



## Neighborhood Guidance Offices: A New Model for Helping the Less Fortunate

**Dr. Ralph Nunez**

Dr. Ralph Nunez is President and CEO of Homes for the Homeless. These remarks were delivered at a Manhattan Institute luncheon in New York City.

I have always thought it interesting how societies always claim they have produced new ideas. I believe that nothing is really “new.” The concept behind the Neighborhood Guidance Office, or “GO Center,” is not new, either. Put in the proper historical context, it is obvious that we are simply repeating a centuries old notion.

Over 200 years ago, Thomas Paine, in a pamphlet entitled “Common Sense,” wrote that we have the opportunity to begin the world again. The American Revolution was fought so that people would be free to make their own independent judgments. This simple idea, which has been so integral throughout American history, has again gained particular relevance as the United States has undergone revolutionary change over the past five years.

The concept behind the GO Center is part of this revolution. People have again begun to ask, “Why should people be dependent on others to make decisions for them?” In starting the GO Center, we sought to teach formerly reliant people to again begin to think for themselves, and to stop considering themselves second class citizens.

The concept behind the GO Center is also grounded in history, not just in these ideas. For thousands of years in villages and in towns, when people had problems or needed an answer they went to a town elder: the person, or group of people, who had been around long enough to know how to direct them to the appropriate course. The Neighborhood Guidance Office reaches back into our collective history to bring some very simple ideas into a contemporary setting with the focus on making people independent.

Contrast this vision with the reality of today’s large social service networks. In these machine-like bureaucracies, people are simply stamped and filed away. You are assigned a caseworker, you are signed up, and you become just another case in the system.

In implementing our vision we wanted to set up a social clinic where people could come for help and find a solution without becoming enmeshed in a bureaucratic, process-driven system.

That is what we established. The Neighborhood Guidance Office has been open for about

a year and a half in a brownstone on Kelly Street in the Hunts Point neighborhood of the Bronx. There are two people in the office, called “GO Associates,” and their job is to deal in a clinical sense with the people who seek our help.

When people visit the Center with any given problem, we ask, “How can we help you?” In asking this, however, we are not just looking for the path of least resistance. We want to know what it will take if, for instance, a person is on the verge of homelessness, to send him or her home, instead of to the city’s Emergency Assistance Unit. We try to resolve people’s problems using common sense instead of bureaucracy.

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We began the GO Center’s pilot program in the South Bronx simply because of the enormous needs of that particular neighborhood. The South Bronx represents a unique challenge. I believe that it takes a real familiarity with a neighborhood, its families, and its services to even begin to adequately address its problems. Because we were already running a full service shelter, called an American Family Inn, in that neighborhood, we believed that we had enough experience to move on with this new project.

We faced many questions when we began. How can we market the GO Center to the people who need its services? How can we map out the community in terms of the problems and solutions that currently exist? How can we spread the word of our program and really get it off the ground?

For marketing we posted flyers in the community when the Center opened, and from that little bit of advertising the program took off. We now work with an average of one hundred people a month. This includes both those who telephone and those who stop by our office in person. Word of mouth has expanded the program tremendously.

I am sometimes amazed by the ways that people will hear about us. Sometimes they come in after overhearing a conversation on the subway. The schools are also a great way of spreading the word. We drop off flyers at some of the public schools, the kids take them home, and we end up having the parents come in.

Our first year of operation has taught us that there are certain demands and specific needs out there that, if they are dealt with quickly, do not have to become big needs. These problems do not require government assistance and do not involve major costs.

We have found that people have several different types of problems. First and foremost, the overwhelming majority of people who come to us seek employment, whether or not they possess marketable skills.

A typical example is the case of Claudia, a woman we worked with from Florida. She came in one day and said she could not work, was stuck on welfare, and would soon be thrown off. She claimed to have absolutely no skills. At the GO Center, we sit down and talk things through with every person who comes to us. We try to determine what the problem really is, and whether or not there is anything we can do about it on-site.

