

# Managing Workfare: The Case of the Work Experience Program in the New York City Parks Department



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The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for  
**The Business of Government**

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Founded in 1998 by PricewaterhouseCoopers, the Endowment is one of the ways that PricewaterhouseCoopers seeks to advance knowledge on how to improve public sector effectiveness. The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment focuses on the future of the operation and management of the public sector.

**Managing Workfare:**  
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# Foreword

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On behalf of the PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for the Business of Government, we are pleased to publish the Endowment's first grant report. When we launched the Endowment in July 1998, we especially looked forward to publishing the results of our first grant. Having now reached that milestone, during the next year the Endowment will publish more than 30 research reports prepared by other Endowment grantees.

We would like to commend Steve Cohen, Vice Dean of the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, for his excellent study. We believe that *Managing Workfare: The Case of the Work Experience Program in the New York City Parks Department* will be a valuable resource for federal, state, and local executives seeking lessons learned about implementing welfare-to-work programs. As noted by Dean Cohen in his Executive Summary, the paper takes no ideological position on the policy issue of workfare. Instead, the paper aims to assist government executives in meeting the challenge of implementing new federal programs.

The goal of the PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for the Business of Government is to stimulate research and facilitate discussion on new approaches to improving the effectiveness of government at the federal, state, local, and international levels. With the publication of Dean Cohen's outstanding paper, we believe that the PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment has made an important first step toward meeting our goals. We hope that you enjoy reading *Managing Workfare: The Case of the Work Experience Program in the New York City Parks Department* and find it useful.

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# Executive Summary

The chief goal of this study is to identify and discuss the lessons that other localities can learn from New York City's experiences with managing workfare workers; to identify the methods used to train, manage, and deploy this temporary, part-time work force. Much of the literature on welfare-to-work includes an ideological discussion either in favor of or against workfare. This paper takes no position on the policy issue of workfare. Instead it treats this new workforce as a given and as a challenge that public and nonprofit managers will deal with throughout the United States.

The Parks Department has been an aggressive and effective user of workfare labor. At its peak in 1998 this number topped 6,700 before stabilizing at about 5,000 in early 1999. The work of Work Experience Program (WEP) employees has substantially improved the cleanliness of the parks during a time of continued budget stringency. In December 1993, after a long period of cutback, the Parks Department had a staff of 3,192. In November 1998 the Department's head count stood at 2,122. Without WEP workers, New York City residents would have seen a noticeable decline in the cleanliness of the parks during the 1990s.

The New York City parks system consists of 27,944 acres of parkland and other properties including 2.6 million park and street trees. Total parks personnel is less than half the level it was two decades ago. Capital and operating expenditure levels have recently increased after a long period of relative decline. Since most of the people

in New York City live in apartment buildings, parks are an essential municipal service. New York City parks not only need to be managed as a business, they need to be managed according to cutting edge business practices.

Over the past decade, the Department of Parks and Recreation has made a number of efforts to improve the management of New York's park system. In 1997, citywide cleanliness ratings for parks reached 95% acceptable and overall condition rose to 75% acceptable. This contrasts with cleanliness ratings of 75% acceptable and condition ratings of 39% acceptable in 1994.

Work that WEP workers have been assigned to varies from site to site. At New York City's Department of Parks & Recreation, common WEP worker tasks include cleaning bathrooms, sweeping leaves, picking up garbage, landscaping, removing graffiti, mowing grass, repairing and maintaining facilities, working in recreation centers, and performing routine clerical tasks in administrative offices. A large portion of the daily upkeep of parks involves the removal of litter, and therefore, most of the hours worked by WEP personnel have been devoted to picking up trash in parks.

*Perhaps the most significant lesson learned in New York City's Parks WEP experiment is that workfare can work. The Department has absorbed a workforce of over 5,000 part-time, diverse, and untrained workers and put them to productive use, with visible results.*

There are a number of specific lessons that other localities might consider when implementing workfare programs:

- Begin workfare employees with brief, essential training in job safety and the tasks they are being asked to perform. Provide the basic uniforms (identification, gloves, boots, winter clothing) and equipment needed to perform these tasks.
- Promote line workers with direct knowledge of the work being performed to manage crews of workfare workers.
- Create special all-workfare crews that are managed by these newly promoted regular employees.
- Make a real effort to include workfare employees in the organization's daily life. This includes employee recognition programs and recognition of workfare contributions in routine messages from management about the organization.
- Provide substantial and meaningful opportunities to find full-time regular employment both within and outside the department. Provide training both in marketable skills and in job readiness — appearance, punctuality, and communication.
- Assume that a higher than typical amount of turnover and absenteeism will take place and build crews of sufficient size to perform without all of its members present.
- Create a separate organizational unit within the Parks Department to deal with the unique personnel, paperwork, and training needs of workfare workers, but then assign these workers to work units within the regular operational command structure.

