



Communities that Work:
An Analysis of Qualitative Research
Exploring Perceptions of Lifetrack Programs and Policies

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Method

This is the second in a series of reports designed by the FrameWorks Institute to explore public understanding of, and support for, transitional work experience programs. This particular phase of qualitative research was designed to explore a series of hypothetical reframes intended to build public support for Lifetrack's program and its broad policy agenda which includes related structural deficiencies in housing, transportation and education that these programs address, and reforms to the employment system that fails to accommodate the needs of this important population. Specifically, the research was designed to explore answers to the following questions:

- How do people think about Lifetrack's target populations and the issues faced by the target populations?
- What are the barriers to people's support for the work Lifetrack does and the policies it advocates?
- What problem are these policies perceived to address?
- What frames advance support and engagement?
- How can these frames best be composed using messengers and other frame elements to support the frame?

To explore answers to these questions, focus group participants were exposed to four articles designed to reflect four frames. The FrameWorks Institute defines framing as referring to "the way a story is told -- its selective use of particular symbols, metaphors, and messengers, for example – and to the way these cues, in turn, trigger the shared and durable cultural models that people use to make sense of their world" (Bales and Gilliam, 2002). Research on how people think demonstrates that people use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world, and that new information provides cues to help people determine how to connect the new information to what they already know. This lens on the issue then quickly defines issue understanding, priority, consequences, solutions and responsibility for fixing the problem. This is framing. (Note: For more information on frames and framing, see the FrameWorks Institute web site at www.frameworksinstitute.org.)

The four test articles were carefully constructed to include a mix of frame elements including different problem definitions, goals, values, metaphors, messengers, and so on. The table below provides an outline of the specific elements tested in each of the four frames. For example, the Community Frame was designed to cause the reader to think about how a community achieves a good quality of life by assisting those who are on the edge of society. It conveys the values of interdependence, community stability and even self-preservation by stating that society does not function well when some are operating outside the norms of society. To help communicate this concept, the article includes a metaphorical mechanism that compares a community to a building that needs all parts to be in good shape to function well. Civic organizations and a mayor are used as messengers. Finally, to add to the authenticity of the news articles, Lifetrack Resources was given a different name in each article.

	Community Frame	Prevention Frame	Economy Frame	Community Economy Frame
Problem definition	Some are on the edges of society and need to be mainstreamed	Problems go unnoticed at early stages, missed opportunities	Employers needs skilled workers	Communities' economies are weakened when all do not contribute
Goal	Quality of Life	Opportunity for all	Fully skilled workers	Full employment
Level 1 value	Interdependence, Stability, Self-preservation	Prevention	Prosperity	Economic Interdependence
Level 2 category	Community	Society	Economy	Community/Economy
Metaphor/mechanism	Missing pillars	Transformation	Ripple effect	Fit
Messengers	Rotary, Kiwanis, mayor	Itasca Project mental health professional	Economic Devel Dept, Public Utility Exec	City planner, local businesses, business school
Lifetrack Resources organization name	Columbus United	Transformed Lives	Skill Builders	Lifetrack Resources

Four focus groups were conducted with engaged citizens in Minnesota (defined broadly as people who say they are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have recently contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue.). Focus groups were divided by education/class level but mixed on all other demographic criteria (gender, age, party identification, and race). The groups were:

- Residents of Minneapolis/St. Paul (January 19, 2005)
 - Non-college-educated, blue/pink collar occupations
 - College-educated, white collar occupations
- Residents of the suburbs of Minneapolis/St. Paul (January 20, 2005)
 - Non-college-educated, blue/pink collar occupations
 - College-educated, white collar occupations

Throughout the report, focus group participants are noted by their location, education level and gender.

Introduction

Lifetrack Resources works with a variety of populations – immigrants, ex-offenders, people with mental or physical disabilities – that find it difficult to maintain steady employment. By taking a long-term, holistic approach to address whatever barriers an individual faces, Lifetrack Resources has been able to help people achieve a better quality of life. In order to continue to expand its work, the organization seeks to build public support for its programs and for a comprehensive policy agenda of systemic solutions, including childcare subsidies, Medicaid, transportation subsidies, etc.

There are a number of public perceptions that can easily undermine support for the organization and its broader agenda. First, the organization is working with populations that do not incite public support or enthusiasm. In a weak economy, the public is particularly resistant to investing public resources in unskilled workers, when skilled workers are unemployed. In addition, Americans firmly believe that each individual is responsible for his or her own success and that hard work is routinely rewarded with success. All of these perceptions work against broad-based support for Lifetrack Resources program and its broader agenda.

This phase of research investigated the effect of four conceptual frames on public support for the program and policy agenda provided by Lifetrack. Focus group participants were asked to review four fictional news articles, each of which included a different frame for this issue. The subsequent conversation gauged focus group respondents' understanding of and willingness to support the program and policies.

Focus group participants reviewed four articles incorporating the following frames:

- The Economy Frame, in which the program and policies are described as ways to improve the state's economy;
- The Prevention Frame, in which the program and policies are described as preventive measures that keep manageable problems from escalating into serious crises. Importantly, this news article also included a personal transformation story of one individual who was saved by the program;
- The Community Economy Frame, in which the program and policies are described as ways to improve communities' economies and well-being; and
- The Community Frame, in which the program and policies are described as ways to bring people who are at the margins of society into the mainstream, thereby strengthening communities' quality of life.

