

# On the Right Track

## COMPASS Coaches Homeless Parents on the Road to Employment

by Suzan Sherman

Earlier this year Ana Rodriguez, 25 years old and 31 weeks pregnant with her son, found herself in a homeless shelter with her 11-month-old daughter. She had been working as an assistant manager at a local retail-clothing chain in northeastern Massachusetts, a low-wage position that did not provide nearly enough money to pay her rent and other expenses. In a fit of frustration, she quit her job and began the merry-go-round of sleeping on various friends' couches. "I just couldn't support myself," Ana says plainly. After a time, with nowhere else to go, she arrived at the Lawrence Department of Transitional Assistance, which promptly placed her in a family shelter in nearby Haverhill.

Family shelters most often serve single mothers, 90 percent of whom suffer from emotional and physical trauma, including but not limited to the effects of child abuse, domestic violence, rape, and homelessness itself. A majority of these mothers are without a high school degree; have never garnered a substantial income of their own; lack support, role models, and social networks; and struggle to support themselves and their families. Their work his-

stories are often skimpy at best. Ana might have remained wholly dependent on state and federal assistance had it not been for her housing advocate at the shelter, who provided her with a flyer from COMPASS Community Collaborative—a job-training and placement program—and encouraged her to give them a call.

COMPASS, which has offices in Lawrence and Lexington, began in 2002 as a setting for expressive therapy, women's groups, and parent-child play groups aimed at strengthening relationships within homeless families. Those at the organization eventually realized that their work, though beneficial, was more of a Band-Aid than part of a long-term solution for the growing family homelessness epidemic in Massachusetts. "While these activities provided a voice, stress reduction, and emotional support for families," says Jodi Wilinsky Hill, COMPASS for Kids' founder and executive director, "there were no measurable long-term impacts of our work. When families exited shelter, they were no better positioned to do better than they were when they entered shelter. With an acute affordable-housing shortage in Massachusetts and long, damaging shelter stays, we recognized that we wanted to do more about the multigenerational tragedy that is family homelessness. Access to education and jobs as the core of family economic development became our new focus—our mission." In 2011 COMPASS scaled up its programming by launching a workforce component, with the knowledge that economic self-sufficiency is the key to stability and a brighter future. Recent statistics underscore the challenge the organization faces: in July 2014 there were 3,386 homeless families in the state living in emergency-assistance shelters and motels, a marked increase from three years before, when 2,651 families were documented as homeless.

Tiffany works behind the counter at Coffee Cann after completing the COMPASS program, taking a step towards financial independence.



Nonetheless, the still relatively new COMPASS Community Collaborative has achieved some impressive outcomes: over the past three years, it has enrolled 94 parents in nine cycles of its work-skills programming, with a 70 percent graduation rate. Fifty-two percent of graduates have been hired full-time by the companies that provided their paid internships through COMPASS. More than 80 percent of those hires still held their jobs after three months. Eighty percent of graduates have found employment after completing the COMPASS program, many of them in long-term positions.

After giving birth to her son, Ana took her housing advocate's suggestion and contacted COMPASS. She spoke to the program manager in the Lawrence office, Leslie Kent, who encouraged her to attend one of their weekly information sessions. Past program graduates co-run these sessions along with COMPASS staff, so that prospective participants hear of their peers' positive experiences firsthand. Participants are then encouraged to attend one-on-one intake sessions with COMPASS staff members, who gather information on their clients' work and educational histories and potential career interests.

At her intake session, Ana signed on to have Leslie as her coach, to guide her through the program. COMPASS considers coaching—a blend of conventional life-coaching techniques with trauma-informed case management—to be at the heart of its work. Staff coaches work tirelessly and over the long term with participants as well as graduates. Between meetings, participants can access staff in person or by phone, text, or email, and staff members even make shelter visits when necessary to ensure participant success.

Based on clients' individual work histories, education levels, and personal interests, coaches place them in one of five career tracks. They consist of the job-search-only track, for those few with strong work histories; a soft-skills "boot camp" and job-search track, which includes stress management as well as behavioral- and parenting-skills components; a paid on-the-job-training internship track, for participants who need to build their résumés; a personal-care-assistant track, for those interested in exploring the health care field; and a community-college track, in which child development and computer courses are offered at the local Northern Essex Community College and Cambridge College, along with the soft-skills and job-search components.