It turned out that Claudia could type 60 words a minute. We gave her a test right in the office. She could type well, but did not even realize she had an important, marketable skill. We have developed relationships with five different temp agencies, and it ended up that we were able to place Claudia with one of them.

Some have argued that all we have done is find a temporary job, and therefore only a temporary fix. I disagree: a temporary job is job training, and it is free. Claudia and others whom we have placed temping are learning the norms of what work is, and they are getting paid to do it. They are learning new skills and honing existing ones: everyone comes out a winner.

Other people come to us when they are having trouble paying the rent. They have jobs, but still cannot afford their housing costs. They cannot feed their children. Again, our approach is, “Sit down and let’s talk about it.” Rather than sending people off for the City’s emergency assistance or homeless shelters, we try to address what really is going wrong.

Many times it turns out these people do make enough money, but they just don’t know how to budget. We will then help them work up a small budget, which we believe gives them a feeling of independence.

Eventually we want the people we help to themselves become community elders. For instance, Claudia will go back to her friends. Perhaps one of them is experiencing similar difficulties. When Claudia shares her experience, maybe her friend will try to think of what kinds of things she herself is good at. Perhaps Claudia’s friend worked as a babysitter. Maybe Claudia’s friend could work at a day care center. Maybe she could even open her own day

care center. The purpose of the GO Center is to get people to come up with solutions for their own problems.

The same thing goes for those who learn how to budget. We’d like them to take that knowledge back and then, in a sense, become their own Neighborhood Guidance Office. A hundred people come into this facility every month. If each one goes back and talks to three other people, we will have reached three hundred people. If such “spreading the word” continues, the effects of the GO Center can be tremendous.

Education is the second most important need we encounter. It is no secret that education buys a future, a better job, and everything else. Some of those who come in may have gone through three different job training programs. They have three certificates and still cannot find a job. They are on the point of giving up and often truly believe that the only thing they can do is go on some government program.

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We tell them that, frankly, they are missing the boat and that the point is to first procure a job that will allow them to pay their bills. We then do what needs to be done to get them that job. Again, the temp agencies with whom we have established relationships play a role. We have been able to feed countless numbers of people into such jobs until they can figure out what they are going to do in the long run.

We believe that people need an education, not more job training programs. People need to work and to use a little of the money they earn to go back to school—to a technical

program at a university, or classes at the local community college.

We also have many people who come in who can't find work because they don't speak English. Others do not have GEDs and have difficulty adding and subtracting. These people need to be referred to English as a Second Language or GED programs. At the same time, however, we let them know that while they are doing that, they also need to prepare for work. Again temp agencies play a role.

The third major need is housing. One recent example was a woman named Anna, who came to us extremely upset. She had two children, was on the verge of losing her housing, and was desperate. She was four months behind in rent payments and was about to be evicted.

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We sat down, and again began the process of determining what her real problem was. We asked, "How much do you owe?" She said, "\$4,000." When we asked her if she had any money at all, she said yes, but not for housing. It turned out she did have \$2,000 saved, but had been saving it for something, she didn't know what, in the future. She hadn't considered using those savings for rent.

We explained that this was exactly the situation she was saving for. The \$2,000 was emergency money, and this was certainly an emergency. We also went to the city for a one-time emergency grant, available when the situation is this dire. She ended up staying in her housing, and she knows next time that these bills must be paid. One does not just save money when bills, like the rent, are going unpaid.

I'll give another example to help illustrate the common sense and simplicity of what we do. We had a gentleman in a shelter up in the Bronx who came to us and said that he wanted to get on a housing list so that he could get out of the shelter. We told him that he could get onto such a list, but that there were already 20,000 people on it ahead of him, and he would have to wait another twenty years in the shelter before that housing became available.

