

# **KENOSHA Conversation Project**

— Educational Booklet —



## *Acknowledgements:*

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By

Jo Anne Schneider

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# ***Introduction***

*The Kenosha Conversation Project was a community planning process designed to bring together everyone involved in welfare reform in this locale to discuss the impact of policy changes and suggest ways that the community could best support low income people transitioning from welfare to work. The project consisted of two components. A research process gathered information on Kenosha residents' experience with welfare reform. People working at the Kenosha County Job Center, government and non-profit social service agency representatives, church representatives, low income people served by social service programs, employers, local officials and other concerned citizens met to talk about their experience with welfare reform. The research was used to identify major community concerns which were addressed at a conference.*

*The conference brought together people from all of these groups in issue-oriented small groups to discuss experience and strategies for change. The conversation activities were designed to include all participants as equals. Conference participants developed a number of ideas which could be implemented by various groups throughout the community.*

*This booklet describes the project and its outcomes. It has several goals. First, the booklet provides a brief overview of welfare reform in Kenosha. Second, it outlines the conversation project model so that other communities can replicate the process. Third, the document outlines the various key issues addressed through the project and lists project ideas that people in the community can develop.*

## *Developing the Conversation Project*



The Kenosha Conversation Project began a community planning process designed to involve a wide range of community residents in supporting low income families attempting to move from welfare to work. The project model differed from the standard town meeting or expert presentations prevalent in community involvement efforts. Instead, the project sought to bring together all of the various stakeholders involved in welfare reform as equals. In partnership with Kenosha Department of Human Services and Kenosha County Job Center staff, the program identified six stakeholder groups:

1. Kenosha County Job Center and Department of Human Services staff.  
This group was further divided into administrative, program management, and line staff
2. Social service agency staff
3. Churches
4. Low income people receiving Kenosha County Job Center services
5. Employers
6. Local politicians involved in the W-2 Community Oversight Committee

The Kenosha Conversation Project drew from the tradition of listening projects. This community organizing technique encourages people to share their views on a particular topic. Instead of adversarial organizing, the conversation project was based on the principle that everyone involved in W-2 understood the system from different and equally valid perspectives. W-2 stands for Wisconsin Works, Wisconsin's program under the 1996 Federal welfare reform legislation. The project assumed that developing strategies to improve the lives of low income people involved encouraging people in many parts of the community to support this population.

The conversation project also stressed drawing on people's actual experience with welfare reform rather than their opinions about social welfare policy. Throughout the process, participants were asked to focus on what they had seen themselves. While experience necessarily included observations regarding national or state policy, the project concentrated on practical strategies for change drawn from daily life. The project tried to avoid sessions where people expressed general opinions about what was wrong with society or government policy. Conversations also attempted to avoid blame-shifting speeches which create an adversarial environment

*The project had two primary goals:*

- 1) To encourage people involved with welfare reform in different ways to listen to each other's experience with the system and understand the complex dynamics involved in seeking and retaining family supporting work.
- 2) To develop a list of concrete projects which involved community residents in supporting low income people.

*The project involved two phases:*

- 1) Research to understand community concerns about welfare reform.
- 2) A conference to bring together participants to speak to each other.

The two parts of the project complemented each other. The research process provided insight into issues of concern which became the focus of the small groups for the conference. Developing research contacts also involved identifying local people concerned about these issues. The research process led to greater community involvement in welfare reform for some constituencies. The conference also provided further information on the nature of community involvement.



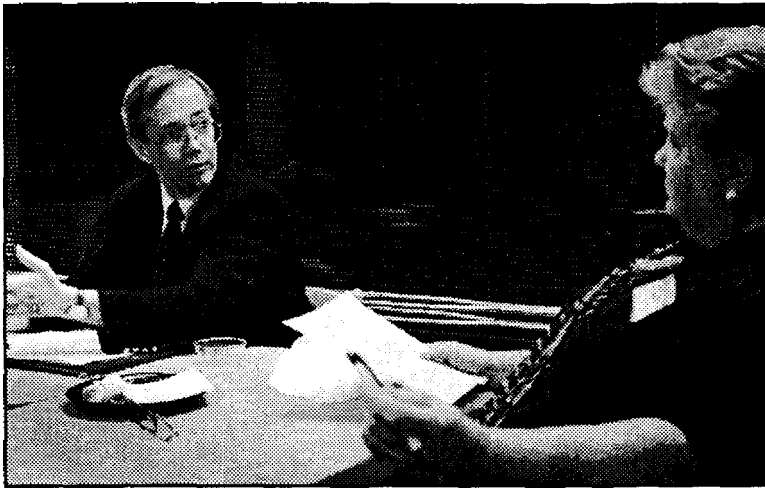
## Focus Group Questions

1. What is your experience with W-2?
2. What is your understanding of how W-2 works?
3. What do you see as the most beneficial aspects of the program? Why?
4. What do you see as the least beneficial aspects of the program? Why?
5. Given your understanding of this program, what would you do differently?
6. What major issues do you think that Kenosha's W-2 program needs to deal with now?
7. Think about the resources that poor people - the kinds of people who would use W-2 programs - have available to them to meet their needs for work, shelter, childcare, and other life needs. These resources might include family and friends, churches, community organizations or support through government or social service agencies. Given this list of problems that people could turn to community resources for help,
  - What do you do when faced with each of these situations?
  - What do you think people with limited incomes should do?
  - What do you think that they will do?
8. What would you do to help connect people to resources or build supports for people in these situations? What do you think a government program should do?
9. Is W-2 the way that our government should be dealing with poverty and other social issues like childcare, education and crime? Of not, what should be done?

## Life Problems (for question 7)

- A. Find a job
- B. Find housing
- C. Pay bills or make sure needs like food and housing are taken care of if you run out of money at the end of the month
- D. Find childcare
- E. Do when the babysitter calls in sick, the day care center is closed, or your children are sick and you have to go to work
- F. Find an education or training program and pay for it
- G. Find transportation if your car breaks down or you don't have one
- H. Get help when you are sick or someone in your family is sick. Make sure that someone is taking care of the sick person.

# *The Research Process*



The research consisted of focus group conversations with various stakeholder groups. A focus group brings together people to discuss a given issue, asking them to reflect on a series of questions. In the conversation project, focus groups included people involved in welfare reform in a particular way. There were separate groups for various kinds of Kenosha County Job Center and Department of Human Services employees, non-profit agencies, church representatives, employers, local politicians, and several participant focus groups. Given the overlapping nature of Kenosha's social service networks, a number of people were involved in several groups. Most participated in the focus groups only once.

It was easiest to combine the focus group with an already scheduled activity. In most cases, the focus group was at the end of a meeting or during a class. The only drawback to this method was that people were hesitant to participate in focus group conversations after an already long business agenda.

Focus group questions dealt with two related topics. The first series of questions asked participants to describe their actual experience with W-2 in Kenosha. This included gathering information on how people understood the program, in what context they knew about W-2, their assessment of program activities and things that needed to be changed.

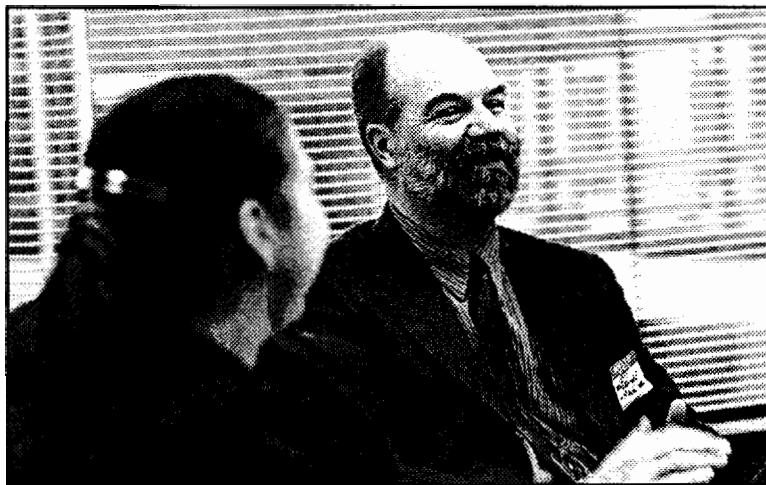
The second half of the focus group discussed the resources needed by low income people to meet their needs. All participants were first asked to talk about how they went about finding jobs, housing, childcare, and other resources. Everyone except low income populations were then asked about their experience and perceptions of the ways that W-2 eligible people met the same needs. The idea of this section was to determine the resources available in the community and the ways that different populations had access to various supports. With the exception of older, well-off residents, people noticed that the low income population had the same problems as other community residents and relied on similar strategies to find work, childcare and other supports.

One of the challenges of a community involvement project is reaching appropriate participants. This is particularly problematic in populations as diverse as employers and program participants. Access issues are even more difficult in communities alienated from the mainstream such as sectors of the African American and Latino communities. Often leaders recognized within the community differ from those sought out by mainstream institutions like the Kenosha County Job Center. The people frequently contacted as community representatives are usually overburdened with these requests. While social service agency representatives can include research or community involvement activities



as part of their work day and take work time to attend meetings, others with jobs unrelated to the research and community involvement activity must weigh competing demands of work, family and other activities in choosing when and where to participate. These problems made it difficult to get participants and employers to focus groups and the conference. In all 20 focus groups or individual interviews were conducted with people from all of the groups listed on page two. However, many more social service agency and government employees attended the conference than other groups. Despite low turn out at the conference, a number of participants, church representatives, and concerned citizens from other groups have expressed interest in continuing work on this project.

In order to counteract these problems, I recommend a slow process of developing trust with various parts of the community. Conversation projects should include at least one year to complete activities. Researchers should work with the community to develop a concept of appropriate stakeholder groups and local leaders before organizing focus groups. Ideally, people asking for participation from others in these kinds of activities should have well-established ties in that sector of the community. Researchers should also have an established presence before asking for community participation.



*1998 Conference Brochure Cover*

CONFERENCE  
1998



KENOSHA WELFARE REFORM  
CONVERSATION PROJECT

Wednesday  
April 29, 1998  
5:30 - 8:00 p.m.  
University of Wisconsin-  
Parkside  
Union

## Kenosha Conversation Project Ground Rules

Our goal in the conversation project is to share experience with W-2 in Kenosha. We hope that we can come up with some creative solutions to some of your concerns about moving low income people into the workforce. In order to do that, we need to set some rules about listening to and talking with each other.

