

## **Building Networks for Low Income Workers: January 30, 2007, Conference Call- Transcript**

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**Erica:** Welcome to our conference call on Building Networks to get Jobs. This is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in Washington D.C. We will be joined today by Carol Clymer, Director of Labor Markets Initiatives, P/PV, Laura Wyckoff, Consultant to P/PV, and Sandee Kastrul, President and Co-Founder of i.c. stars. Before we get started, I would just like to say that we are very excited to be hosting this call because the topic of networking is something that does not get discussed enough, we tell people that they should network, but we don't teach low income ventures how to network. Through my experience, I learned how important it is to talk about networking, because my mother in law was trying to enter the workforce for the first time in twenty eight years, and she was very nervous about it, and I sat down with her and discussed what her skills were, she is a very detailed oriented person, very practical, but she was very nervous about who would want to hire her. What I said to her was that she knew everyone in her community, for about 30 years, so she should start using those people as connections. I talked to her Wednesday morning, and by late afternoon she had a job as an office manager. You need to use the power of just talking about networking, and giving examples of how to access it. I am excited about this call and what it can provide for your program. Without further adieu, here is Carol Clymer.

**Carol:** Thank you Erica. As Erica said, I am Carol Clymer, the Director of Labor Markets Initiatives. P/PV is a national nonprofit social policy research organization. Much of our work deals with the alleviation of poverty. We do a lot of initiatives aimed at improving policy and practice of workforce development organizations. Our primary work is to draw lessons from successful workforce development programs and then we share that information through reports and workshops like we are doing today. Sandee Kastrul, as Erica mentioned, is the President and Co-Founder of one such successful program—i.c. stars. Networking has been key to i.c. stars' success in placing participants in well paying jobs. Sandee will talk a bit later on her experience with networking. She will also offer a lot of practical tips for networking in employment training. Also joining us will be Laura Wyckoff, along with Shane Spalding, at P/PV, was a primary contributor to our networking project. Laura will help answer questions at the end of our conversation.

Let's have a look at slide number two. This slide tells us what we want to accomplish in the training today. We want to discuss the importance of networking and some tools for including networking activities in your job programs. Something that we all know is that people get jobs through other people, its really common sense. If you think about the job you have now, its likely someone led you to that job. I know it's true for me.

If you're looking at slide number three, you will see some very important statistics that 66% of those looking for work apply directly to an employer or through family or friends; this is according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. 88% of employers use personal referrals to recruit workers, according to one study. In other words, successful job seekers use networking and job referrals. Employers use networks to find employees. What is employment networking? We define it as connections with people who may have information about jobs or are able to influence hiring decisions or promotions. Given the way most people find jobs, it seems important for organizations to address networking skills and provide opportunities for participants to practice networking. In fact, employment networking is as important as developing a good resume or learning to interview well. With this in mind, P/PV explored employment and training organizations across the nation to address networking. We discovered that of the 100 or so programs that said they taught networking, only a few are actually doing so. Most were simply telling their participants that networking is important. In many programs, staff did the networking for participants. For example, staff uses its own contacts or the program's contacts to get job leads. Mostly we found that programs did not encourage participants to develop their own networks. As Erica said, they are simply telling their participants that networking is important, but then doing the networking for them. We thought it a little more critical to look closely at this. P/PV decided to find out what is involved in effective networking and we started a networking initiative. We learned about how to go about helping low income people develop and use the skill of networking.

What we found, on slide number four, shows us one of the first things we learned. It is that everyone uses networking. CEOs use networks of their companies to find jobs. Low income people use networks to find their jobs. The difference is that low income people usually network with other low income people that usually don't have information about good paying jobs. A program that serves low income individuals will want to expand a low income person's network of family and friends. Slide number 4 illustrates how bridging networks take place and how networks can give participants more access to new and different people. This diagram shows that individuals in group have contacts in other groups. So you will see on the left hand side of the slide that the job seeker has several different contacts, and one of those contacts, the bridge, is going to have several other contacts and connections to other bridges in other networks. Another important thing that we learned is that people have bridges, but they should look for people that can offer additional employment information in other bridges. This is something that we have tried to develop into materials. Of course your participants will need to let their contacts know that they are seeking employment, this will help them successfully find bridges. They will then need to express or tell others what they have to offer. Then they will need to show the willingness to show information when needed. In addition they will need opportunities to network, which is where you can be involved.

Slide number five shows something else in our research. We learned that programs that intentionally address employment networking have a continuum of activities offering network programs. This slide illustrates this continuum. It starts by emphasizing the importance of networking, and then some people will need to be taught communication and networking skills, then its providing opportunities to practice networking in a safe

environment; next is offering opportunities to network in the real world; and then number five, is to continue to build networks beyond program graduation. Of the programs we interviewed, that included networking, most emphasized the importance of networking. Most taught their participants how to network. This usually meant that they prepared them to talk about themselves and their skills. Very few programs actually included all five steps. i.c. Stars did though. Early on i.c. stars made employment networking central to its mission. Sandee Kastrul is now going to talk about how i.c. stars does this.

