

# Finding new ways to get Beyond Welfare



Lois Smidt (r) and Beyond Welfare work to connect people across their differences and change their understanding of poverty. Judy Morrow (l) says that sometimes “hugs can be better than money.”

By Kristin Senty and Tim Saasta

A small group in Ames, Iowa, is exploring a very different approach to helping people who are poor, an approach that emphasizes social networks that transcend economic differences and a definition of “poverty” that goes well beyond lack of income.

The group’s founder, Lois Smidt, raises some provocative questions about society’s approach to reducing poverty, suggesting that we may be missing the complexity that results from people being poor across generations.

By missing this complexity, our approaches may not take into account the often slow process needed to move beyond poverty.

Smidt also raises provocative questions about how we measure progress on reducing poverty, suggesting that by focusing on indicators that are relatively easy to measure—especially economic indicators like jobs and income—we may be missing some of the most important steps on the path away from poverty.

**REFLECTIONS**  
on Making Connections

The ultimate goal of Beyond Welfare is much more ambitious. It is to use gatherings like this to shift perceptions about poverty by both those who have low incomes as well as those who do not.

On a Thursday night, the basement of Collegiate Presbyterian Church in Ames, Iowa, is a busy place. Dinner is almost ready, and a growing group of adults and children cluster and talk, exchanging ideas like old friends.

Despite the feeling of familiarity among people, any newcomer who walks in is welcomed and encouraged to join in. A healthy, hearty meal blends with good conversation, and afterwards everyone gathers in a circle for time to talk about what's "new and good" in their lives, or perhaps express a particular need.

It might seem like a large gathering of friends, and indeed one goal of these weekly dinners is to build friendships and a sense of community among a diverse group of people.

But the ultimate goal of Beyond Welfare—the 10-year-old group that sponsors these meetings—is much more ambitious. It is to use gatherings like this to shift percep-

tions about poverty by both those who have low incomes as well as those who do not. The goal is to provide support and meaning, both for those struggling economically and for those who aren't. And the goal is to get a range of people to work together on overcoming some of the underlying causes of poverty.

While Beyond Welfare works to meet some of the basic needs of people with low incomes—a car to get to a job, child care, a washing machine, a ride to a doctor's appointment—its uniqueness is in the ways it tries to go beyond a service model designed to help fix the specific problems of individual poor people.

**The Thursday night gatherings—which include an average of about 50 people each week—are an important part of Beyond Welfare's approach.** The emphasis is not to simply make connections and build a social network among a group of people who are poor financially. The idea is to build relationships and networks across communities and across economic lines.

These gatherings—called Community Leadership Team meetings—also include people who aren't struggling financially. Many are "professionals." Some are retired. Often a church connection pulls them in. These people are called "allies."

In addition to sharing a meal, people gather in a circle to talk about what is "new and good" in their lives, which reinforces

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“Radical means getting to the root. We’re getting to the root of our separation by using hospitality and building intentional friendships across our differences.”

—Lois Smidt

Jan Cook, with Terry Davis, usually cooks for 50 people at Beyond Welfare’s weekly gatherings. On this night, with donations, she spent \$12.



the idea that people’s lives are not just about negatives.

This is followed by “announcements,” when members let one another know of events and opportunities for fun, learning and networking in the broader community. Next is the practice of “Wants, Needs and Offers,” a time when all members can ask for help, perhaps a bike for a child, help moving, or a ride to a medical appointment. People respond with ideas about how to meet these needs, a way of reinforcing the idea that everyone has something of value to offer and everyone has needs.

This may be followed by “listening pairs,” which involves pairing up two individuals who really listen to each other, reinforcing the idea that everyone has a voice and an opportunity to talk and be heard. This provides an intentional space for

individuals to notice and honor differences and similarities as human beings.

Finally, the group discusses a topic that often involves a policy issue affecting low-income people. The “Community Leadership Team” is part of a statewide advocacy network that focuses on issues such as child care and transportation that affect low-income families. This reinforces the idea that the struggles an individual may be experiencing often involve social justice issues that transcend that individual’s experience. One person’s struggle is not just a result of a personal weakness. It also often is a result of an underlying issue.

Beyond Welfare also sponsors “Circles of Support,” smaller friendship groups which focus on building deeper long-term relationships between individuals. These relationships can help people identify and claim

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—From “Ties That Bind”

their hopes and dreams and take the next steps in the often slow process of personal change. At any time, 20–30 Circles of Support are active in Ames.

