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Memorandum

Date: January 29, 2001

To: Jerralynn Ness, Community Action Organization

From: Kay Sohl

Subject: **Key Findings from CAO Staff Environmental Scan (January, 2001)**

I. Investing to Improve Staff Satisfaction and Performance

When we asked staff to advise the board on "how to invest \$1 million to improve staff satisfaction and performance", three major suggestions emerged:

- Improve pay
- Improve benefits
- Improve access to technology and needed equipment
- Add more staff to reduce workload demands

We utilized a spectrogram process, asking staff to place themselves in an imaginary square defined by these four strategies, moving closer to the corner which they believed would be most effective, and placing themselves on an axis to indicate the other corner they would be second most effective.

We observed most staff placing themselves on the axis between improved pay and improved benefits, but a substantial number placed themselves on an axis between better pay and better access to technology and equipment. Relatively few placed themselves toward the "add more staff" corner. Management staff noted that the focus on adding more staff seemed to be within several specific programs.

Given CAO's current relatively low compensation levels, it was not surprising to find most staff placing emphasis on better pay and benefits. However, in both the spectrogram

exercise and in the discussion of strategies, many staff placed strong emphasis on improved access to technology and improved work space as key elements in improving performance and satisfaction.

II. Investment in Infrastructure

We posed the million dollar investment in infrastructure question after the question about investing to improve staff morale and performance. Interestingly, the infrastructure needs had already been covered extensively in the staff morale and performance discussion. The discussion in this section simply reaffirmed staff's perception that difficulties communicating electronically, as well as obtaining needed help with technology are a priority for investment. Staff also emphasized their frustration with the telephone system which they perceive as both a barrier to effective client services and to effective staff performance. For some staff, lack of private and/or adequate work space was also a significant barrier.

III. Investment in Client Services

We asked staff to provide advise on investing \$1 million to improve the services/resources provided for low income people in Washington County, including both those who currently participate in CAO activities and those who do not participate at this time. The recommendations shown below proved consistent with discussions reported in subsequent sections.

The recommendations for investing in client services which were offered most frequently were:

- Expand current CAO programs
- Develop programs which provide direct access to money for clients who have immediate needs (housing, medication, child care, household supplies, etc.)
- Child care- provide or help clients pay for child care so that they can work or obtain education to work
- Help clients address language barriers to accessing needed services
- Assist clients with "life skills" - literacy, money management, parenting, household management
- Provide more assistance with housing - rent subsidy, home ownership opportunities, emergency assistance
- Improve client access to effective help with mental health issues

Several staff suggested that the \$1 million be invested to provide ongoing support for program needs which cannot be met through government contracts.

IV. Barriers to Self Sufficiency in Washington County

We asked staff to use their in-depth knowledge of the life experiences of CAO program participants, and in some cases, their personal knowledge of the challenges of providing

for a family encountered by low income residents in Washington County, to describe the primary barriers to self sufficiency and quality of life which CAO participants confront.

Staff painted a vivid picture of difficult barriers. The most frequently mentioned barriers (listed with descending order of frequency of mention) were:

- Difficulty accessing help, including lack of awareness of resources, waiting lists, and eligibility requirements which are too narrowly defined to allow all in need to participate.
- Lack of education and job training
- Lack of living wage employment
- Language barriers
- Personal insecurity and difficulty asking for help
- Immigration status and fear of apprehension or harassment
- Transportation
- Difficulty meeting basic needs which prevents addressing education and employment issues

V. Barriers to Participating in CAO Programs

Participants reflected on the challenges and barriers which prevent low income individuals from using CAO's current programs. Key barriers identified included:

- Reluctance/dislike of asking for help
- Severe personal problems including mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, and a sense of hopelessness
- Past experience of being unable to qualify for assistance or bad experiences receiving assistance
- Fear of INS or SCF or other governmental authorities
- Language and cultural barriers
- Lack of information about availability of services and difficulty accessing CAO due to phone system limitations.

VI. Elements Contributing to Positive Work Environment at CAO

We asked participants what aspects of working at CAO really helped them perform their jobs well and be able to enjoy working for the organization. Participants expressed strong positive feelings about working at CAO. Among the elements they reported as contributing the most to job satisfaction and performance were:

- The dedication of co-workers and enjoyment in working together
- The deep satisfaction in working with program participants
- Support from supervisors and a positive tone from management
- The availability of training, opportunities for advancement, and recognition for their work
- Flexibility, the sense that CAO cares about both the employees and their families and wants to be flexible in order to help staff have satisfying family lives

- Respect for independence and faith that employees will find good ways to do the work
- Pride in the work of CAO and in the support from the community for its work
- Resources and systems in place to help staff do their work well

VI. Barriers to Job Satisfaction and Effective Performance

We also asked staff to identify the most significant barriers they encounter in working at CAO, things which get in the way of their job performance and satisfaction with their work. We have listed the most frequently mentioned barriers, in order of frequency of mention.

- Too much work to do, and not enough paid hours to do it
- Communications breakdowns/ unclear expectations
- Frustration in seeing that families cannot get the help they really need
- Need for better technology, facilities, supplies to do the job
- Lack of consistent funding for programs
- Too much change and turn over
- Language barriers and the sense that the bi-lingual are asked to do two jobs when they must translate for other staff and clients
- Sense that staff are asked for input on issues which have already been decided