# Introduction

## **Background: The New York City Parks System and the Need for Management Innovation**

The principal mission of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) is to assure that the parks, beaches, playgrounds, stadia, marinas, recreation facilities, gardens, malls, squares, and public spaces are clean, safe, and attractive for the health and enjoyment of the people. This mission is strongly supported by the citizenry of New York City. A solid majority of New Yorkers — 62%, according to a 1994 Commonwealth Fund survey — believe that this mission is so important that parks are as essential a public service as police protection, fire protection, and sanitation.

The New York City parks system consists of 27,944 acres of parkland and other properties including 2.6 million park and street trees. Parks account for almost 20,000 acres, while non-park properties make up the remainder. Non-park properties typically include playgrounds; expressway and parkway land; malls, strips, and plots; circles, squares, and triangles. New York City runs 479 parks, but five of its best known parks (Central Park in Manhattan, Flushing Meadows-Corona in Queens, Prospect Park in Brooklyn, Van Cortlandt-Pelham Bay in the Bronx, and the Greenbelt in Staten Island) make up nearly 41% of all the acreage. In addition to these parks, there are 34 parks above 100 acres each. These parks account for 8,385 acres (approximately 43% of all parkland). Thus, 39 large parks account

for approximately 84% of parkland. The 41 medium-sized parks (20-100 acres) and 399 small parks (under 20 acres) account for the remaining 16% (3,072 acres). Park facilities include 623 ball fields, 541 tennis courts, 33 outdoor swimming pools, 10 indoor swimming pools, 31 recreation and senior centers, 14 miles of beaches, 13 golf courses, 6 ice rinks, 4 major stadiums, and 5 zoos.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, DPR concentrated on maintaining the parks and recreational facilities that already existed. Under the leadership of Parks Commissioner Henry Stern, acquisition of parks space has quietly resumed. Under the Giuliani Administration, the Department has added a total of 1,488 acres of parkland to the city's holdings. In recent years, DPR has continued to operate under tight financial constraints. Capital and operating expenditure levels have recently increased after a long period of relative decline. The 1999 budget for DPR called for \$183 million in capital spending and \$170 million in operating funds. In 1996, DPR spent \$155 million on capital projects and \$145 million on operations, compared with \$95 million and \$132 million respectively in 1992. In addition, total parks personnel is less than half the level it was two decades ago. In December 1993, after a long period of cutback, the Parks Department had a staff of 3,192. In November 1998, the Department's head count stood at 2,122.

While in some parts of the United States parks are a pleasant addition to outdoor life that is primarily based in backyards, for most people in New York

City the park is their backyard. For while most of the land in New York City sits beneath single-family homes, most of the people in New York City live in apartment buildings. All of this is to say that parks are an essential municipal service in New York, and in an era of tough resource choices, not only need to be managed as a business, they need to be managed according to cutting edge business practices. The city's Parks Department needs to creatively deploy all the resources they can muster, including volunteer labor, individual and corporate donations, and welfare workers.

## The Use of Management Innovation Strategies at the Department of Parks and Recreation

Over the past decade the Department of Parks and Recreation has made a number of efforts to improve the management of New York's parks system. The previous Parks commissioner, Betsy Gotbaum, attempted to bring total quality management (TQM) into the Department. More recently the Department has attempted to improve parks management by improving its performance measurement system. It has dramatically increased routine inspections of the most utilized parts of the parks system and cooperated with the nonprofit NYC Parks Council and its efforts to survey customer satisfaction with the parks. The Department also cooperated with the Parks Council's effort to develop and pilot-test a method for inspecting the parts of the parks that remain outside the parks inspection system.

Currently, the Department's inspection system focuses on the relatively small portion of the parks that are most intensely utilized. In 1997, citywide cleanliness ratings for parks reached 95% acceptable and overall condition rose to 75% acceptable. This contrasts with cleanliness ratings of 75% acceptable and condition ratings of 39% acceptable in 1994. The inspection system developed by the Parks Council in the summer of 1998 is a low-cost method, that uses volunteers to help examine the other areas in the park system. This inspection system found that 56% of the conditions were acceptable in the areas inspected outside the heavily utilized areas routinely inspected by the Parks Department.

In addition to efforts to improve customer-orientation and performance measurement, the Department has undertaken a number of other innovative initiatives:

- **Managed competition:** The Department has implemented two pilot projects to contract out parks clean-up and maintenance functions in 90 park facilities. The aim of this contracting effort is to reduce the costs of routine operations.
- **Increased computerization:** DPR uses computer-assisted design in planning capital projects. As a result, the time involved in drafting designs has been reduced. The Department computerized registration in all seven Manhattan recreation centers in 1996. DPR now issues all tennis permits through a computerized system and has begun to implement computerized registration in all of the city's recreation centers. The Department also utilizes hand-held computers to speed park inspections.
- **Public-private partnerships:** The Department has made extensive use of volunteers and interns and has worked with a number of non-governmental organizations in an effort to raise funds and co-sponsor programs. A number of organizations have raised millions of dollars to support parks, including the City Parks Foundation, the Central Park Conservancy, the Prospect Park Alliance, and the Riverside Park Fund. In 1998 the Parks Department turned over the management of Central Park to the Central Park Conservancy.
- **The use of workfare employees:** The Parks Department has been an aggressive and effective user of workfare labor. By the end of 1995, the Parks Department employed over 3,600 participants in the city's employment program for Home Relief Recipients, the Work Experience Program (WEP). At its peak in 1998 this number topped 6,700 before stabilizing at about 5,000 in early 1999. The Department manages one of New York City's largest WEP workforces. The work of WEP employees has substantially improved the cleanliness of the parks during a time of continued budget stringency.

