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Out of Poverty, Family-Style

By *DAVID BORNSTEIN*

Fixes looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

Tags:

[community](#), [families](#), [Family Independence Initiative](#), [incentives](#), [Poverty](#), [working poor](#)

Shortly after Candace Keshwar immigrated from Trinidad to Boston in 2002, her life took a difficult turn. Her dream had been to go to college and have a career where she could help others. But her first daughter was born with cerebral palsy and Keshwar spent the next seven years caring for her at home. She grew isolated. Her husband worked in construction, but jobs were sporadic, and the family relied on government assistance. “It was a real dark space for me,” Keshwar said. “I kept thinking, ‘This cannot be my life. I know I have the potential to do so much more.’”

A turning point came when Keshwar was asked to join a group of families who had self-organized as part of an initiative that helps people in low-income communities achieve their goals. Called the [Family Independence Initiative](#) (F.I.I.), its approach is radically different from the American social service model. Although it is still quite small — working with a few hundred families — its results are so striking that [the White House has taken notice](#). What F.I.I. does is create a structure for families that encourages the sense of control, desire for self-determination, and mutual support that have characterized the collective rise out of poverty for countless communities in American history.

A program that motivates poor families to help themselves, and each other.

F.I.I. is not a “program” in a traditional sense. It doesn’t seek to implement changes, but to elicit them from others. It was launched as a research project by Maurice Lim Miller in Oakland in 2001. Lim Miller, whose mother was an immigrant from Mexico who worked multiple jobs to support her children, had previously spent 22 years building Asian Neighborhood Design, a youth development and job training program, for which he was honored by President Clinton during the 1999 State of the Union address.

Lim Miller had come to believe that the American social welfare system focused too much on poor people's needs and deficits, while overlooking — and even inhibiting — their strengths. A safety net is crucial when people are in crisis, he said. But most poor families are not in free fall. They don't need nets to catch them so much as they need springboards to jump higher. In a conversation with Oakland's mayor Jerry Brown (now California's governor), Brown challenged Lim Miller to try something different and gave him broad scope to be creative.

Lim Miller wanted to see what families would do if they came together in a context that supported their initiative. He began by identifying families in low-income communities who were surviving, but who had “given up hope” of aspiring to more. He asked them to pull together six to eight other families. He offered them a challenge. The country had been waging a war on poverty for 40 years, he said, but the problem remained unsolved. “What we're going to do is give you some resources and connections and we're going to trust that *you'll* do something,” he said. “You guys are in the power position. If you do nothing we'll fail. If you do something we'll all learn.”

Courtesy of Family Independence InitiativeA Family Independence Initiative gathering in Boston.

They started with 25 families in three cohorts — eight African American families, six Salvadoran refugee families and 11 Iu Mien families from Laos. The latter were all on welfare. F.I.I. asked them to write down their goals, gave each a computer and enlisted them to fill in a questionnaire each month that tracked changes in things like income, assets, debts, health, education, skills, social networks and civic engagement.

They offered families \$30 for every success they reported up to a maximum of \$200 per month. (F.I.I. pays for reporting, not for specific actions, a different anti-poverty approach known as “[conditional cash transfers](#)” that we have reported on in *Fixes*.) Lim Miller reasoned that if he were to hire a consultant to collect this data, it would cost three or four times more. The families agreed to meet with an F.I.I. liaison every three months for an audit. Anything they reported — a pay increase, a doctor visit, an improvement in a child's grades — had to be documented.

Most important, families had to agree to meet as a group at least once a month in a confidential setting to discuss their goals and any issues they deemed important. F.I.I. didn't guide the agenda and its liaisons did not act as facilitators. They established the structure and backed off, creating a vacuum for families to take the lead. Lim Miller gave his staff strict instructions that they could not offer any advice — not even friendly suggestions. For some, this proved too difficult; he had to fire people who couldn't help but be helpful. Lim Miller was convinced that the assumption of incapacity behind the helpfulness was a big part of the problem.

“When you come into a community that is vulnerable with professionals with power and

preset ideas, it is overpowering to families and it can hold them back,” he said. “Nobody wants to hear that because we’re all the good guys. But the focus on need undermines our ability to see their strengths — and their ability to see their own strengths.”

At first, families waited for direction from F.I.I. Some grew frustrated. But soon people began sharing their goals, publicly declaring things like: “I need to get out of debt.” “I need to spend more time with my kids.” “I need to stop smoking.” “I need to get my G.E.D.” Group members offered encouragement, as well as advice and contacts. In follow up meetings, people would talk about steps they had taken. The group members would hold one another to account: “Didn’t you say you were going to get your G.E.D.? Where are you with that?”

