

Statewide Initiative in Illinois to Build the Assets of Low-Income Families

Ricardo A. Millett - December 2005

Illinois policy advocates and community-based organizations are collaborating to advance a shared policy agenda built on an asset framework. Sharing the belief that asset building can be the cornerstone of national social and economic policy for decades to come, a number of state organizations are now pursuing asset policies that work for Illinois and, perhaps, for the country.

A statewide conversation was initiated by the Woods Fund of Chicago in 2003 to explore how promoting building assets could help further its mission to “enable work and reduce poverty”. The Woods Fund engaged the Institute on Assets and Social Policy to facilitate discussions among the participating groups, fashion a shared policy agenda for action and be a resource to the working groups as the collaboration moved forward.

Over the first year, the Illinois Asset Building Group (IABG) laid the groundwork for development of a common policy agenda aimed at advancing strategies that build economic security for low-income families. By the fall of 2004, a governance structure was agreed upon and Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights and Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law were selected to administer the initiative. Over 20 organizations that were engaged in the early formation of the initiative elected to sit on the Coordinating Committee and meet quarterly.

While Illinois is a relatively prosperous state, far too many Illinois working families are asset poor.

- Many Illinois families do not have the income and resources to make ends meet and tide them over in an emergency. More than a quarter of working families do not have sufficient income to maintain a safe and decent standard of living.
- Much of the Illinois workforce is not prepared for the jobs of tomorrow. Nearly half of Illinois’ residents have literacy skills below the level needed to function adequately in today’s job market. By 2006, nearly two-thirds of all jobs will require workers to have some education beyond high school, even jobs at the entry level.
- Without access to good jobs, many Illinois residents do not have a reliable nest egg for a secure future. Over 50% of Illinois workers do not have employer-provided pensions. Almost one-third of Illinois’s families do not own their own home. Eighteen households out of every 1,000 have had to declare personal bankruptcy when they encountered financial crisis.

Acting in concert on a range of issues that can help build household assets, the IABG members are taking on the challenge of reframing public policy to strengthen working families in Illinois. Their efforts are focused on achieving policy change to equip all Illinoisans with the assets necessary to contribute to the vitality of the state, both today and for future generations. IABG’s initial efforts will concentrate policy activity in the following areas:

- Lifelong education and training
- Healthcare
- Financial security and investment
- Housing, home ownership and utilities
- Small business development
- Transportation
- Tax policies impacting income

The collaboration believes that this combination of policy research, organizing, rhetorical framing and advocacy on these issues will emerge as a national model that can be replicated elsewhere. Already at this early date, the IABG has contributed to several legislative victories for low-income people in Illinois including the passage of Payday Loan Reform legislation, expansion of the FamilyCare program, and creation of a Rental Housing Support program. IABG was also instrumental in persuading the Governor and his administration to eliminate barriers to asset building in public assistance programs by removing eligibility restrictions on money in savings and vehicle ownership.

On November 29th the IABG held a full membership meeting with over 50 representatives of policy and community organizing groups participating. The highlight of the meeting were the reports from the three grassroots outreach efforts undertaken by ACORN Illinois, Voices for Illinois Children and Work Welfare and Families. Each conducted a series of surveys and focus groups in communities across the state. The results will be critical in helping IABG identify issues that will galvanize citizens, policies that can appeal across class divisions, and language that will be effective in marketing asset building concepts to these target groups.

The Woods Fund of Chicago is proud of its formative role in the creation of the Illinois Asset Building Group and is grateful to the Institute on Assets and Social Policy for supporting and nurturing the collaboration in its early stages.

-- Ricardo A. Millet, PhD., is the President of Woods Fund of Chicago, a grantmaking foundation whose goal is to increase opportunities for disadvantaged people and communities in the metropolitan Chicago area. The Woods Fund engaged the Institute on Assets and Social Policy to facilitate discussions among the participating groups, fashion a shared policy agenda for action and be a resource to the working groups as the collaboration moved forward.