## Study Objectives and Methods

This most recent innovation, the use of workfare employees in park maintenance, is the subject of this report. My related research strongly indicates that for the foreseeable future many local governments in the United States will be faced with the problem and opportunity presented by the presence of former welfare recipients in their workforce. New York City has the largest local workfare population in the United States, and the Parks Department manages one of the city's largest WEP workforces. Therefore, the chief goal of this study is to identify and discuss the lessons that other localities can learn from New York City's experiences with managing workfare workers.

This study focused on methods used to train, manage, and deploy this temporary, part-time workforce. Much of the literature on welfare-to-work includes an ideological discussion either in favor of or against workfare. This research takes no position on the policy issue of workfare. Instead it treats this new workforce as a given and as a challenge that public and nonprofit managers will confront throughout the United States. While cities such as Indianapolis now have a labor shortage and no need for public service employment, not all cities can avoid workfare; should the economy contract, even Indianapolis may confront this problem.

This study addresses the following questions:

- What work have WEP workers been assigned?
- How have WEP workers been trained to perform their assigned tasks?
- Who has managed their work and how have they responded to management?
- Are there any potential career paths leading welfare workers into the regular workforce? If not, can and should such a path be developed?
- What problems has this workforce presented to management?
- How have these problems been addressed?
- What problems caused by WEP workers remain unresolved? What suggestions do managers and the workers have for addressing these problems?

- What lessons does the New York experience provide for other jurisdictions? In what ways is New York unique and in what ways is it typical?
- What lessons does the New York experience offer for managing part-time and temporary workers who are not former welfare recipients?

The use of untrained, part-time, temporary workers is one faced by many governments and private organizations. The goal of this study is to develop some methods for utilizing this workforce more effectively.

To address these issues, a team of faculty and graduate students interviewed senior managers in the DPR who are responsible for coordinating and deploying WEP workers, as well as non-profit managers and analysts outside the Department with substantive knowledge of the program.<sup>2</sup> We also interviewed several of the line managers involved in directly managing this workforce.

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<sup>2</sup> Over 20 current and past Parks employees and outside experts agreed to be interviewed for this study and provided much of the information included here. I greatly appreciate their assistance. See Appendix for the interview guide used in this study.

# Study Findings

## The Scope and Impact of WEP

Beginning in 1995, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani committed his administration to creating the largest workfare program in the United States, the Work Experience Program (WEP). In New York City, public assistance recipients work off their benefits in government and nonprofit agencies. Administered by the Human Resources Administration, program participants are assigned primarily to maintenance, office services, and human services. As of October 1998, 33,794 welfare recipients were participating in the city's workfare program. At that time, approximately 20 percent, or 5,928 of all WEP workers were assigned to the Department of Parks and Recreation. Only two months later (December 1998), the number of WEP workers within Parks had dropped to 5,171, with a distribution of 1,750 in the Bronx, 1,375 in Brooklyn, 1,136 in Manhattan, 800 in Queens, and 110 in Staten Island. This decline is due, in part, to the lower demand for labor in the parks during winter months, when far fewer people use the parks. It is also due to a reduction in the number of workfare referrals being sent to the Parks Department by the city's Human Resources Administration.

From a management perspective, these fluctuations create significant challenges to operations managers as they seek to organize the work of a temporary, variable workforce. The Department of Parks and Recreation is quite dependent on the WEP workforce. In the 1990s field maintenance staff in the Department dropped from approximately 2,800 to less than 1,200. Without WEP, it is unlikely that

the Department could keep up with routine maintenance and clean-up.

Cleanliness of the parks, particularly the city's large and well-known "flagship parks" such as Central Park in Manhattan and Prospect Park in Brooklyn, has gone up dramatically due to this new workforce. The organized and significant presence of WEP workers and their supervisors in the parks have improved safety and security of the parks and made them a more inviting place to visit. Many park managers believe that WEP is highly cost effective and sustainable over the long run. One observed that "the contribution of WEP workers has been huge...cleanliness is up from 60 to 90% largely due to WEPs. Parks are cleaner than they have ever been." Another noted that they were "particularly helpful to small parks where manpower has always been short." Nearly every park staff person and manager that we interviewed stated that the improved appearance of parks in New York City is largely attributable to the WEP workers and the Department's ability to effectively deploy this new workforce.

