

Fall 2017

# LEO NEWSLETTER



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# A MESSAGE FROM THE FOUNDERS

Bill Evans and Jim Sullivan reflect on issues central to LEO's mission



Poverty is a complicated issue. The causes of poverty are multifaceted and vary by individual. Personal experiences, adverse events, and macroeconomic circumstances all play an important role. Complicated problems tend not to have simple solutions. Interventions that address the symptoms rather than the causes of poverty may be limited in their ability to have a sustained effect on poverty.

Many of our provider partners are experimenting with new ways to address the multifaceted, complicated nature of poverty. A common feature of these innovative interventions is that they take a more comprehensive approach to providing services. These interventions emphasize holistic services—including detailed assessments, individualized service plans, and long-term coordination of multiple services—rather than transactional services that address an immediate need such as a food pantry or homeless shelter. Typically, a client will establish a long-term relationship with a case manager, and they work together to find solutions to a variety of obstacles preventing the client from becoming self-sufficient. We have observed a growing trend towards this more comprehensive approach among service providers. Although these programs are more expensive, they hold the promise of having a more sustained impact on the lives of vulnerable families and individuals. Given the expensive and time-intensive nature of these programs, it is critically important to understand their impact.

To generate evidence on the impact of these more comprehensive case management programs, LEO has launched a series of impact evaluations across the country. The contexts and target population vary considerably. We are examining the impact of these more intensive services for: low-income high school students who are at risk of dropping out of school; vulnerable community college students struggling to complete their degree; low-income seniors who are discharged from the hospital and are transitioning to independent living; and individuals and families seeking emergency financial assistance.



LEO co-Founders Jim Sullivan and Bill Evans.

In this newsletter we highlight one of our comprehensive case management projects, Bridges to Success, an adult mentoring service that helps clients from neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty set goals and navigate the often confusing network of available services. This program, which is being implemented in Rochester, New York, is a nice example of a successful partnership between a city and providers. The providers recognize that poverty is complicated and that research can play an important role in finding solutions. As Bridges to Success Program Manager, Lydia Alston-Murphy says, “Poverty is caused by many variables; research can give us a glimpse into what those variables are and what causes them. Research can help us determine which approach is the best practice for reducing poverty.” LEO’s impact evaluation will test whether professional mentoring increases economic mobility for those living in poor neighborhoods, resulting in improved self-sufficiency. Evidence such as this will inform providers and policy makers about best practices that help to break the cycle of poverty.

LEO CO-FOUNDERS

# FACULTY AFFILIATE UPDATES

LEO's research network is comprised of faculty affiliates from universities around the country with experience evaluating anti-poverty programs. LEO identifies innovative projects and matches them to academic researchers with appropriate expertise.

## BEN CASTLEMAN

Professor Castleman and colleagues recently released a working paper reporting pilot results from a five-state nudge campaign to support college students. The authors find that low-cost nudges increased college graduation among students at the highest risk of withdrawal by over 30 percent.

## JEN DOLEAC

Professor Doleac recently co-hosted a research working group on prisoner reentry at the American Enterprise Institute, and her study using ShotSpotter data to measure the effects of juvenile curfews on urban gun violence is forthcoming in the Review of Economics and Statistics.

## JAVIER ESPINOSA

Professor Espinosa was recently appointed as the Undergraduate Program Director in the Department of Economics at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

## KATHRYN WAGNER

Professor Wagner recently completed the study: "The Great Recession and Public Education." LEO's William Evans and Professor Robert Schwab (University of Maryland) helped co-author the paper which examines the impact of the Great Recession on public education funding and employment.

## MARCI YBARRA

Professor Ybarra's paper, "Health insurance coverage and routine health care use among children by family immigration status," was recently published in the Children & Youth Services Review. She was also recently appointed to the Poverty, Employment, and Self-Sufficiency Network sponsored by the Institute for Research on Poverty at University of Wisconsin.

