



Community of Practice Summary

The aha!Process is a national antipoverty organization that helps people move toward upward mobility. The focus of its Bridges Out of Poverty model is on socioeconomic class differences, and helping people understand the importance of these factors and how they are related to their lives.

The mission of aha! Process is to directly impact the education and lives of individuals in poverty around the world. Communities are awakening to the reality that they do not offer a sustainable way of life to their children and are looking for direction. Equity and critical mass impact the changes that are taking place. If a community allows any group to be disenfranchised for any reason (religion, race, class) the entire community becomes economically poorer (Sowell, 1998). When poverty reaches a point of critical mass in a community and efforts to reverse the problem don't succeed, the people with the most resources tend to move out of the community, leaving behind enclaves of poverty. At this point the community is no longer sustainable.

What Is the Bridges Model?

Poverty is a complex problem that demands a comprehensive approach. And therein lies the challenge. Poverty is not resolved with a single program or even set of programs, because there so many variables. Bridges is not a program. It is a set of constructs that can be applied in many settings and in many ways.

Poverty is a common denominator for many sectors in society. Its impact is felt by a wide range of entities, including schools, healthcare providers, social services, food services, faith communities, police and other first responders, courts, correctional facilities, workforce development, employers and government.

The Bridges model operates on the law of attraction: If you like this approach, then take ownership of the ideas and apply them where you live and work. Your innovations can impact the lives of people in poverty, improve the outcomes of your organization, and help build a broad community initiative. When you share strategies with others, you are creating a learning community – whether it's at the water cooler where you work, within your own discipline, or in a community collaborative.

Our Community of Practice will host quarterly meetings and will include professionals of all levels (Executive Directors, Management and Case Managers) in each of the Bridges Community Sectors, which include:

- Prenatal care
- Early-childhood development
- K-12 education
- Postsecondary education
- Housing
- Workforce development
- Businesses/employers
- Banking/lenders
- Health and healthcare
- Faith-based entities
- Arts and entertainment
- Government safety-net services
- Nonprofits
- Addictions and mental health
- Courts and corrections
- Law enforcement and first responders
- Elder care and hospice

A national study of Getting Ahead participants conducted by Elizabeth Walher of Indiana University identifies 16 barriers. This is what the poor and working poor perceive. They are arranged according to the frequency with which they were reported:

- Bad credit
- Unemployment
- Transportation
- Affordable housing
- High debt
- Physical health
- Mental health
- Isolation
- Underemployment
- No access to computers
- Chemical dependency
- Learning problems
- Felony convictions
- Unstable working conditions
- Lack of affordable childcare
- Domestic violence

Communities that use the Bridges constructs recognize that to address poverty effectively we must engage the whole community. All sectors and economic classes need to be at the table and speaking the same language and the Community of Practice supports this ongoing work. The Community of Practice brings people from all sectors and economic classes together to improve job retention rates, build resources, improve outcomes, and support those who are moving out of poverty.

The goals of creating a Community of Practice are to:

- move individuals from poverty to self-sufficiency
- reduce social costs to crime, poor health and welfare
- strengthen educational attainment and job skills
- improve on-the-job productivity
- revitalize neighborhoods and build sustainable communities where everyone can live well



The Community of Practice brings key participants together to discuss how the concepts can be applied within their organization, and at a higher level, the entire community. These discussions will lead to a vision that is developed collaboratively and is supported by staff at all levels.

Our Vision is to have a Champion in each of the Bridges Community Sectors who will participate in the Community of Practice, while also working to implement the Bridges concepts within their respective organization. Ideally, this individual would also become a Certified Bridges Out of Poverty Trainer and would also provide ongoing educational presentations within their organization, as well as their field of work.

The Bridges Out of Poverty model is currently used in 35 states and 7 countries; there are currently 33 communities across the world that have established Communities of Practice.

Communities of Practice are currently being developed in additional communities across the State of Illinois. These include Gurnee, Joliet and McHenry. We will have the opportunity to meet with these communities to discuss policies that we could influence together for statewide change.

Typical Steps for Developing a Bridges Community of Practice

- Training on Bridges: Develop critical mass.
- Embed Bridges constructs in organizations.
- Engage people in poverty using Getting Ahead.
- Develop a communitywide collaboration.
- Develop a systemwide evaluation system.
- Expand to all sectors.
- Share best practices.

Triple Lens Approach

Individuals learn about poverty through personal experience, stories in the news, reading, and general debate—but rarely through an intention to fully understand this complex problem. Without a structure for processing the complexities of poverty, without a way to organize our thinking, our responses to poverty will continue to be ineffective.

The triple lens is a structure by which poverty can be assessed and processed thoroughly. Looking at poverty through a single lens—be it individual, organizational, or community—will not provide the depth of understanding that comes from viewing poverty through all three lenses. By using the triple lens, we develop new ideas, discover how to apply new concepts, and make necessary changes. This tool helps us do thorough work.

POLICY



Individual



Institution



Community

Causes of Poverty

Hidden Rules of Class

Resources

Language

Bridges Constructs



Training on Bridges:
Develop Critical Mass

Engage People in Poverty
Using Getting Ahead

Understanding of the
Complexities of Poverty

Understanding of the
Bridges Constructs

Getting Ahead
Outcomes

Client Life Cycle

Theory of Change

Stages of Change/Motivation

Institutional Resources

Institutional Policy/Procedure



Embed Bridges Constructs
in Organizations

Expand to All Sectors

Institutional Changes
Based on Use of Bridges
Constructs

Outcomes Based on
Metrics from Institutions
(Results they are already
measuring)

Getting Ahead Classes

Staying Ahead Network

Bridges Community
Workshops

Steering Committee

Bridges Community of
Practice

Policy/Advocacy

Develop A Communitywide
Collaboration

Develop a Systemwide
Evaluation System

Share Best Practices

Bridges Champions in
Each Sector

of People Trained in
Workshops

Community Policies
Changed/Impacted

Managed By

Rebuilding Lives, Transforming Our Community

One Body Collaboratives

In Partnership With



For More Information

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Bridges Out of Poverty Rockford Region