

**RAISING ASSETS, EARNINGS, AND ESTEEM:
THE HOUSING AUTHORITY OF PORTLAND'S FAMILY SELF-SUFFICIENCY PROGRAM**

April, 2004

Under review at *Feminist Economics*

Karen J. Gibson, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
School of Urban Studies and Planning
Portland State University
P.O. Box 751
Portland, OR 97207-0751
503-725-8265
gibsonk@pdx.edu

ABSTRACT

When Mollie Orshansky first devised the poverty line, the largest household budget item was food. Today it is housing. Anti-poverty programs that help poor households with housing costs while removing work disincentives and providing resources to increase educational attainment, earned income, and financial assets are likely to be effective. This study analyzes how one holistic model called Family Self-Sufficiency works to help families raise earned income, leave public assistance, and in some cases, become homeowners. It presents the results of a survey of graduates, including their perceptions of how the program helps them empower themselves. It has theoretical and policy implications for asset development efforts in the community economic development field.

INTRODUCTION

In 1964, when the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, launched the War on Poverty, a measure of the extent of poverty was needed. Social scientist Mollie Orshansky, an employee of the social security administration, extrapolated a measure of income poverty from an analysis of household expenditures. At that time, the largest household budget item was food. Today it is housing. Anti-poverty programs that help poor households with housing costs while providing resources to increase educational attainment, earned income, and financial assets have a good chance for success. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) designed such a program in the early 1990s as their contribution to local welfare reform efforts across the nation. It is called the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) Program. In addition to helping with housing costs, this program has three advantages over most anti-poverty efforts: it allows participants to develop financial assets through a savings account and thereby removes the work disincentive, it provides human support, and is a long-

term (five years). This study analyzes how this holistic model has worked to help families raise earned income, leave public assistance, and become homeowners in Portland, Oregon. It presents the results of a survey of graduates from the Housing Authority of Portland's FSS program, aptly entitled "Greater Opportunities to Advance, Learn, and Succeed" (GOALS). It is one of the more successful programs nationally, and provides practical lessons about how to improve the economic well-being of families. It also provides an empirical case study of the efficacy of asset-based anti-poverty policy, a strategy advocated in theory and practice by many in the community development field (Michael Sherraden, 1991; Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, 1997, Ray Boshara and Elizabeth Corman, 1999). As important, it provides insight into the role of human encouragement and support for families, primarily headed by women, who often lack social support networks. According to program graduates, the GOALS program staff actually "have a heart", unlike the staff in the local welfare bureaucracy, and this makes an important difference in their self-esteem and motivation for completing the program successfully.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT FSS PROGRAM ELEMENTS AND THEIR IMPACT

In the mid-eighties HUD experimented with ways to return public housing back to its role as a temporary solution to economic deprivation (Anne Shlay, 1993). The FSS program design, in theory, has strong potential to move households from dependency to self-sufficiency. Like other welfare reform efforts in the 1990s, it removes the penalty of higher rent that must be paid when household income increases. It contains seven basic elements: a voluntary long term contract of participation, a requirement to become independent of public assistance, a matched savings (escrow) account, case management, goal setting, a local resource network, and housing. Participants are encouraged to develop a plan to become self-sufficient and are provided with the economic incentive and support services enabling them to do so. The key to success lies in the implementation of these elements.

Not much is known about the program's impact because there are relatively few studies on FSS. William M. Rohe and Rachel Garshick Kleit (1999) conducted the most extensive analysis in 1996 with completed surveys of 564 housing authorities with FSS programs. The program and its predecessors (Project Self-Sufficiency, Operation Bootstrap, and Charlotte's Gateway program) have been shown to have potential to raise earned income, increase educational and employment outcomes, and reduce dependency among recipients of housing assistance (William Rohe, 1995; Anne Shlay, 1993; William Rohe and Rachel Kleit, 1997, 1999; Amy Bogdon, 1999; Barbara Sard, 2001). The concept of an escrow account is especially powerful: it provides an economic incentive to increase earnings because it rewards work, a notion central to real welfare reform (Mary Jo Bane, 1994). It represents an approach to poverty reduction based on assets rather than income, and is central to poverty reduction in the long term.

Assets "change the way people think and interact in the world" according to Michael Sherraden (1991). He argues that only assets, as opposed to income, can motivate poor people to look toward the future and pursue long-term goals. Analysts of racial economic inequality in wealth formation also advocate for asset development strategies (Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, 1997, William Darity and Samuel Myers, 1998). Roughly half of the families who completed the program nation-wide between 1999 and 2000 had accumulated an average of nearly \$5000 in savings (Barbara Sard, 2001). The escrow account is considered the most important program element by FSS program coordinators according to William Rohe and Rachel Kleit's (1999) national survey.

Perhaps the pivotal feature of the program is the case manager or coordinator. The case manager assists the client throughout the contract. Their relationship begins with the initial assessment and is maintained by quarterly visits. The case manager supports the efforts of the participant to create a plan to achieve self-sufficiency. Their role in providing psychological and emotional support to motivate and encourage participants is critically important. Program

administrators consider the role of the case manager important for linking clients to employment training and other resources and therefore making utilization of the escrow account possible (William Rohe and Rachel Kleit, 1999).

Access to a network of existing resources is strongly linked to client success. HUD does not provide funds for services, but aims to leverage its contribution (housing) to the local community by encouraging local officials and service providers to get involved. Each authority sets up a program coordinating committee that is comprised of people from employment agencies, businesses, health and social service agencies, elected officials, and other organizations (Amy Bogdon, 1999). In order for implementation to succeed, the local authority must devote energy to developing partnerships so that the case managers have a referral network.