**Individuals come into Beyond Welfare because of a connection with someone already participating, a referral by a local agency, or because they have a specific need.** Given the importance of transportation in a relatively small city like Ames, one of the carrots that can pull people into Beyond Welfare is a donated car, a program called Wheels to Work.

To get a car, a person must have a low income but also must complete a “reciprocity” agreement—they agree to participate in community service and in the network. Again, the idea is that everyone has something of value to contribute.

While Beyond Welfare is small, with just two full-time staff, it has had an impact on a lot of people: more than 400 have participated in its Community Leadership Team meetings, about 150 have been part of Circles of Support.

Many testify to the impact it has had on their lives, saying that they have gotten the kind of support over time they needed to change their lives. One is quoted in *Ties That Bind*, a report on social networks that was published in 2006 by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

“There is a lot of negativity that will try and stop you,” this participant explained. “Among Black people...they accuse me of being too white because I’m trying to take initiative, trying to make a difference. They say we survived for years; we make-do just staying in our little village.”

“When I went to school I lost 98 percent of my friends. I’ve experienced that whenever there’s been a major change in [my] life. Maybe they’re not where you’re at. But in Beyond Welfare, it’s kind of nice to go through changes and know they’ll be there and that you won’t lose 98 percent of your support.”

Just as important to Beyond Welfare’s founder Lois Smidt, the group has also had a profound impact on the thinking of many of the people who provide this support over time, helping these “allies” understand that poverty involves much more than an individual’s poor work habits or substance abuse.

One person quoted in the *Ties That Bind* report says that, “I have come to see injustice and the reality of the underclass. I take this learning with me to my church.... Everyone who knows me—in my social circles—knows about Beyond Welfare, so there is a multiplier effect. And then some of us get together and serve as advocates in changing practice and policy.”

Another person reports that, “I became much more aware of my class status, how I got to it and how I feel about it relative to others.”



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## A new way of thinking about poverty

While becoming aware of one’s class status is an important step, a key goal of Beyond Welfare is to get people to see and appreciate the similarities among people of different income levels, not just the differences. By experiencing the similarities, a sense of connection and community can be built.

All this starts with a different definition of what it means to be poor, Smidt believes. Rather than looking at poverty in terms of income alone, Beyond Welfare defines it in terms of “money, friends and meaning.”

“You can be wealthy in money and impoverished in friendship and meaning. By defining it that way...we measure success not just in terms of income,” Smidt says.

By defining poverty like this, Beyond Welfare tries to put people from different socio-economic backgrounds on a level playing field. Each participant has strengths and

needs; each has something to offer and gain from the relationships. “You could have a lot of money but be very poor in friends. A person who is very poor financially could be a resource to you by helping you figure out community and friendship.”

She calls this process of pulling a broad range of people together to share a meal and to talk about their lives and see their commonalities a form of “radical hospitality.” The goal is to break through the isolation that people in poverty often experience and shift the way that everyone—wealthy and not so wealthy—sees their strengths and deficits.

“Radical means getting to the root,” she says. “We’re getting to the root of our separation by using hospitality and building intentional friendships across our differences.”

**T**he development of Beyond Welfare and its underlying ideas starts with Smidt’s own story. She had grown up poor, yet sought higher education, eventually gaining the credentials to teach at a

Beyond Welfare brings together groups of people diverse in age, gender, race and economic status.



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—Lois Smidt

university. After her early success, she found herself at a difficult point, suddenly both unemployed and a single mother.

To ease the transition, she went on welfare for a time but noticed that, in spite of her education and workplace accomplishments, “I was treated as though I was not very intelligent” when she interacted with people in the welfare system. This observation became a catalyst for Smidt, who decided that she wanted to change perceptions about poverty. “I said to myself, ‘I’m going to do something about this.’”

Smidt got off welfare in 1996, just as “welfare reform” was occurring. She held on to the idea that she wanted to do something to change perceptions around poverty, and became a founding member of the Consumer Leadership Team (the group which grew to be the Community Leadership Team of Beyond Welfare). At this early stage, it was a group of women who were interested in “bringing the voice of people on welfare to the welfare reform movement.” Some had been on welfare, some had not.

In spite of the group’s desire to capture that voice, Smidt noticed that, for most people who had received welfare, “It was hard to get them to speak up, get involved and say what they really needed.”