Both the Economy Frame and the personal transformation story embedded in the Prevention Frame trigger a range of stereotypes and prejudices. Focus group participants feel that they are competing for fewer and fewer jobs with immigrants and unskilled workers who will accept low wages. As they feel increasing economic pressure, focus group participants become more resistant to using tax dollars to help these populations.

In contrast, the Community Frame provides a completely new lens on this issue. When in a community mindset, focus group participants understand collective responsibility for

people who are struggling in a community. They have a stake in maintaining a healthy community, and recognize that all people in a community are interdependent. Therefore, they quickly support actions that move people from the margins of society to the mainstream. The *reason* that a person may be at the margins of society becomes irrelevant, so prejudices are quickly set aside. Instead, people bring their attention to the need for all people to contribute to society in some way. In this way, work is seen to symbolically represent self-esteem and civic responsibility, not merely wages.

Issue Context

Focus group participants came to this conversation with existing perceptions of the economy and the community that influenced how they understood the Lifetrack program and its broader policy agenda. This section analyzes these existing perceptions to provide a context for focus group participants' reactions to the test materials. Much of this analysis is based upon an open-end conversation that occurred prior to focus group participants' exposure to test articles concerning each of these issues.

The Economic Context

Existing perceptions of the Minnesota economy are unlikely to build support for policies and programs to address the needs of the target populations that Lifetrack supports. The state's economic problems are caused by jobs going abroad and too many people competing for the remaining jobs, which push wages lower, according to focus group participants. In this way of thinking, immigrants are part of the problem. In addition, they noted that highly-skilled workers are finding it difficult to secure good-paying jobs, so few focus group participants recognized that training in basic job skills would be an effective solution for the state's economic problems. In the struggle for limited job opportunities, they do not understand why taxpayers should fund job training for immigrants, welfare recipients, ex-offenders or other marginal populations, when skilled US citizens and laid-off employees are ready to work, but cannot find jobs.

Focus group participants provided a mixed assessment of the economy. While "lousy" was the most commonly voiced description of the Minnesota economy, several focus group participants expressed the opinion that the status of the state's economy depends upon the economic segment being analyzed. Some pointed to high levels of new construction and consumer purchasing that indicate a strong, or rebounding, state economy. At the same time, focus group participants were very worried about unemployment, low wages, and the high number of layoffs the state has experienced.

The economic indicator that raised the most concern was maintaining a high level of quality jobs. "Too many crappy jobs, not enough good jobs that draw a diverse group of people," stated a non-college-educated man from the city. "Look at Northwest Airlines, outsourcing. All of the mechanics, the work is done over in Singapore now," asserted a non-college-educated woman from the city.

Several talked about the negative effect of immigration on the Minnesota workforce. "You can go to Southdale or the mall and I bet you 90% of your clerks in the stores are Somali," stated a non-college-educated suburban woman. "Enough of the melting pot. Plug the borders. We are full," stated a non-college-educated man from the city. "I picked up a job two nights a week waiting tables just to get a little cash. I see that the entire work staff...are all new to this country, every single one of them. So we transition that whole industry with those folks which is awesome for them, but it seems like those are jobs that high school kids used to do... personally, I think the economy is in enormous transition," stated a college-educated man from the city.

Most noted that the Minnesota workforce is highly skilled and highly desired. "I think our technical schools do a great job in graduating good, skilled technicians," stated a college-educated suburban woman. To improve the workforce, some want additional resources put toward higher education. "It's like a Catch-22. You can't afford to go to school, so you can't get the skills and then you can't get the job. If you can't get the skills, you can't go to school, because you can't afford it," explained a college-educated man from the city.

Community Context

Perceptions of community extend beyond limited understandings of a physical place. Focus group participants spoke at length of the emotional relationships that create community and each individual's responsibility to contribute to and support the broader community. The idea of reaching out to someone in need is closely associated with people's understanding of community. Therefore, "community" sets a context that is conducive to creating a sense of civic responsibility for the marginal populations that Lifetrack supports.

Focus group participants described "community" as consisting of both a physical place as well as an emotional relationship. "You've got geographic community, which means my neighbors live here and my school is here and whatever. But you've also got a community, say a church community," explained a college-educated woman from the city.

In the physical sense, people have different definitions of community – a neighborhood, a small town, a city, and so on. They discussed particular amenities, such as schools and community organizations, for example. In the emotional sense, focus group participants mentioned similar characteristics as defining community: security, trust, participation, well-being, willingness to help others, etc. "You rely on your neighbors to look out for each other, like people in watch groups and everything like that," stated a non-college-educated man from the city.

According to focus group participants, communities that are struggling have particular characteristics that affect their ability to progress. "Lack of businesses, lack of community centers, lack of programs for people to attend whether it is YM-YWCA-type of organizations," explained a suburban college-educated man. While many focus group

participants initially assumed that struggling communities are economically poor, others suggested that any neighborhood in transition can be a weak community if personal ties do not exist. "[If] you've got a lot of transition, a lot of new people, [then] you don't have the neighborhood. You don't even know who your neighbor is from one day to the next," explained a non-college-educated suburban man.

Strong, successful communities are marked by high levels of participation, noted focus group participants. "Community activity, church activity," stated a non-college-educated suburban man. "Go look at the tiny little towns. When something happens, the whole town comes to help. That's community," asserted a non-college-educated woman from the suburbs.