The COMPASS workforce program also assists families in developing financial literacy and learning to save money through 12-hour courses provided by Lawrence Community Works, the local community development organization. In addition, the organization helps with transportation to and from the work-



After completing the COMPASS program, single mother Kimberly took an assistant teacher position at COMPASS partner Little Sprouts and a year later obtained an early childhood teaching position with a 40 percent increase in pay.

place (which includes stopgap funding for public transportation, gas subsidies, and organized carpooling). COMPASS supports clients as they pursue educational goals (through GED classes, training in English for Speakers of Other Languages, or ESOL, and college enrollment). Finally, the group works to foster professional skills, such as writing successful cover letters, résumés, and thank-you notes as well as doing prep work that includes conducting mock job interviews, understanding work-appropriate clothing, and training in the importance of punctuality and conflict resolution.

"Since I was little, I had wanted to become a nurse," Ana says, so it was a natural fit for her to enroll in COMPASS's personal-care-assistance program. "The training was hard at first," Ana admits. "Every day from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. for eight weeks. I put my kids to bed at 6 p.m. and then did my homework afterward."

A few weeks after graduating from the program, Ana was hired as a part-time nursing assistant at Wingate Healthcare, a senior-living facility, and she is looking for supplemental work. With COMPASS's encouragement, Ana opened her own bank account. She and her two children currently reside in housing subsidized by the state, where she pays 30 percent of the rent, but Ana hopes to save enough money to afford a market-rate apartment when the subsidy reaches its end, in two years. "I'm truly grateful to COMPASS," Ana says. "I learned how to be presentable in going on job interviews and to send thank-you notes afterward. Without their help, I wouldn't have been able to move forward."

Like many formerly homeless adults, Ana has only a tenuous connection to her original family. The support and encouragement



Carmen obtained a job with GEM Shipping after graduating from COMPASS and is working hard to advance her career.

that she and others in the program desperately needed have come through her relationship with Leslie and other COMPASS staff members, among them Paul Fisher, the employment training specialist, and Marianne Pelletier, who co-founded COMPASS Community Collaborative and pinch-hits when needed as an instructor, program manager, coach, or resource advisor. COMPASS graduates have also been known to form makeshift extended families and look out for one another.

Hill is equally committed to connecting with the population she serves. “Everyone gets my personal cell phone number, and not one person has ever abused it,” she says.

Hill says that the COMPASS program could have never become the success that it is without its connection to Susan Leger Ferraro, the CEO of Little Sprouts, a local child care provider with multiple locations throughout the region. Ferraro, a single mom, began Little Sprouts when she was 17 and has grown her company from \$15,000 to \$18 million in annual revenue. Hill describes Ferraro fondly as a “creative problem-solver.” Hill first met Ferraro at the Little Sprouts in Lawrence in 2007, when she had hit a roadblock in developing the COMPASS Community Collaborative pilot program. At the time COMPASS was serving homeless single moms and their children living in congregate shelters in Waltham. “One of my program managers introduced me to Ferraro in an effort to solve an acute shortage of child care voucher slots for the children of the mothers we had hoped to have in our program,” Hill recalls. “At the time, we had funding from the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance to serve 40 families, but none of the young children in these families were in early-childhood programs, and there was no voucher space near the shelters.”

Ferraro was able to provide 40 voucher slots at Little Sprouts to COMPASS children, a game-changer for Hill, who could now offer child care to mothers who would have otherwise never been able to attend the program. In addition, Ferraro began hiring COMPASS graduates for paid on-the-job training in early-education care, which in turn gave mothers much-needed work experience and provided them with references for other positions in the future. “This is about opening doors,” Ferraro says. “It’s been great collaborating with COMPASS, and they’ve been such an asset to our organization by making our team feel empowered in the process of helping to create better lives for young-adult parents trying to make their way in the world.”

Last fall, after completing the COMPASS early-education training and an internship at Little Sprouts, Yorian Vega, 31, was hired there as a part-time employee. She now works 40 hours a week as a teacher of toddlers. Although Little Sprouts does not provide her family’s medical insurance—Yorian has twin boys, age 10, and a 12-year-old son—she is able to receive care through MassHealth, a public insurance program for low- and medium-income Massachusetts residents. It was only a year ago, after being laid off from her job as a receptionist in a Spanish-language setting, that Yorian grew increasingly concerned that she would lose her market-rate apartment. Through HomeBase, a homelessness-prevention program in New England that offers financial assistance for those in need of funds for rent, utility bills, and other housing expenses, she was referred to COMPASS. Soon afterward, Leslie became Yorian’s coach.