Coupled with that observation was something else Smidt noticed: many people living in poverty were isolated and lonely. She saw this in her first post-welfare job as a case manager, visiting with clients in their homes.

“Clients would be very eager to see me and would say, ‘Lois I haven’t talked to another adult since I saw you,’ which might have been two weeks to a month. They saw me as their only adult friend, which I thought was very sad,” she says. “People were very isolated.”

**Ideas about the nature of poverty began to emerge in Smidt’s thinking—that poverty might not only be about economics, but also about feeling, perception and conditioned behavior.**

“I started to see that there was an internalization of things around poverty, and when you’ve grown up in generational poverty, there are ways of thinking about it. There’s a pattern where you know what you know, and you just do what you’re used to, which often leads people to stay stuck.”

She saw these internalized feelings reinforced through external messages coming from society. “When I was on welfare, even though I knew I was intelligent and had pursued higher education, I struggled to believe I was intelligent. That comes from being raised in poverty and seeing the divisiveness of class lines.”

Her observations of these internal and external messages, and her awareness of the various barriers that many in poverty face, drew Smidt to conclude that poverty itself is very complex.

“Poverty intersects with everything—with mental health, physical health, dis-

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abilities, incarceration, substance abuse, domestic abuse,” she says. “It seemed to me that any approach driven by the mainstream culture’s definitions of success—and getting results based around those measures—would not address its complexity.”

Through the ongoing work of the Consumer Leadership Team, Smidt sought new ways to change those internal and external perceptions that kept individuals in poverty isolated. She became intrigued with and a practitioner and teacher of “Re-Evaluation Counseling”—a peer-counseling approach that brings people into relationship across differences. This became a key source of theory and practice that influenced Beyond Welfare. To Smidt and the team, individuals both in and out of poverty seemed a good pairing for a mutual learning relationship, with the intentional listening practices of Re-Evaluation Counseling helping to nurture and support those relationships.

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Despite the new connections, after several years of experimentation, the pairs themselves remained isolated. “Having one person to think about a poor person’s life wasn’t such a change from the traditional case management model. People were still struggling, and it was more of a feeling of you and me against the world.”



Many children come with their parents to the Thursday night meetings.

## A new way to approach poverty by challenging the illusion of difference

As Smidt began to see the limits of simply forming a connection between two individuals, she looked for new approaches. She was drawn to John McKnight’s “Asset-Based Community Development,” which focuses on the strengths and assets of individuals and communities, not their deficits. Beyond Welfare began to work with consultant Mike Green.

Smidt says that at one local community forum where Green was present, partici-

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Bernadette Siebert, with her husband Ken, says that while she is an “ally” to a single mom, “They offer me something as well. They bring more meaning to my life.”

pants started talking about their isolation. Green mentioned the work of Circles of Support and its founder, Judith Snow, a quadriplegic whose friends had literally circled around her with support to help her move from a lonely life as a client in an institution to a life of community and interdependence. The result of this communal support is that “now Snow has a full life, writes, travels and lectures—she is a much different person than someone who is institutionalized,” says Smidt.

Many would view an individual defined as a “quadriplegic” as someone without much to offer. Yet through the communal support that Snow’s friends offered her, she was able to transform the label of “quadriplegic,” developing her assets and potentials rather than being consumed by the limitations.

The prospect of creating this same kind of community circle around someone

isolated by poverty seemed like a natural extension of the Circles of Support concept. This idea was folded into Beyond Welfare’s approach.

Just as the service system didn’t acknowledge Snow’s inherent strengths and abilities, existing approaches to poverty don’t acknowledge the potentials of people with low incomes, Smidt argues. The service system also forces low-income people to take on a “debilitating label” to get help, which in turn undermines their strengths and assets.

The existing system assumes that “people in poverty need to be fixed” and that those who aren’t struggling economically are all right, Smidt says. “It suggests that we’re up here and you’re down there, and you need to come up to where we are.

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At the same time, Smidt says that many poor people internalize ways of thinking, feeling and behaving that feed into being poor. These ways often get set very early: of those who come into Beyond Welfare, more than 70 percent report that they grew up in poverty. In essence a culture of poverty—a class of people who live with the perception that they lack strengths and assets and require fixing—is formed and replicated, she believes.



“All my friends looked like me, wanted the same things as me, had the same music and foods. I have all kinds of friends in my life now. My life is richer now. It’s not just about poor people having a better life.”