First, it is important that everyone listens carefully to each other. Each person brings a new piece of information based on their experience. Others may have different information because they have different experience. But that does not make the other person's experience wrong, just partial or different. By sharing various experiences, we can develop a more complete picture of how W-2 is working in Kenosha.

For this reason, it is important to listen carefully to each person. As we go around the circle, try not to spend the time thinking up what you are going to say or how you are going to prove your point, but think about how the other person came to their opinion and what new things that brings to your experience with W-2.

In each section, we will go around the circle asking people to briefly tell their stories or respond to a question. Try not to take more than two minutes in responding to any question. Then we will have a little time to ask each other questions to clarify information. We will use the same practices in developing ideas to deal with your concerns about W-2.

In the second half of the conference, we will focus on developing creative solutions to some of your concerns. We will divide these solutions into three groups:

1. Issues or concerns that the job center can address. This section should include specific advice for the job center.
2. Program ideas or changes to existing programs which community based organizations, churches or other concerned citizens can develop. These include ways to provide information on existing services or new ideas which could be developed into programs to help low income people.
3. Problems which will require changes in legislation or W-2 program administration at the state level.

In each case, we will ask you to make a commitment to work on ideas or problems that concern you. As we go through these ideas, think about who best should work on a particular problem or program and whether or not you are willing to be part of this work.

# *The Conference*

Drawing on findings from the focus groups, five areas for continued discussion were identified:

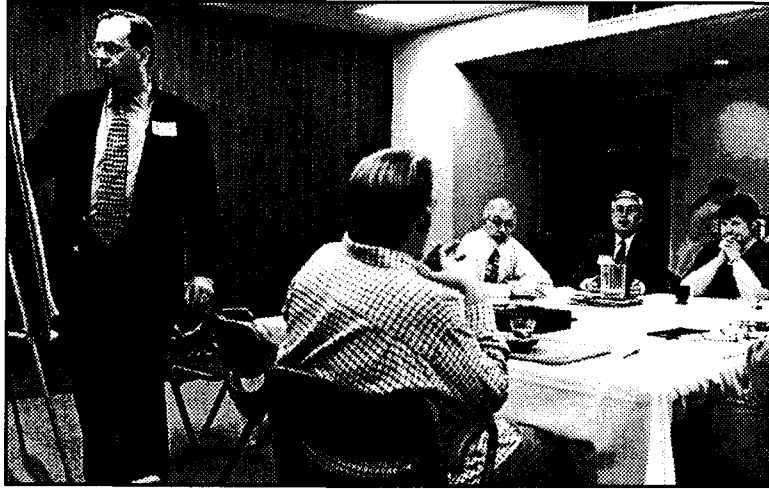
1. Job Retention and Advancement
2. Childcare and After School Programs
3. Transportation
4. Support Services for Low Income People
5. W-2 Education and Outreach

Focus group participants were invited to participate in the conference. For the most part they were organized into small groups based on one of the issues listed above which contained a mix of people from the various stakeholder communities. After an introductory overview, participants spent most of the conference talking in their small groups about these topics. They were given two general charges for this time. The first part of the focus group activity simply allowed participants to hear each other's experience with W-2 and to get to know each other.



In the second half, participants were asked to talk about strategies for change on the topic. In order to prepare this conversation, each small group had a short summary which listed the primary concerns raised on the issue during the focus group and strategies for change which had already been suggested. Participants were asked to divide their suggestions into projects which community members could accomplish, suggestions for change for the Kenosha County Job Center, and changes which required federal or state policy initiatives to accomplish. Finally, participants were asked to identify people or organizations who would take an active interest in carrying these projects forward.

In order to ensure that all participants had an equal chance to speak and that project ideas included the insights of everyone involved, the project trained facilitators and set ground rules for activities. The small groups endeavored to create a safe space for conversation. Instead of defining consensus as locating the points of agreement within conflicting views, participants were encouraged to develop creative ideas which drew on the experience of everyone involved.



Each small group had a facilitator and note taker to achieve these goals. These people were trained in conflict resolution and facilitating consensus process. Facilitators also had significant involvement in welfare reform themselves. Their role in the small groups involved both participation and facilitation, enabling them to model appropriate behavior.

### *Next Steps*

The conference was only the first step in this planning process. Sharing project findings with the wider community and developing any of the project ideas will take time. Part of developing a conversation project is realizing that these activities create momentum in a community. Organizers need to be prepared to identify appropriate ways to follow through on this energy.

The remainder of this booklet describes the outcomes from the research and conference process. It is meant as the first step in sharing the Kenosha Conversation Project insights.



# Welfare Reform in Wisconsin



Wisconsin Works (W-2) is one of the most radical welfare reform programs implemented under the 1996 U.S. federal welfare reform legislation. *The Personal Responsibility, Work Opportunity and Medicaid Restructuring Act of 1996* ended entitlements for public assistance, replacing the *Aid for Families with Dependent Children* (AFDC) program with block grants to the States. States had much flexibility in designing welfare reform strategies, as long as local programs rapidly moved low income people into work-related activities. Federal legislation restricted government aid for low income families to five years over a lifetime. In order to help people move from welfare to work, the legislation increased support for child care assistance. The food stamp and medical assistance programs were left alone. This meant that people could still qualify for food stamps or Medicaid outside of the welfare program, but they needed to meet the income and asset eligibility requirements.

Wisconsin Works replaced cash assistance based on limited income and the number of minor children in the household with a system designed to help people find work and provide supports to keep them employed. Each person requesting assistance meets with a Financial and Employment Planner (FEP) who evaluates their employment prospects and develop a self-sufficiency plan. In Kenosha, the FEP job is performed by a team. W-2 created a four level employment ladder with the following steps:

### 1. Unsubsidized Employment

People are first guided to jobs. Those who find work become eligible for case management services for food stamps, medicaid, childcare assistance and the earned income tax credit (EITC) depending on their income.

### 2. Trial Jobs

People who have trouble finding work could be placed in regular jobs subsidized by government during a three to six month training period. These people may be eligible for food stamps, medicaid, childcare, EITC and case management. This employment strategy is rarely used in Kenosha.

### 3. Community Service Jobs (CSJ)

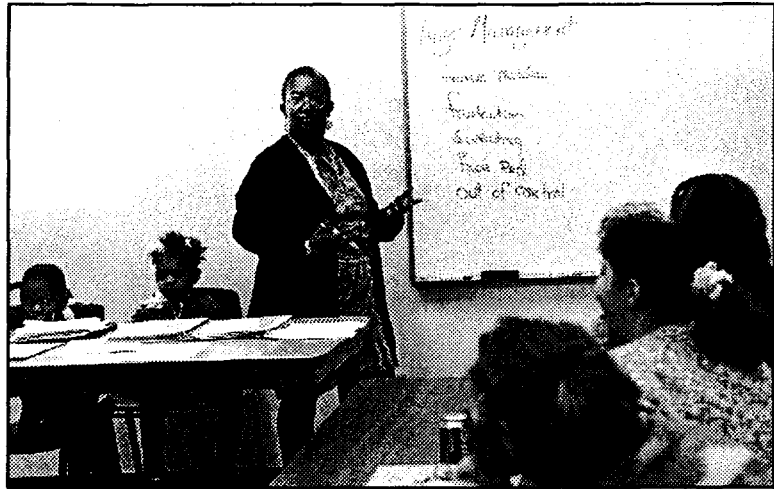
People who are not likely to find employment quickly are placed in community service jobs. The CSJ positions are expected to develop work experience for participants which would lead to regular employment. People in this category work at their CSJ placement for 30 hours a week and attend training for another 10. They receive a cash grant of \$673 per month. However, this cash grant could be reduced if they miss hours without good reason. CSJs may also be eligible for food stamps, Medicaid, childcare, and case management.

*Under W-2, there will be no entitlement for assistance, but there will be a place for everyone who is willing to work to their ability.*

—Department of  
Workforce Development  
Website

*There has been a separation of the program from poverty policy. It seems to me that AFDC was a very wide open program designed to address the needs of anybody who's poor. And then the JOBS program narrowed that somewhat, but there was still AFDC. The W-2 program is very narrow in terms of who it's intended to serve. And yet, the implications of the overall transition from an AFDC JOBS mode into a paradigm which is a W-2 paradigm without AFDC, impacts far more people than are relevant to the W-2 program. The policy impacts many more people than actually participate in the program. And that separation is far more noticeable.*

—Kenosha County Social  
Service administrator



*There's a girl in my class that told me that she was receiving a check. And I'm like "Well, wow, I've been like penniless for two months." On my break I went over and asked about it. They told me that, more than likely I didn't qualify because in the time I've been here I've had five jobs and I found them on my own. So they say well, I can work, I'm able to work, I've had to work, so get a job.*

—W-2 program participant  
classified as job ready

#### 4. W-2 Transition

People with major problems which keep them from performing independent, self-sustaining work are placed in this last category. In Kenosha, the W-2 transition category includes people with developmental disabilities, those caring for disabled children and others with similar problems. These people receive cash grants of \$628 per month and may be eligible for food stamps, Medicaid, childcare, and case management. They are expected to participate in work or developmental activities for 28 hours per week and education and training for 12 hours per week. The program assumes that people will eventually transition to CSJs and then unsubsidized employment.

In order to assist people in gaining employment, W-2 also provides several forms of additional assistance. Case management changes from determining if someone is eligible for assistance to a social service system designed to help participants solve problems which stand in the way of work. Transportation assistance is available to help the participant to get to required programs or job interviews. Most local W-2 agencies provide drop in childcare for participants. Job access loans are available to cover the costs of such items as clothing, work related tools or money to buy a car to get to work.

As required by federal mandates, W-2 also increases enforcement of child support. W-2 applicants are required to name the fathers of their children so that the state can ensure that they provided cash support. While AFDC also required women to name the fathers of their children, the new federal law expects states to increase enforcement of child support. People who are working receive all the money that the state collects while those in the cash grant program got 41 percent of child support payments. Local agencies complain that child support enforcement is significantly under funded.

While the W-2 program carefully outlined the various kinds of assistance available to people once they are placed in the system, it is less clear about support while they look for work. AFDC supplemented income with cash assistance for people working in low paying or part-time work. It also provided income to people while they looked for work. These benefits disappeared under W-2. People working in part-time or low wage jobs could receive more aid in food stamps, but no additional cash assistance. W-2 program applicants deemed job ready are offered workshops and other assistance to find work, but no cash support during their job search. The state has adopted a system to provide partial CSJ positions which would provide cash support to people working part-time, but has yet to make this option available. It is currently scheduled to go into effect in March, 1999.

