

*spotlight on*  
**POVERTY and OPPORTUNITY**  
THE SOURCE FOR NEWS, IDEAS AND ACTION

**To Help Families Locally, Changes Are Needed at the State Level**

Karon Rosa, Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative

*This commentary is part of a series highlighting the work of the 2012 [Ideas for Action Award](#) winners, sponsored by The Northwest Area Foundation, University of Minnesota, and University of Washington. This award recognizes organizations that take practical and innovative approaches to helping low-income individuals.*

Despite an unemployment rate that is almost a full percentage point below the national average, Arkansas is one of the poorest states in the nation. Its median income is the second lowest in the country, and it ranks among the ten worst states in terms of poverty and lack of health care coverage. Compounding this problem, only 18 percent of Arkansans have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. How can a state so deeply entrenched in poverty begin to dig its way out?

The Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) was developed as an innovative tool to help Arkansans fight their way out of poverty. CPI is the result of a partnership between the Arkansas Department of Higher Education and the Arkansas Department of Workforce Services. We have found that greater integration and cooperation among state departments and agencies can help the citizens of our state to achieve economic security.

Arkansas has traditionally used its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant to provide assistance to low-income families through cash assistance, case management, work subsidies, and supportive services.

Yet these resources are often nothing more than a short-term fix. They don't provide families with the services needed to escape generational poverty and achieve self-sufficiency. Families are able to address their immediate problems, but something more is needed if we are to help Arkansans become economically secure in the long-term.

In 2005, state agency heads made a move to tackle high poverty and low education rates by linking state resources. Two state agencies took the lead—the Arkansas Department of Higher Education and the Arkansas Department of Workforce Services. This state partnership created the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative model.

CPI provides low-income individuals with a comprehensive set of academic and support services in order to earn a degree or the credentials needed to acquire a high-demand, high-paying job. In addition to career training and college classes, participants may also receive other benefits, such as textbooks, childcare, and transportation.

The Initiative is funded through the TANF block grant, with the Department of Higher Education providing administration of TANF funds from the Department of Workforce Services. This unique partnership has allowed state agencies to work closer together in order to more efficiently address the needs of low-income Arkansans.

This approach benefits families in two ways that we believe other states can replicate.

First, it streamlines the administration of resources and benefits, allowing low-income individuals to receive services through one simplified program.

Before CPI began to serve clients in the fall 2005, two-year colleges, workforce entities, social service providers, community- and faith-based organizations, adult education providers, and economic development agencies operated in relative isolation from one another.

*spotlight on*  
**POVERTY and OPPORTUNITY**  
THE SOURCE FOR NEWS, IDEAS AND ACTION

With this model in place, low-income individuals no longer need to visit each of these agencies and organizations to receive services. Instead, one comprehensive program provides them with basic skills, job search services, remediation, advanced skills training in high-demand occupations, and college credentials.

The second benefit of this model is that it can be individualized to meet the needs of each student. Different families need different supports as they work towards self-sufficiency, and programs of this nature allow participants to access the specific resources that can help them the most.

Students enter CPI at various stages of educational attainment. Some may not have earned a high school diploma, while others are ready to earn the college credit needed to perform a high-demand job. Other participants may need more focused help building basic skills they were never able to acquire.

Because participants are working towards a determined career path, CPI is able to tailor its program to meet the needs of each student and provide them with the specific resources that will help them to best achieve their goals.

Since 2005, over 27,000 students that meet the TANF criteria have used CPI to earn over 24,000 certificates and degrees. Ninety percent of our participants have been female-custodial parents. Student success rates are ten points higher than other community college students, and all mandated performance measures in enrollment, attainment, entering employment, and job retention have been met or exceeded.

There is no doubt that families need multiple supports in order to make their way out of poverty. In addition to a well-paying job, social services, skills training, childcare subsidies, and many other resources are needed to achieve long-term financial security.

Whereas families may have found the administration of these resources confusing and repetitive in the past, CPI has helped Arkansans escape the red tape that often hinders low-income families from receiving these critical services.

Greater cooperation at the state level leads to better service delivery at the local level. In order to help individuals in poverty, states must restructure their resources. When state agencies and departments work together, low-income families win.

*Karon Rosa is a program director at Arkansas Department of Higher Education for the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative.*

The views expressed in this commentary are those of the author or authors alone, and not those of *Spotlight*. *Spotlight* is a non-partisan initiative, and *Spotlight's* commentary section includes diverse perspectives on poverty. If you have a question about a commentary, please don't hesitate to contact us at [info@spotlightonpoverty.org](mailto:info@spotlightonpoverty.org).