The New York City public workforce is heavily unionized. During the period of this study, District Council 37 (DC 37) of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the union representing 120,000 city workers and all non-management parks staff, was in the midst of considerable turmoil. In late 1998, the media uncovered a scandal at DC 37. Apparently, the union's leadership had stuffed the ballot box in order to pass an unpopular contract it had negotiated with

the city. There was substantial opposition to that contract because it included a pay freeze. As a result of the scandal, its top leadership was forced out of office and replaced by a trustee sent in from national headquarters. In February 1999, the union sued the city, accusing it of using workfare workers in parks to replace the work formerly done by city employees. Under DC 37's previous leadership, the union supported the expansion of workfare. The new leadership sought to reduce the scope of the program.

The city government maintained that the union misunderstood the sequence of events. Staff cuts through attrition came first, and the condition of the parks deteriorated for some time before WEP workers came on board and helped improve the parks. This appears to be the case, for while WEP workers have certainly replaced work that had once been done by parks employees, many of those employees were attrited long before WEP arrived. While it is difficult to predict the future, it is unlikely that this lawsuit will reduce the presence of WEP workers in New York City's parks.

## What work have WEP workers been assigned?

Work that WEP workers have been assigned to varies from site to site. At the Department of Parks & Recreation, common WEP worker tasks include picking up garbage, cleaning bathrooms, sweeping leaves, working on Summer Stage setting up for concerts, landscaping, planting and pruning trees, removing dead trees and stumps, removing graffiti, mowing grass, repairing and maintaining facilities including park benches and playground equipment, working in recreation centers, and performing routine clerical tasks in administrative offices. Most of the person hours worked by WEP personnel have been devoted to picking up trash in parks. One Parks staffer noted, "They do many things — cleaning is most obvious and they clean everything. It has been necessary to use them as mobile crews rather than sector based,<sup>3</sup> which is preferable due to their temporary status and less regular attendance. They have also served as pruners of hedges, cutting lawns, tree pruners, security and traffic control for special events. They have done well in low

<sup>3</sup> Not all WEP crews were mobile. In other parks some crews were assigned to specific locations.

skill and high skill positions with the right attitude and proper supervision."

## How have WEP workers been trained?

The city's Human Resources Administration (HRA) is responsible for assigning welfare recipients to a workfare assignment. Parks holds orientation sessions for the new WEP workers every two weeks in each borough. The first day is a borough-wide orientation where workers get briefed on WEP requirements, HRA policies and procedures, and Parks policies and procedures.

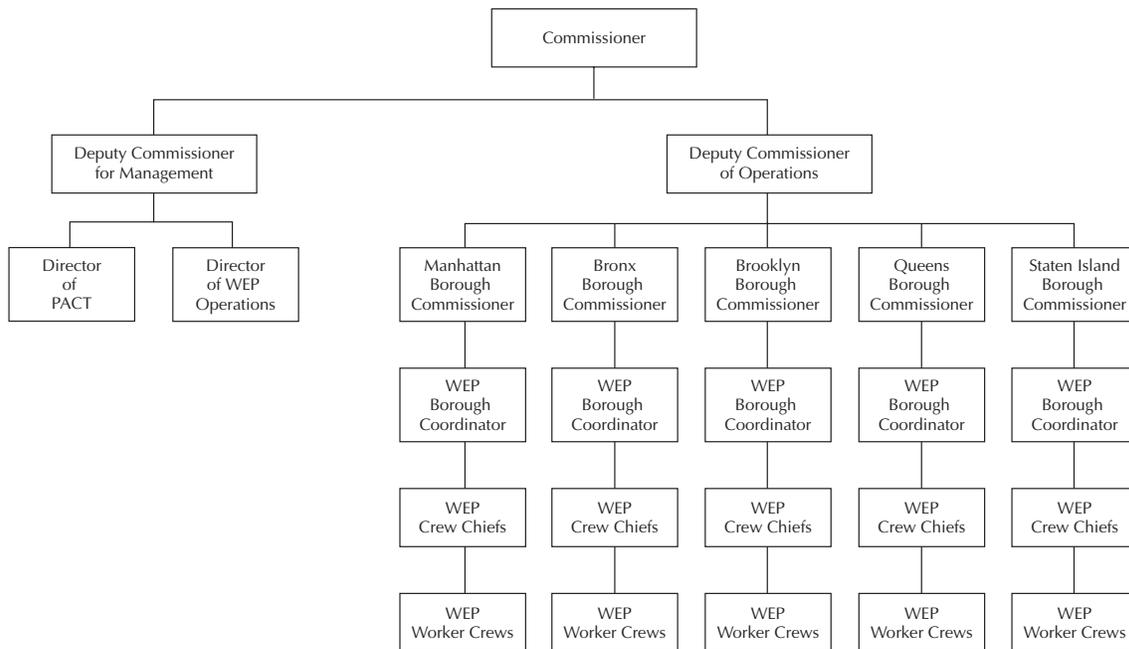
During the orientation the program's participants learn about rules governing their "right to know" about any chemicals or toxic substances they could come into contact with in the workplace. WEP workers also receive some basic safety training, especially in dealing with medical waste or drug-related waste.