As a work-first program, W-2 limits educational benefits. CSJs can participate in GED or other educational programs for 10 hours a week. Job related training is covered only for 240 hours: 12 weeks at 20 hours per week. People already engaged in educational programs are supposed to be allowed to finish their training.

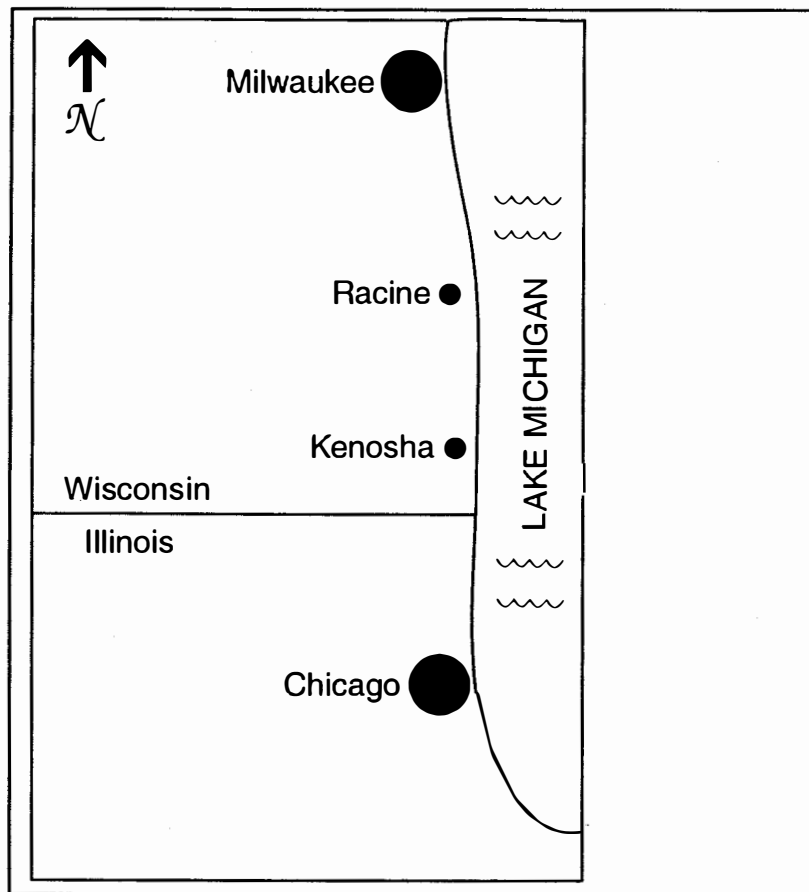
W-2 blurs the line between low income working people and welfare recipients. This policy decision attempts to reduce the stigma of government support and provide benefits to low income workers often ineligible for any benefits under AFDC. Childcare support is available to anyone earning 165 percent of the federal poverty level or below. However, recipients must pay co-payments for this aid. Medicaid is available to more children than under AFDC.

W-2 shifts the focus from providing income to support children to seeking work for the adult responsible for a family. Under AFDC, relatives caring for their family member's children received cash benefits. W-2 replaces this system with Kinship care, which provides \$215 per month for each child. This amount is often less than AFDC. Kinship care also requires extensive background checks for relatives caring for children. Agency staff note that insufficient funding has been given to local child welfare agencies to perform this work.

AFDC only provided aid through local government agencies. W-2 allows government, non-profit and for-profit organizations to bid for W-2 services. The W-2 contracts cover administrative and staffing costs. Each agency is also allocated money to pay for cash grants or other payments to program recipients based on an estimate of the number of people who will use the system in that area. Agencies who place more of their participants into jobs can keep a portion of the cash in this account as a "profit" to put toward new programs. However, if more people than expected need CSJ or W-2 transition assistance, the agencies can lose money. This system encourages local administrators to concentrate on moving people into paid work quickly.



## *Welfare Reform in Kenosha*



Kenosha County is located on the Wisconsin/Illinois border at the Southeast corner of the state. The county has about 135,000 people. The city of Kenosha is located about an hour and a half north of Chicago and about 45 minutes south of Milwaukee. 1990 U.S. Census figures listed a population of approximately 80,000 people in the city. Ninety percent were white, six percent African American, and six percent were Latino.\* Most of the people of Spanish heritage originally came from Mexico.

While Kenosha experienced an economic downturn when its Chrysler plant closed in 1988, its economy rebounded with a mix of industry and service. At the present time, the local economy is thriving.

In recent years, Kenosha County became a bedroom community for people from suburban Chicago. In addition to work in the Kenosha area, 20 percent commute to northern Illinois. Kenosha residents believe that low income people also migrate from Chicago to Kenosha seeking work, life in a less dangerous smaller community and prior to W-2, a more generous public assistance system.

*\*The census asks if people are "of Spanish origin" as a separate question. Latinos must choose a racial category (Black, White, Asian, Native American, Other) first. For this reason, percentages add up to more than 100%.*

## *Kenosha's W-2 Program*

Most parts of Kenosha's W-2 program were in place before implementation of recent welfare reform initiatives. Kenosha participated in an early Work Experience and Job Training Program in 1987. In 1990, Kenosha opened a one stop job center which has become a national model. Located in a remodeled one story department store, the center offers completely integrated services for employment and training. The current configuration evolved during the early 1990s, including 23 different programs run by a collaboration of nineteen different agencies. The Kenosha County Job Center is a unique public/private partnership run by a combination of non-profit organizations, for profit consulting services and government. Kenosha's W-2 program is recognized for successfully implementing the state welfare reform plan by reducing the number of people on welfare, finding people jobs, streamlining the employer connection to publicly funded employment programs and services, and developing an effectively integrated set of employment services in a true "one-stop" mode.

Kenosha County has offered a comprehensive array of employment and family support services in its approach to welfare to work programming. This approach accounts in part for Kenosha's long history of success and reputation for programmatic excellence. In making the transition to W-2, Kenosha has continued to provide support services to the low income working families which make up the broader public assistance client base at the Job Center (through the W-2, Food Stamps and Medical Assistance programs). Kenosha County has advocated the position that the state should make more of its unspent federal TANF funds available to counties to underwrite these services in the belief that the availability of such support services will be critical to the long term employment and economic success of many families who have made the transition from AFDC income support employment.

*"To empower the Kenosha County residents who are eligible for Wisconsin Works program services to attain and sustain economic self-sufficiency."*

—Kenosha W-2 program mission statement



## *Agencies at the Kenosha County Job Center*

- Adult Educators, Inc.
- Child Care Resource and Referral of Greater Racine and Kenosha, Inc
- Gateway Technical College
- Goodwill Industries of Southeastern Wisconsin, Inc.
- Hoppe - Orendorff, CPA, S.A.
- Kenosha County Department of Human Services - Divisions of Workforce Development and Health
- Kenosha Unified School District Head Start
- Labor Management Council
- LJJ - Associates in Management Services, Inc.
- Professional Services Group, Inc.
- Senior Community Services of Southeastern Wisconsin, Inc.
- Southeastern Wisconsin Private Industry Council, Inc.
- United Migrant Opportunities Services
- Wisconsin Job Service

*When folks come in the door looking for a job, they may not have any preconceived notion about what services will be available for them. They just know that this is a place where they can get some help. Possibly public aid, possibly job information. They are not going to know that they're going to be working with one of 18 different agencies that are located at the job center. They are not going to know that they're W-2 eligible, or that they're JTPA funded, or that they're some other funding source. They're not going to know any of this, necessarily, because our goal is that the person who comes in the door is not entitled to a service. We go through an eligibility determination and try to find what best supports them. It is not just the implementation of W-2 for us at the Job Center. It's helping all folks in our community find what's best to move them toward self-sufficiency.*

—Job Center employee

Kenosha Job Center staff contributed to the formulation of W-2. The Kenosha County Job Center has successfully run a work-first program since the early 1990s. Implementing W-2 meant few initial changes in their program design. While the Kenosha County Department of Human Services is the official contractor for the program, the program involves the same private/public partnership already providing services.

The job center services are linked into a wider array of human services offered by government and non-profits. In a community the size of Kenosha, a small number of agencies provide social services. Most participate in regular network meetings. The Prevention Services Network includes seven community based organizations, the Department of Human Services, and the Kenosha Unified School District. This network provides an array of services to the most at risk families in the area. The Emergency Services Network focuses on housing, shelter, disaster relief, Women Infants and Children's program and other support services. The Children's Services Network focuses further on children at risk. Many of the same organizations participate in each network. In addition to formal social service agencies, there is a network of churches providing emergency housing. Some churches also provide social services. These church based activities seem to be less formally linked to the official safety net networks, but there does appear to be some overlap in individuals participating in various kinds of community supports.



Kenosha's program is unique in two respects:

- 1) *The integrated services model does not distinguish between W-2 eligible people and other county residents needing employment services.* Kenosha provides the same general range of services for all residents. Part of the Kenosha County Job Center model involves treating low income people the same as everyone else. W-2 eligible people use the same job resource room as others in the county seeking work. Job development and assessment workshops include both W-2 recipients and other community residents. Job placement services do not distinguish between low income and other workers in recruitment, interviewing or placement activities. All other programs in the center are available to any county resident equally. This strategy is meant to combat the stigma attached to welfare recipients.
- 2) *Case management and employment services are provided by a team.* Rather than one FEP who is responsible for decision making and referral for a W-2 case, the Kenosha program includes a team of economic support specialists, case managers, job placement specialists, and employment support specialists. The initial employability plan is developed through a team discussion. Any additional needed services involve a wide range of people throughout the organization.

*What we've been able to do is play off each other's strength. Everybody is a subject matter expert. Everybody has input. And, when we look at W-2 places, not one person can say this person is a CSJ or this person is case management only. There is a team of people who come to consensus on that decision. And I think it makes the program stronger because it helps to eliminate any of the individual prejudice you may come to the table with.*

—W-2 program employee



In keeping with this model, the Kenosha W-2 program offers newcomers several options when they enter the building. People can go directly to the job resource room, where they will be guided toward job listings, resume development tools and other resources by a job placement specialist. The facility includes a phone and fax machine to help participants apply for work. Employers also interview potential workers on site.

People also can start with the general reception area, across from the job resource room. Like many W-2 programs, Kenosha attempts to divert people from cash assistance whenever possible. The receptionist first refers people to a pre-screener who offers information on job related workshops and other employment services, food pantries, housing and rental assistance, and family services. This same person also provides information on food stamps, medical assistance and childcare support. Besides providing information to the general public seeking help, this customer service representative tries to resolve low income people's needs without enrolling them in W-2.