Framing Effects

After the contextual conversation described above, focus group participants were exposed to fictional news articles¹ designed to evoke four different frames for this issue. Specifically, the focus groups investigated four frames that were constructed using a number of framing elements, as noted in the methodology section: the Economy Frame, the Prevention Frame, the Community Frame, and the Community Economy Frame. The frames were presented in different order across the groups to prevent response bias based on an order effect. This section describes the responses to each of the constructed frames including all the tested elements of each frame. When appropriate, this section also includes references to participants' raw associations with economic or community issues as described in the prior section concerning issue context.

¹ The articles are fictional and were developed by the FrameWorks Institute and Public Knowledge and adapted from numerous unverified sources. They should not be used as a source for factual information.

The Economy Frame

When people view the Lifetrack program and a proximate policy agenda through the lens of the state’s economy, they are less receptive toward assisting marginal populations in achieving job skills. They believe that Minnesota already has a highly-skilled workforce, and even highly-skilled employees cannot find good jobs in the current weak economy. The problem facing the state’s economy, they assert, is creating enough quality jobs and this program does not address that concern.

In addition, some are confused about the target of the program, believing that middle-class workers are the focus, but these workers do not need job training, childcare subsidies or the other policy recommendations. Others understand that marginal populations are the focus, but these focus group participants feel pressured by the weak economy and are resistant toward assisting populations that compete with them for jobs. Simply put, the Economy Frame does not advance Lifetrack’s agenda and should be avoided.

The Economy Frame seeks to link the needs of marginal populations with the needs of the state’s economy. It suggests that prosperity for all is limited, due to the inability to fully utilize a significant population of unskilled workers. The article asserts that future prosperity relies upon developing a fully-skilled Minnesota workforce which will result in better jobs and higher wages, creating a ripple effect through the state’s economy. It relies upon the state’s Department of Economic Development and a public utility as messengers.

As noted earlier, focus group participants believe the real problem facing the state’s economy is that good-paying jobs are leaving

Steps Toward a Fully-Skilled Workforce An Interview with the Minnesota Department of Economic Development

Interviewer: What can we do to strengthen the state’s economy?

Minnesota’s future prosperity relies upon its ability to provide employers with a *fully skilled* workforce. We’ve made significant progress in developing a *highly skilled* workforce and currently have among one of the most educated populations in the country, But the state has a long way to go to create a *fully skilled* workforce.

Interviewer: What do you mean when you say “fully skilled workforce?”

A fully skilled workforce is one in which every adult has the skill and ability to contribute to the state’s economy through meaningful work if they choose to do so. Right now, roughly 20% of the state’s workforce is unemployed or underemployed due to problems that could be overcome. These are workers that want to be contributing more to the state’s economy, but are unable to. Employers are increasingly drawing workers from outside the state, because the pool of skilled workers in Minnesota is stretched thin, and unskilled workers are unsuitable for employers’ needs.

Interviewer: What can we do to address that problem?

We’re beginning to address it now. Xcel Energy, one of the state’s public utilities, is one of many companies in the state that is participating in an effort to develop workers’ skills by working with Skill Builders’ innovative programs. Skill Builders fully assesses the skills that an individual needs to be successful in the workforce. Through paid employment with partner companies, targeted training over a period of several months, and interventions to keep workers on track, Skill Builders is able to transition workers from marginal employment or unemployment, to fully functional workers.

This helps us all. As employers expand employment and previously marginal workers earn higher wages, the benefits will ripple through the state’s economy and lead to more prosperity for everyone. We need to expand these kinds of programs, and make changes in public policy that will enhance their effectiveness.

Interviewer: Such as?

For one thing, the law limits the amount of vocational training for welfare recipients. That’s ridiculous. Instead, we need to look at barriers to employment and improve access to work supports such as training, childcare subsidies, expanding Medicaid, and transportation allowances. Finally, if we require immediate employment when people are released from prison, and assist them in getting employment, we can mainstream them into society and dramatically reduce the number of repeat offenders.

End of Interview

and there is too much competition for the remaining jobs, which results in low wages. Given this, focus group participants conclude that the article's policy recommendations do not address the issues in the state's economy. "The real problem for Minnesota is that the jobs have gone. Companies have disappeared. Northwest has made cuts over and over. The jobs are gone. I don't understand what they are talking about 'problems that they could overcome.' They're not bringing the jobs back in," a non-college-educated suburban man expressed. Some discussed how the very foundation of the economy is changing. "Wal-Mart is the biggest, newest employer in the state. I'm not sure that is good," noted a non-college-educated man from the city.

The issue described in the article, they note, is not about the state's economy; it is about charity. "They are separate issues in my mind. It is almost a societal issue rather than an unemployment issue. It has to do with immigration; it has to do with the generosity of the state. First it was the Hmong, now it is all these other people that are coming in, and it is fine but it is a separate issue...from people who have lost their jobs, who have been working, who are citizens, if you will, and who are skilled and are looking...it doesn't deal with us," argued a non-college-educated suburban woman.

In a weak economy when people are competing for good-paying jobs, focus group participants are resistant to sacrificing their own well-being to assist welfare recipients and immigrants. "I think they have to cut down on all the people they're letting onto welfare...I've gotta keep working. I can't get insurance. They get it," stated a non-college-educated suburban woman. "Why should one state draw all these folks from who knows where and then make the state as a whole have to figure out what we are going to do for these folks," argued a non-college-educated suburban woman.