Another strong feature of the FSS program is the long-term contract. Most poor, single mothers consider access to higher education to be the only viable route out of poverty (Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, 1997). Yet it is hard to find time to attend school *and* support and care for a family. The five-year FSS contract, combined with the financial cushion of the escrow account and assisted housing, makes the option of higher education more feasible. For women, access to living wage employment is especially important, since the fraction of women earning poverty-level wages—although it has decreased in recent decades—remains very high. In 1997, for white and black females respectively, the percentages were 32 percent and 43 percent, in contrast to 18 percent for white males (Lawrence Mishel, Jaren Bernstein, and John Schmitt, 1999, pp. 140-41). Women high school graduates earned hourly wages only 75 percent of male high school graduates in 1994 (Randy Albelda and Chris Tilly, 1997). In addition to providing time to improve human capital, the program gives families the time needed to address other barriers to self-sufficiency such as domestic violence, lack of work experience, learning disabilities, substance abuse, language barriers, depression, or illness (Jocelyn Taliaferro, 2001; William Rohe, 1993).

Barbara Sard, Director of Housing Policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, considers FSS to be HUD's "best kept secret for promoting employment and asset growth" (Sard, 2001). Sard considers FSS effective because it helps families build assets, yet she estimates that it serves less than five percent of families with children in public housing and Section 8 voucher programs. Program coordinators cited the following problems with implementation: lack of interest among eligible participants, understaffing of case managers, lack of staff expertise, and a lack of employment opportunities and services (especially transportation and childcare) for participants (William Rohe and Rachel Kleit, 1999; Bard Sard, 2001). Although it is recognized as a potentially effective anti-poverty program model, there are few studies of FSS graduates. One of William Rohe and Rachel Kleit's (1999, p. 368) "major unanswered questions" is how effective the program is in helping participants achieve self-sufficiency, because at the time of their survey, only six percent had graduated. They also emphasize that their findings on barriers to program completion is from the administrators' perspective, not the participants'.

FSS IN PORTLAND: THE GOALS PROGRAM

The Portland case provides an example of what the FSS program model can achieve when properly implemented. The Housing Authority of Portland has overcome many of problems with implementation Rohe and Kleit found in their national survey. The voluntary, long-term nature of the program enables participants to realize their own potential. As one participant who dropped out remarked, GOALS is a "do-it yourself" program. The case managers (who prefer to be called coordinators) act as coaches. They provide some guidance and access to resources, but the participants are encouraged to make their own way through the program. They are encouraged to advocate for themselves. In fact, staff members on the housing management side of HAP express surprise (and sometimes dismay) at the growing capability of GOALS participants to speak up on their own behalf. The main role of the

coordinator is to help start the participants on their own road to self-sufficiency by providing them access to the escrow account when they sign up for the program, and to help them plan their goals for the future by helping them fill out the “dream sheet” in the initial assessment. Peggy Martini, a social worker and lead coordinator, named the initial assessment form the “dream sheet” because it is used to encourage participants to identify their dreams for their lives. It covers not just employment, education, or finances; but other aspects of life, such as family, social relationships, and mental health. The coordinators encourage participants to make step-by-step plans to achieve their goals. The goals can range from being a better parent to expunging a criminal record. Once the goals are identified, the coordinator can then suggest resources to assist the participant with achieving them. After the initial meeting, it is the responsibility of the participant to follow-up with their coordinator on a quarterly basis to report progress, change their plans, seek other resources, etc. Should a participant neglect to contact the coordinator after six months, they are dropped from the program. Once a participant has achieved all of her goals and is off of public assistance, she is eligible to graduate from the program and receive her savings in the escrow account. The program is set up in a contract, with a time limit of five years, although extensions are made when circumstances warrant it. In addition, participants can use their escrow savings for work or education related expenses, such as car repairs, car payments, books, and tuition.

In 1994 the Housing Authority of Portland (HAP) hired its first case manager to implement its own version of the FSS model. Although HAP did not systematically track participants until 1999, an estimated 200 participants graduated from the program between September 1994 and May 2000. Graduation means participants no longer receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), but may still receive housing assistance. During this five and a half year period, the average contract time was three years, seven months, and the average escrow amount at graduation was \$5,800. An outcome that is surprising to the administrators is the homeownership rate: 35 percent of graduates were able to use their

savings to purchase homes. Graduates also express an eagerness to “give back” to the program and help others, according to Peggy Martini, lead coordinator at HAP. Peter Edelman, former welfare policy advisor for President Clinton, points this out in his book, *Finding America's Heart*: “People who are economically secure are more likely to feel connected to the larger world and more willing to give something back” (Peter Edelman, 2001).

Not all participants finished the program, however. During the same period (1994-2000), there were 189 participants who did not complete the program (48 percent of total). Roughly half of these were terminated from housing for lease violations, and the remaining drop out of the program or move out of HAP's jurisdiction. For this reason, HAP began screening participants for motivation by letting them jump ahead to the top of the waiting list if they complete a money management class. HAP experienced one the common implementation challenges discussed earlier: lack of adequate staffing. When average caseloads become too heavy (more than 80 participants per coordinator), clients tend to fall through the cracks. Despite the high rate of attrition, the program is having a significant impact. Since 2000 HAP has added 4 more coordinators and diversified its staff to accommodate non-native English speakers. From that time until spring 2004, the number of GOALS participants increased from 262 to 558, 24% of whom speak English as a second language. There are now 120 graduates who own homes, and the average escrow savings amount is \$5,900. The total amount of escrow disbursed to graduates is \$1.5 million. Word of the program's success has spread, so that in spring 2004 there are more than 400 families on the waiting list. HAP has even started a “GOALS for Kids” program that provides a matched savings account (individual development account) and goal-setting techniques for the younger residents.