The training session reviews the rules and procedures for WEP workers — primarily the time limits for workfare and documentation requirements to maintain welfare benefits. Trainees watch a video on sexual harassment and one on safety in the workplace. All WEP workers participate in an extensive one-on-one interview to see if they have interest and/or qualify for several programs that Parks offers to encourage full-time employment. The participants are also clearly told that this is their WEP assignment and it will not lead to full-time employment at Parks.

When they arrive at their worksite the next day, the crew chiefs provide a more detailed explanation of the work they will be doing, what is expected of them, and scheduling requirements. When we asked park managers about WEP training, a number referred to on-the-job training for fairly routine tasks. One park manager noted:

"Training in a particular specialization was not as important as the worker's regular work skills and work behavior. Their on-the-job attention, work habits, good attitude, and energy is what leads to regular placements ... and many WEP workers have moved up and into civil service titles this way."

Exhibit 1: Organization of Workfare Workers in the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation



## Who has managed their work and how have they responded to management?

WEP management is divided into two elements: (1) recruitment, training, deployment, and administration and (2) the management of day-to-day tasks. The second element is fully integrated into the parks borough-based command structure. Borough commissioners manage borough-wide organizations that are divided into districts. Each district has a number of work crews. Many of these work crews are now comprised of WEP workers, managed by recently promoted line workers. One way in which support for WEP was generated in the Parks Department is that many of the people managing workfare crews used to be clean-up crew members themselves before WEP began. These first-time managers are specifically promoted to the job of WEP supervisor. One park manager stated, "They supervise 15-20 people doing essentially what they used to do.... So it's not complicated and there is not much formal training except for things like sexual harassment and interpersonal issues that might come up.... This is a good deal for the workers and that is why the unions don't complain."

**WEP Administration.** The Director of WEP Operations reports directly to the Deputy Commissioner for Management about the day-to-day administration of the Work Experience Program (See Exhibit 1). WEP Operations includes all administrative aspects of the Work Experience Program but does not include the day-to-day Management of WEP workers. The Director of WEP Operations coordinates those administrative tasks and is also responsible for running the Central WEP Office. She makes policy recommendations, serves as the Department's resident expert on city, state, and federal welfare policy, and serves as agency representative for WEP issues.

The Central WEP Office is staffed by WEP analysts, who are responsible for day-to-day administration including answering questions about WEP from within Parks, developing curriculum/teaching, managing supplies, and running specific WEP training and employment programs. The WEP Personnel Office is run by a WEP Personnel Coordinator, and a staff of 3 assistant coordinators. The WEP Personnel Coordinator reports to the Parks Department's Director of Personnel. The Central Personnel Office is responsible for performing time sheet audits, obtaining data on new WEP

assignees from HRA, and producing WEP head-count charts. They also prepare WEP personnel manuals and perform Crew Chief evaluations.

At the borough level the program is overseen by the Deputy Chief of Operations (in Manhattan by the Chief of Administrative Services). Reporting to the Deputy Chief of Operations is the WEP Borough Coordinator. There are five borough coordinators for WEP, and in each of their offices there is an assistant coordinator and timekeepers. This elaborate administrative unit is needed to shield the Department's operations people — the people who actually do work in the parks — from the paperwork burden, training needs, and job placement programs required by this unique group of workers. While a separate organization was established to deal with the specific needs of WEP workers, their actual work assignments and the management of their daily tasks was fully integrated into the Department's traditional organization structure.

***Managing the Work of the WEP Workers.*** Directly supervising the WEP participants are crew chiefs. They report to park supervisors or park managers. There is no official relationship between the WEP borough coordinator and the crew chiefs, nor between the Director of WEP Operations and the crew chiefs. To reiterate this critical point: the NYC Parks Department has divided WEP management into two components: one administrative — to handle WEP's unique paperwork, recruitment, placement, and training needs; and one operational — to ensure that WEP workers are integrated into the Department's day-to-day borough command structure.

Crew chiefs work in the field, and many of them were Parks employees before WEP, earning supervisory status as WEP grew. When WEP started, these crew chiefs were not trained to be supervisors and many problems arose. In late 1997, the Department began a crew-chief training program. Crew chiefs in the field are now required to come in for a series of training seminars in record keeping, scheduling, conflict resolution, medical waste disposal procedures, motivation, and leadership. Some interviewees noted that these managerial tasks are new for crew chiefs, who only a few years

ago were line workers themselves. Some supervisors require additional training and support, and thus the Department is making efforts to assist these new first-time, front-line managers.

