

## THE HARD TIMES CAFE FAMILY OPPORTUNITY PROJECT

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### ABSTRACT

The Hard Times Cafe is a mutual help-oriented organization for individuals who have low incomes and/or physical and mental disabilities. This article describes the overall approach of the Hard Times Cafe, focusing in particular on its Family Opportunity Project (FOP). The FOP shows how emotional and economic self-help approaches can be successfully integrated.

The Hard Times Cafe (HTC) believes that disadvantaged people are a resource to be tapped rather than a problem to be solved. Operating in Clare County, Michigan since 1991, HTC is a participant-managed program based on four basic values that guide every decision and activity of the organization: the dignity of each person; a focus on potential for improvement rather than on deficits or disabilities; building a supportive community; and ensuring the responsibility of each participant.

HTC participants (called patrons) include current and former welfare recipients, families living in poverty, people with physical and/or mental disabilities, and others who are experiencing hard times. The goals of the Hard Times Cafe, approved by patrons in January 1992, include: 1) to work together to meet our needs and improve our lives; 2) to develop skills and attitudes that will help us to prosper; 3) to create a positive impression in the community that will bring us respect and opportunity; 4) to improve our community; and 5) to serve as a positive role model for children.

The Hard Times Cafe has demonstrated that empowerment works. Empowerment simply means to give authority. At the HTC, patrons have full authority for all structures and activities of the program. All decisions are made by consensus. Everyone has input. HTC patrons have delegated some authority to teams of

patrons but final say over every decision and activity of the program rests with the group as a whole. This helps to ensure inclusion and makes every patron responsible for the success of the program. Staff serve as advisors, trainers, facilitators, and coaches, but have no direct control over program operations except that delegated by patrons for reasons of efficiency or timeliness.

The HTC Family Opportunity Project (FOP) seeks to build a bridge between disadvantaged people and the mainstream economy by increasing opportunities that help participants to work together to meet their needs while developing skills, habits, and motivation that lead to regular employment and improved family life. Every aspect of the HTC Family Opportunity Project provides opportunities for disadvantaged people to obtain training and work experience. FOP participants are organized into self-managing teams that are responsible for day-to-day operations such as record keeping, accounting, computer operations, and administrative tasks. They also operate businesses that provide basic needs for low-income people and provide services within a peer-managed, self-help environment. These peer-run services help participants obtain resources and develop skills, capabilities, and conditions that lead to improved family life.

HTC patrons earn Points of Improvement for improving work habits and job skills while working in the program. The hourly rate is based on the work habits they demonstrate throughout the work day. They can earn up to 8 Points of Improvement per hour for meeting each of sixteen positive work habits such as coming to work early, being appropriately dressed, working at a steady pace, etc. This system is being expanded under the Family Opportunity Project so that participants will earn bonus points for earning certifications in specific skill areas and for training other patrons. Each team will offer a number of certifications that provide evidence of mastery of work skills. For example, Office Management team members will be able to earn certifications in reception, filing, word processing, copy machine operations, etc.; and retail team members earn certifications in customer service, cash register operation, inventory management, etc.; Automotive Team members will earn certifications in various aspects of auto mechanics as well as in diagnostics and the use of specific types of tools and materials.

Points of Improvement can be exchanged for items sold by HTC businesses or for vouchers that can be used for necessities. Patrons are currently operating a food and personal needs store for FOP participants and a retail used clothing, furniture, and appliance store that serves the public. We are developing a used car business that will sell only Ford Escorts (because all of this car's parts are interchangeable over many model years, patrons can rebuild damaged cars into running vehicles using parts from other vehicles). Future business plans include a temporary job service, day-care center, home repair and rental service, and possibly a small farm. We expect FOP businesses to generate sufficient profit to provide basic necessities which participants can obtain in exchange for Points of Improvement earned by improving work habits and job skills. This provides a potentially self-sufficient

alternative to welfare where participants can meet their needs through their own efforts while developing skills and confidence that lead to good paying jobs.

In the Family Opportunity Project, evaluation is an ongoing process integrated into the flow of information that helps the program operate efficiently. Systems and structures that provide direction and information for project operations also produce data which can be used to evaluate success among individuals, sub-groups, and the project as a whole. This provides accurate, up-to-date information that effectively measures actual progress being made through program efforts without creating an additional bureaucracy or paperwork burden for staff or participants.

HTC is developing a peer support system in which patrons help others in similar situations to obtain assistance and to access available resources with a minimum of difficulty. Community Resource Teams assist with finding housing, transportation, child care, as well as employment and educational opportunities. We have designed a peer-managed intake and referral process where people-in-need will meet with peers trained as "resource consultants" to assist in accessing needed services and taking advantage of appropriate opportunities.

Family Enrichment Teams assist patrons in developing skills, capabilities, and conditions that remove obstacles to employment and lead to improved family life. Participants identified needs for training in stress management, relationship skills, parenting, understanding the human service and Protective Service systems, and dealing with anxiety, depression, anger, and substance abuse. Each team determines the focus for their weekly meetings based on the current needs of the participants. Meetings involve a training session in the topic selected, sharing of strengths and information, and a problem solving time. Teams create fictional families who are struggling with concerns that have been prioritized by the team and then apply their newly learned skills to these situations. Each team member is in training to co-facilitate future group sessions. An on-call support system is being developed so participants can easily support each other with non-crisis situations.

HTC patrons have completed over 220,000 hours of work training and community service and earned over 750,000 Points of Improvement. They have reported finding over 450 jobs and more than 220 patrons have returned to school. HTC patrons have become part of governing and advisory boards for local agencies and have advocated state-wide for increased consumer involvement in human service programs. In 1998, HTC served as the lead agency in developing the successful application for Clare County's federal designation as an Enterprise Community, one of twenty awarded nationwide.

The Hard Times Cafe has developed a new way of looking at human services and the welfare system that emphasizes empowerment and personal responsibility. We are an independent, non-profit organization with the flexibility to be immediately responsive to the needs, concerns, and ideas of our participants. A strong commitment to our values and principles is built into the structure of the program.

We maintain a clear vision of where we are headed but implement our programs incrementally to allow for adjustment and fine-tuning to insure efficiency and a good fit with the needs and potential of our patrons.

The Hard Times Cafe has received State and National awards for innovation and collaboration. The FOP is being implemented with an eye to replication and in anticipation of future training needs.

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