RESEARCH APPROACH, DATA, AND METHOD

I became interested in studying the GOALS program after learning about HAP's success in moving people out of poverty. A case study approach is useful when one wants to

understand how and why a program works (Robert Yin, 1994). I conducted a literature review and interviews with GOALS staff to determine the generic program elements and the specific way they are implemented by HAP. Once the components of the program were identified, it seemed obvious why the program is effective: it is a holistic program in the sense that it provides housing, economic development or employment, and social work to help low income persons overcome their economic situations. Most other anti-poverty programs address only one aspect of the poverty situation, this one is comprehensive; providing asset development, access to resources, and emotional support. Yet a thorough analysis of the program must assess the thoughts and attitudes of the program graduates, as well as their socioeconomic status after graduation. The survey allows the participants voices to be heard so that we can better understand the impact of the FSS model on their lives.

The case study methodology involved a variety of data sources about the GOALS program, including program documents, interviews with program administrators, focus groups with participants and staff, and a mail survey to graduates. First, using a collection of 103 dream sheets (initial assessment forms) from participants between 1995 and 2000, a set of baseline data about program participants was developed. Second, the interviews and focus groups yielded information about program and participant characteristics. Third, with this information a mail survey questionnaire was designed and sent to graduates in early 2002. It contained a total of 70 open and closed questions covering two areas: (1) their current socioeconomic status and (2) their thoughts and perceptions about aspects of the GOALS program (housing, escrow, motivation and long term contract, goal setting process, case management role, support resources from program, family and social support, and satisfaction with the program). For confidentiality purposes, an administrative staff person at HAP mailed out the survey, leaving me with little control over the mailing process. I did not anticipate that there would be a problem with getting all surveys out at once, but there was. They were mailed in two batches, with the second batch requiring a quicker turnaround time to receive the \$10 gift certificate (2 weeks

rather than 3 weeks). In addition, records on the exact number sent and the number returned due to incorrect addresses were poorly kept. Given these constraints, the best estimate is that the response rate to the first batch was 40%, and about 15-20% for the second batch of surveys. The overall response rate was about 30 percent, or 74 surveys. Because the survey data reflect the thoughts and attitudes of those who completed the program, and not those who dropped out, these data are somewhat biased positively toward the program. Data from program dropouts is very difficult to obtain because so many dropouts leave the Housing Authority they no longer have addresses. Not all graduates are completely satisfied with the program however, although the majority indicated that it did help them in some way, and very few had significant complaints.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOALS PARTICIPANTS

Table 1 displays information about the socioeconomic status and goals of all program participants enrolled from 1994 to 1999. It provides insight into the challenges the participants face and their desired goals. This data was compiled from administrative records that HAP retained from the early years of the program. Three-quarters of program participants were employed when they began the program, although often in low-wage jobs, and slightly less than 40 percent receive some form of public assistance. Less than ten percent have not completed high school, and at least a third have had some college. A majority face barriers to self-sufficiency such as a negative credit rating and lack of a social support network. Most have cars, but a third or less do not have a car or a driver's license, have criminal records, substance abuse in the family, and need legal assistance. Health problems are prevalent (40 percent), yet the majority has some form of health insurance. The goals identified by the majority of participants are to own their own homes, get a better job, and continue their education. Credit repair and transportation are next in importance.

The mail survey asked GOALS graduates questions about their demographic characteristics. These are displayed in Table 2. The majority of respondents are female, 34 years or older, and single. Most have at least two children that are under 18 years of age. A significant number had either physical or learning disabilities. Residents of public housing were less likely to be enrolled in GOALS than those using Section 8 vouchers. The survey did not ask participants to reveal their race or ethnicity. The racial/ethnic composition of all GOALS participants during this period were 50 percent non-Hispanic white, 40 percent African American, and 8 percent Latino, and 2 percent American Indian/Alaskan.

TABLE 1 **BASELINE CHARACTERISTICS & GOALS OF FSS PARTICIPANTS**
(1994-2000) N=104

	Percent
Employed	75
Receive public assistance (TANF, food stamps, or gov't. aid)	39
Receive child support or alimony	18
Credit status is negative	63
Education level	
Bachelor's degree	4
Some college	35
High school or GED	23
Less than high school	8
Training (beyond high school)	20
Housing	
Not happy with housing situation	44
Housing situation is not safe	10
Want to move from current residence	68
Transportation	
Use car to get around	62
Have driver's license	72
Health and other support issues	
Have health insurance	88
Have health problems in the family	40
Do not have a support system	72
Substance abuse in the family	27
Need counseling for the family	50
Need legal assistance	24
Criminal record	22
Goals	
Homeownership	88
Employment	82
Education	79
Credit repair and debt reduction	45
Transportation	37
Legal	13
Increased personal time	12
Criminal record expungement	6
Citizenship	5

Source: Housing Authority of Portland GOALS Initial Assessment "Dream Sheets"

TABLE 2 CHARACTERISTICS OF GOALS GRADUATES

(1994-2001) N=74

	Percent
Female	92
Age	
18-24	0
25-34	22
35-44	51
45-54	19
55 and older	1
Single	64
Married or living with significant other	28
Household size	
One	8
Two to three	54
Four	20
Five to six	15
With children under 18 years	85
With children over 18 years	43
Number of children	
One	19
Two	31
Three	20
Four or more	20
Housing type during program	
Section 8	62
Low Rent Public Housing	38
Physical or learning disability	30

Source: Survey of GOALS Graduates

OUTCOMES FOR GOALS GRADUATES

There are a number of positive outcomes indicated by the survey in terms of outcomes related to the material well-being and human capital development of graduates (see Table 3). The most significant finding is that graduates saw a 338 percent increase in their earned incomes from 1996-2001. The majority of graduates were able to raise their incomes significantly enough to enable them to leave housing assistance, and 40 percent were able to buy homes. While about one-fifth of survey respondents still have incomes near the poverty level (less than \$15,000 annually), about a quarter earn more than \$30,000 per year after going through the GOALS program. Automobile transportation, often a barrier for low-income mothers in the labor force, appears to be more reliable among graduates (78 percent own a reliable car) than among baseline participants (62 used a car to get around). The survey asked graduates questions related to their financial stability. Only about one-fifth indicate that their incomes are still inadequate for maintaining their basic household needs.