# RESEARCH PROJECT UPDATE

**Investigators:**  
Javier Espinosa  
William Evans  
David Phillips

**Policy Focus Area:**  
Self-Sufficiency

**Partner Agencies:**  
Action for a Better Community  
Catholic Family Center of Rochester  
City of Rochester  
Community Place of Greater Rochester  
Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative

# Evaluating Bridges to Success

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

Bridges to Success (BTOS) is a unique collaboration between the City of Rochester Mayor's Office of Innovation and Strategy and several community organizations in Rochester, New York as part of the Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative (RMAPI). The program was designed in response to community research that identified two major obstacles for those in the Rochester community working to achieve self-sufficiency: a need for coordinated services and a knowledge gap about available services and how to access them. BTOS is being piloted in a cluster of neighborhoods in Rochester with high poverty rates but significant opportunity for progress. The program employs professional mentors who partner with participants to set and achieve individualized goals that build up participants' human capital and financial assets. Mentors help participants access comprehensive support in the areas of affordable housing, health, behavioral health, and job acquisition and retention.

## SIGNIFICANCE:

Poverty rates in Rochester are more than twice the national average. According to data from the IBM Smarter City Challenges Rochester Report, 34 percent of the city's population lives under the federal poverty level. Around 16 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty (under half of the federal poverty level), making Rochester number one in the nation for extreme poverty. BTOS targets neighborhoods with a high concentration of extreme poverty. Comprehensive case management programs have shown promise for addressing extreme poverty but are also more expensive than other types of programming due to the duration and intensity of the mentoring relationship. Justifying these costs requires determining the impact of comprehensive programs such as BTOS.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

This evaluation will test the hypothesis that providing a professional mentor/navigator program in a targeted area of concentrated poverty will increase economic mobility for program participants, resulting in improved self-sufficiency. In particular, LEO is interested in answering the questions: What is the impact of BTOS on participants? Does this differ across demographic sub-groups? Is BTOS a cost-efficient way to reduce poverty in Rochester?

## EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN:

Participants are being recruited through multiple channels, including referrals from institutional partners, neighborhood and community organizations, door-to-door recruitment, and walk-ins. In order to measure the pilot's success and make decisions about scaling the program, RMAPI is partnering with LEO to evaluate the pilot as a randomized controlled trial (RCT). In year one, BTOS will enroll 300 participants; 150 to the BTOS program group and 150 to a comparison group. The RCT uses survey data and administrative data to answer key research questions. At enrollment into the study, participants answer survey questions about their employment status, household size, and public program usage. Participants are invited to re-take this survey one and two years following enrollment into the study, which will allow the research team to study changes in participants' lives over time. Additionally, the City of Rochester has worked with LEO to identify key regional and state agencies interested in linking administrative data on outcomes such as public assistance enrollment and earnings.

## PROJECT STATUS:

Bridges to Success is currently recruiting and enrolling participants who will be in the study.



*Lydia Alston-Murphy, Program Manager of Bridges to Success at Action for a Better Community (ABC), has managed the program since December 2016. Prior to that, Lydia was a Navigator with the Health Profession Opportunity Grant (HPOG). Lydia developed several policies for Bridges to Success and as part of the Bridges Core team developed the Program Infrastructure. Lydia has a Bachelor's in Social Work from Keuka College and has worked in human services for over 15 years.*

# LYDIA ALSTON-MURPHY

## What are your responsibilities with LEO research studies?

I see my responsibility to LEO research studies as trying to assist in acquiring the data they need to obtain useful outcomes for the Bridges to Success study. I share information from LEO with Bridges to Success staff to ensure that they understand and are aware of the necessity to support LEO, the purpose of the study, and its connection to future program efforts and funding.

## How did you become interested in serving low-income adults through holistic case management?

I am a product of a low-income family; I have been in a service profession for over half of my life. It is hard to explain how or why serving low-income families through holistic case management became of interest to me. I can say that all the pieces fit, and that I love my job and am grateful that I have found an occupation that gives me purpose in life.

## How do you anticipate LEO's research will improve Bridges to Success?

LEO's development of a survey designed to collect Bridges to Success' participant information during their two year commitment to the program is an essential component for measuring progress over the two-year period participants are engaged. Once the study is completed and the data is compiled, we will learn if the mentor approach is the best approach to reduce poverty in our area.

## In your opinion, what role does research play in reducing poverty?

Poverty is caused by many variables; research can give us a glimpse into what those variables are and what causes them. Research can help us determine which approach is the best practice for reducing poverty. In my opinion, research is an invaluable tool that allows researchers to measure the progress made in eliminating poverty.