People requesting government services go through a screening process to determine a plan of action based on the W-2 program ladder. Depending on their employability plan, they then participate in job search, job development workshops, and other activities.

As with all W-2 programs, participants receiving food stamps, childcare and Medicaid are required to meet with a case manager every three months to continue eligibility. People involved in active job search, CSJ or transition programs may meet with case managers or other job center staff more frequently.

*It's about choices. We have a menu of services that we can provide for them to better their lives, to move things along for them, but they make the choice as to whether they want to participate, which program they really want to go into.*

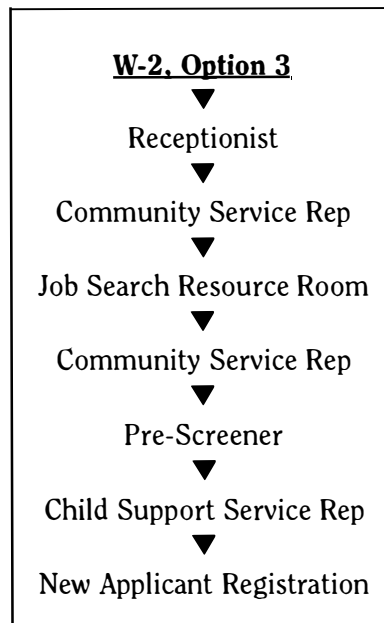
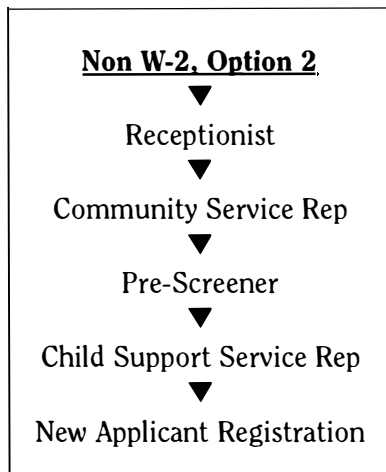
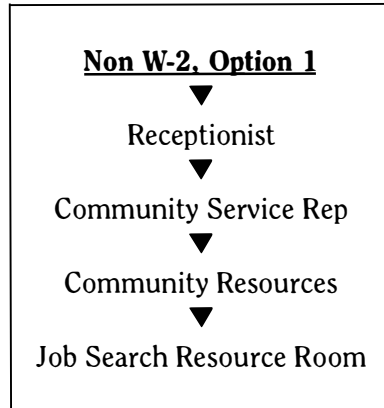
—Kenosha County Job  
Center employee

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# Welfare Reform in Kenosha in 1997-1998

W-2 began in the fall of 1997. Local W-2 agencies had until March 30, 1998 to convert all AFDC cases to W-2. Case conversion meant that everyone receiving AFDC had to report to the W-2 office and sign a "participation agreement" in order to be eligible for W-2. As in other parts of the state, Kenosha found that roughly 50 percent of their caseload came in for processing. The remainder lost benefits on either October 1st or November 1st 1997.

## Kenosha County Job Center Flow



*I got a paper in the mail that said "Sign up for W-2 by this time." At that time I was like Whatever that means, and I threw it in the garbage. Most of the people are just like All right, well I can't do this, I have to do this, ok, whatever, throw it away. They don't know what they can do and what can't do. I don't think it was specified enough for understanding.*

—Medical assistance recipient

### Kenosha W-2 Cases as of April 27, 1998 (330 total)

Number of Cases	Category
1.	<i>Categories where people do not get a cash grant, but get case management services, other services at the job center (work shops, employment assistance, etc.) and may get food stamps, childcare and medical assistance if their income is low enough.</i>
32	<i>Job Ready: People that the job center think can easily find a job who are looking for work.</i>
101	<i>Employed</i>
57	<i>Employed, Follow up: People who have found jobs, but the job center feels that they need extra case management support to keep their jobs.</i>
2.	<i>Categories where people get a cash grant, case management services, other job center services, childcare, medical assistance, food stamps and other related services.</i>
0	<i>Trial Jobs: Employment which is subsidized by the government.</i>
73	<i>Community Service Jobs: People in this category have barriers to employment. Community service is supposed to give them current job experience so that they can get a job. People are placed in a community service position. They are required to spend 30 hours a week at their community service site and 10 hours in classes. They get a cash grant of \$673 per month. They lose money from their cash grant if they do not put in the required hours without good reason.</i>
40	<i>W-2 Transition Jobs: People in this category have many barriers to employment. They attend classes of other activities to help them get ready for work for 28 hours per week and education for 12 hours per week. They get a cash grant of \$628 per month. They can lose part of their cash grant if they do not put in the required number of hours without good reason.</i>
27	<i>People with a child under 13 weeks: No activity requirements</i>

Kenosha has experienced a dramatic drop in people receiving W-2 services. As of April 30, 1998 only 330 cases were officially enrolled in W-2. One hundred and forty were receiving a cash grant. Of the 750 cases that Kenosha had to convert into W-2, half were already employed. Relatives caring for children were converted into kinship care. The people transferred to kinship care were taken out of the count of AFDC cases six months before Kenosha began to implement W-2.

The drop in cases is part of a longer term trend in Kenosha. The 1996 Department of Human Services annual report notes a 66 percent drop in AFDC caseload from 1990. Kenosha human services and job center people believe the change was caused by their implementation of the workfirst JOBS program and the upswing in the local economy.

Transitioning people into jobs does not mean that they earn enough to support their families or that they receive critical benefits like health insurance. A work first system in a booming economy can locate good paying jobs for people with skills or experience in good paying jobs, but people with low-wage service sector work experience like most AFDC recipients are likely to return to low-paid, service sector work. Many start out in part-time jobs with no benefits.

<b>Use of Government Funded Aid Programs Comparison Between 1990 and 1998</b>			
<b>Type of Assistance</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>% Change</b>
AFDC/TANF/W-2	3,092	381	-88%
Food stamps and medical assistance	160	960	+589%
Food stamps only	573	443	-23%
Medical assistance only	955	2,226	+233%
Total unduplicated count	4,783	4,010	-16%

Many of these low wage workers may still need government services. A system which shifts emphasis from income support to providing services which enable an individual to work should show a shift from the numbers of people receiving cash assistance to greater numbers working but also receiving food stamps, medical assistance and subsidized childcare aid. In fact, Kenosha's program performance mostly fits this model. While the percentage receiving Medicaid and food stamps has increased dramatically, in April, 1998, only those getting some form of public assistance were getting subsidized childcare. In January, 1999, 7 percent of the families getting childcare aid were not getting any other public assistance benefit.

Despite the increasing numbers getting government support for health care or food but not cash assistance, non-profit organization representatives worry that some people eligible for Medicaid and food stamps may not be receiving services because enrollment for these programs is now separate from W-2. The fact that people need to take time off work to redetermine eligibility for services every three months may also deter some people from accessing these services.

The population served by the W-2 program has changed in the last year. The Kenosha County Job Center programs serving low income populations under the predecessors to W-2 had a consistent ethnic make-up of 60 percent white, 25 percent African American and 15 percent Latino. Forty-five percent of participants did not have a high school diploma or GED. In the first six months of 1998, 46

*I think it complicated what was before a fairly simple delivery system where food stamps, medical assistance, AFDC were one thing and now its three different things with two different eligibility lists, creating a lot of confusion in the minds of potential users about who's eligible for what.*

—Kenosha County  
Department of  
Human Services  
administrator



*There are very few names in the city of Kenosha that one agency could name that the others don't go "Oh, yeah."*

—Social service agency employee

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*I had a client that finally did something. Then because she didn't have enough hours for a couple of month's prior...she got nothing, and I feel that for those 40 hours that she had gone, she should have gotten paid if this is really truly like work. Because now we're back to her falling off the face of the earth and her not returning our phone calls and coming in for appointments. ...When you're starting a job, you **don't** start off having a monthly check of them having the hours that you don't do subtracted from that. I would love to see it being paid per hour that somebody **does** work. And I think that would be easier for the clients to understand too, rather than sanctions.*

—Kenosha County Job Center Employee

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percent of the people enrolled in W-2 were white, 41 percent African American and 13 percent Latino. This means that the population has shifted to more people of color. The proportion of participants without a high school diploma has risen slightly to 49 percent. In addition, only 46 percent of the current W-2 participants have a valid driver's license. People without cars in Kenosha find it more difficult to get to job interviews. They also have fewer options regarding the job location and times that they can work.

Taken together, these shifts in the characteristics of people served may mean that, increasingly, the people left relying on government assistance have more barriers to finding stable jobs. Research on low income people shows that people of color with limited education or work experience often have more trouble finding stable jobs than whites. This is particularly true of people living in low income neighborhoods who lack transportation. Some people worry that the Kenosha County Job Center W-2 programs may face additional challenges in helping people become economically self-sufficient if only the hardest to serve remain in the program.

Kenosha's program offers comprehensive services to people enrolled in W-2. CSJ and W-2 transition participants take part in a series of workshops and assessment activities before placement. Given the size of the caseload and linkages within the community, individual problems can be resolved through a concerted team effort. Community size also means that service providers often know details of individual cases.



For example, one program participant needed special medical services for her child. Kenosha County Job Center staff were able to quickly identify strategies to resolve the problem and contact service providers. At the conference, an administrator identified the case through the participant's story and told her all of the services provided. In another example, a community based service provider commented on the change in one program participant and her family in the months after the conference. The service provider knew this individual through her children, and was able to connect the various pieces of her life due to ongoing contact in the community. In both cases, agency staff could easily identify individual clients even if they had not worked with them personally.

Despite the nature of the services and community size, problems still exist. A number of agencies hosting CSJs complained that they had trouble finding appropriate tasks due to limited skills of the people placed at their agency. Concerns regarding supervision and training time for these individuals were also noted. CSJs and W-2 transition participants also had trouble meeting program requirements. The Kenosha County Job Center reported sanction rates of around 40 percent. Average number of hours missed were 60 in one month. While only a few people lost their entire cash grants through sanctioning, average sanctions came to nearly half of the grant amount.

Kenosha County Job Center line staff expressed concerns that the state system for sanctioning did not send the right message. On the one hand, sanctions took effect several months after the person missed hours. This meant that someone could be participating fully in their scheduled activities yet lose money for things that happened in the past. On the other hand, people with medical excuses or other good cause reasons for absences still received benefits. One case manager worried that these people would not survive in the workforce because employers would not keep people who were continually absent regardless of the cause.