Several focus group participants were initially confused about the target audience for this program, thinking that it is for highly-skilled workers who may currently be underemployed, due to the weak economy. "I think you're talking about the college graduates who haven't been able to get a job," stated a college-educated woman from the city. "It's not just the unskilled. It's the over-skilled that need to be retrained," stated a non-college-educated woman from the city. When asked who the unemployed and under-employed are in the article, a non-college-educated suburban woman responded, "It's the ones that are middle-class that really have the skills that they can say they are overqualified. They don't have to pay them as much, or they are underqualified, so they don't have to hire them." "They had to take a lesser job, so they are now working for \$10 an hour, but they could really be capable of \$30," explained a college-educated suburban woman. "They only want to hire nurses part-time, so they don't have to pay the benefits and stuff like that," explained a college-educated suburban man. A college-educated suburban man defined the term "fully skilled workforce" as describing "everybody reaching their own potential. If I've got a Ph.D. in history, I'm not employed as a laborer."

With the wrong target audience in mind, they do not understand the policy recommendations. "This last paragraph was quite a list of what they call 'barriers to employment.' They get into childcare subsidies, Medicaid, transportation, training, all

sorts of different things that aren't directly related to what you're talking about in the top part...I don't think it explains how that relates," stated a college-educated suburban man.

Since they believe that Minnesota has a highly-skilled, desirable workforce, they find it difficult to believe that employers are looking outside the state for talent. "It says that employers are increasingly hiring workers from outside the state, because we don't have a pool of skilled workers in Minnesota, we are stretched thin. I'm unaware of that," noted a college-educated man from the city.

When people do find this article compelling, it is because they are reading into the article a Prevention or Community Frame. A college-educated woman from the city used Prevention and Community Frames to explain why she thought the article was compelling: "What stood out to me was the reduction in the childcare subsidy. So suddenly people could no longer go to school or work because they've lost their subsidies. That means they are less of a contributing member financially to society...we're shooting ourselves in the foot by limiting their access." "It's very important to the community and as a whole in the economy to take care of these people, to invest in them more than three hots and a cot," stated a non-college-educated man from the city.

FrameWorks research often finds that businesses prove to be effective messengers on economic issues, but in this instance the business messenger was unable to build support for remedial policies. Some were suspicious about the company's motivations. "It's hard to believe a corporation is going to contribute to something they are not going to benefit from...To just fund something for the greater good, I find it hard to believe," noted a college-educated man from the city. While some felt that employers should be able to find skilled workers without having to train them, others felt that if training is necessary, companies should pay to train their own employees. "It should be the burden of the company, not the burden of the taxpayer," argued a non-college-educated suburban man.

Finally, focus group participants understood the Lifetrack-type program, which was labeled "Skill Builders" in this article, to be a job training program. "The Skill Builders are supposed to be working with people to help them with the skills that they have," stated a college-educated suburban woman. "I read it as a job assistance program or job training," explained a college-educated suburban man.

The Prevention Frame

The concept of prevention is powerful and compelling; however it is undermined by the personal transformation story included in the article. Focus group participants became consumed with the details of the victim's story, and were then unable to see any societal responsibility for addressing the situation. Furthermore, when focused on the mistake that one individual has made, focus group participants found it hard to imagine generally how situations like these could have been prevented.

As its name suggests, the Prevention Frame emphasizes the value of preventing a problem before it gets worse. It suggests that many of the problems society faces are due to missed opportunities to address minor problems before they escalate. A successful society, it suggests, is a society in which everyone has an opportunity to succeed. Importantly, this is the only one of the four tests frames that included a profile of an individual. This kind of episodic story is a frequently-used device in news articles. Finally, this news article includes two distinct messengers: the Itasca Project, which is an organization of business leaders, and a mental health professional.

"Prevention" is a powerful word and a compelling concept. "Because I just believe in prevention. It's just so important. Instead of trying to fix the problem after; it takes more to fix the crisis," stated a college-educated woman from the city. However, many find it

difficult to imagine how this kind of situation could be prevented generally, in part because they center attention on the initial cause of one victim's spiraling decline – domestic violence. A college-educated suburban woman wondered how a prevention

Prevention: A Strategy for a Healthier, Happier Society

The importance of prevention is a concept that has been touted for a long time by the medical community to improve physical health. Now, business and community leaders are turning to the concept of prevention to address a variety of social problems affecting Minnesota communities.

The Itasca Project is a group of 40-plus business leaders and public officials who came together to create a strategy to improve the economy and quality of life in the Twin Cities. The group is calling upon the state legislature to be more proactive in preventing social ills, instead of waiting until problems are so severe they begin to affect the state's economy or quality of life. "The key is to get ahead of problems -- and that takes coordination across different segments of society," remarked Carl Anderson, a representative of the Project. "If we want stable communities and a strong workforce, which benefits us all, we need to take care of problems before they show negative effects."

"There are times when a person hits a crossroad. If intervention happens at that critical juncture, a problem is prevented," noted Alex Wear, a psychologist from Transformed Lives, a community organization based in St. Paul. "Or, a missed opportunity can result in a severe setback that takes a lot of time and resources to address."

Tina Yuen is one example. Tina came to the United States 10 years ago with a work visa as a certified nurse. After three years, her problems started. "My boyfriend used to beat me. I had no family in this country, so I had nowhere to go. I started to drink and ended up losing my job," she explained. After a particularly bad beating that resulted in a brain injury, she moved out. She went from one low-wage job to another, unable to complete her work. Finally homeless, she turned to prostitution to pay for food.

"Look at all the points in Tina's story where a small intervention could have prevented a cascade of problems," Wear rattled off. "A domestic violence intervention to remove her from abuse; an alcohol recovery program that could have prevented job loss; rehabilitation to address her brain damage and find suitable work; a loan for a deposit on an apartment to prevent homelessness. Any one of these programs would have prevented a worsening situation." With the help of Transformed Lives, Tina is beginning to cope with her brain injury, works at a suitable job for her skills, and is living on her own.

