers. Lower wage workers cannot attain livable wages without remaining in jobs long enough to advance. Communities cannot become financially stable without generating and maintaining stable employment for those trying to move out of poverty.

### Impact Area: Basic Needs- Employment

#### Target Outcomes:

- Youth and adults have the job skills and life skills they need to work.
- Youth and adults have the well-being and support they need to work.

### Project Objective and Goals:

Develop a series of best practices to help businesses of all sizes hire, retain and advance low to moderate income employees and maximize the effectiveness of an economically diverse workforce.

- Apply the concepts of Ruby Payne's "Bridges out of Poverty" in the participating workplace settings.
- Experiment with various HR practices, such as training, financial benefits, and on-site support.
- Measure and analyze results using various metrics, such as attendance, retention and advancement.
- Develop and disseminate a list of best practices and supporting stories to interested employers and public entities.

### Catalyst for United Way Becoming Involved

UWCC's initial work to improve the financial stability of our community focused on working with nonprofit and government agencies that serve low to moderate income individuals to improve service delivery and outcomes. In the course of our work it became increasingly clear that financial stability requires job stability. In addition, we discovered that if we did not expand our efforts to include businesses and employers, we would never be able to bring about real and lasting change. Workplaces that successfully employ economically diverse populations are the foundation for communities which are truly financially stable.

## Theory of Change & Strategies

### Mobilizing Communities

- Working Bridges workgroup convened by UWCC with employers from the manufacturing, construction, health care and hospitality sectors.
- Periodic "Bridges out of Poverty" trainings to set the foundation for organizational and systems change



### Community Changes

- Participating employers developed a series of management and benefits changes to improve workforce attendance, retention, and advancement.
- Successfully piloted emergency loan programs and installation of an on-site resource coordinator to help employees meet basic needs



### Population Outcomes

- Employees with unmet social service needs are connected with services while remaining at work
- Employees and management report improved attendance, retention, and financial stability
- Supervisors report less time spent addressing employee needs and improved

## Strategies and How Chosen

The need to facilitate workplace changes in order to improve the financial stability of our community had become increasingly clear through our ongoing impact agenda development. In 2007, UWCC invited employers to come together to address common challenges involved in managing an economically diverse workforce. Participating employers led the way in developing new management and benefits practices that would have a positive impact on their lower-wage workers. UWCC played an intermediary role in educating employers about community resources that could help employees, and in helping to design and implement the new approaches.

### What Has Been Successful to Date:

- The “Income Advance Program” provides emergency loans to employees via partnerships with credit unions. Employees gain access to emergency cash, start saving once the loans are paid off and the payroll deductions continue. Loan defaults are almost nonexistent, and employers pay only a minimal fee to the credit union partner.
- The “Resource Coordinator” pilot provides assistance at work to employees facing a host of barriers. They are able to remain on the job while accessing the assistance. Employees are highly satisfied and productive when their barriers are resolved, and supervisors are highly satisfied when they can focus on job-related issues knowing that employees are receiving expert assistance.
- These pilots and other employer activities are spreading to other parts of Vermont via information sharing and technical assistance to other community partners.

### United Way’s Partners and Their Roles

- **SHRM**, the Society of Human Resource Management provided initial financial support, disseminates information to members and awarded the project its annual innovation (“Pinnacle”) award.
- **Jane’s Trust**, provides financial support.
- **State of Vermont Agency of Human Services, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation**, provides financial support and technical assistance.
- **Rhino Foods, Fletcher Allen Health Care, Engelberth Construction, Community College of Vermont, and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters**, are highly active members who have implemented some or all of our best practices. Additional employers from the health care, hospitality, manufacturing, construction, and education sectors are also participating.
- **North Country Federal Credit Union** created and piloted the employee emergency loan model.
- **AHA Process, Inc.** created the “Bridges out of Poverty” content that is the foundation for our work.

## Implementation

### Annual Budget

The annual budget of the Working Bridges Project is approximately \$125,000 which supports 1.75 FTE Project Director and Resource Coordinator and associated training and programming costs.

### Financial Resources Mobilized

UWCC secured a \$150,000 grant from Jane’s Trust, \$153,400 from VocRehab Vermont, \$12,500 from SHRM, and \$15,000 from participating employers to support the project. The generation of additional support from participating employers and new funding sources is underway.

## United Way Involvement & Implications

### United Way Roles

As the host and convener of Working Bridges, United Way of Chittenden County:

- serves as an intermediary between employers and human service and workforce development providers;
- convenes and facilitates periodic workgroup meetings and training sessions;
- assists in the development and implementation of ideas generated by project participants; and
- supervises the on-site resource coordinator position.