The Kenosha Conversation Project took place in this context. The community housed an award winning welfare reform program with strong placement statistics. The local economy was good. The community offered an array of social services. The organizations providing service developed good communications to resolve local problems.

At the same time, some people involved in the community worried that welfare reform would increase poverty, particularly for children. Others had little understanding of W-2 or felt disenfranchised from government services. The conversation project aimed to bring the community together to discuss the impact of welfare reform in Kenosha and enhance community consensus about effective action.

The rest of this booklet reports on the results of the focus groups and conference.

*We're setting them up for failure because it doesn't mirror the real world. If I had a doctor's excuse for 3 weeks, I may have a job, but I may not either. My employer may have to fill my position. I had to apologize for the W-2 program because they really did (one of my clients) a disservice. She didn't understand why she was fired when she had medical documentation, and it was substantial.*

—Job center case manager

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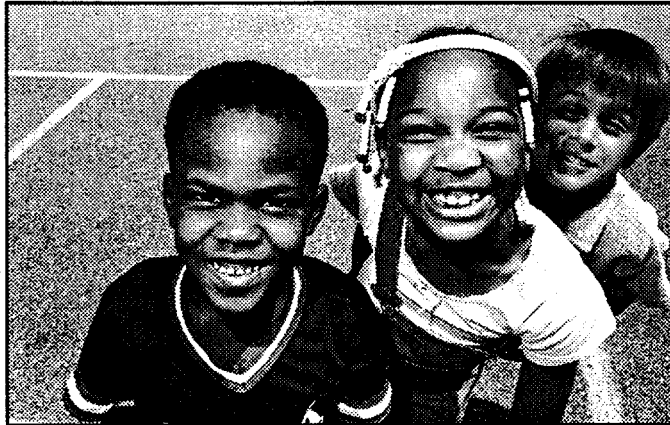
# ***Kenosha Conversation Project***

## ***Issues of Concern and Strategies for Change***

### ***Overlapping Issues***

*The idea is if you can get a job and keep it all of your problems will be solved and that's basically it. And many of us in the middle class now know that isn't the case even if the wife and husband are working 40 hours a week. It is interesting that we are basically saying that if they were more like us, we wouldn't have these problem but that is not necessarily the case. We're finding that we are more like them every day.*

—Social service agency  
employee



The Kenosha Conversation Project highlighted that many of the problems faced by low income workers were also shared by every family throughout the community. People have trouble juggling work and children's needs. Everyone worries about earning enough money, work stability and paying for health care. Many of the issues raised in a conversation about W-2 really reflected larger issues regarding work and family.

Research project participants also felt that work-related strategies impact on the community as a whole. Despite the fact that W-2 focuses on adults, program effects involve families and the entire community. Two issues caused particular concern. First, people saw W-2 affecting children in both positive and negative ways. Many felt that working parents would provide role models for their children. On the other hand, people throughout the community worried that W-2 would have a negative influence on youth and the community as a whole. Would unsupervised children get in trouble and raise the crime rate? Would the emphasis on work encourage teens to drop out of school to help their families? How could the community best provide for its youth?

Kenosha residents also saw trends related to W-2 decreasing community involvement. One of the small groups at the conference noted that there has been a move away from people acting as a community toward paying service providers to care for community needs. The pressures of work contribute to this problem for everyone. How could the community provide the resources which would encourage civic involvement, while also expecting people to work?

### ***Suggestions for Change***

1. *Do a needs assessment survey of community residents of childcare, transportation and health care needs through employers.*

In order to really understand the needs of all working families and bring employers more clearly into the process of dealing with the work related needs of their employees, this idea stressed working with Kenosha employers to survey their entire workforce.

2. *Expand hours and days of operation for both the job center and social service agencies in order to accommodate people working during the day.*



## *Job Retention and Advancement*

*The 1996 Federal welfare reform legislation limits the length of time that a person can get cash assistance to five years in a lifetime. Everyone recognizes that low income people will need to find jobs, keep them, and move up into better paying jobs if they are going to sustain their families without welfare. Kenosha has a great success rate in placing people into employment due to the good economy and the efforts of the job center. Many low income people prefer to work. However, everyone who has contact with the low income community recognizes that many of the jobs available to low skilled workers pay poorly, are part-time and have no benefits. While people disagree about the reasons, everyone also sees that low income people have trouble staying in jobs. Many people recognize that the majority of "entry-level" jobs have no way to advance and that low skilled workers will need to get additional training if they are going to qualify for better jobs.*

### **The Good News:**

Kenosha's economy is booming and many people can easily find work. The job center has a good success record in placing people in jobs. Many low income people prefer to work and some see the job center programs as possibly helping them to get ahead. Many people appreciate the job center services and format. Some people see W-2 as breaking the cycle of poverty by insisting that people work. These people see W-2 programs which mimic work through requiring activities and sanctioning people who fail to participate as building good work habits and responsibility. However, there is much less consensus on the messages sent by these programs and the outcomes related to work than for any other issue raised during the focus groups.

### **The Concerns:**

Issues concerning building work habits, job placement, retention and advancement had the least consensus of all the concerns raised in the focus groups. Many people saw the same problems, but offered very different reasons for those difficulties. Some people saw several reasons for each problem. **In order to give all of the different viewpoints, each section below presents the various explanations for the problem.**

It is also important to note that, even though some people saw that people with substantial work histories and good educations ended up on public assistance, many only thought about people with limited work histories or limited education when reporting concerns about job placement and advancement for W-2 participants. Since people picture low income workers as single parents with many children who have not completed high school and who have never worked, many explanations for problems finding and keeping jobs apply primarily to these kinds of welfare recipients. Given that many studies show that the population on welfare is very diverse, and that the majority of people on public assistance move between welfare and low skilled work, these interpretations may only partially apply to Kenosha's low income workers.

*I just go to different places filling out applications and talking to people. I ask a lot of different people that I just run in to. Like I might even ask you, "You know where they're hiring?"*

—Job Center participant who had been unemployed for over three months on how she looked for work.

*There's a lot of them that I don't know with their criminal background, where they're going to get hired at. And if they have alcohol and drug problems, I don't know where they're going to get hired at. I'm not going to do it at a retail position, where you're going to trust somebody to handle money and deal with customers day in and day out.*

—Employer

*Usually factories, people usually don't stay at the jobs especially if they go through the temporary services. I know a lot of people they go in and out of temporary services.*

—W-2 program participant

*It's probably the case that a lot of people believe that that first job which they get is not sufficient to meet their needs, economically, over the long haul and they would certainly like something better. And preferably soon. And with that you see job hopping. People may be hopping, to some extent, because they get bored with the job. They just don't like it. But the conditions of employment may be an issue in some cases. But my guess is that a lot of job-hopping is the desire to make more money to get ahead.*

—W-2 program employee

## 1. *Problems finding employment or jobs that pay enough:*

While most people in the focus groups recognized that Kenosha has a good labor market, many reported that low income people found that they had trouble finding full-time work with benefits which paid enough to support a family. Several people reported that employers hired through temporary agencies or that people would be laid off just before they were eligible to become permanent employees or qualify for benefits.

### *Reasons given for the problem:*

- People do not know how to look for work or do not have the networks to find jobs. Both people who work with low skilled populations and program participants reported that they often did not know how to find good jobs. Many would rely on information from friends who also had low wage, part-time work, or would simply go from place to place filling out applications. Many did not have a clear idea of the kind of work that they wanted to do or recognized that they did not have the education or training to get the kind of job that they would like.
- Low skilled workers do not have the work histories, education or work habits to get good jobs.
- W-2 participants have other barriers to employment such as criminal records or substance abuse problems which prevent them from getting good jobs.
- W-2 participants cannot get to good jobs because of lack of transportation and childcare.
- Employers are taking advantage of the low skill population by hiring through temporary agencies or not keeping people past their probationary period in order to avoid paying them benefits.
- Employers have trouble finding people who are reliable and thus must be more careful in choosing who to hire.
- Employers do not pay enough and do not offer benefits.
- In today's economy, employers cannot afford to pay more or offer benefits.

## 2. *Work expectations versus work realities:*

Employers and some W-2 participants reported that many low income people would quit jobs quickly because the jobs were boring or did not provide enough pay and benefits. Others reported disappointment because they expected that an "entry level" job would be a "middle level" job.

### *Reasons given for the problem:*

- Low skilled people are not realistic about "entry level" jobs and the job center was not psychologically preparing them adequately to take these jobs.
- Low skilled people or those with limited work experience lack basic work skills like how to use a telephone or copier; rudimentary spelling and math; proper dress for a workplace or the ability to talk properly to get good jobs.
- Employers are taking advantage of the fact that people now have to work by giving them the all the menial jobs and replacing paid employees with community service workers.

### 3. *Poor work habits and unreliable employees:*

Everyone commented that the population served by W-2 has trouble getting to work on time or leave early, often miss work, frequently do not call in when they miss work, and often do poor or sloppy work. Many people recognized that the same problems occur throughout the workforce, decrying the lack of a “work ethic.”

#### *Reasons given for the problem:*

- Most people are juggling work and family and low skilled people have even more chaotic lives. This is particularly true for people who have unpredictable housing, transportation or childcare. People who rely on government services have the most problems because they must also report to these agencies during work hours on a regular basis in order to get services.
- People lack the supporting networks of spouse, family and friends which sustained workers in the past.
- People lack the resources to report responsibly to employers and are too stressed to put their jobs first.
- People do not know how to talk to employers when they have a problem or how to ask for documentation for an absence like getting a note from the court officer if they have a court appearance.
- People are more concerned about their children or relatives than their jobs.
- People simply do not care about working and lack a work ethic.
- Employers have destroyed the work ethic through downsizing, hiring through temporary services and not offering full time jobs with benefits.
- The job center is not helping people build a work ethic because sanctions do not support positive change and letting people get benefits when they do not appear for medical reasons for long periods of time creates the expectation that employers will allow the same behavior.
- People have substance abuse problems that interfere with work.

### 4. *People lack training to advance and do not seem to have the resources to get training.*

Much of this issue focused on the fact that many low skill people simply cannot juggle school, work and family. They do not enroll in training and then without that training cannot get into better jobs.

### 5. *Community Service Jobs are not preparing people adequately for the workplace.*

- Community service workers are not being given jobs with enough responsibility because the employers think that W-2 participants are not capable of doing more complicated work.
- Agencies who supervise Community Service workers do not have adequate guidance or time to work with volunteers.