"Getting things right the first time is easier than trying to fix them later. Situations like Tina's cost us all," noted Anderson. "That's why it is in our best interest to fund effective prevention programs and to encourage employers to take part." A new bill requesting funding for a range of prevention programs will be considered by the state legislature this session.

program would operate: "What does that look like? How can you anticipate ahead of time, before there is even a problem?"

In addition, most focus group participants assert that there is no shortage of programs to address these issues. The problem is a lack of information. The programs exist, but people do not know about them. "A lot of these problems this lady had, they have the resources. They are there but people don't know about them," stated a college-educated suburban woman. A college-educated suburban man suggested some simple ways to inform people: "Go to some of the clinics. In the rest rooms they've got a little sign, 'Abuse is never okay. Call this number.' Just little ways to tell people."

Most assume that immigrants would find it particularly difficult to access available programs. "These people don't know where to go and I'm sure there are organizations that would love to help them and yet maybe that is what is stopping them. An immigrant isn't going to see an old white lady. They figure 'what does that old white lady know about my life?'" explained a non-college-educated suburban woman.

Importantly, the perception that most undermines support for the policy agenda is individual responsibility. The episodic story introduced in this news frame caused people to blame individuals rather than address the ways citizens can work together to solve problems. Communications needs to reinforce collective responsibility.

A few focus group participants draw on the previously-introduced topic of community to argue for putting programs in place to help people in these situations. "We should know that, as a community, that we have so many vulnerable people that are part of the community, that if at any step along the way they trip up, they're going to run into situations like this...we should be able to identify that as a community and have things in place," stated a college-educated man from the city. A non-college-educated suburban woman argued that it is important for government to support these programs "for the greater good of society as a whole. Once again, you have people who don't fit in, and they become malcontents and the crime rises and that affects us all, not only in prices but in safety."

However, most focus group participants blame the victim for his or her situation – a reaction that is seemingly reinforced by the nature of the personal transformation story included in the article. "So many women who are the victim feel they deserve to be the victim and they go back again and again and again. You can talk until you are blue in the face and you're not going to get anywhere," argued a non-college-educated woman from the suburbs. People have to take responsibility for their own problems, they insist. "Silence is acceptance. If somebody is abusing you, you know that you feel pain from somebody's action, it is up to you to step up to the plate and do something about it, because I can't do that for you," asserted a college-educated suburban man.

The fact that the particular person profiled in the article is an immigrant further distances people from the situation. "First of all, why did she come here for the work as a certified nurse if she didn't have long-range plans for having her life in order? For myself to go to another country, I'd better have my act together," stated a non-college-educated woman

from the suburbs. "We've been taking care of the world, don't forget it," asserted a non-college-educated suburban woman.

Once focus group participants were exposed to a profile of one individual victim, they were unable to see the larger societal issues. They became completely focused on the victim's situation, whether or not the victim was worthy of help, and what needed to happen to address that particular person's situation. Note the following extended conversation among non-college-educated city residents:

What's your reaction to this one?

M I think there is a certain point in time when people have got to help themselves. She was a certified nurse or registered nurse?

Moderator: Certified.

M Certified nurse. Okay, that obviously had to take some education. She is not a stupid person. The first time she was abused maybe a flag should have went up. It shouldn't have happened repeatedly. I just think people have got to help themselves. I'm all for programs, but sometimes you've got to help yourself.

M There are a lot of martyrs out there in this world that want to pose themselves as real victims.

F Just because the programs are there doesn't mean she'd go to them.

Moderator: Did everyone have the same take on Tina's situation, or did someone feel differently?

F Other than not helping herself, I guess this is a common problem just from reading different articles that women don't seek help. They just feel it's something they've done and so if she was in that [inaudible]. So maybe rather she should have sought help . . .

M I don't see she had much of a choice.

F But a lot of people that live in this country and speak the language or whatever don't get help either, and sometimes they are killed. They may put up with it because they think it is something that they're doing wrong. So I guess I wouldn't blame Tina.

M I don't think she thought that she was doing something wrong. She had nowhere else to go. She's from out of country. . .

M No family. [talkover]

M Like that one they said if they had put her up in a home before she got on the street to be a prostitute like that, because when you're in domestic abuse like that you're in love -- blah, blah, blah. These women are afraid. They have nowhere to go. That is the main thing. It's not stupid she stayed there; she had nowhere to go except go be a prostitute. . .

M If she could speak English, which she should after 10 years -- after three years. . .

F She was a nurse she should.

M After three years as a nurse coming to the States, why would she if she didn't speak English? Not to disagree with you in the sense where you're not making a point but it just seems like if you can communicate. There is people -- there is too many people out there that are willing to help. . .

M Not that many I don't think. The prevention programs are there yes, but she needs to find out and how many of them are there? [talkover]

F But there are abuse places, though, at this point.

M I think she made a bad choice. She chose to go into drinking rather than choosing to try to do something outside [inaudible] trying to find somebody to be a friend with, she chose drinking.

M When she did that just made her problem worse. If she had used best judgment at that point, she could have avoided all the problems she had afterwards.

M I would think anybody that is a nurse working with a group of people in the medical field [talkover] she could have talked to them. Can I move in with you for three months until this is squared away?

M She should have made some kind of friends with the people that she worked with.