We told him, "Here is the newspaper, and this is how you find housing." You look for apartments, you look for furnished rooms. At the same time you have to have a job, so we will help you get a temp job and you will find an apartment. Lo and behold, he found an apartment. He ended up going to work in a temp job and he is now out of the shelter.

All of a sudden these people who have come to us are achieving independence. They are beginning to think for themselves again. People want to know, "How do I do it?" At the Neighborhood Guidance Office, we take the time to show them, to answer their questions.

We also have people come in with more severe problems. The fourth major issue we address, domestic violence, is one such problem.

One woman came into our Center every Tuesday afternoon to sit and talk with one of the GO associates with whom she felt comfortable. She was a victim of domestic violence, and her kids were in danger.

If her situation were allowed to continue, the kids would eventually end up in foster care. Each one of those foster homes costs the state \$40,000 a year. The woman would end up in a single's shelter, entailing another \$16,000 a year.

Lo and behold, we have a \$100,00 price tag. This is not a solution.

It took a while, but after about six or seven weeks we were able to direct her to several groups that are doing good work in the area of intervention and prevention of domestic violence. She was taken out of her abusive environment, and now she and her children are safe.

Such situations are obviously more difficult, and require our contacting other real social service groups, hard “nuts and bolts” types of agencies. The more usual role of a GO Center, however, is to provide a fast, immediate response. I like to think of it as a SWAT team. We seek out the nature of the problem and usually can offer a workable solution to insure that people do not end up being admitted into “the system.”

The GO Center has now entered into its second stage, what we refer to as “asset-based community development.” The next six months will be spent mapping the good services that already exist in the community, that can be tapped to help the community develop itself.

“Asset-based community development,” first modeled by John McKnight and John Kretzman, sees community development as a process rooted in neighborhoods, driven by relationships within that community and limited only by the capacity of people and institutions in the community. This vision—which sees opportunity where others see despair, and focuses on what people can do rather than what outsiders can do to them—animates our work. We found that the people at the J. M. Kaplan Fund were thinking outside the traditional philanthropic box and shared this same view of community involvement. They were eager to by-

pass traditional social service solutions, embraced our plan, and provided the GO Center’s initial financing.

Another important by-product of the GO Center is the neighbor-to-neighbor concept. We continually have people come in to tell us how a neighbor who had worked with the GO Center helped them out with a problem. Now they have a new problem and are looking for guidance. So we find ourselves training another person in a new area.

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This is what the GO Center is all about. We build a community of elders. We talk about common sense: if you need a job, go through the newspaper. The job does not have to be “full blown”: temporary jobs are available to help pay the bills while you continue to search for a better job.

If you want to go back to school, we think that is excellent. It is even better, however, that you work while you are going to school. When you finish your schooling, you will be able to get an even better job. If you need housing, don’t just put yourself on a list and wait for a subsidy. Look in the newspaper, find yourself an apartment, and we’ll help you find a job to pay for it.

Working is a great way to put a life back together, and people do not realize that it is not that difficult. I believe that when this idea starts to take hold, we will have served a great purpose.

The day that the GO Center goes out of business will be the day that the concept of a community of elders, of rebuilt communities of *independent* people, will be a reality.

I do not advocate the creation of millions of GO Centers. The effort needs to be strategic. The greatest hope for replicating a program like this is in areas where community development is taking place and banks are beginning to invest money. It is important for there to be a commitment to reconstruction both by the community and business.

Another important factor in neighborhoods is the influence of the church. The church is often where we find the new team of elders who help people solve their problems.

When community commitment at various levels is achieved, we will start our Centers and begin to build this system of elders: people who can help other people solve their problems and become independent.

We believe that the long-run savings will be truly phenomenal. As this project progresses we hope that the Kaplan Fund, who pioneered it in conjunction with the Manhattan Institute, will discuss the GO Center concept with other foundations, banks, and individuals. These other groups, in turn, will then try to do the same thing in other areas. That is the way to rebuild a city, and because I believe this firmly, I have great hope for the future.

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