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“When I look at people in poverty and what we’ve internalized, it is almost always the message that something is wrong with you,” Smidt says. “Our culture promotes the message of pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. It’s very individualistic—a meritocracy—that suggests we get by on our own merits.”

Smidt challenges this idea, asserting that “really none of us has gotten anywhere without relationships and a lot of support.” The truth, she says, is that everyone has “struggles, hurts and deficits. We all need help and we all get it.”

She says the trick is that many of us get help in ways that don’t carry the same stigma as someone who needs help when they are poor, which gives us a kind of pass. “Some of us have ways to get help through networking and relationships, and some have money to pay for it so that it doesn’t become public.

“I have a higher education, a decent paying job and certain ways of functioning that look good in my culture, so I’m not seen as needy. Yet I’m incredibly needy, but it’s seen as okay for me to get help.

“This is not to say people don’t need services because they do,” concludes Smidt. “It’s just to point out that defining everything in a money system brings an inequity to that.... It’s a system that separates people from one another to create an illusion that some need help and some don’t.”

To really get at the roots of poverty and stop relying on systems that unwittingly perpetuate it, Smidt believes that a different approach is needed. She says that the key is to challenge this illusion of fundamental differences between people who are poor financially and those who are not.

As individuals interact over time through Beyond Welfare, social networks develop. This offers “participants” and “allies” different avenues to “get their needs met so that they don’t necessarily have to be labeled and go through eligibility requirements” every time they come up against a challenge, Smidt explains.

The key is that everyone in the network can get their needs met, Smidt says. “It equalizes the relationships between allies and participants. If an ally has adequate income but is struggling with diverse friendships, then suddenly participants have something to offer and there is reciprocity.”

The Ties That Bind report quoted one Beyond Welfare “ally”: “All my friends looked like me, wanted the same things as me, had the same music and foods. I have all kinds of friends in my life now. My life is richer now. It is about everyone having a richer life. It’s not just about poor people having a better life.”

Changes in both allies and participants are tracked. “We see that in allies, their experience of being friends with people in poverty changes not only their attitudes but also the actions they take in the world.

“What we need to understand about the other is that we all have gifts, we all have a contribution to make, we all have challenges and places where we are very afraid or ashamed. We all feel lonely at times and we’re all human.”

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Sometimes we’ve seen that it changes the way they might vote or think about policy.”

Smidt says this translates into “a more comprehensive way to think about poverty, rather than just trying to get people into jobs and increase assets.”

When everyone involved in Beyond Welfare has the chance to see and be seen for the strengths and assets they possess, both participants and allies have the chance to support each other and offer something of value.

“We’re all experts at something—a single mom who has survived on a welfare check for three years has some real talents and expertise that society may not acknowledge,” she says. “So rather than being divisive around the differences in status, how can we bring many good, brilliant minds together to learn from each other? That is really fascinating to me.”

What Smidt has learned is that well-off people are not the only ones with stereotypes: people living in poverty also have many stereotypes about people who don’t have low-incomes. “What we need to understand about the other is that we all have gifts, we all have a contribution to make, we all have challenges and places where we are very afraid or ashamed. We all feel lonely at times and we’re all human.

“It’s normal for people to have gifts and want to contribute; it’s normal to struggle and want to give up. The biggest thing is how much more we have in common than we realize.”



Ken Seibert (r.) says that Beyond Welfare has given him “a sense of purpose after retiring.” He adds, “The friendships make this feel the most rewarding.”

Beyond Welfare creates an environment that focuses on the development of friendship and community rather than on the reduction of poverty defined by economics or by labels such as “welfare mom.” This makes sense, says Smidt, because “people want to come together for fun, food and contribution more than they would because they are supposedly ‘messed up.’”

It’s a safe environment where everyone can change their perceptions of each other and come to a new way of relating. “People can let down their guard and their fear and just relax around one another. When people feel safe and they are not defined by what is wrong with them—or not defined by their accomplishments and their status—it’s quite remarkable.

“We strip away identifiers and labels and any kind of box, whether it’s a box of prestige and status, or disability, want and need. Just strip away the trappings that prevent us from being human.”

“Defining and measuring success is a huge challenge, because what are we measuring? As Einstein said, we measure what we value and we value what we measure.”

—Lois Smidt

To reduce poverty, Beyond Welfare focuses on changing the way people define success and how they see themselves and others.