*I believe they started her out in the coffee shop, but she was unable to get there on time. Sometimes she would be as late as two hours. It was because she didn't plan for her children, the oldest son had to go to one school and she had a kindergartner, she also had two preschoolers. So she was just not able to manage all those things and get to work on time and eventually she just kind of gave up.*

—School outreach worker

*I can think of sisters we have that both started working in a local nursing home. A relative got ill. They knew it was a nursing home, they knew it was Saturday. They wouldn't get off, “we'll just go now.” They left, didn't talk to their employer ahead of time about requesting the day off, explaining it. The relative died while they were there. Then they called and said, “Well, I've got to be at the funeral, I won't be back.” Had a difficult time making them understand that, “Had you gone to the employer ahead of time, explained the situation, you had a very good chance of getting that Saturday off. There's the Family Leave Act.” But if you work in a nursing home, weekends are sacred. Its very difficult to get off. They knew that but never even considered approaching the employer with it first because they might say “No.”*

—Job center employee

*Focus group question: What do you do for back up childcare? Well, that depends on how the job pays.*

—Social service employee

## ***Suggestions for Change:***

### ***Changes Requiring Legislation or Changes in W-2 Policy:***

1. *Require better wages and benefits.*
2. *Change W-2 to support education and work.* Allow intensive one or two year equivalent training/education to improve wage levels, after a person has shown attachment to the labor force and identified or worked in a specific career field.
3. *Allow Job Center staff to continue working with clients through several jobs, until living wages are obtained.*
4. *Provide positive incentives and rewards to people who fulfill requirements or do well on the job instead of sanctions.* Change W-2 sanctions to positive “wages” earned when a W-2 participant fulfills program requirements.

*There are some companies in which there is such a little chance. For example, they'll have 200 entry level workers doing packaging and they'll have two supervisors where only two out of 200 are likely to get to be supervisors.*

—Job center employee

### ***Suggestions for the Kenosha County Job Center***

1. *Enhanced assessment for job center participants.* Assessment which takes more fully into account an individual's past experience, goals and aspirations.
2. *More far-reaching case management and job readiness training.*
3. Support and training for community service job sites and employers who work with low- skill workers.
4. *Establish a case management mechanism which would focus specifically on retention and advancement for both people involved in community service jobs and paid employment.* The case management component ideas stressed that case managers should work with both employers and Community Service Job sites and participants for a period of time after people are placed specifically around day to day retention issues and developing strategies to advance. In keeping with the job center's mission to not distinguish between W-2 eligible and non-W-2 participants, this service would have to be offered to all employers who work with the Kenosha County Job Center. While some people recognized that the Job Center does some of this already, the idea for additional workers came up because of feelings that the work load for current case managers is high enough as is and that these kinds of additional supports are needed. Some also mentioned that case managers who are not involved in enforcement may have better rapport with participants.
5. *Starting work experience earlier in the job center process and combining work with classes.* This suggestion came from a program participant. Several participants could not see the connection between classes and work.

*They're dealing with issues that they have to take care of today. There isn't a lot of long term planning and, even though we stress that in workshops, its hard for them to say what they are going to be doing a year from now. They're worried about what they're going to do tomorrow.*

—Job center employee

### ***Suggestions for Community Residents or Kenosha County Job Center/Community Partnerships:***

1. *Offer workshops which focus on such retention issues as communicating with employers about family or transportation problems, conflict resolution, and advancement strategies.* There was concern that people do not readily come to these kinds of workshops. One strategy might involve offering workshops at job sites, schools or community based organizations.

2. *Develop an organized group to develop a conversation with the business community about how they could participate in welfare-to-work most effectively.*
3. *Work with employers to offer flexible hours for employees with children.*
4. *Get employers to offer childcare on site and help with transportation.*
5. *Provide mentoring for low income people to help them retain jobs and advance.*
6. *Alert low income workers of the need to begin looking for higher paying jobs at a certain point and support them to do so. The small group suggested using media and satellite centers as ways to convey this message to the appropriate population.*

*They're being identified as work-ready, and we're lucky if they know how to use a copying machine, and they are not team players because we're spending so very much time teaching them this is how you answer the phone, this is how you dress appropriately, just all the things you'd expect a regular employee to come in knowing. So there is a differentiation. And its kind of "us" and "them". You know, "Why don't you just go take the trash out because we know you know where the dumpster is at this point?" How on earth is this individual ever going to be ready for a real job because we don't have the time to train them and no one seems to be training them?*

—Social service agency  
employee

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*No one will give me guidelines. No one will say "this is what they're supposed to be doing.*

—Social service agency  
employee

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## Childcare and After School Programs

*I went to the job center for childcare. I filled out the papers and everything for my daughter to be in it.*

*Question: And it worked pretty well? Yea.*

—W-2 program participant

*Another thing I learned is people are not willing to leave their children. They're not fond of day care. Day care centers, they want to know that their child is with a family member or a good friend. Somebody they trust. They're just not willing. Day care for some people is just not an option.*

—School employee

*The welfare did give me a list and I met this lady and she lived two houses down where I lived so my kids went to day care when I had to go for classes. She was registered through the welfare and she did it out of her house. She was a really nice lady.*

—W-2 program participant



*Even though the Kenosha County Job Center offers on-site drop off childcare and a good list of day care providers, working families still have problems finding affordable childcare they trust which is convenient and available during the hours that they work. Locating childcare quickly in order to start a job is also a problem. People also have trouble finding back-up childcare. There are limited after school programs for older children and few programs for teenagers.*

### **The Good News:**

People spoke favorably about the Kenosha County Job Center childcare center and the assistance that they had received in locating childcare through the job center.

### **The Concerns:**

Childcare problems fall into seven areas:

1. **Childcare families trust:** Many parents are afraid to leave their children in day care centers because they have either had a bad experience with childcare or heard about unsafe day care centers or childcare workers who treat children badly. However, neighborhood-based unlicensed day care can lead to serious problems too.
2. **Childcare families can afford:** Even with government paying most of the cost for childcare for many low-income families, people working low wage or part-time jobs often cannot afford the co-payments for childcare. Day care centers which insist that people pay the co-payment up front have caused problems for people just starting work who do not have the money to lay out.
3. **Childcare which is convenient:** People have trouble getting to childcare providers which are located at a different place from their homes or jobs. This is a particular problem for people who do not have cars. The location of childcare is even more of a problem for people with several children in different schools or day care centers. For example, several people reported losing jobs or having trouble finding work because they had to get children to several different providers in the morning and then leave work in the middle of the day to pick school-aged children up and take them to a day care provider.



4. *Hours that day care is available:* Families have lots of trouble finding childcare which is available during second and third shifts and weekends.
5. *Temporary childcare and the difficulty finding childcare and a job at the same time:* People have trouble finding temporary child care for job interviews. People often find it hard to both look for work and locate childcare. Given that W-2 provides no money for some people while they look for work, often these individuals rapidly find jobs but then find that they have not had time to locate childcare. While the Kenosha County Job Center offers drop-off and emergency childcare, there are limited slots, the location is not convenient for many people. Some people who have asked for temporary childcare assistance have been told that they must pay market rates for the service. As a result, people have lost job opportunities or left their children alone or with unsafe providers.
6. *Back-up childcare:* Back-up childcare is a huge problem for all working families. Day care centers do not take sick children, day care and schools close during working hours. Family and friends who regularly provide childcare have other commitments and are suddenly not available. Single parents and people with few friends and family who are not also working have the hardest time, but the same problems exist for everyone. Many employers either cannot afford to employ people with unreliable childcare or do not understand the difficulties faced by working parents. Many people report that low income people have lost jobs due to lack of back-up childcare.
7. *After school programs:* Parents with school-aged children often find that there are few organized programs for their children between the hours that school lets out and when their jobs end. This is a particular problem for parents of teenagers. As a result, parents either must get their children from school to a day care provider or leave them unsupervised. Not only does this potentially lead to children getting in trouble, but parents who spend half of their work day worrying about their children are less likely to do well at their jobs.

*There have been times where I actually had to cancel job interviews because I had to watch my children because Grandma couldn't. Now I've just gone to the childcare center and asked if they could watch my son and they said "No."*

—Job ready W-2 program participant

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*I have a couple of friends and it depends on it the kids are on vacation cause one of them is 13. With me I don't really have anything else. If my kids get sick I won't be able to come here because I don't have anybody else to watch my children.*

—W-2 program participant

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*"We need more day care providers that are night care providers."*

—Job Center employee

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*In several cases that we are dealing with their 15 year old son or daughter is made to stay home to take care of the little ones so that mom can go to this job. And as a result the kids are now falling behind and will eventually drop out of school. So we're building another person that needs assistance because of the one that is now in this situation.*

—Minister

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## *What People are Doing Now:*

*Focus group participants reported that low income people had a variety of strategies to deal with these problems now. Some of these solutions are creative, positive tactics. Others are more negative or lead to other problems.*

1. *Finding child care wherever they can.* Often, families choose family members, neighbors or community day care providers over formal childcare centers. This strategy works well unless the childcare provider is not reliable or is unsafe.
2. *Relying on family and friends for back-up when it is available.* People often turn to their networks for help. This works well, but also creates social obligations for the person which could interfere with locating or keeping jobs. For example, one person reported having to cancel job interviews because the family member who was her childcare provider insisted that she take her to an appointment.
3. *Using older children as babysitters.* Several people working in schools, as well as people at social service agencies reported that low-income families are pulling their older children out of school to babysit the younger ones while they work. Low income people often reported using their older children as childcare providers.
4. *Leaving children alone.*
5. *Missing work, job interviews, classes and appointments because they cannot find childcare.*

## ***Suggestions for Change:***

### ***Changes Requiring Legislation or Changes in W-2 Policy:***

*Relax the rules for licensed childcare centers so that churches and people with life experience working with children can more easily provide care.*

### ***Suggestions for Community Residents or Kenosha County Job Center/Community Partnerships:***

1. *Establish a hotline for childcare concerns. This suggestion included two general components:*
  - A. *An emergency solution hotline to give advice to children who may be home alone or caring for other children. This hotline would provide advice and referral for minor problems.*
  - B. *A telephone referral service to childcare agencies, church or other groups which provide both long term and drop in care or a way to arrange for a volunteer to do a home visit to the family.*
2. *Set up both "drop in" care and second/third shift childcare centers. This idea envisioned a network of agencies or churches. The program would charge participants a small fee and ask for participants to donate some of their time to help defray costs to give a sense of ownership and community to the activity.*
3. *Create mentoring programs for families, especially new parents.*
4. *Create a network of families and agencies to provide care on an emergency basis. Older adults were suggested as providers through a grandparents' organization, United Auto Workers Local 72 retirees, and/or the retired teachers organization; "Sniffles" day care provided by churches or other providers.*
5. *Encourage employer provided on-site childcare.*
6. *Expand school-provided childcare and after school programs.*
7. *Expand day care and after school programs provided by churches or other community-based agencies.*

8. *Expand existing day care center hours.*
9. *Help people develop cooperative childcare arrangements with friends, neighbors or co-workers on other shifts.*
10. *Help people develop reliable back-up plans.*
11. *Get employers to be more understanding and flexible about childcare problems. Encourage flexible scheduling and time off for childcare emergencies.*
12. *Encourage people to call in when childcare emergencies happen and help them learn how to talk with employers or agencies about these kinds of problems in a constructive way.*

## Transportation



*Kenosha has a big problem with public transportation. The bus system stops running at 7 PM on weekdays and 5:30 PM on the weekend. It does not go to many of the areas where jobs are located. Bus service between Racine and Kenosha is not well coordinated and there is no public transportation into northern Illinois. Many low income people either do not have reliable cars or do not have drivers' licenses.*

### **The Good News:**

Everybody recognizes the problem.