Table 4 displays the outcomes related to assets, debt, and money management skills. Graduates left the GOALS program with an average of \$6,000 in a savings account. Most of the homeowners used their escrow savings for a down payment on their home. The majority of graduates indicate that their savings pattern has improved since participating in the GOALS program, only 23 percent never saved during the 12-month period preceding the survey and 57 percent are currently saving for a future goal. The majority of graduates had less or no debt after completing the program, and those with home mortgages were about three times as likely as renters to indicate that they had more debt.

TABLE 3

INCOME AND ASSETS OUTCOMES

	Percent/Dollars
Gross annual household income	
> \$40,000	8
\$30,000 – 39,999	19
\$22,000 – 29,999	26
\$15,000 – 21,999	23
< \$15,000	22
Average annual earned income ¹	
Beginning of GOALS program	\$ 4,000
End of GOALS program	\$17,500
Average increase in earned income	338
Tenure	
Homeowner	40
Renter in private market	28
Renter with Section 8 or public housing	32
Median home purchase price	\$100,000
Own reliable car	78
Financial stability over previous 12 months	
Had problem paying rent more than once	17
Skipped payment on utility bill more than once	22
Did not earn enough to support family	20

¹ The earned income data is from HAP's records on 120 graduates who participated from 1996 to 2001.

TABLE 4**ASSETS, DEBT, AND MONEY MANAGEMENT OUTCOMES**

	Percent
Average savings amount at graduation	\$ 6,000
Currently saving for a future goal	
Yes	57
No	39
Saved income monthly during previous 12 months	
Always	19
Usually	16
Sometimes	34
Never	23
Savings behavior by tenure	
Owners who always/usually saved during previous 12 months	43
Renters who always/usually saved during previous 12 months	27
Level of financial debt after completing GOALS	
Less or no debt	49
Same amount of debt	18
More debt	30
Likelihood of having more debt by tenure	
Owners	53
Renters	15

Table 5 displays employment and educational attainment outcomes. More than 90 percent of graduates are employed (up from 75 percent in baseline participant group). A significant proportion (46 percent) attributes their increased earnings potential to the impact of the GOALS program. The majority indicates that their employment status improved after going through the GOALS program (74 percent), but 20 percent indicate no improvement, revealing some bifurcation in outcomes. An important finding is that only 22 percent found better jobs through the GOALS program. This should not be a surprise, since HAP's expertise is in housing, not employment. Graduates are twice as likely to be satisfied with their employment situation than their educational attainment level. This appears to be an indicator of the desire for more education, even though the majority has at least some college. GOALS has enabled one-third of the graduates to complete an educational program and 68 percent indicate that their educational attainment level has improved. How and why the program helped graduates attain these outcomes is the topic we turn to next.

TABLE 5**EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT**

	Percent
Currently employed	92
Change in earnings potential as a result of GOALS	
Much improved	46
Somewhat improved	32
Did not improve	15
Got a better job through GOALS	
Yes	22
No	74
Change in employment status since leaving GOALS	
Much improved	47
Somewhat improved	27
Did not improve	20
Satisfaction with current employment situation	
Satisfied	57
Not satisfied	35
Education Level	
Graduate degree	3
Bachelor's degree	7
Two-year degree	18
Some college	53
High school or GED	12
Less than high school	5
Completed an educational program while in GOALS	32
Completed an educational program after leaving GOALS	14
Change in educational attainment as a result of GOALS	
Much improved	34
Somewhat improved	34
Did not improve	24
Satisfaction with current educational attainment	
Satisfied	28
Not satisfied	70

THE ROLE OF PROGRAM ELEMENTS IN PROMOTING SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The survey asked the graduates to rate the importance of various program elements for helping them reach their goals. Table 6 displays the results. Although the survey did not include housing assistance as an item to be rated, many discussed its role in their open-ended comments. Because housing provides the secure base from which participants could think about their goals, graduates' perceptions of its role are discussed first. Following it are the other program elements: escrow, goal setting process, program coordinators' role, and support resources.

Housing assistance

Housing assistance provides the essential foundation from which participants strive to become self-sufficient. Without housing assistance, some of the families in GOALS would have been homeless: "Having stable housing assistance took a lot of worry off of my family being homeless especially when working a minimum wage job with no benefits". Only when they have the security of affordable housing can families begin to redirect their attention from the present to the future. One graduate explained: "Housing assistance helped me achieve my goals by allowing me to have more income towards taking care of other needs, reducing the stress factors in my life and enabling me to focus on my future plans better." In purely practical terms, the rent subsidy allows families to pay for necessary living expenses and pursue goal achievement: "By keeping rent at a price I could afford, I was able to buy gas or a bus ticket to get where I need to go for training or to get information that was useful to me to reach my goals". One graduate expressed how her family viewed the rent increases that accompanied increases in earnings in a positive way: "Having rent based on income was a huge help. It also helped us see how we were climbing out of poverty [because] higher rent meant better income, which equals success".