**Sandee:** If you would like to listen to the second part of this conference call, please dial 866-803-1430, then press 1, then 9374281#, and then 5817031#. The networking in our program is central to our business. We are basically a staff of four people, and we train twelve people at a time. There are a few different things that we do that are core to this kind of networking piece. The first point that was emphasized with the idea of the importance of networking, and how we kind of tackle this through our training program is that the vision of i.c. stars is a thousand community leaders by 2020. So the first thing off the table, it's not about getting jobs, although we do have a 100% placement rate for our last three groups, and I will explain how that happens. The ability to make change, or be a change agent, and to be a leader in the community is dependent on three things— financial capital, intellectual capital, and the social capital. We believe that all these are important to make change. Certainly financial capital is, how much you make, saving, spending, how much you give, and the intellectual capital is realizing that learning is life long. But the social capital is a piece that a lot of the time we forget, and that's who you know. This directly relates to networking. So how big your network is all about who do you know? The social capital piece for us, if you can imagine a large conference table with all of our participants, I would say there are a thousand people standing underneath the table supporting them. So really painting that picture about social capital is an important piece of this. I think we can all point to famous people who have the financial capital, but don't have the base. We can also talk about it in terms of community organizing. How do you organize your base? How do you get people involved? Well, the same thing is involved when we are talking about workforce development and careers.

On to the second point about teaching communication and networking skills, we do some very special things here at i.c. stars and its called high tea. And every day at 4pm, the company stops, comes to the table, and we all have formal tea. We always invite a different business leader, technology leader, or community leader to share tea with us every day. Over the course of four months, we will have had a different tea speaker for every day in four months, who comes in and tells their story, and some their current business challenges. And there is a beautiful exchange and sharing that goes on during this afternoon tea, and what's unique about that is at the tea everyone will introduce the person next to them. There is this element of how do you promote the person next to you? How do put them in a light and represent them in front of their next employer? It is a beautiful exercise of reciprocity that happens every day. You might even be mad at the person next to you, but you still have to come up with something powerful to position them. What happens after this tea, there are two things really. One is that this CIO (Chief Information Officer), who is sitting there, is expecting to see a very urban setting where young people are going to be very casual, but they come away with saying, "wow, they

ask better questions than my management team!” From that point on, that leader will evangelize i.c. stars and our participants to the rest of their company. My favorite story to tell is that on my way back to the suburbs in Chicago. The CIO’s are driving back and they call H.R. and they tell them they have to hire these people. At the same time they are calling their community chair element of their business and saying “we have to fund these people.” There is a business development piece as well. What is powerful about this from a participant standpoint is that they are a part of the business development of i.c. stars. Knowing that during this tea, we are going to lock in a new sponsor, a new community opportunity, or a friend/partner in our social network that is going to be important. This makes everyone accountable. This is quite powerful. In addition to tea, we also do time workshops. Those are workshops that will happen as people are working on projects, meeting with clients, and working within the community based organizations. We might see some communication skills that need beefing up or the participants might say, “I need a workshop on public speaking.” So we have workshops ready to go, but it is up to the participant to tell us what kind of workshop they need. The third piece is giving an opportunity to practice this.

Aside from tea, another thing that we do, is developing what we are fighting for as an organization and as individuals. One of the most potent things we have done is say that one of our jobs is to change perceptions. Whether its that CIO who is coming for tea, or if we are going to go to an internal i.c. stars event, we are trying to change perceptions to what it means to be young, a person of color, to be in technology, becomes something that everyone can really rally around. So we do a bunch of different things. We have five events a year that half of our revenues are derived from. These are not your typical fundraising events, but more business networking events. We usually have a panel, CEOs or CIO’s, who will talk about the future of technology or where the business is heading. We allow our technology executive network to come, as well as having service providers, the Microsoft’s and Oracles, and HPs, who are very interested in meeting with those decision makers, and that’s what makes up a networking event. So what is fascinating is that this is an opportunity to practice because it is internal and our participants become the connectors. If I know all of the CIO’s because I have had tea with them, then I am on a first name basis. If a service provider approaches, I as an alum or participant am able to make that connection, and when you think about it, its all about business connections. Then guess what, I become the most valuable person in the room because I am the one that is in the know. Shift that power from I need a job or to I am enabling people to do business. So getting a job is no problem, because he just introduced me to the CIO of Kraft. The other thing that we do is try to have some very fun events that are in an environment where our participants feel very comfortable. Every cycle of training is 4 months long, and halfway through that we have an art gallery. This is where we have an artist come and transform our office into an art studio, we all wear black turtle necks, and we open up our training studio to all of our stakeholders, all the people in the pipeline we are looking to partner with. At this event our participants have roles such as the announcer, the bartender, whatever that role is, but it is always a role that is facilitating the connections between people. By doing that variable to practice, what works and doesn’t work, they are fostering their social network. On to the real world networking, we also participate in many industry events, since we deal with technology, there are a lot of