“I knew that I wanted to work with kids,” Yorian says, “but I was so concerned about my English.” When Yorian first arrived in Massachusetts two years before, after being told by doctors in her native Puerto Rico that one of her twins had a severe medical problem and might not walk in the future, she did not speak more than a few words of English. Knowing no one in Massachusetts except for a couple of cousins who lived in Lawrence, she made her way from San Juan to Shriners Hospital for Children, in Springfield, followed by Boston Children’s Hospital for the specialized medical treatment that her son would not have received in Puerto Rico. Her son’s prognosis improved considerably in Massachusetts, but Yorian still wasn’t speaking English. “I knew that I needed to try [to speak English] in order to get work, and Leslie kept telling me that I could do it.” Without any formal training in the language, she simply began learning and speaking it as well as she could, making great progress.

The Little Sprouts child care facility where Yorian works is a 20-minute walk from her apartment; thanks to her job, she has not had to move to a smaller market-rate apartment or seek shelter. At the end of the workday, she takes a taxi home to ensure that she is there when her kids return from school. “The program was amazing for bettering my life,” Yorian says. “And I still talk to Leslie all the time.”

Besides Little Sprouts, COMPASS also has job-placement relationships with Salvatore's, a restaurant in Lawrence, which prepares participants for careers in the restaurant and customer-service industries, and Gemline, another Lawrence-based business, which offers manufacturing and screen-printing experience. Not coincidentally, Ferraro is on the corporate board of Gemline, a longtime friend of COMPASS. Other relationships with local businesses are in the works, with the goal of growing COMPASS's internship component, though Hill admits, "Development is a long process. We just show up and be responsive, and try to understand what it is that a potential employer needs from us on an entry level."

A majority of the jobs for which COMPASS provides placement are, Hill readily admits, not adequate for fully sustainable, independent living, since higher-wage positions typically require college degrees; nonetheless, being employed is a step in the right direction. "A family still might need food stamps or state medical insurance" while working in these jobs, Hill explains, "and although a college degree is a long process, we try to keep people motivated over the long term."

Because the COMPASS Community Collaborative is partially funded by federal Workforce Investment Act dollars, participants must be legally able to work in the United States. "Most of the COMPASS training program is done in English, and everyone must have functional English for the jobs placement," Hill says—"it's the law." Lawrence, which has historically been considered the "immigrant city" of northeastern Massachusetts, is now 75 percent Hispanic, and although some homeless parents lack English-language proficiency, COMPASS connects them with community organizations that provide ESOL as a stepping stone to job readiness. Another major barrier to job placement is one's Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) status, as a substantial number of families have members with records of

some kind. Less concerned with family members' past than with getting them back on track, Salvatore's does not screen for CORI, and Gemline does so only for felonies, making more clients eligible for job placement.

COMPASS recently held a fundraiser, which Hill describes as an exuberant "dance party where we make new friends. We connect housed people in the community to what we do." In the process, they raised \$100,000. "But that amount of money only serves about 15 families," Hill says, "since the work we do costs \$5,000 to \$10,000 per family for a year of training." In addition to events such as the dance-party fundraiser, Hill relentlessly generates money by approaching private donors; forming partnerships with other agencies; subcontracting, or receiving part of the money from grants to other organizations in exchange for doing part of the work; and, of course, writing her own grant applications. "We just got funding to do workforce development for people living in motels," Hill says. (As part of growing phenomenon, 200 Massachusetts families currently reside in motels.)

To make sure they are known in the community, COMPASS performs outreach at the various local homeless shelters and also has connections to faith-based groups and community-development organizations. Prior to initiating its workplace component, COMPASS had already formed solid relations and a track record with key state agencies as well as other nonprofits and funders that operate in the family-homelessness arena in Massachusetts. Most notable among them is Emmaus Inc., based in Haverhill, an organization that oversees all of the state-funded shelter, transitional housing, and temporary housing in the Lawrence region and provides most of the referrals for COMPASS's Lawrence program.

The COMPASS Community Collaborative is also currently a participant in the new Lawrence Working Families Initiative, which is in the process of creating a family resource center designed to increase the income of parents in the Lawrence public school system by 15 percent over 10 years. That citywide effort was awarded first prize in the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's Working Cities Challenge competition, aimed at supporting leaders who are reaching across sectors to ensure that smaller cities in Massachusetts are places of opportunity and prosperity for all their residents. The competition has funding and strategic partners from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors in addition to the Federal Reserve Bank.

What are Hill's long-term goals for COMPASS? "Replicate workforce solutions throughout the state," she says without missing a beat, "and be loud and clear." ■



Graduates of COMPASS celebrate completing the program. After graduation, they will receive continued support as they seek employment and further education.