

Lisa

PIPELINE

Ready to Learn, Ready to Work



BARBARA SOLOW

A class at the LaGuardia special pilot program for homeless women:
The key is to provide people with options and a chance to meet people who care about them.

BY BARBARA SOLOW

"I'M A SURVIVOR. I ALWAYS have been," declared 25-year-old Gina Holder as she gathered up her notebooks and made ready for her next class. "I really feel good about this program because it gives us a chance, for once."

Holder and 25 other women living in welfare hotels in Queens, Manhattan and the Bronx are part of a special-pilot training program sponsored by the Division of Continuing Education at LaGuardia Community College.

The 10-week program designed to address the causes of homelessness, helps women on public assistance get the skills and confidence they need to find jobs. And unlike many private training programs, this one takes the women's personal needs into account. The college offers free transportation and childcare services, paying for babysitters in the hotels and providing space at LaGuardia for women to bring their children to classes. Sessions in typing, business English and career education are offered twice a week.

Breaking Ground

"This is the first program of its kind in the city," explained Fern Khan, director of the Community Service Programs at LaGuardia. "The key here is to provide people with options and a chance to meet people who care about them and welcome their input into the program."

The idea for a project involving homeless women grew out of a conference on homeless families held at the college last January. Queens houses the largest number of homeless families in the city, with half of the families placed in hotels by city agencies located in the borough. "People were amazed at the number of homeless families in the area," said Khan. "We knew we couldn't do anything to solve that problem right away but we wanted to do something to ease conditions for people."

The proposal for a training program offering homeless women job skills and counseling won the support of funders at the New York Community Trust and classes began at the college last November. The majority

of students are young, single mothers. Some of them have skills from previous jobs while others are eager to finish schooling they never got a chance to complete.

Suretta Glover came to the program with experience as a registered nurse and switchboard operator as well as two years of college. She had been living in an apartment in St. Albans, Queens before a fire claimed it. Now, Glover comes to class with a group of women from the Traveller's Inn near LaGuardia Airport.

"The atmosphere at the hotels is very depressing," Glover said. "We need to get the women out of there. If more women could get out and come to a program like this, they'd be more able to work."

"It's hard to move around and do things when you have young children," said Trissena Radcliffe, who has a young son. "When I was in high school, I didn't want to go to class ever. Now I feel I can do it. I want to be able to reach out to my son. With both of us learning in school we can relate to each other better."



Marion Rutledge leads a class in career education: Showing women that they can change the concept of who they are.

The trials of being on public assistance coupled with the demands of caring for families make regular attendance difficult for many of the women—even with transportation and childcare paid for. “I’ve realized a lot more fully what it’s like being out there as a mother, with the hotel manager on my back, my kids running around with no place to play and no time to spend on finding a job,” said Program Coordinator Joan Wilson. “We expect these women to be well-directed but yet our services for them are not coordinated. We have one young woman here who had to give up a good job at a bank because she just couldn’t find a babysitter.”

Reaching Out

To publicize the program, Wilson and Khan visited hotels in Queens and Manhattan and worked with crisis intervention agencies to get the word out to homeless women. Trissena Radcliffe learned about the program through an ad in *Newsday*. At first, women in only two hotels signed up. But in the final weeks of the program, calls flooded in from hotels in all boroughs, from men and women, homeless and housed alike.

So far, the program only teaches

office-related skills but Khan hopes that being in a college environment will encourage women to branch out. “I want people to see they have choices,” she declared. “They don’t have to be just typists. LaGuardia has a lot of programs: physical therapy, nursing, human services. We want to train women to get good jobs.”

In Marguerite Green’s career education class, the women use videotape to look at themselves and analyze their self image. “Because they are women, they’ve been told to stay in their place; that they can only go so far,” stated Green. “We want to show them they can change the concept of who they are.”

The program also helps ease the sense of isolation many women feel living in strange neighborhoods. Milagros Davila has lived at the Allerton Hotel on West 22nd St. for two years. She left her Coney Island apartment when she could no longer afford the soaring rent there. “But even if I do get into my own apartment again, I want to stay here and get into more classes,” she said. “People here have the same problems as you do. We bring our kids here together. It’s nice to see people who want to do something for themselves.”

More Classes

More funding is needed if the program is to continue but both directors are hopeful they will be able to expand the training sessions. “Originally this was designed for mothers but now we even have a single father who is interested,” commented Wilson. “If we got a core group in every hotel, we could offer group sessions on parenting—not to criticize, but as a way of sharing experiences and problems in common.”

The way the city offers services to the homeless should be changed Wilson believes. “I don’t see why we can’t use the Henry Street Settlement model as a way of organizing services. Everything should be in one place.”

Khan is now negotiating with companies like Brooklyn Union Gas, asking them to sponsor a job fair for the women. “We need to bridge the gap between training and job placement,” she explained. The college is also planning to work more closely with groups such as Catholic Charities and the Coalition for the Homeless is designing and publicizing future programs.

Meanwhile, in the business English class, Trissena Radcliffe and a friend from another hotel bent closely over their exercises, debating which was the right answer. Upstairs in one of the offices, a group of small children made a circle and began to run around in a ring. One little boy named Solomon was already asleep on a nearby couch while his mother attended class downstairs.

“A lot of people have the wrong impressions about us,” argued Suretta Glover. “They see women in the hotels as different somehow. They feel we’re not trying to do anything for ourselves. But a lot of the women are just ordinary women. They got burned out or their rent is too high. We’re not bad women.”

“I don’t want to take just anything—any old apartment, any old job,” added Gina Holder. “I have my kids to think about. I have their future to think about. And I want to be able to hold out for something good.” □

Barbara Solow is a freelance journalist and co-host of *Econonews* on WBAI.