Once focus group participants place responsibility upon the individual, they resist a role for government and citizens in addressing these issues. "I don't understand why everybody always has to look for the government for their solution. The government is not always the solution. Why does it always have to be the state, the county, the federal government?" asked a college-educated suburban man. "I don't feel that I should be paying my tax dollars for a lot of these programs that they are implementing," stated a non-college-educated suburban man. "On a selfish level, I pay these tax dollars. I want those potholes fixed in my freeway. It's my tax dollars. I don't want my tax dollars going to help an addict somewhere," asserted a non-college-educated suburban woman.

The Community Frame

When focus group participants view Lifetrack’s program and policies through the lens of a strong community, they are very receptive to assisting marginal populations. In a community mindset, people see their responsibility for acting on behalf of the common good. They understand how the community as a whole benefits and are less likely to feel resentment toward, or competition with, the program beneficiaries. Without question, the Community Frame is an integral component of effective communications on this issue.

The Community Frame is about enhancing the quality of life in communities. It suggests that quality of life is impeded when too many people are on the edge of society. The solution is to mainstream people who are on the margins. To help people understand this concept, the article employs a metaphor: “A community is like a building; all parts need to be in good shape for it to function well. If there are a few weak beams, or if parts of the foundation are crumbling, it affects the stability of the entire structure. It is up to all of us to keep the building in good shape.” The article incorporates values such as interdependence and community stability. Finally, the article includes a range of civic organizations as messengers -- Rotary, Kiwanis, and the mayor.

Focus group participants could see parallels between the problems facing Columbus and the problems facing Minnesota. "We have the same problems here. It appeared from this article that they are tackling them better and getting results," noted a non-college-educated woman from the city. Most were enthusiastic about what is happening in Columbus and would like Minnesota to learn from its example. "If this is what is really happening, my gosh this is a great model and we should try to get inside of it and try to find out how they are making this work

Columbus, Ohio: Building a Strong Community
Part of an occasional series profiling cities across the country

In many ways, Columbus *is* America. It is the nation’s 15th largest city, but its diversity represents communities across the country. It is both urban and suburban, and farmland is just a few miles away. And Columbus has experienced all the trends that have affected the rest of the nation: population growth, sprawl, aging, an influx of immigrants, among others.

But there is energy to Columbus that feels unique. Two years ago it was rated one of the top 10 best cities in America, and the nation's second hottest job market. According to Mayor Michael Coleman, the city’s success is due to its concentration on a good quality of life for all residents. “Every city has people who are on the edge of society for one reason or another – those with physical disabilities, mental health issues, immigrants who have not yet learned the language, ex-offenders, and so on,” Coleman explained. “Instead of pretending these problems don't exist, we work hard to bring everyone into the mainstream.”

Civic organizations like the Rotary and Kiwanis are instrumental to success. According to Carol Green, a local business owner and member of the Rotary, “A community is like a building; all parts need to be in good shape for it to function well. If there are a few weak beams, or if parts of the foundation are crumbling, it affects the stability of the entire structure. It is up to all of us to keep the building in good shape by making necessary repairs in the way our community works and shoring up the foundation.”

Columbus United, an organization that works to transition people from the edge of society into the mainstream, no matter what the obstacle, says the key to success is work. “When people work, they are contributing to society and feel better about themselves and the community. But stable work can be out of reach for those who struggle with physical or mental health issues, or do not speak English, or have problems in their background that keep them from getting hired,” stated Robert Wear, executive director of Columbus United. “This city put in place the policies and the funding that allow people to build the skills they need, whatever they are, to become productive members of the community.”

Over a period of 10 years, Columbus has experienced a growth in employment and a decline in crime. Most important, according to Coleman, is that “surveys demonstrate that the people of Columbus are extremely satisfied with their quality-of-life.”

Sounds like mayors from other cities should book a trip to Columbus.

and see if we could duplicate and implement and all of those other things," remarked a college-educated suburban woman.

The concept of prevention is an important component of this story. The public expects elected officials to wait for a crisis before acting. Therefore, they admire the fact that Columbus is addressing its problems rather than ignoring them. "It's kind of like a toothache or a cavity. Go to the dentist or the cavity gets bigger," explained a college-educated woman from the suburbs. Another college-educated woman from the suburbs added that it is "easier to solve it when it is small than when it gets larger."

Critically, focus group participants clearly understand who would be targeted by these programs. When asked to list the kinds of people who would participate in these programs, non-college-educated city residents readily responded: "those who are illiterate," "limited education," "immigrants," "people on drugs," "people with disabilities," and "ex-offenders." Most focus group participants strongly support working to address the barriers that keep these segments of the population on the margins of society. "This is important to be done, because any time you help people help themselves and become better and become a more productive member of the community, you help the whole community. Otherwise, they are going to be a drain on the community. They will be the violators in the community," stated a non-college-educated woman from the city.

That focus group participants understand the program beneficiaries and continue to support the program is important, because the public typically blames these marginal populations for the situations they face. In response to this frame, however, several recognized that the issue is not about an individual's moral fiber or work ethic. Rather, it is about skill and opportunity. "It's easy to say, 'go get a job.' These people are not employable. They have a past record. They are not trained. They do not speak English, which really hurts them. They don't have the skills and it's a real problem," stated a non-college-educated man from the city.

While nearly all focus group participants assumed that the problem rested with the program participant (lack of skill, language barrier, etc.), several noted that the problem rests with employers when it concerns ex-offenders. Employers are unwilling to take the risk of hiring a person who has broken the law in the past. A non-college-educated woman from the suburbs suggested, "Like at the hospital where I work, they go by your credit. If your credit is bad, you won't get a job. So it can be hard for people that are coming out like ex-offenders."