### **The Concerns:**

Transportation problems fall into three areas:

1. *Hours:* People need transportation to get to jobs, education programs and other services on evenings and weekends.
2. *Frequency:* Public transportation does not run often enough which means that people spend lots of time trying to get to their jobs and appointments. This becomes a particular problem for people who have to pick up their children at several schools or day care centers in addition to getting to work.
3. *Getting to places where the buses do not run:* Since many jobs are located out in the county, people without cars have trouble getting to them. It is also difficult to get to jobs in Racine or anywhere outside of the city limits.

### **What People are Doing Now:**

Focus group participants reported that low income people have a variety of strategies to deal with these problems now. Some of these solutions are creative, positive tactics. Others are more negative or lead to other problems.

1. *Taking the bus when available.*
2. *Taking taxicabs.*
3. *Sharing rides with friends or family or paying a co-worker or friend to drive them to work or other appointments.* This strategy works well but can lead to problems if the driver has other things to do or is not reliable.

*I know a lady that works there, she lives like two blocks from where I was staying so she would give me a ride home. I would give her like \$10 a week to take me back and forth. So I never have a problem with getting there.*

—W-2 program participant

4. *Sharing cars.* This works well until several people need the car or it breaks down.
5. *Walking or riding a bike.*
6. *Missing appointments or work when transportation is not available.* Limiting their choices for work because they cannot get there.



### ***Suggestions for change:***

#### ***Suggestions for Community Residents or Kenosha County Job Center/Community Partnerships:***

1. *Expand the hours and routes for the bus service.*
2. *Help people buy cars through job access loans or other means.*
3. *Get employers to provide transportation.*
4. *Help people develop car pools and back-up transportation.*
5. *Develop back-up volunteers who are willing to drive people to work or appointments when they have no other options.*

## *Services for Low Income People Outside of W-2*



*Kenosha has a number of high quality services for people who need housing, food, assistance finding work, training and health care. Service providers generally work well with each other, and many low income people are aware of the services. However, as fewer and fewer people are served through W-2, this service network finds itself at risk for two reasons. First, since W-2 does not provide cash benefits to people with part-time jobs, some people who are looking for work, or people who have not signed up for this program, housing, food and health service providers find that more people need their services. But, since the amount of money for many of these programs is given out based on government figures of who uses W-2, providers are afraid that their funds will be cut even as the need increases. Private funders either do not have the money to fill the growing need or base the amount of money that they give out on the same government figures.*

*The job center is at risk for the same reason. Many people report that the Kenosha job center succeeds because it serves the entire population in the area and because it provides the same services to everyone who walks in the door. If low-income people are to move from part-time, low wage "entry level" jobs to family sustaining employment, they will need access to these services. However, the state W-2 program administrators only count people who are formally processed into the W-2 system when allocating money. Since a large portion of the job center's services are paid for by W-2 contracts, people involved in administration of the job center are concerned that they will not be able to continue to offer these services, much less expand them, if the amount of money that they get is based on the smaller number of people who officially receive W-2 now.*

*Education and training providers face a similar dilemma. While many low income people need training in order to move up in the workforce, most find that they do not have the time to manage education on top of low wage work and their families. As a result, people do not get the education they need and education providers face continuing budget cuts.*

### ***The Good News:***

Kenosha County Job Center provides high quality services which many people in the community use. Kenosha has a number of highly regarded social service programs which provide food, housing, shelter for victims of domestic abuse, education and health care. Many of these agencies work well with each other. People in the low income community are aware of these services and make use of them. Both formal service networks and informal networks through churches and other connections exist which reach out to families in need within the community.



*You have all heard of the redistribution of wealth. I really think this is redistribution of welfare. As long as the numbers don't show up on the bureaucrats' list, it's done. The problem's solved. I think it's real obvious. People like yourselves and people here are going to really end up with the redistribution, and the concerns are out there.*

—Social service agency  
administrator

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*Both my husband and I, when I was a student at school, we made just barely - about \$1,000 over a year over the federal guidelines for AFDC and WIC. And I see a lot of problems with our clients who fall into that same category, where they're making just a bit too much and they're considered not poor any longer because they are working, even though they're not making enough to sustain a household.*

—Social service agency  
employee

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### **The Concerns:**

Concerns fall into the following categories:

1. *Having enough services to fill the need:* All programs are concerned that they will see an increasing need which they will have no way to pay for. There is particular fear that programs will be cut while the economy is good and that services will no longer be available if the economy falters.
2. *Filling the gaps in the W-2 system:* The job center process first tries to help people find jobs or solve their problems through other kinds of assistance before putting people on W-2. Until recently, people considered "job ready" by the job center did not receive cash assistance while they looked for work. There was also no way to give people additional cash assistance if they took part time jobs which did not pay enough to live on. Providers are concerned that people who do not apply for W-2 or who are not processed into W-2 will have no money to live on and will not get access to medicaid, housing assistance, and other services. There is a particular concern because many of the government funded programs like housing assistance and energy assistance have either been told that people must apply for W-2 before they can be served or base their decisions on providing services on information from W-2 case workers. For this reason, people may not get services that they need. Others simply may not apply because they do not know that services are available. These gaps may lead to people not getting enough to eat, being evicted or losing utilities. Problems dealing with these basic needs can make it harder for people to find and keep jobs.



3. *Housing concerns:* Many people recognize that rents in Kenosha are high and little housing is available for larger low income families. Kenosha landlords have a reputation for quickly evicting people. Others may not rent to people on W-2 or who are low income because they know that they may not have a steady income. Many people report low income families moving in with friends and family, and there is fear of greater homelessness.
4. *Medical care concerns:* There is a growing concern that people are either doing without health care or using emergency room services.
5. *Education and training for advancement:* Everyone recognizes that many of the "entry-level" jobs which the majority of low income people are qualified to fill will not pay a family sustaining wage. Most employers recognize that they need skilled workers. However, because W-2 limits the length of time that people can be in education programs to ten hours a week. People can also only be in a training program full time for 240

hours, roughly 12 weeks in a 20 hours per week program. W-2 also provides no supplementary cash assistance for people who are working part-time or doing low wage work and going to school, therefore few low wage workers are getting additional training. Most find that they simply cannot manage training, work and family.

6. *Keeping the Kenosha County Job Center running and expanding services as the number of people on W-2 dwindles:* Ironically, the job center's success may make it harder to continue its programs because W-2 funding provides a large part of its budget. Even though the Kenosha County Job Center is praised for its ability to find jobs for people and keep them off of W-2, it has no way to get credit for that work given the W-2 accounting system. The Kenosha County Job Center recognizes the need to expand its services so that it better serves the whole community and provides the continuing service that low income people will need to advance. However, it will need to find other sources of funding if government funds are cut.



*The wait list to get low income housing is just incredible. Basically to get in you have to be homeless and have lost everything.*

—Job Center employee

*People are being made to jump through so many hoops to get the benefits that they used to get by jumping through fewer hoops.*

—W-2 program administrator

### ***What People are Doing Now:***

Focus group participants reported that low income people have a variety of strategies to deal with these problems now. Some of these solutions are creative, positive tactics. Others are more negative or lead to other problems.

1. *Signing up for W-2 or other services in much lower numbers than expected.*
2. *Using the emergency room or doing without medical care until they are really sick because they do not have insurance.*
3. *Not enrolling in training or quitting training programs because they cannot find the time or financial support.*
4. *Losing time from work to get to services only open during regular business hours.*
5. *Using food and clothing programs offered by social service agencies and churches. Doing without adequate food or clothing when these services are not available.*
6. *Moving in with friends and family when they cannot afford housing. Doing without utilities or phones because they cannot pay the bills.*

*I use to just take them to the emergency room. Because it was real hard to get a family doctor for all those little kids. I would just take them to the emergency and for their shots I would take them to the community health center.*

—W-2 program participant

## **Suggestions for Change:**

### **Changes Requiring Legislation or Changes in W-2 Policy:**

1. *Change government policy to provide income supports for people in training programs or with part-time jobs.*
2. *Pass legislation which creates universal health care benefits.*

### **Suggestions for Community Residents or Kenosha County Job Center/Community Partnerships:**

1. *Develop a regular meeting time and forum so that the ancillary agencies could share information on programs and cases. This would also involve agencies outlining all potential services they provide and perhaps creating a directory of services available in Kenosha.*
2. *Develop some sort of feedback mechanism for services such as a form which participants carry with them to service providers outlining their needs. The agency would then return the form to the Kenosha County Job Center in order to ensure that the participant actually got the services. Similar forms were suggested which would go from the ancillary agency to the job center suggesting that people apply for W-2 services like childcare and medical assistance.*
3. *Develop e-mail links between social service agencies and the Kenosha County Job Center so that program participants and agencies could more easily communicate with the job center. Feedback mechanisms for service could also be handled through e-mail.*
4. *Create outreach centers and an alternative communication system (perhaps e-mail) at community agencies so that participants and ancillary agency staff could more easily reach case workers to resolve problems. Program participants, job center and social service agency staff all recognize lags in getting service due to problems reaching people by telephone.*
5. *Get additional help from churches or other community groups to provide services.*
6. *Expand hours for service and seek additional funding from government, business and private sources.*
7. *Create guidelines for flexible services instead of strict eligibility rules, and find equitable ways to deal with last-dollar emergencies like the low income person who does not have money for up-front childcare co-pays or credit checks for housing.*
8. *Increase low income and single room housing options in Kenosha as well as create a transitional housing facility between shelter and housing in the regular market.*