TABLE 6 IMPORTANCE OF PROGRAM ELEMENTS FOR REACHING GOALS

	Level of importance			
	Very	Somewhat	Not	No response
Goal setting process	88	11	1	0
Fact that program is voluntary	84	11	4	1
Participant's own motivation	83	15	1	1
Coordinator's help with goal achievement	82	15	3	0
Increased self-esteem	80	15	4	1
Escrow savings account	77	12	4	7
Coordinator's encouragement	76	19	3	3
Five year contract	72	19	7	3
Coordinator holding participant accountable	68	23	8	1
Ability to make interim escrow withdrawals	38	15	41	4

Escrow account

Participants in GOALS use their savings to support a variety of activities while in the program, most often making withdrawals for car repairs, tuition and books, and work-related expenses. Like housing assistance, the escrow account impacts the participant in both tangible and intangible ways. The lump sum of money in savings that becomes available upon graduation is often used to pay off debts and put a down payment on a home. But the escrow account means much more than money in the bank. The promise of the lump sum motivates participants to complete goals, increases their sense of security, and their self-esteem.

Graduates were asked to list one to three reasons why the escrow account helped them achieve their goals. Many responded by listing how they spent their savings: down payment, closing costs, bills, car, school, furniture, clothes for work, and to start a business. One graduate remarked "Escrow was a strong incentive because it was something tangible". Along with others, she used it to pay off past debt and repair her credit. A number of graduates indicated that the escrow account taught them how to save money: "I could never save money because my budget was too tight to pay my high rent [this was] the only way to save money".

Many discussed how the escrow account motivated them to reach the “dream” of homeownership: “Escrow felt like to me as security and hope for my own house”. The escrow account helps participants look forward: “We were excited about knowing the reaching our goals would bring riches and this made us keep striving to reach our goals. Receiving an updated statement also encouraged us to keep focused”. Another respondent said escrow provided a “psychological boost”, because of the “sense of getting ahead rather than treading water”. One graduate called it the “carrot in front of the horse” that “stimulated a realistic life change on how to set and achieve goals”.

The security of the savings account was important to many graduates. When asked “What aspect of the GOALS program had the most lasting impact on your well-being,” one graduate wrote “Having so much cash from my account, it gave me security”. Another responded “Actually graduating with a pot of gold at the end of MY rainbow”. The emphasis on “MY rainbow” reveals a sense of accomplishment. The most lasting impact for another graduate was “The state’s willingness to invest in self-sufficiency—there is no reason to be stuck on welfare. There is enough help to get out and on our own”. Clearly, the escrow investment is an important sign of commitment from the government to those involved in the GOALS program.

Goal setting process

Graduates consider the goal setting process to be the most important element of the program. During the initial interview with participants, the coordinator asks “What are your goals and how can we help you reach them?” The participant fills out a “dream sheet” that asks them about a variety of areas: work, education, family, daycare, transportation, etc. Homeownership is the goal most often cited by participants, as the majority seeks to become economically independent from housing assistance. There is a significant decline in the fraction of graduates who identified the goals of employment (82 to 54 percent) and education (79 to 58 percent) compared to the baseline group (see Table 7). This could reflect a change in goals over time,

or be evidence of the difficulty of achieving these goals for low-income working mothers. Although more than half of the graduates achieved all of their goals before graduation, 42 percent did not. In addition to completing their goals, the participants acquire the habit of setting goals and teach the techniques to family and friends.

When asked what the most important goal they accomplished, homeownership was cited most often, followed by a better job, reduced debt, education or job training, increased earnings, getting off public assistance or housing assistance, and getting a car. A few cited that their most important accomplishment was getting clean and sober, for others it was obtaining American citizenship. The program's goal-setting orientation is appreciated by the participants, many of whom had never engaged in a process of systematically planning for the future. One graduate said that she liked "goal setting as an instrument of survival for individual and business". Many family members and friends are eager to learn goal-setting techniques from graduates, having seen their accomplishments such as increasing their earnings, going to college, or buying a house.

TABLE 7 OUTCOMES RELATED TO GOAL SETTING PROCESS

	Percent
Goals most commonly pursued by graduates	
Homeownership	74
Off housing assistance	62
Education	58
Debt reduction	55
Better job	54
Increase earnings	46
Off public assistance	38
Achieved all goals before graduating	
Yes	54
No	42
Currently use goal-setting techniques	
Always	47
Sometimes	42
Rarely	7
Never	3
Have taught family members or friends these techniques	
Yes	70
No	27

Program coordinators

The program coordinators have social work backgrounds. Their role is to help participants identify short and long-term goals, connect them to resources, and provide support and encouragement. According to Peggy Martini, Lead Coordinator, they approach participants with an attitude that says basically: “We care. We want you to succeed. We will listen to you and support you in anyway we can to help you reach your goals”. The coordinators explain the program, have the participant sign the contract of participation, and help them set goals. The participants have to check-in every three months to inform the coordinator of their progress. During these meetings, the coordinator may help trouble-shoot problems, provide encouragement, and link participants to resources. In terms of frequency of visits with the coordinator, during the first year of the program 49 percent did so frequently, 40 percent

occasionally, and 8 percent rarely. This rate of visitation remained the same during the last year for the vast majority of graduates. The survey asked graduates how important their coordinator was in helping them achieve goals, in providing encouragement, and in holding them accountable to their goals (see Table 8). Over four-fifths of the graduates consider the coordinator's help with goal achievement very important. Three-quarters of the graduates indicated that the coordinator's encouragement was very important. Over two-thirds indicated that the coordinator's role in holding them accountable to their goals was very important.

The coordinators help participants in very practical ways such as helping them make decisions about goals and planning strategies to achieve them. They also provide emotional and psychological support by inspiring confidence in the participants' capabilities. The survey asked graduates to list the three most important things the coordinator did to help them achieve goals. The most important functions the coordinator performs are to encourage and motivate the participant, to provide them with emotional support, and to listen and talk to them. Staying in regular contact is also important. Lastly, graduates consider the information and referrals to supportive resources to be important.

