



Sample Op/ed: Penny Wise, Pound Foolish

By Steve Johnson, Phalen Neighborhood Association

Today, Phalen Avenue, on St Paul's eastside, is one of the Twin Cities most dynamic communities. Twenty years ago, after Hamm's Brewery and Whirlpool closed their doors, few could have imagined the resurgence of community taking place here today. Immigrants and refugees from Vietnam, Laos, Latin America, and Africa have revitalized our communities and our state.

Lifetrack Resources is a nonprofit organization that played a vital role in helping many of these new Americans become active and successful members of our community. Because it recognized the value of work as a tool for community and economic development, the state legislature awarded \$1 million dollars/biennium in 1997 for Lifetrack to work directly with the Somali community, the Hmong community and others to identify and overcome barriers such as language and cultural differences that prevented them from fully participating in American life. That investment has paid off in a revitalized community and a new tax base for the state.

Since 1997, Lifetrack has helped hundreds of people learn the skills and knowledge they needed to move from dependence to self-sufficiency. Getting and keeping a job, taking care of one's family, building a future, all became possible when Lifetrack worked with individuals to prepare them to become part of the community

The return on our tax investment is amazing. Just the savings in public assistance and related costs alone is more than \$2.30 per dollar spent. That does not take into account that all these people are now working, spending their own money as well as paying taxes. This kind of transition into the community is the force driving many of the improvements in the Phalen neighborhood, as small businesses find the right employees, and some people go on to start their own businesses.

The State's investment in Lifetrack was cut back to \$200 thousand dollars in the last biennium, and now the legislature is zeroing out the program. Yes, \$0, saying there are too many good programs and not enough money. The legislature needs to do the math.

Cutting Lifetrack, which has both reduced public assistance expenses and created new workers contributing tax revenue is not just "penny wise and pound foolish." Stopping such progress is wasting our tax dollars. We need investments in projects like Lifetrack that increase the viability of our communities, that ensure every member of the community has a chance to contribute. We are all better off when the worth and capability of each person is recognized and developed, and put to good use.

A walk through the Phalen neighborhood is proof of what happens when people, once estranged from the community, are helped to overcome barriers and become able to participate as full partners in the community. Without the help of Lifetrack, too many valuable members of our community will be left out, and we will all be the poorer for it.