The suggestion that work provides a sense of self-worth rang true for focus group participants. "I think work gives you a sense of self-satisfaction. It gives you the opportunity to progress. It gives you the opportunity to build skills," stated a college-educated suburban man. A college-educated suburban woman explained that this is really about having respect "for themselves and the community; feeling good about themselves and being able to contribute to your community." "They do whatever they can do so that they feel their worth, and then I think they're going to be a productive

member of society. If they do nothing, I think they get down on themselves and it's a downhill spiral," remarked a non-college-educated man from the city.

Most see this as a win-win situation; when one segment of the community succeeds, the whole community benefits. "I think that with a program like this, there is less crime if you're making money. You don't steal things to eat. There is less taking money for welfare. Maybe they get off welfare and lower the tax burden. There are a lot of obvious benefits," explained a college-educated suburban man. In addition, the leading role of civic organizations, such as Kiwanis and the Rotary, may help focus group participants see the benefits to government revenue and deflect criticism that tax dollars would be spent in inappropriate ways.

At the same time, several focus group participants found the situation too good to be true. They questioned whether Columbus was really able to achieve something unique, or whether the low unemployment rate was simply due to a recovering economy. "I just wonder what the reality is for the residents of Columbus, and the ones that work with Columbus United, because it sounds very rosy, like well gosh then everyone can find a job in Columbus. So I'm curious about how it works," remarked a college-educated suburban woman. "But they aren't saying how they are doing it, are they?" asked a non-college-educated woman from the city. "It seems to be too good to be true," stated a college-educated woman from the city.

It sounds unrealistic, in part because the measure of success noted in the article was the overall economy and quality of life in Columbus, rather than a more specific measure of the program's success. They wonder how it could have such an impact if it is just addressing one segment of the population. "It is not dealing with the middle-class that are looking for work," stated a non-college-educated suburban woman. "Once again, it is an important segment, yes it is because they are there and they are part of us and they'll either contribute or take away or contribute to crime or whatever. But it is still just addressing one segment of a bigger problem," explained a non-college-educated suburban woman. "That means the jobs were there for people to move into," noted a college-educated woman from the city.

In addition, there seems to be an order-effect that influences people's response to these articles. Once people have been exposed to the Economy Frame, they are still receptive to the Community Frame, but they demonstrate a more competitive stance toward this population than those who began the conversation with the Community Frame. For example, non-college educated suburban residents began the conversation with the economic frames and then voiced significant resentment toward immigrants in response to the Community Frame – a dynamic that was less pronounced in the other focus groups. "Why are we bringing all these people in so that we have to provide all this type of training and skills and everything? Has there ever been any thought to holding off on all these people coming in?" asked a non-college-educated suburban man. "I think employers are kind of not coming down, but paying down. They have this unskilled workforce that they are perfectly willing to exploit and not pay good wages, or not offer better jobs to the people who have higher skills," noted a non-college-educated suburban woman.

Finally, the Community Frame was the most memorable. In three of the four focus groups, participants referred back to the theme of community at the end of the focus group discussion. When asked what the evening’s discussion was all about, most focus group participants said "community":

I think it's more than jobs. I think it is community. I think community is the word. (Non-college-educated man from the city)

If you've got a bad economy, you've got a bad community. (Non-college-educated man from the city)

How to make a better community. (College-educated woman from the city)

And it looks like working and getting people into the workforce. (College-educated woman from the city)

I'm really tired of all these dollars going into stadiums and all this stuff. We need to do more of this, I think. (College-educated woman from the city)

Non-college-educated people from the suburbs were the only participants who did not talk about the importance of community at the end of the discussion. As noted earlier, this may be due to order-effect since this group began by talking about the economy. Alternatively, this particular population may feel more threatened by these policies, or it could have been an unrepresentative group of 10 people. At the end of the group discussion, they expressed strong anti-immigrant perceptions:

Everyone who is not a citizen that does not become a citizen and will not learn our language, you deport them. (Non-college-educated suburban woman)

Take the criminals and put a cap on what their crime was, in whether we try to rehabilitate them or not. Put them into our society and then give cutoff dates or restrictions where they have to change certain things. (Non-college-educated suburban man)

Since this research is qualitative, the distinctions between groups should be viewed as directional insights, not conclusions.

The Community Economy Frame

Report: Unemployment Leads to Weak Communities

Today the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota released a report concerning the economic health of different communities across the state of Minnesota. The report found that several communities continue to lag behind the rest of the state and nation in economic growth. “The most important indication of a strong economy in a community is how close it comes to full employment,” according to Richard Sorenson, author of the report. “When everyone is contributing economically, everyone benefits. The communities without full employment end up becoming weaker in several ways – a weaker economy, a dilapidated infrastructure, more stress on families, and so on.”

The ideal of full employment – defined as an unemployment rate under 2% -- helps communities set goals and struggle harder to reach them. Pat Buckley, a city planner from Hennepin County, says full employment means getting the right fit between workers and employers: “There are people who want to work, and jobs that need doing, but not everyone fits the mold of an able-bodied, ready-to-go worker. Sometimes, it takes employers and community organizations working together to find the right fit for people looking for employment opportunity.”