TABLE 8

MOST IMPORTANT COORDINATOR ROLES

*List three most important things coordinator did to help you achieve your goals.
(Responses are verbatim)*

Forms of Support

Practical and technical

Stayed in contact
Remind me what I need to do
Keep on track
Keep me focused
Keep me going when hard
Accountability

Help make decisions
Suggestions for planning for future
Short term goals
How to do things step by step

Help me find way to complete goals
Move obstacles out of way

Keep me informed
Gave information, referrals, resources

Psychological and Emotional

Constant encouragement
Confidence
Gave me hope
No room for discouragement
Motivate

Care
Patient
Positive
Sincere
Genuine

Talk with me
Listen
Listen to ups and downs
Emotional support
Being there

Believed in me
Helped me believe in myself
Help me feel good about myself
Pride in my achievement
Tell me I'm doing good

Knew my name and face, not just a client
Talk to me like I was important
Advocated for me
On my side

The coordinators' interpersonal skills include their abilities to motivate, raise self-esteem, provide emotional support, and treat participants with respect. They have communication competence. Clearly these skills are very important to the success of the program. The coordinators are able to gain the trust of the participants and help them develop their self-confidence, improve their decision-making capability, and develop goal-setting techniques that

they can use throughout their life. When asked “what aspect of the goals program the most lasting impression on your well-being”, most named the coordinators and the support they received from the staff. This statement by one graduate sums it up well “How each and everyone there gave us confidence and encouraged us to keep reaching for the stars”.

Support resources

The GOALS coordinators draw upon a variety of resources to support each participant's goal attainment. Table 9 shows the programmatic resources that are considered very important to the graduates. The homeownership program is highly regarded for its effectiveness in helping graduates achieve their dream.

TABLE 9 PROGRAMMATIC SUPPORT RESOURCES

	Percent
Support resources considered very important to program completion	
Homeownership	72
Money management	63
College education	43
Employment referrals	35
Job training	35
Parenting support	35
Childcare	32
Job readiness	31
Health-related	24
Domestic abuse	22
GED resources	19
Substance abuse	16

The money management program helps many get of debt and buy their homes (only 11 percent indicated no improvement in their skill at money management). More than two-fifths of the graduates consider resources for higher education to be very important to their goal achievement. Surprisingly, only about one-third of graduates consider the employment-related resources very important (only 22 percent received a better job through GOALS). This is one

area of program weakness that HAP has addressed by improving its relationship with the local community college, the largest provider of employment and training services in the area. About a fifth of the graduates reveal that their needs are serious: domestic abuse, substance abuse, and GED resources were very important to program completion for them. It may be that this segment of the population is the same segment that still remains very low-income.

The GOALS lead coordinator, Peggy Martini, considers the participants' social relationships to be pivotal to success, as negative associations hinder many from serious pursuit of their goals. Table 10 shows that the graduates overwhelmingly had the support of family and friends to participate in GOALS. Participants who dropped out of the program likely did not have this kind of social support. Many experience improved relationships with family members and friends because they are achieving their goals and feeling better about themselves and their future prospects.

TABLE 10 PERSONAL SUPPORT RESOURCES

	Percent
Social support for participation in GOALS	
Family members were supportive	85
Friends and associates were supportive	88
Developed healthier relationships since going through GOALS	
With family members	62
With friends	53
Discontinued relationships with family and/or friends while in GOALS	
Yes	23
No	72

The coordinators help participants see how their social relationships may influence their ability to realize their goals. Highly motivated participants are willing to discontinue negative relationships. Graduates were asked to describe how their social support systems may have changed since going through GOALS. Of the forty-six graduates that responded to the question, about 30 percent said there was no change, and 65 percent (30 respondents) indicated significant improvement in their support network. The following three responses encapsulate the fundamental change in social relationships: “I am seeking healthier friendships for self and children”, “I just stopped hanging around certain people that wanted to do nothing with their lives or better themselves”, and “I feel my friends today are much more positive”. Giving up negative relationships and bad habits is an indicator of the personal growth participants often achieve. Participants begin to see that they can focus on their own growth “I was able to figure myself out (needs/wants/dreams) and grew to accept/acknowledge that its okay to take care of me.” They begin to re-arrange priorities: “I just keep all my business first and all fun last—and I have helped other people and been supported by them”. Many experience improvements in their ability to communicate with others “I can talk with people better. I now know how to listen.” The coordinators claim the participants become more assertive as a result of growing self-confidence associated with their accomplishments. One graduate overcame the barrier of language: “I have learned how to deal with people and talk to just about anyone, even if they speak English”. Some statements reflect a sense of accomplishment and pride: “My children were proud of the achievement that I did in the GOALS program and so were my friends” and “Friends have developed a new respect for what I have accomplished and in turn have given me moral support that I used wisely”. One graduate indicated that her social support system changed in a most personal way: “I’ve met and married a non-abusing, hard-working, sweet, kind man”.

When asked the question “What aspect of the program had the most lasting impact on your well being?” The responses fell into four main categories: coordinator support, goal achievement, escrow and money management and personal growth. One graduate summed it up well “The GOALS coordinators that I had the privilege of working with made a lasting impression, they really care”. A number of graduates specifically mentioned their coordinator and described her as “wonderful”, “a super encourager and supporter”, and “awesome”. Others mentioned the goal setting techniques and the sense of accomplishment from achieving their goals: “I reached my goal – own a house”. Another wrote “Reaching the goals gave me confidence that I could reach for anything as long as I tried.” Others mentioned that “learning options for saving” and “saving money” made a lasting impression: “I am still amazed how quickly my account added up once I was working”.

Several graduates identified the increase in their self-esteem and confidence as having the most lasting impact on their well-being. “I have faith in myself and know that I will be a homeowner one day soon”. Others simply stated “my self esteem” or “motivation, self-esteem, and self-confidence”. This graduate expressed it powerfully, “It has given me the courage and determination to pursue a career of my dreams”.

