

# Generational Poverty Focus of Chapter's Project

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Breaking the cycle of generational poverty in St. Joseph County, Ind.—where an estimated one in six people in South Bend live in poverty—is the long-term goal of the Michiana chapter's "Future Story Project."

The chapter was one of seven U.S. chapters and two state councils to win the coveted Pinnacle Award in 2010 in a national competition that the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and ADP sponsor annually. Winners were announced during the SHRM Leadership Conference in November 2010.

Michiana's program is in conjunction with "Bridges Out of Poverty," a national program that St. Joseph County became involved with in 2004 and that South Bend's mayor in 2007 named as one of his five directives for the city. The county's program, one of 40 in the U.S., targets generational poverty and associated issues such as predatory lending practices and low wages.

The community has been "profoundly affected" by poverty, according to Leah Zimmer, employment specialist for Bridges Out of Poverty in St. Joseph County. She sits on the Michiana chapter's board as a Bridges communications representative.

Fifty-five percent of single mothers with children under the age of 5 live in poverty in South Bend, compared to 17 percent of all families in South Bend living in poverty, according to the chapter, citing figures from the 2005 American Community Summary, U.S. Census Bureau.

A single adult earning \$10,400 or less annually and a family of four earning \$21,300 or less annually is considered to be living in poverty, according to 2008 figures from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This is not just a social service issue but "a business and HR issue," the chapter's board secretary and committee chairman, Jaime D. Murphy, said of generational poverty.

"HR professionals have a profound impact in a company. They have an opportunity to really bring something to the table and solve a really global issue by starting with just the folks that are within their building or the folks that are walking in their building filling out [job] applications."

Generational poverty, which the chapter's program targets, typically is defined as lasting at least two generations. Children in those families grow up with little expectation of improved financial circumstances, and their concept of a job is about making enough money to survive rather than preparing for the future or aspiring to a career, according to various studies.

"If you're really just trying to deal with the problems right in front of you, right now ... you're just trying to get enough money and resources for this moment," Zimmer said.

And that impacts employers.

“We know it’s affecting our HR practices,” Murphy said. “We know it’s affecting our hiring, our retention.”

It’s a factor in such issues as high absenteeism and turnover, the ability to concentrate on the job at hand, and excessive tardiness. An employee whose only transportation to work is the bus or a junk car that’s constantly in need of repair, for example, will have attendance issues and job instability.

### **How Bridges, Future Story Project Work**

“Bridges” is free to participants and has three components:

1. A seminar introducing the “Bridges” concept of self-sufficiency.
2. Getting Ahead—a 15-week curriculum of three-hour sessions held twice a week.
3. Next Steps—monthly networking meetings with local “allies” or partners that provide job search resources, mentoring, employment and support.

Bridges has had more than 300 Getting Ahead graduates in the county since 2006. Most are women, and more than half are single mothers; 36 percent have children age 5 or younger. Among the graduates, one-third are employed, and one-third of that number work full time.

The chapter became involved with the county program in 2009, created “Future Story Project” and made it a focus of its strategic initiatives. The program’s name emphasizes looking to the future.

### **‘Tyranny of the Moment’**

“Living in poverty means living in the ‘tyranny of the moment,’ ” the chapter explained in its application. Proactive planning and thinking “are essential for creating a future story. Without one, people can’t plan for their own or their children’s future.”

Chapter members work with Bridges graduates through mentoring and networking and serve as steering committee members with Bridges staff and other community partners, such as the Chamber of Commerce, Teachers Credit Union, a local hospital, a community college and local agencies.

“It’s not enough to help somebody get a job, and this is where [the SHRM chapter] really recognized it’s not enough that they showed up for work,” Zimmer said. “It’s what we can do to support them once they’re on the job that they stay here ... not just coming in for three months and leaving because something breaks down.”

During one chapter-sponsored monthly networking meeting with graduates, members were stationed at tables to discuss “hidden rules” of the workplace—the importance of dressing properly for an interview and on the job, the importance of punctuality, and appropriate vs. inappropriate questions to ask at a job interview. Participants gain insights into the hiring process, such as the importance of completed job applications.

“It kind of gives them another side of what an HR person is looking at,” Murphy said.

“This is not a program that identifies what’s wrong with people in poverty” but a mutual relationship, she hastened to add. She has learned some things as well, such as that persons raised among generational poverty operate under their own set of hidden rules or unspoken coping strategies that differ from the middle class’ hidden rules.

For example, while those in the middle class associate power with job position, institutions and information, people living in poverty link power with personal respect and the ability to fight.

“If they feel disrespected, they will go somewhere else,” explained Zimmer. The power of relationships also affects communication.

“If information is not connected to power for you and people just keep giving you information but they’re not developing a relationship with you, they are not giving you respect, they’re not treating you as an adult, you’re not developing a relationship of mutual respect.... Those things come into conflict in the workplace,” Zimmer said.

### **Getting and Keeping Jobs**

During 2010, nine Getting Ahead graduates became employed; one graduate was nearing her one-year anniversary of employment. The number of graduates who have found employment has increased since 2010, according to Murphy.

“Staying employed for one year is a great accomplishment for someone from generational poverty,” the chapter wrote in its Pinnacle application. “Their success will influence their children and reduce the likelihood that they will live in poverty.”

The chapter continues to participate in monthly networking meetings with graduates, but its primary focus in 2011 is educating the business community, Murphy said. That will include helping Bridges craft training materials for the business community to illustrate how generational poverty impacts their bottom line with issues such as turnover, productivity, quality of work and diversity.

“Not only are we helping the individuals enrolled in the program and their families,” the chapter wrote, “we are educating businesses and building bridges with other agencies and institutions” in working toward a stronger community.

One example is the executive leadership forum that it’s planning for the fall of 2011 that will include a business leader speaking about poverty’s affect on the bottom line and the importance of eliminating obstacles specific to Getting Ahead graduates.

“We believe in the [Bridges] program ... and we felt like we could assist in the hiring phase of the graduates,” Murphy said.

SHRM’s Michiana chapter, Zimmer said, is “the most powerful connection we’ve made in our community.”

Visit the chapter’s SHRM webinar about the program for more information. **Kathy Gurchiek is associate editor for HR News.**