That’s just what some local businesses are doing in Minneapolis. They have joined together with a community organization, Lifetrack Resources, to match employers’ needs with workers’ skills. Lifetrack works with job seekers to become ready for employment, which could include training in literacy, language, or employment basics. “Many of the trainees have had difficult challenges, such as mental illness, a past criminal record, or immigration to a new country,” according to Chris Whitten, owner of Whitten Hardware. “Because the organization works with the whole person, addressing whatever difficulties they face, it has an extremely successful track record of transitioning

The Community Economy Frame attempts to merge people's concern about the economy with their desire to strengthen communities. Interestingly, people's response to this frame was dictated by whether they prioritized the community aspect of the frame or the economic aspect of the frame. Those who had already been exposed to the Economy Frame continued to focus on traditional economic definitions and resisted the broader policy recommendations. However, those who had been primed to think about community were very receptive to the program and policies. This finding provides further substantiation that Community should be the primary frame for communications. The Community Economy Frame can provide additional support, once the Community Frame is established.

The Community Economy Frame shifts the economic focus to the economy's effect on communities. The article defines economic health as full employment and states that communities are healthiest when everyone in the community contributes economically. The Community Economy Frame relies upon a value of interdependence to engage the audience. Full employment is reached, according to the article, by finding the right "fit" between an employer's needs and an employee's skills. Finally, it uses a range of messengers, including a city planner, a business school, and a local business owner.

Focus group participants quickly recognize that there is a relationship between employment and community stability. "In the outlying towns, the stores close because people don't have money to buy," remarked a college-educated woman from the city. Note the following conversation among college-educated suburban men:

I think we all agree that unemployment is a negative towards a community, towards the individual that is unemployed.

Moderator: How is it a negative to the community?

What is that individual doing for eight hours a day? Sitting at home watching TV? Maybe out in public causing a nuisance.

Drugs.

Which leads to more serious problems and that affects the community as a whole.

Those focus group participants who began the evening conversation talking about the role of community returned to that theme in this article. "The better the fit, absolutely. That worker is productive, happy, and in turn it ripples through all of society," stated a college-educated suburban man. "Like it says here, whenever everybody is working, they contribute to the economy and to the whole thing," stated a non-college-educated man from the city.

However, those focus group participants who began the evening's conversation with the Economic Frame were primed to think in traditional economic terms and were then less amenable to the broader policy recommendations suggested in this article. First, they became so convinced that jobs are leaving the state that they could not see how job training would be a solution. "It assumes the jobs are there. If there are no jobs, you can't wish yourself into having a good job," argued a college-educated woman from the city. "They're talking about the wrong end of the horse...without the jobs you can train

for weeks and years and not get anywhere," noted a college-educated woman from the city.

Second, several became competitive with the target population. "The middle-class blue-collar worker is left to fend for themselves," stated a non-college-educated suburban woman. "If they can't speak English, can't read or write, have a mental disability, then they are going to pay money and train you to get a job. But the ones that are already qualified can't get it," stated a non-college-educated suburban woman.

Once again, several focus group participants argue that the programs are available, but the information has not gotten to the people who need it. "I think like Juan said, 'Where is this program?' If he knew where it was, he would go there and he would tell his people where to go," stated a non-college-educated man from the city. "If you are illiterate or not real trained or skilled, you may not know how to search for this," noted a non-college-educated woman from the city.

Problematically, many focus group participants think that the organization profiled in the article is basically an employment agency. "Specialized employment agency," stated a college-educated woman from the city. "Training the less employable sector," added a college-educated man from the city. "It does the exact same thing that unemployment does. Why do they think they are going to succeed?" asked a non-college-educated suburban man. "It's about a company, Life Track, that is going to take these unskilled workers, provide the training for them and then find a fit in companies," remarked a college-educated suburban man. The notion of "good fit" is generally effective. A college-educated suburban woman discussed the effectiveness of the approach discussed in this article: "Not everyone is a perfect worker, but trying to find a good fit for them if they are looking for employment."

Finally, the Carlson School of Management is a respected, credible messenger. "I think they are renowned. I hear of them all the time," stated a non-college-educated woman from the city. "It just seems they had the statistics here. They were more specific about the Lifetrack resources...they had quotes and actual reports," asserted a college-educated woman from the city.

Conclusions

- The public's response to Lifetrack's program and broad policy agenda will vary dramatically, based upon the frame used to introduce the program and policies.
- It is clear from this research that some frames undermine support for the program and policies.
 - The Economy Frame causes people to worry about lost jobs and increasing competition for the remaining jobs – a competitive mindset that is not conducive to building support for job opportunities for marginal populations.

- Any frame that emphasizes individual stories, such as a Sympathy Frame, a Charity Frame or an Individual Transformation Story, will undermine support. In response to these episodic stories, people become consumed by details of one individual's story and are unable to see broader societal responsibility.

- Success will require developing a lens on this issue in which all citizens have a stake in addressing the needs of marginal populations. The Community Frame achieves this, because it causes people to think about what communities need to be strong and healthy. In addition, it provides a rationale for work that does not trigger traditional anti-poverty perceptions. Instead, it reminds people that one value of work is building self-esteem. The Community Frame includes the following elements:
 - It is about enhancing the quality of life in communities.
 - Quality of life for all is improved by mainstreaming people who are on the margins of society, for whatever reason.
 - The values of interdependence and community stability are inferred.
 - A mechanism to describe the consequences when some people fall out of the community or when everyone contributes to the community helps people understand interdependence.
 - Including civic organizations as messengers allows people to see that this is not a government welfare program.
 - The economic consequences to the community can be a supporting point for the Community Frame, but it cannot be the leading point, or it will shift the emphasis toward an Economy Frame.
 - The preventive aspects of the program and policies can also be a supporting point for the Community Frame, but prevention should not focus on individual situations.