It is not clear if the management training given to crew chiefs is sufficient. One park manager commented, "Little training is given to the supervisors. While they don't need a tremendous amount of training given the simplicity of the assignments, they are first-time supervisors and they are managing new workers in the workplace, [so] they should get more training than they get. For now all they get is training in sexual harassment issues and other personnel procedures; nothing on the skills needed to be a manager and nothing ongoing." Another noted, "Supervisors could probably use more social-work type training to deal with conflict, bad attitudes, and drug use." However, WEP crew chiefs receive six full days of training in their first year and one or two days of supplemental training in subsequent years, which by New York City government norms is a relatively extensive training program.

### **Are there any potential career paths leading welfare workers into the regular workforce? If not, can and should such a path be developed?**

An atypical characteristic of this workforce is that the Department must take steps to facilitate outplacement of WEP workers from the welfare system to full-time employment. During orientation, participants are encouraged to continue their job search and are told that by documenting an interview with a business card or letter they will be excused from their hours that day and given carfare to reach their interview. The Parks Department is serious about facilitating the move from welfare to work and has developed several methods for encouraging this transition: (1) The PACT Program, (2) College WEP, and (3) Job Assistance Centers.

***Parks Career Training (PACT) Program:*** a 35 hour per week intensive training program that takes the most motivated WEP participants. This program requires that WEP workers work a full-time, rather than part-time, schedule in return for extra training and placement services. It is designed for those

Park WEP participants most committed to finding full-time jobs. The program has trainers, counselors, and job developers that help people develop skills in horticulture, security, clerical work, handyman tasks, and facility maintenance. PACT's five major components are: (1) job-readiness training, (2) marketable skill training, (3) job search assistance, (4) driver's license training, and (5) basic education instruction (GED).

PACT is a selective program that requires participants to "demonstrate" a strong desire to leave public assistance and to find full-time employment. The program selects people who distinguish themselves through "a good work ethic" and a "positive attitude." Participants need to be willing to be in training or at their work site for 35 hours a week regardless of their benefits. If the participant has not obtained a job after 10 months of this 35 hour a week program, he or she is put back into the general WEP program. If participants receive job offers and don't accept them, they are also put back into the general WEP program. A participant can leave PACT at any time. In 1996 and 1997 PACT trained a total of 1,021 people, 634 of whom found employment and left the welfare rolls. In 1998, the program nearly doubled in size to approximately 1,000 enrollees. While only a small proportion of the WEP population is enrolled in PACT, the program celebrated its 1000th job placement in 1998.

**College WEP:** a program in Parks that attempts to place Parks WEP participants who are currently enrolled in college, or have completed some college courses, in WEP assignments that use their skills and are related to their field of study or extracurricular interests. Placements are designed to avoid conflicts with students' academic schedules. Placements can include work as clerical assistants, computer assistants, technician's assistants, computer lab attendants, tutors, assistant sports coaches, preschool teacher's assistants, arts and crafts program assistants, and nursery assistants.

**Job Assistance Center (JAC):** a newer program that Parks began in the summer of 1998. This program is less intensive than PACT and is marketed slightly differently. JAC was designed for those who believe they are job-ready, but are confronted by too many barriers to employment (homelessness, child care

issues, criminal records, language barriers and/or methadone programs) to be considered by PACT or do not want to make the time commitment that PACT requires. JAC began in June 1998 and was initially offered only in Manhattan. By early 1999, there were five centers running in four boroughs, two of which were in Manhattan. Any WEP worker who expresses interest is invited to a JAC session.

The JAC program includes four full-day sessions for which attendees receive credit as work hours. When in the program, participants go to the center once a week. They have access to phones, fax machines, and newspapers. The first day is an orientation and resume writing workshop. The second day covers "Introduction to Job Searching on the Internet" and "Interviewing Techniques." Days three and four vary depending on the needs of participants. They can come to drop-in sessions and use the center's resources to search for a job, or they can come to workshops such as basic word processing, interviewing with a criminal record, mock interviews on videotape, conflict resolution, and other soft-skill classes.

After the fourth session, they can use the JAC as a resource room and also participate in new seminars; however, WEP workers must attend on their own time. The Parks Department provides mass transit fares to encourage attendance after the initial training sessions. After the fourth session, WEP workers can also be considered for interviews through the different job connections that JAC develops with businesses that express interest in hiring people on public assistance.

## **What problems has this workforce presented to management?**

Early in the program there were problems caused by lack of equipment, safety training, and well-thought-out assignments. These initial problems were quickly corrected, although others remained. One major problem of the WEP workforce is that they are assigned to the Parks Department without an assessment of their skills. They may be untrained or trained for different work. Some of the people assigned to Parks are trained as home health aides, cooks, or secretaries.

A deeper problem is that a significant amount of the workforce has little experience with the day-to-day world of work, hence tardiness and reliability can sometimes be a problem. Another issue is worker resentment and resistance. As workfare and time limits are new concepts for many people who have been on welfare for a while, workers may think they are entitled to their benefits and may not think they should have to work for them. Some welfare workers feel that they are being made to work for exploitative wages and therefore are sometimes unwilling to work or work with an "attitude." Finally, schedule issues come up, as WEP participants must deal with child care, family, or medical issues and do not come to work. One crew chief observed that "at times, I'm not sure who will be coming in to work on any particular day." Turnover can also be an issue, although this appears to vary. Some workers turn over fairly quickly, while others seem to stay a longer period of time. It appears that the majority of WEP workers stay for over 100 days.