“We’re just trying something different to change as individuals, and in relation to each other. As we come to learn about and care about each other across our differences, we come to care about the different things that keep us isolated and hurting. Then we join one another to work on changing injustices.”

## The challenge of measuring this different approach to poverty

The biggest challenge for those who see the value of this different, potentially more encompassing approach to poverty involves the need to measure the results that come from this process, according to Smidt. In essence, she is challenging the increasing emphasis on quantifiable results by many funders.

She warns that the understandable desire by funders to make sure their service programs and initiatives are producing results can lead to unintended consequences. It’s easy to focus on things that are relatively easy to achieve and measure.

But reducing poverty that has existed across generations is not something that is going to be achieved for more than a few individuals in a short period of time, Smidt believes. And it is going to involve changes, such as how people view themselves and others, that aren’t as easy to measure as,

say, an increase in the number of families filing for the Earned Income Tax Credit.

“Defining and measuring success is a huge challenge, because what are we measuring?” Smidt quotes Albert Einstein: “We measure what we value and we value what we measure.”

Approaches to poverty like Beyond Welfare are working within “a funding model that is results driven, with success being defined by the funders and measurement being driven by their definitions of success.”

By “funders,” Smidt is not just talking about foundations that fund initiatives. She is also talking about agencies that fund service delivery programs. In essence, these agencies get a fee based on the number of people they serve. She believes their focus is on identifying individuals who have a problem and need a specific service, then providing that service. The service provision is then measured.

Perhaps the funder also tries to measure the impact of the services, but that too can be problematic, Smidt believes. For one thing, you will be measuring a change in only one aspect of a person’s life. But most low-income people and families who are struggling face a range of interrelated issues.

Plus, focusing on the relatively short-term impact of a specific service misses the larger picture of what happens to this person and her family over time.

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—Lois Smidt

Another problem, Smidt believes, is that funders often focus on economic measures, both because they are easier to measure than other changes and because there is a deep bias towards economic success.

Smidt would agree that low incomes contribute to family struggles and poor outcomes for kids. But, she contends, just taking an action that increases a family’s income or assets in relatively small ways—say an EITC refund or a new savings account or even a new, non-career job—does not in itself transform that family. There are too many other factors involved. These are the factors that groups like Beyond Welfare try to confront. But they are hard to measure, particularly in the short-term, which is the focus of too many funders, Smidt says.

“Results aren’t found only in things that are relatively easy to quantify.” Instead, she believes results can be found in other aspects of change, “whether it’s a relationship change or a feeling or thinking change.”

In essence, she asks, if people change their image of who they are and what they can be, is that a valid result only if it can be measured by these people earning more money? How would you measure the change in how young minority kids see their futures as a result of the election and example of Barack Obama?

What about the mother who used to only interact with her social worker who now is a focal point of a group of 20 or so other mothers who live in her neighborhood? Is that a valid result only if it leads her to a job?



Tessa Lenz with her son Hayden.

She argues that the challenge is to find ways to “measure results like these in a way that people will value and honor. “Process changes are results, and I will argue that until the sun goes down. It’s real. Something is not ‘unreal’ just because it can’t be quantified.”

**T**his struggle around how to measure success reflects Beyond Welfare’s conviction that there are many factors involved in generational poverty. As a result, this focus on economics misses the full picture of what influences poverty.

“In any evaluation of success...all of the things that contribute to poverty... need to be included,” says Smidt. By failing to look at all of the contributing factors, she adds, we will continue to fail to find lasting solutions.

It may be that, if you focus on finding ways of measuring these other types of changes, you will eventually see a relationship between these changes and *economic* success.



“The funding system and the way it defines and evaluates success is a huge challenge to building community. When you are building community, you are not simply looking to change individuals, you’re looking to create something completely different and new.”

—Lois Smidt

But this is a change that needs to be measured over many years, perhaps a generation.

“The funding system and the way it defines and evaluates success is a huge challenge to building community,” Smidt says. “When you are building community, you are not simply looking to change individuals. When you’re building community, you’re looking to create something completely different and new. You are facilitating, measuring and sustaining change in everyone involved, and in communities and systems.”

Smidt sees another problem in this system for defining and measuring success and basing funding decisions on “results.” In essence, by focusing on changes in individuals, you are neglecting the broader societal issues that result in so many individuals struggling with poverty.