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT QUALITY AND IMPACT OF THE GOALS PROGRAM

In order to give the graduates an opportunity to share their thoughts about GOALS they were asked what it was that they liked the most, the least, and how to improve the program. Just about half of the graduates answered these open-ended questions. What graduates like the most was the support of the coordinator (22 responses). They appreciate the frequent contact, the support and encouragement, and the information and access to resources that the coordinators provide. Graduates also liked the savings account (17 responses). They not only like the financial asset itself (an average of \$6,000 in escrow), but they appreciate learning how to save, and how to manage their money. Graduates also like learning how to set goals and

accomplishing them (9 responses). A few cited reaching the goal of homeownership (4 responses), becoming self-sufficient (4 responses), and just the opportunity provided by the program (4 responses). One graduate stated that what they liked most was “A system that rewards always doing well”.

In response to the question “What did you like least about the GOALS program?” sixteen persons indicated that there was nothing they disliked. For example, one graduate wrote “I have nothing negative to say about it cause it is a good program for people who want to make it”. The most common complaint (6 responses) was infrequent contact with a coordinator. This stems from the fact that in the early stages of the GOALS program, HAP had problems hiring qualified coordinators. A few complained about the pacing of the program; they were unable to finish their goals and could not “stop the clock” or get an extension after the five years. A few complained that they could not build up an escrow account because they were unable to earn an income through employment. Lastly, a couple of the participants indicated they didn’t like the “paperwork” involved in the program.

Graduates were asked about ways to improve the program. The responses suggest that the experience and attitude of the coordinators are critical factors in program implementation. The comment about giving the coordinator “more control” suggests that the program cannot be run purely bureaucratically, without concern for the human touch. HAP has put forth significant effort to respond to some of these suggestions, especially to expand program access to non-English speaking residents. They now have coordinators who speak Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Eritrean, and a few other languages.

TABLE 11

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE GOALS PROGRAM

How would you improve the GOALS program?

Hire more coordinators who are well-qualified

Hire coordinators that “have a heart”

Provide coordinators with more background on low-income people

Have more meetings/communication with coordinators

Give the lead coordinator more control

Improve coordination between the Section 8/public housing staff and the GOALS staff

Improve coordination between local TANF office the GOALS program

Start program at onset of housing assistance

Make program mandatory

Better intake process to assess client readiness

Separate participants by goals (not one size fits all)

Let the public know about the program

Reach more non-English speaking families in public housing

Have expectation of how escrow should be spent

Increase access to escrow account (for bills, moving costs, etc.)

Make budgeting class mandatory

Have participant group meetings on monthly basis

Have paid peer mentors

Have retention services

Have more support groups for healthy relationships

Have more job training and referral services

Have realtors assist participants with homeownership

Follow up and support homeowners

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

“Money was important hook---but the plan is about self-determination and empowerment.”

As one GOALS graduate articulated, while the escrow savings account was important, the program is successful only when participants are motivated to make it work. The goal setting process, the long term voluntary contract, and coordinator support were all more important than the escrow account. The GOALS program can be interpreted metaphorically as providing the environment for people to move from a position of treading water, just surviving, to moving forward. Residents need to go somewhere instead of standing still. Housing provides a base of security---the freedom to look forward instead of worrying about present. The escrow account helps to propel forward movement toward the tangible goal of a savings account. The coordinators' support and encouragement helps to improve self-esteem and confidence necessary to move forward. The goal setting process provides a roadmap and helps clear the path. Moving out of poverty requires all three elements: housing, employment resources, and emotional support. It is clear that the coordinators skill at listening and supporting residents is the cornerstone to the program. This component, not easily quantified, adds the nurturing element missing from traditional anti-poverty programs. In fact, graduates feel so positive about the program that 61 percent were willing to volunteer as peer mentors or in other capacities to help current participants. They appreciate the fact that their graduation provides an opportunity for another family to participate.

The support resources are very important elements of the program. Homeownership and money management counseling services were highly regarded. In the past year HAP hired a former realtor to help participants attain homeownership. The links to employment and training services were weak however. In response to these survey results, HAP has strengthened its partnerships with the Portland Community College workforce program, and continues to seek relationships with large employers in the region. While average earnings have increased

significantly, the financial stability of graduates is mixed, with the bottom quarter of respondents still receiving low incomes and needing housing assistance. This especially impacts participants who are either elderly or disabled, or who care for disabled children.

Graduates suggest that the program could be improved by having more frequent access to the coordinators time. It is difficult for HAP to fund the reduction in caseload to make this happen however, because HUD provides little if any financial support for the coordinators; it mainly provides Section 8 vouchers and the escrow resource. The coordinators themselves suggest that another key component needing improvement is program development resources. With additional funding, the coordinators could enhance support resources for GOALS that could improve outcomes. For example, literacy activities for youth are needed. In addition, the peer mentors that graduates consider important to success could be cultivated if there were additional dollars. It is likely that the peer mentors would help decrease the attrition rate. Lastly, the graduates suggest that the GOALS program be integrated with the local TANF program. This was one of HUD's original objectives for FSS, and is difficult to attain without incentives for both bureaucracies.

There are theoretical and policy implications of these findings. Many claims in Michael Sherraden's (1991) theoretical formulation on the role of assets in reducing poverty are supported by this case study. He argues that assets are both tangible and intangible. The tangible assets are the savings accounts, increased earnings, and homes graduates accumulated. The tangible assets stimulate people to improve themselves and increase intangible assets such as human, social, cultural, and political capital. The GOALS graduates increased human capital, and the 70 percent desire more education. Graduates improved their social support networks (social capital) and are better advocates for themselves in formal bureaucracies (cultural capital).