technology user groups, there are a lot of external events we get invited to from associations, and we then staff interns and alums at those events. We won't know everyone there, but they have a buddy, so they can introduce them. What is nice about this is that there is a cross over between the people that we know and the people that we don't. Again we are promoting from an internal standpoint the idea of changing perceptions, the idea that we are impacting thousands of people in our lifetime for good or bad, and ultimately, our job as leaders is to create opportunities for others. I am not really selling my own skills, but I am selling the skills of the person next to me. The result of doing this, being a giver, I am painting a phenomenal picture of who I am and how I value you in business.

The last piece of this is continuing beyond the program. One of the really neat things that we do here at i.c. stars is after the 4 month program, you become an alum, and one of your jobs as an alum is to mentor the next cycle. So now that I am at my new job, I am continuing to grow my financial capital (an average grad from i.c. stars sees a 200% increase in pay), I am studying for technology certifications, I am getting my degree (we have a partnership with DePaul University), but my social capital is that maybe I don't need to attend the networking events to get a job anymore, but I would like to go to some user groups to foster my intellectual capital, so maybe I want to learn a specific technology (there are user groups all over the city). What I can do now is invite one of the interns or current participants in the program to join me at that user group. I have identified a networking group in the gaming industry. So here is the idea of reaching back in and helping someone else get a job. So this has been a very powerful way for our alum to stay connected to our organization. So this is how we look at that 5 step continuum, and how its not just an integral part of our program but also of our business. Our job leads come from our participants and from bringing people in, and its focus is not on what am I going to get, but what I am going to give, as well as what legacy I am going to leave behind for the next cycle.

The whole context is in the form of community. As a nonprofit, we have positioned ourselves as a hub in the technology community for small businesses and large fortune five hundred companies. So we are always building that network. And the truth is that we wouldn't exist without it. We don't have any government funding; our funding comes from the technology and business community. So you see it is very important for us to maintain those relationships. I can talk all day long until I am blue in the face, but what is so powerful is seeing a business leader talk to a young 20 year old, which is passionate about technology, and that business leader gets recharged by that passion, not necessarily from a charity standpoint, but from an opportunity standpoint. I want these people on my team, they are thinking outside of the box, and they are going to bring a whole new life to my organization. So this is how we know that our work is going well. The 100% placements, the 200% increase in pay, and the powerful brand we have on the community is less about me and my colleagues, and more about the participants building their social capital and networks.

**Carol:** Thank you Sandee. You have such great insight, telling us what you do, but how you develop employment networking. I also thank you for just being a resource for others and sharing your afternoon with us.

The last slide is simply our contact information. Also listed, are a few resources. You can access these on P/PV (Public Private Ventures) website—[www.ppv.org](http://www.ppv.org)—one of the resources is getting connected, strategies for planning the employment networks for low income people, this is a Shane Spalding report, it includes more descriptions of what Sandee talked about, as well as others who we found were doing interested things. It kind of distills the lessons we learned about employment networking. You can download this from our website for free. Another set of materials we developed out of this project is called networks: expanding the networks of low income people. This is a collection of activities, a curriculum if you will, related to networking. It contains lesson plans, tip sheets, and ideas for programs to learn to network and build their skills. This is also available on our website.

### **Questions:**

Contact information getting into i.c. stars Program:

Other information: [www.icstars.org](http://www.icstars.org) . Go under Programs, to the information sessions. You can schedule an appointment there for a pre-orientation about i.c. stars program. i.c. stars is only located in the Chicago, IL, area.

What are the best strategies for improving networking, in particular in welfare-to-work candidates?

The 5 Step Continuum is really the best thing available. You can also throw networking parties. Make sure to introduce your guests to your participants. Also, prepare the participants to be ready for that networking conversation, asking questions about the guest, and developing a sincere curiosity.

Are there any creative strategies for harder to serve populations?

**Sandee:** One strategy we use in the training studio is a position given called the “cruise director.” This person will answer the door, get to the know guest, and forward that information. There is also a position where someone is in charge of bringing light whenever necessary. So whenever something is going poorly, it will be this person who steps in and sees the glass as half empty. Another job includes someone who makes sure none of our plants dies. This person is also in charge of planting information, so if a discussion is quiet, this person will always have a little background information beforehand that he/she can bring to the table and ask a zinger question. It’s all about empowering your participants.

**Carol:** The guide also has examples for any group you are working with.

How do you go about building up the motivation of those ex-offenders or those coming out of drug addiction?

**Sandee:** Having a cross mentoring system is probably the best way. The greatest way to get hope is to give hope.