## W-2 Education and Outreach



*Few people understand what W-2 does, who the program serves and who is eligible for services. Many people do not understand what kinds of benefits are available to low-income people even if they are not eligible for W-2. While a number of people had good things to say about the job center, sometimes job center staff give conflicting information to social service agency employees or low-income people about benefits and the things that they must do to qualify for services.*

*Some people have trouble getting through to their caseworkers on the phone. Fewer people than expected are coming to the job center to enroll in W-2 and some social service providers think that the number of people signing up for WIC, Medicaid and related programs is much lower than expected. However, job center statistics show that many more people are signing up for food stamps and Medicaid than in the past, an indication that low income working people are getting these extra supports. Some people report that low sign up rates are because people do not want to deal with the hassle of a government program for no cash benefits or because of confusion about who is eligible for which benefits. Others have trouble with the job center location and hours.*

### **The Good News:**

The people who use the job center have positive experiences and the job center systems are working to find people jobs and childcare. Participants reported using the computers and other technology in the job center, illustrating that these services have been made "user friendly" for a broad range of people. While some complained about trouble reaching their caseworkers, no-one reported long waits or concerns over inadequate facilities. This lack of negative feedback is a good sign, and very different from the usual way that government-funded social service programs for the poor are described. The job center strategy of serving everyone as equals seems to be working well.

*I don't even know; more or less I think you go to the job center and take classes and go look for a job every day from what I understand. I know the money goes by a certain allowance, that's all I know.*

—W-2 program participant

*In fact I have a connection with the job center that sometimes these people will call me. Yet on the other hand let's not kid ourselves there have been a lot of people - black folk in particular and Spanish - have been discriminated against from every walk of life. From jobs to social services....I don't know the percentage from the job service,. How many people I've had come in and tell me that they were denied jobs from job service.*

—African American minister

*I know that one of the gaps that I've heard people discuss locally are problems that people might have who are immigrants, who fear asking for assistance, even if they are eligible or their children might be eligible because they were born in the U.S. But being afraid that maybe this would hurt their immigration application. ...I know they talk about the "disappears," the people who come in to the first desk and then they hear about all the rules and then they never get to the second desk.*

—Social service agency employee



### **The Concerns:**

Concerns fell into seven areas:

1. *Confusion over what W-2 does, how the program works and who it serves:* Very few people in the focus groups understood what W-2 does and who it serves. Low income people, in particular, had no idea what W-2 means. In fact, most people who were receiving services funded by W-2 said that they were not W-2 recipients. Most think that only people receiving a cash grant are on W-2. Even job center and social service agency staff are confused about who is considered a W-2 recipient and what services are available to people with different income supports or abilities. For example, one person called to apply for childcare assistance and was told that she would have to get a court support order from her child's father to receive services. People have gotten conflicting information about loans for cars and other services. There is particular confusion over how people are categorized as job ready or placed into Community Service Jobs.
2. *Concern over low sign up for W-2:* In many ways, the fact that few people have signed up for W-2 is good news because it may mean that more people are working. However, many people in the focus groups fear that people are falling through the cracks because they are not using government-funded services. The same concerns were echoed when speaking to social service providers, people involved in the school system, job center staff, church representatives, and participants. Several reasons are reported for this problem. First, many people do not want to bother with a government program if they think that they will not get much out of it or they feel that social service workers will intrude into their lives in unwanted ways. Many do not want to take the time needed to apply for government services. Some people of color think that the employers who hire through the job center are prejudiced and that they will not benefit from job center services because of this.
3. *Low sign up rates for Medicaid, WIC and other services.* Under AFDC, people signed up for Medicaid, food stamps and other government programs at the same time that they applied for welfare. W-2 is supposed to provide these support services to low-income people while they are working in order to help them survive in low wage jobs. In some cases, more people can now qualify for support services like childcare and Medicaid than before. Job center statistics show that many more people are signing up for medicaid and food stamps than in past years, showing that the system is working. However, social service agency representatives, advocates, church representatives and participants think that more people should be signing up for these programs. Focus group participants report various reasons for people not using these services. These include confusion over who is eligible, people not wanting to deal with

government services, and problems with hours and location of the job center.

4. *Glitches in reaching caseworkers:* While people using the Kenosha County Job Center reported many fewer concerns over getting access to service in a timely manner and the quality of service than often occurs in a government-funded program, there were still some complaints. Problems reaching caseworkers by telephone were something of special concern, especially those who do not have phones.
5. *Concerns over reporting requirements and expectations for W-2:* W-2 requires people who receive food stamps and Medicaid to be reviewed much more often than under AFDC. Taking time off to go through these reviews causes problems for many low income workers. Many do not want to go through the process of review for these services and simply do not use them. Others are afraid to apply for W-2 because they have informal child support agreements with the fathers of their children and do not want to ruin those arrangements by participating in the court-ordered support system. People enrolled in education programs are afraid to apply for services because they think that they will be forced to take full time work.
6. *Concerns over Kenosha County Job Center hours and location:* Working people have trouble getting to the job center during the hours that it is open. Some people have trouble getting to the job center because of the limited public transportation in Kenosha and the time that it takes to get there.
7. *Lack of information about services offered through other agencies and problems with their hours:* The same confusion about what services are available through the Kenosha County Job Center occurs for other agencies who offer government services like WIC. Low income working people also have problems getting to those services during the hours that they are open without taking time off from work. As a result, people do not sign up for programs, use the emergency room instead of the health clinic, or lose jobs because they are taking too much time off to deal with housing, medical, or food needs.

### ***What People are Doing Now:***

Focus group participants reported that low income people have a variety of strategies to deal with these problems now. Some of these solutions are creative, positive tactics. Others are more negative or lead to other problems.

1. *Signing up for W-2 or other services in much lower numbers than expected.*
2. *Using the emergency room or doing without medical care until they are really sick because they do not have insurance.*
3. *Using informal childcare arrangements or pulling their older children out of school because they cannot afford childcare.*
4. *Losing time from work to get to services only open during regular business hours.*
5. *Using food and clothing programs offered by social service agencies and churches. Doing without adequate food or clothing when these services are not available.*
6. *Moving in with friends and family when they cannot afford housing. Doing without utilities or phones because they cannot pay the bills.*

*Our school offers, in the parent center, access to a phone for local phoning. They drop their children off in school and they come to the parent center and they lined up for the phones starting at 8:00 in the morning. They are so desperate.*

—School district employee

*I've spent over \$200 a month in gas getting to job interviews and the job center, and they expect me to go down there once a week.*

—W-2 program participant.

## ***Suggestions for Change:***

### ***Changes Requiring Legislation or Changes in W-2 Policy:***

*Change the government reporting policies and procedures needed to get services so that providing related services like employment information, childcare aid, Medicaid and food stamps are counted as W-2 activities in agency activity reports.*

### ***Suggestions for the Kenosha County Job Center:***

1. *Create a series of easy to understand pamphlets aimed at the general public which clearly outline the services available at the job center and the many services provided through W-2 dollars besides cash assistance.*
2. *Develop clear guidelines for job center staff and ancillary agency personnel on such services as job access loans, extended medical assistance, and subsidized childcare. Institute a series of educational forums on these programs for both ancillary agency staff and job center line staff.*
3. *Develop outreach mechanisms through talks at community-based organizations, churches and other community institutions as well as through the media to help people understand all of the services available through the job center and who is eligible for service.*
4. *Expand the hours and locations where people can sign up for services. Examples include Medicaid sign-up at hospitals and WIC sign-up at hospitals, schools and day care centers.*
5. *Better training for Kenosha County Job Center, school, day care or social service agency employees about W-2 and other related services.*
6. *Institute additional ways that program participants and agency staff can more easily communicate with their caseworkers. The job center has recently created a walk in system where people can write requests to caseworkers. This suggestion included better publicizing this option. Suggestions also included creating e-mail access.*
7. *Provide guidelines to participants on leaving effective messages for Kenosha County Job Center staff. Job Center staff complained that many times people would just leave a message saying "call me" rather than details about what they needed. This was particularly difficult when people left pager numbers rather than numbers of telephones with answering machines. Job center employees could address problems or respond to questions much more easily with detailed information.*

### ***Suggestions for Community Residents or Kenosha County Job Center/Community Partnerships:***

1. *Develop better relationships with organizations serving the Spanish-speaking community and create outreach mechanisms especially targeted for this population.*
2. *Develop better understandings of the needs, concerns and best way to communicate with many parts of the Kenosha community, particularly low income and marginal populations.*

## *Conclusion*

The Kenosha Conversation Project was designed as the first step in a process to involve the entire community in supporting Kenosha residents in their quest to find stable employment and meet their families' needs. The project identified community-wide problems, established a dialogue to discuss these issues, and outlined a number of potential strategies for change. The project generated enthusiasm from a wide array of community groups. Members of the Kenosha Women's Commission and representatives from a variety of community organizations have expressed interest in continuing to work on these issues. As of Fall 1998, several projects are currently underway or in the planning stages. These include a study of employer attitudes regarding low income workers and their workers' perceptions of their jobs conducted by Anne Statham at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside; proposed work on employment and retention issues associated with the Lincoln Neighborhood Center; and a study of the needs of the low income African American and Latino communities and their perceptions of the Kenosha County Job Center.

The Kenosha Conversation Project descriptions of W-2 related problems are also being used for classes on related issues at Carthage College and University of Wisconsin-Parkside. This education booklet is designed for classroom use as well as to provide an overview of W-2 and related issues for community members interested in discussing welfare reform or developing projects to aid Kenosha citizens. Teachers and people giving workshops on W-2 related issues are encouraged to copy materials from this booklet for use in classes and community events.

The Kenosha Conversation Project also provides a model for other communities interested in developing similar community needs assessment efforts. The research and conference process model can be adapted to any neighborhood or community. People working on related issues are welcome to use this model in their communities.

Some of the concrete projects suggested to aid low income people in Kenosha may also work in other locales. Policy makers, planners and community organizations are welcome to adapt project ideas for their own communities.

A companion video on this project is also available.