A recent concern has been that as the local economy has gotten stronger, the best WEP workers have left the program for full-time work. While this is a success for welfare reform, it creates problems for parks management. The remaining WEP workforce is less work-ready than the one that preceded it. In addition, WEP workers do not have some of the skills of the regular workforce they replaced. Skills in plumbing, carpentry, and other areas are scarce, in part because the unions oppose giving the WEP workers this kind of training.

## **How have these problems been addressed?**

One approach used by the Parks Department has been to make the program more attractive to participants. This is done through initiatives such as the Job Assistance Centers and the PACT program. Additionally, there are possibilities for employment with the Parks Department that serve as incentives. When seasonal positions open up at the end of February, the Department tries to hire WEP workers to fill these openings. Some WEP workers have received training in carpentry, and others have been assigned to non-profits and volunteer groups

that may lead to permanent employment. The possibility of training and job opportunities help convince WEP workers that good work may be rewarded. According to some Parks employees, these potential opportunities help motivate the best WEP workers. The issue is whether the opportunities for upward mobility are sufficient for the number of workers enrolled in WEP. The recent increase in the size of the PACT program is an indication that the Department is working hard to increase the opportunities for upward mobility for their workfare employees. There are also monthly awards given and Christmas parties that provide incentives and a sense of community and belonging.

One interviewee mentioned that she was conducting an attrition analysis of the program. She has found that lately people have been dropping out of the program less frequently. This may be due to the additional programs and assistance that the WEP staff provide for their workfare participants. In dealing with absenteeism, the Department's strategy has been to take advantage of the large number of WEP workers and assemble work crews that are somewhat larger than necessary, with the assumption that some crews would have members absent.

The main strategy used by the Department is to view the WEP workers as a valuable part of the organization. They are viewed as important members of the team and a substantial effort is made to integrate them into the organization's life. They are included in award programs, provided with uniforms, equipment, and training, and also given opportunities for upward mobility. By appointing regular employees to management titles to supervise WEP workers, the Department neutralized one source of potential internal opposition to using WEP workers. All of this serves to improve the morale and motivation of the WEP workers and their supervisors. While there are workers and supervisors who are disgruntled with the situation in Parks, there is little question that the Department has developed an effective way to manage this workforce.

Thousands of part-time, untrained workers have been integrated into the daily work of the Parks Department. Parks cleanliness ratings are high as a result of this workforce. While there have been

start-up problems, the new managers who supervise WEP crews have gotten substantial, productive work from WEP workers.

### **What problems caused by WEP workers remain unresolved? What suggestions do managers and the workers have for addressing these problems?**

Many of the initial problems associated with the WEP program have been resolved. Safety training and proper uniforms and equipment were early visible problems that were quickly resolved.

Turnover has not been as rapid as some feared, and there is sufficient time on the job for it to be quite cost-effective to train workers for the tasks they are assigned. Most Parks mid-level and senior-level managers consider the program to be a great success.

The main problem remaining is not a direct operational management issue and is beyond the scope of this study, but certainly worth mentioning. This outstanding issue is the aspiration of WEP workers for status as regular employees. While the Parks Department has worked hard to include WEP workers in the life of the Department, these workers believe that they are second-class citizens. They feel they are not employees but welfare recipients providing taxpayers with work in return for their welfare check. Unlike the Depression-era public service workers in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) or the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), they do not hold public service jobs, but workfare assignments. This affects their morale and is an issue that is a fact of life in the work environment in the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.

Given these facts it is somewhat remarkable and certainly to the credit of all involved — the workers and Parks Department managers — that, in the words of one former Parks official, “Many WEP workers actually like the program and report feeling better about themselves for doing something good each day and having a place to go where they are needed. It is a self-esteem boost. I am

always surprised to see how many WEP workers fit into this category.” This is not to say that all workers feel this way, or that this approach to public service employment couldn’t be improved. However, it does highlight the attraction of even menial public service employment and the potential for deploying this workforce to beneficial, productive and even personally rewarding work.

# Lessons Learned

The experience of New York City's Department of Parks & Recreation provides reason to be optimistic about the possibilities of absorbing a large number of temporary, part-time workers into simple but well-organized tasks in a carefully managed workplace. This is not an easy thing to accomplish. The Department has experience with seasonal workers and with fluctuations in workload and work capacity. New York City's parks are utilized a great deal more from April to November than they are from December to March. Lifeguards and other seasonal workers are always added during warm-weather months. Most of the Department's person hours are devoted to simple tasks such as removing litter and trash, raking, and cutting grass. The training requirements for these tasks are modest.