One Salvadoran couple, Jorge and Maria Elena, decided to borrow money from friends and take out a mortgage to purchase a home. It was a predatory loan — and when it became clear that they were in danger of losing the home, friends helped them renovate it and fix up the yard so they could refinance at better terms. Today, the couple are still in the home. Shortly after, other group members — who had historically sent extra money to El Salvador — began saving here, believing that home ownership might be a possibility for them in America. “That’s when we saw how strong the ripple effect was,” recalled Lim Miller.

Of the initial 25 families, F.I.I. found that, after two years, household incomes had increased 27 percent (excluding the payments offered by F.I.I.). People got promotions, pay raises, worked extra hours, and built up informal side businesses. After F.I.I.’s payments stopped, incomes continued to increase. After another year, they were 40 percent higher than the baseline. “Nobody believed it,” Lim Miller recalled. “The stereotype is that they can’t do it. People said, ‘You have to be creaming [picking the easiest people to help].’ They can’t believe that this capacity exists and that it can be brought forth.”

He extended the work to Hawaii and San Francisco. After two years, F.I.I. reported that incomes across all its sites had increased, on average, by 23 percent and savings were up 240 percent. In San Francisco, 30 percent of families established side businesses — everything from lawn maintenance to making pupusas to cutting people’s hair — to cope with the recession. A quarter of the families that had been receiving government income or housing subsidies — CalWorks or Section 8 — dropped them. Families reported improvements in health care, children’s grades, reductions in debt, enrollment in training programs and home ownership — all audited. Word rippled outward and within six months, 200 families applied to join F.I.I. “Something viral had happened,” explained Mia Birdsong, F.I.I.’s vice president. “We still trying to track how it spread. We think it has to do with the trust factor.”

Last year, F.I.I. started working in Boston. Within six months, family incomes were up by 13 percent. At her first meeting, Candace Keshwar saw new possibilities for her life. “There were a bunch of people who had stories that were very similar to mine in terms of the struggles,” she said. “But I saw that people were still managing some accomplishments. One girl went to college with her babies. The stories made me realize that I could go after some of the things that I wanted.”

Keshwar’s goals were to get a job, buy a car that could accommodate her daughter’s wheelchair, enroll in college and buy a home. She found that tracking her progress was helpful in this process. “When you actually see on paper what you’ve done, it allows you to think further,” she said. The networking was also critical. One of her group members helped her re-write her resume. Another arranged an appointment with a friend who offered credit counseling. “It’s much better than having to call an office and get the runaround,” she said.

Today, Keshwar works as a family partner at Boston Health Care for the Homeless, owns a 2007 Pathfinder, has enrolled in Springfield College and is building a credit history. She is working toward a degree in human services with a concentration in mental health counseling and also plans to pursue a nursing degree. She has also encouraged her husband to get his contractor’s license.

Lim Miller is clear that F.I.I. is not trying to lend comfort to people who want to dismantle the social service system. He wants to fix it: to make it more about incentives. Today, [85 percent of the \\$400 billion](#) that the government spends to encourage things like home ownership, college attendance, investment and small business ends up in the pockets of the top 20 percent of earners (and half goes to the top 5 percent). Very little ends up helping the working poor. On the other hand, many social benefits cut off when a family’s income rises roughly 30 percent above the poverty line — which is still a far cry from being out of poverty.

For the middle class, resources are linked to initiative; for the poor, they are linked to problems. “We’re not advocating for this gravity defying ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps idea,’” adds Birdsong. “We’re saying: invest in families when they take initiative. We need to take what works for middle and upper income families and extend it to the whole income spectrum.”

F.I.I.’s budget is only \$2.5 million. It is still to be seen if its approach will work with much larger numbers of families. But its experience with a few hundred reveals ways that social services could work better. Lim Miller offers three suggestions as a starter: 1) Where possible, replace case managers with peer families who have succeeded; 2) Make it easier for small scale entrepreneurs to start businesses and raise capital; 3) Solicit regular

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feedback from the clients. “These families have opinions about what works and what doesn’t work,” he explains. “Our system would work better if it responded to their feedback. And it would be very empowering to them if they knew their voices were heard.”

On Wednesday, I’ll respond to comments, explain how F.I.I.’s work draws on the idea of “[positive deviance](#),” and explain how the organization plans to expand its reach by tapping the leadership that has emerged within the families in its network.

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David Bornstein is the author of “[How to Change the World](#),” which has been published in 20 languages, and “[The Price of a Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank](#),” and is co-author of “[Social Entrepreneurship: What Everyone Needs to Know](#).” He is the founder of dowser.org, a media site that reports on social innovation.