In contrast, by trying to build a different kind of community, Smidt says, “You’re acknowledging that the existing system is unjust. It’s not just about poor people needing to change, it’s about systems needing to change. We all have to change.”

One of the many interesting aspects of Beyond Welfare’s model is that many of the “allies” who are part of this new community, most of whom have higher incomes, begin to change how they see poverty. They come to see that it is about more than an individual’s particular shortcomings. They see that there are broader issues involved, an awareness that Smidt believes is essential to eventual system change.

“When we look at individual outcomes on getting jobs and making money, we see that some individuals will be successful,” says Smidt. “But when we keep doing this, will we really get to the root causes of poverty and do anything around social change?”

Those who argue for this focus on results would say that requiring systems to measure success is a powerful tool to keep them accountable and achieve system change.

Smidt argues that you’ll achieve accountability only when you figure out a way to measure success less narrowly and over a much longer time frame. “If it worked to simply get people into jobs and train them in financial literacy, we’d be getting better results than what we’re seeing. Something is not working with that model of helping people.”

Smidt is uneasy with funders deciding what the measures should be, which says that “they know what success is for people who are very different from themselves. That is just kind of crazy. There is no direct relationship between the people being served and the people making decisions around policy and funding.”

Smidt knows that not every funder has the same bias towards measuring short-term results. She says that the Casey Foundation has acknowledged the importance of social networks, setting aside money to support organizations like hers that are trying social network approaches and creating a group of people to study these approaches.

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She notes that this group has noted the key distinction between “instrumental” changes, such as increases in income, jobs or assets, and “transformational” changes, which are changes in how a person sees himself and his abilities or how he interacts with others. “And they focus on how building healthy social networks is key for both transformational changes and instrumental changes.”

Unfortunately, Smidt says, it’s hard for most funders to focus on transformational changes “when the whole culture is results driven.” Certainly transformational changes can be measured over time. But that’s the core of the problem, Smidt thinks. Transformational changes take time. “When you need to measure progress annually or even quarterly, as many initiatives and funding agencies do, it’s hard to be patient for indicators of these long-term changes.

“We’re going really deep and trying to understand things in their complexity, and address them in that way. That takes time. But our society is geared toward quicker approaches.”

One question implied in Smidt’s thinking is this: what if progress on instrumental changes for more than a few individuals depends on progress on transformational changes?

One of the most bothersome parts of many jobs programs is their low retention rates. If you measure how many people get jobs, a program might look pretty good. But if you go back in six months and measure how many of these people still have these

### The importance of language

One result of the attention that Beyond Welfare has received has been invitations for Lois Smidt to work with national funders. She says that she appreciates the opportunity to communicate Beyond Welfare’s approaches and underlying thinking to funders. But she finds the language that many funders use to be a barrier to understanding.

“I really don’t find it amusing. It’s alienating and exclusive and oppressive. I can sit there as a person with the privilege of higher education and translate it in my head. But it’s exhausting and not much fun.”

But even more important, she says, “It separates me from the people in the inner circle. It says we [in the inner circle] are the ones who are comfortable with these ideas, and this is the language we speak and the tools we use, rather than coming to some common ground to understand something in the most accessible way possible.

“People say they don’t want to dumb it down, but you’re not doing that—you’re enhancing your own intelligence by using inclusive, accessible language that allows you and others to talk effectively about a shared concept.”

jobs, that is often a much less impressive number. Perhaps people don’t stay in jobs because other aspects of their lives have not transformed. Perhaps they needed more than training and a connection to a job.

A core belief of Smidt and Beyond Welfare is that many people who are poor are dealing with much more than the lack of a job. More than half (54%) the people who come to Beyond Welfare reported mental health problems, half reported

“We don’t have to go down the road of arguing that measuring positive outcomes like jobs and child performance are a bad thing. In fact, it is important that these types of tangible, quality-of-life changes happen for people too. They will tell you so themselves.”

—Audrey Jordan

domestic violence, 38% had chronic health issues and 35% reported involvement with the criminal justice system.

“There are numerous things going on in their internal or external worlds that slow a person in poverty down,” Smidt explains.

Part of supporting change in a person living in poverty is to simply slow down along with them—to understand the pace of change for a person with a variety of factors that affect their lives. In light of this, Smidt says it becomes “all the more important to take time when building community.”

Again, funders that add “the pressure of time to produce results quickly” are a burden not only on the slow process of community building, but also the process of change that individuals with multiple barriers must go through.