## What have you gained from working on a LEO research project?

I have gained more respect for research working with LEO. I appreciate all of the work LEO has put into Bridges to Success to make sure they collect the data necessary to measure the work the mentors and participants are doing to reach economic self-sufficiency.

## What aspect of Bridges to Success do you believe could improve economic opportunities for participants in Rochester?

I believe Bridges to Success could improve economic opportunities for participants in Rochester through the mentor/participant relationship. This relationship is one of the most important aspects of Bridges to Success. In this relationship the mentor establishes trust, support, and positive reaffirmation, and provides knowledge of resources, reliability, and dependability for the participant over time. If those characteristics are apparent in the relationship, I believe that participants will identify and achieve more goals on their path to economic opportunities and self-sufficiency.



*David Phillips works as a Research Assistant Professor of Economics at LEO where he helps lead several LEO projects coordinating study design and implementation, directs data analysis, and disseminates results through academic publications. His research focuses on poverty, particularly as it relates to low-wage labor markets, crime, and housing. His research has been published in high quality economics field journals and presented widely for policy audiences. Prior to coming to Notre Dame, David received a Bachelor's degree from Butler University and earned his PhD in Economics from Georgetown University. He worked for four years at Hope College in Holland, Michigan as an Assistant Professor. David also contributes his valuable expertise on the Chicago Cubs, small town Indiana, and literature for toddlers.*

# DAVID PHILLIPS

## Why did you join LEO?

A decade ago, I started a Ph.D. because I was good at math and thought God could use a person with an economics graduate degree to fight poverty. Actually doing that in reality turned out to be a bit more complicated, but that's still my basic goal. About 18 months ago, I became convinced that I could best fulfill that calling by becoming part of LEO. Notre Dame holds a unique place in higher education with its combination of academic quality, alumni engagement, and Christian commitment. LEO has managed to leverage that place to create a lab that has an unusual combination of intellectual rigor, access to resources, and real connections with agencies doing day-to-day anti-poverty work. I was glad to join up. And it helps that they built it 30 miles from where I grew up.

## In your opinion, what role does research play in reducing poverty?

Research facilitates communication and understanding along a chain of people. People who are poor do not regularly interact with policymakers, donors, and others with the most decision-making power. When those groups do meet, miscommunication can dominate. Field experiments, statistical evidence, and academic research provide an opportunity to present the voices of people struggling with poverty in the language of those who have the most power to effect change. At their best, our tables of statistics allow those who struggle with poverty to say in the most succinct and accurate way possible, "this is what my life looks like, and here's how the decisions you make affect me." Better understanding will not fix everything that is broken, but I have hope that a little bit of light makes a difference.

## What makes LEO's approach to research unique?

Many economists evaluate the effectiveness of anti-poverty interventions. Few build an organization that encourages researchers to partner sustainably with service providers. Collaborations with service providers are messier and more likely to fail than research projects completed entirely in an office. There are so many more moving parts! As a result, many academics who want to achieve tenure or build a reputation avoid complicated collaboration. LEO has created an alternative structure. Research faculty work for LEO full time, which allows us to make vital but slow to pay off investments in relationships with service providers. The permanent staff manage the organizational structure and the details of complicated projects that academics like me would bungle. All of this allows us to focus on making a deeper impact.

## How do you see LEO expanding in the next few years?

First, I think state and local governments will increasingly look to partner with LEO on evaluating anti-poverty programs that they fund. Government frequently conducts anti-poverty work through local non-profit organizations, and evaluating such programs requires coordinating and compromising among researchers, local government, and non-profit service providers. Experience helps. Through our collaboration in Rochester (see Research Project Update), we have built a capacity for this work.

Second, I think LEO will become known for leading a wave of rigorous research on homelessness. While there is some good work out there, few studies rigorously measure the effectiveness of responses to homelessness. LEO's on-going work on Chicago's Homelessness Prevention Call Center has given us a prominent place in this arena already.

I am excited about a pair of early stage collaborations with counties, Santa Clara (CA) and King (WA), where we are building on both of these strengths. In both places we aim to measure the impact of common interventions against homelessness which are funded by local government and implemented by local non-profits.

# BY THE NUMBERS: DEMONSTRATED NEED IN BRIDGES TO SUCCESS TARGET NEIGHBORHOODS