Assets, in Michael Sherraden's conceptual framework, have a number of welfare effects that were evident in this case study. They improve household stability, create an orientation for

the future, enable focus and specialization (e.g. on schooling rather than daily survival), provide a foundation for risk-taking, increase personal efficacy (control and empowerment), and increase the welfare of offspring. Although this study yielded little direct evidence bearing on the claim of improved political capital (political participation, power, and influence). One graduate's story illustrates growth in participation and influence: this person utilized the help of GOALS to not only become self-sufficient, but she later founded the African American Health Coalition, an organization responsible for helping improve the quality of life for a multitude of persons in the Portland area. Another woman used GOALS to overcome poverty brought on by domestic violence to return to a career in computer technology where she earns more than \$60,000 a year. Increases in earnings often translate into increased well-being of families and communities, particularly considering increases in taxes paid. Thus, when FSS is fully implemented, its welfare effects multiply beyond the individual to the larger community and society. It represents a sustainable investment in the future of families.

The policy implications of this study reinforce Barbara Sard's conclusion about FSS as a powerful program for increasing assets and employment. There are efforts underway to support implementation of FSS in localities across the United States because it is recognized as vehicle for expanding asset-building opportunities for low income families (Jeff Lubell, 2004). The Housing Authority of Portland's GOALS program provides important lessons for these efforts. The key is to understand the intangible effects of a coaching case-management style that allows residents to empower themselves and realize their own potential. The secret to success is that the program is more than mechanical: it requires trust, respect, and belief in the dignity of people who happen to find themselves in a low-income situation temporarily.

REFERENCES

- Albelda, Randy and Chris Tilly. 1997. *Glass Ceilings and Bottomless Pits: Women's Work, Women's Poverty*. Boston: South End Press.
- Bane, Mary Jo and David T. Ellwood. 1994. *Welfare Realities: From Rhetoric to Reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bogdon, Amy S. 1999. "What Can We Learn from Previous Housing-Based Self-Sufficiency Programs?" In *The Home Front: Implications of Welfare Reform for Housing Policy*. Sandra J. Newman, Editor. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press.
- Boshara, Ray and Elizabeth Corman, 1999. "Rewarding Savings: Individual Development Accounts Pave a New Path for Community Development and Social Policy". *Shelterforce: The Journal of Affordable Housing and Community Building*, July/August.
- Briggs, Cathey. 1996. *Family Self-Sufficiency Program*. Unpublished Paper. Portland State University.
- Darity, William A. Jr. and Samuel L. Myers, Jr. 1998. *Persistent Disparity: Race and Economic Inequality in the United States since 1945*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- Denzin, Norman K. and Yvonna S. Lincoln. 2001. "The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods, Second Edition*. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Editors. NY: Sage Publications.
- Edelman, Peter. 2001. *Searching for America's Heart: RFK and the Renewal of Hope*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Edin, Kathryn and Laura Lein. 1997. *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Gibson, Karen J. 2001. "Fighting Poverty and Winning: The Housing Authority of Portland's GOALS Program". Paper presented at the Urban Affairs Association Annual Meeting, Detroit.
- Gibson, Karen J., William A. Darity Jr. and Samuel L. Myers, Jr. 1998. "Revisiting Occupational Crowding in the United States: A Preliminary Study." *Feminist Economics*, 4(3), 73-96.
- Greene, Jennifer C. 2001. "Understanding Social Programs through Evaluation". In *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods, Second Edition*. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Editors. NY: Sage Publications.
- Housing Authority of Portland. 1994. *Family Self-Sufficiency Master Book*. El Cajon, CA: Nan McKay and Associates.
- Lubell, Jeff. 2004. *HUD's FSS Program: A Promising Alternative Vehicle for Helping Low-Income Families Build Assets*. <http://www.fsspartnerships.org>. March 15.
- Martini, Peggy. 2001. GOALS Program Coordinator, Interview on February 23. Portland, OR.

Mishel, Lawrence, Jared Bernstein, and John Schmitt. 1999. *The State of Working America, 1998-99*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Newman, Sandra J. Editor. 1999. *The Home Front: Implications of Welfare Reform for Housing Policy*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press.

Oliver, Melvin and Thomas Shapiro. 1997. *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*. New York: Routledge.

Rohe, William M. 1995. "Assisting Residents of Public Housing Achieve Self-Sufficiency: Evaluation of Charlotte's Gateway Families Program." *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 12(3).

Rohe, William M. and Rachel Garshick Kleit. 1997. "From Dependency to Self-Sufficiency: An Appraisal of the Gateway Transitional Families Program." *Housing Policy Debate*, 8(1).

Rohe, William M. and Rachel Garshick Kleit. 1999. "Housing, Welfare Reform and Self-Sufficiency: An Assessment of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program." *Housing Policy Debate*, 10(2).

Sard, Barbara. 2001. *The Family Self-Sufficiency Program: HUD's Best Kept Secret for Promoting Employment and Asset Growth*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Sherraden, Michael. 1991. *Assets and the Poor: A New American Welfare Policy*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.

Shlay, Anne B. 1993. "Family Self-Sufficiency and Housing." *Housing Policy Debate*, 4(3).

Taliaferro, Jocelyn DeVance. 2001. *Welfare, Multiple Barrier Families, and Work*. Unpublished paper. University of Delaware, Newark.

Wood, Michelle, et al. 1999. *From Welfare to Work: Using HUD's Programs to Help Families in Transition*. Prepared by Abt Associates Inc for the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Yin, Robert K. 1994. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the staff at the Housing Authority of Portland and especially the GOALS program graduates who participated in the survey. I also appreciate the research assistance of Kim Hoffman, Jennifer Porter, Kerry Sullivan, and Tina Mosca; graduate students in the School of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University.