“The whole pressure for results is going to leave out anyone who doesn’t move as quickly as we expect people to move.... Right now the pace of our society is such that if you don’t produce results and move quickly, you are going to get left behind. We live in a model of productivity.

“If we are going to include most people in poverty and truly bring their gifts into the culture, we are going to have to slow down,” she concludes. “It’s incredibly huge. If we could just get funders to understand this piece. It’s rare to get funding for more than a year for anything. Three years is incredible. Ten years with *Making Connections* is huge, yet it’s still taking longer.”

The person within the Casey Foundation who led the team focused on social networks, Audrey Jordan, understands Smidt’s uneasiness with too much focus on measurable results. But Jordan thinks that there is a middle ground.

“I would argue that we don’t have to go down the road of arguing that emphasizing and measuring positive outcomes like jobs and child performance are a bad thing. In fact, it is important that these types of tangible, quality-of-life changes happen for people too. They will tell you so themselves.

“I would argue that success in achieving tangible results—and the more intangible ones that Beyond Welfare is so good at—are both important, even as I agree with Lois that most funders don’t understand and don’t put the same emphasis on the intangible benefits. The role of organizations like Lois’s is to show the importance of emphasizing both types of success and how much better the tangible results are when you support strategies to reach the intangible ones.”

Beyond Welfare has become known internationally as a place to go to learn about the process of building community, especially across class lines. Smidt says that this interest suggests that the art of community building has been lost. “Isolation is huge in our culture. And not just with people who live in poverty....

“People are calling on Beyond Welfare to figure out how to build community. Part of me is thrilled and part of me is so sad.

“Building community takes time and is very process oriented.  
That process in and of itself produces results. Results are results.  
They don’t just have to be about material changes in people’s lives.”

—Lois Smidt

### “What I learned from Marissa is about slowing down.”

To help make her point about the need for more patience, Smidt tells the story of a woman she met in the United Kingdom named Marissa.

“She is wheelchair bound, has Cerebral Palsy, and cannot speak.” She does attend a university, using an alphabet board to communicate, pointing out individual letters to her assistant.

“I’ll admit, when I was young, if I saw a person who looked like Marissa, I would assume that her physical limitations meant she also had mental limitations. But she is brilliant, an English major with wonderful things to talk about.

“What I learned from Marissa is about slowing down. If I’m going to hang out with her, I need not be in a hurry because she’s going to spell out every single word.”

Marissa was on a panel when Smidt met her. Asked her biggest challenge, Marissa said it was the fast pace and the pressure of time.

“Because if you are going to be my friend and get to know me,” she said to Smidt. “You are going to have to slow down.”

“Marissa is kind of an extreme example,” Smidt says. “However, if we are going to include most people in poverty and truly bring their gifts into the culture, we are going to have to slow down.”

What we do is pretty basic, simple human stuff, sit together, have a meal, be friends, figure stuff out.

“We’ve gotten so far away from our basic humanity that people will pay Beyond Welfare to learn about this.”

Smidt says that she has noticed that, when she teaches professionals how to build community, “sometimes it’s hard for them

to relax their expectations of what they will learn and simply allow for an experience of community to unfold.

“People do not have an experience of having community through charts, graphs and matrices. People don’t have an experience of community with a power point. Our whole learning environment in Beyond Welfare is sitting in a circle, getting on couches, eating together, playing games. We fill people up with content, but the message and the delivery is very communal.

“People get the material content on how to do this stuff, but they also have an experience that changes them from the inside out.

“To get people to understand that community building is a qualitatively different approach from service delivery takes time and is a challenge. Building community takes time and is very process oriented. That process in and of itself produces results.”

This is one of a series of reflections and reports done by **The Diarist Project**, a new approach to documenting and learning from *Making Connections*, a long-term community change initiative supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation ([www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)). For more information about the diarist work or to read other diarist reflections, go to [www.DiaristProject.org](http://www.DiaristProject.org) or contact [Tim@CharityChoices.com](mailto:Tim@CharityChoices.com) (240-683-7100).

For more information about **Beyond Welfare**, contact Lois Smidt, Beyond Welfare, 130 S. Sheldon, Suite 308, Ames, IA 50014, 515-451-8199 ([www.BeyondWelfare.org](http://www.BeyondWelfare.org)).

All photos by Kristin Senty except pages 5, 7 and 10 (by Sheila Rose).