New York City is the nation's largest local government. It is thus reasonable to ask if the lessons learned in New York are applicable anywhere else. In my view, they are applicable elsewhere. A department with 500 workfare workers faces the same issues faced by a department with 5,000. In smaller cities, some of the overhead administrative services provided by the New York City Parks Department's central administration might need to be provided on a city-wide basis or perhaps through the use of contractors. However, the general lessons learned here seem broadly applicable. Of course, the only way to know for certain is to experiment with this approach on a pilot test basis and analyze modifications that will inevitably be required in other locations.

Over the next several years, I am confident that this new part of our workforce will be institutionalized

into local government. Issues of management, pay equity, and upward mobility will be raised, as they should be. A management issue that the Parks Department may need to face is its increased reliance on this workforce. If for any reason the program were to end or the number of workfare workers substantially reduced, the Parks Department would face an enormous challenge in maintaining the level and quality of service that it now provides. This paper focused on the issue of management and concludes that workfare workers can be valuable additions to an agency's labor force. They are productive workers who can be managed and successfully integrated into a local agency's daily operations.

Perhaps the most significant lesson learned in New York City's Parks WEP experiment is that a large-scale workfare program can be successfully implemented. The Department has absorbed a workforce of over 5,000 part-time, diverse, and untrained workers and put them to productive use, with visible results. There are a number of specific lessons that are worth noting:

***Begin workfare employees with brief, essential training in job safety and the tasks they are being asked to perform. Provide the basic uniforms (identification, gloves, boots, winter clothing) and equipment needed to perform these tasks.***

The work assigned to workfare workers was simple but still required training and equipment. The training focused on job safety and communicated to workfare workers that their labor was valuable and

their well-being was important. At first the Parks Department did not realize that boots, gloves, and jackets were essential equipment for workfare crews, but before long it recognized how important these items were and provided them.

***Promote line workers with direct knowledge of the work being performed to manage crews of workfare workers. Create special all-workfare crews that are managed by these newly promoted regular employees.***

The managers of workfare crews were former line workers who were glad to be relieved of the tasks of working on clean-up crews. The crews they managed were, for the most part, comprised entirely of workfare workers. This made the management challenge somewhat simpler for these first-time managers and contributed to the productivity success of the workfare crews.

***Make a real effort to include workfare employees in the organization's daily life. This includes employee recognition programs and recognition of workfare contributions in routine messages from management about the organization.***

Workfare employees outnumber regular park employees by as much as three to one. They are essential and valuable workers, even though they are temporary and part-time. A few low-cost symbolic gestures can help to build a sense of teamwork and feeling of belonging to the larger group. The Department's willingness, indeed eagerness, to hire workfare workers into regular civil service titles provides workfare workers with hope and a sense that their work might be rewarded.

***Provide substantial and meaningful opportunities to find full-time regular employment both within and outside the Department. Provide training both in marketable skills and in job readiness — appearance, punctuality, and communication.***

The PACT program in particular communicates to workfare workers that the Department is interested in helping them leave the workfare rolls. It is true that not all workfare workers are ready for full-time

employment, but for those seeking such opportunities it is critical that a pathway to success be established. When workfare workers see others "graduate" to full-time work it builds morale and provides motivation to adhere to the rules of the game.

***Assume that a higher than typical amount of turnover and absenteeism will take place and build crews of sufficient size to perform without all of their members present.***

From a management perspective, workfare workers are not the ideal workforce. The workers facing the most obstacles never arrive at the work site and those with a moderate level of personal problems will often be late or absent. The most ambitious and motivated workers will perform as well as any other workers, and will show up consistently at work and take advantage of the Department's job training and job placement resources. In order to make sure that the daily job of the workfare crew gets done, it is important for those that plan crews to assume a higher than typical rate of absenteeism.

***Create a separate organizational unit within the Parks Department to deal with the unique personnel, paperwork, and training needs of workfare workers, but then assign these workers to work units within the regular operational command structure.***

The paperwork requirements for workfare workers and the logistics of obtaining referrals from the Human Resource Administration are jobs that require a great deal of time and expertise. If the number of workfare workers assigned to an agency is large, management should not expect the normal personnel and operations management staff to add workfare administration to their routine tasks. Building a separate administrative and training staff allowed the Department's managers in the field to focus their efforts on learning how to manage this new workforce. I believe it was a significant contributor to the Parks Department's success in managing its workfare workers.

# Appendix

## Interview Guide

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a graduate student (faculty member) at Columbia University. I am assisting Dean Steven Cohen of Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs in a study he is conducting on the management of WEP workers in the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation. I'd like to ask you a few questions about these management issues. Your responses will be held confidential and not attributed to you by name or title.

1. What type of work do WEP workers do in the parks department?
2. How are they trained & by who?
3. Who supervises them?
4. Is any special training needed to supervise these workers? Is any management training given? Should such training be provided to supervisors?
5. WEP workers are part time, temporary workers. How many months or weeks does a WEP worker stay with the Department? Does their rate of turnover create any challenges to management? If so, what are those challenges? How are these challenges overcome? What new strategies and practices have been developed to manage WEP workers?

6. What contribution do WEP workers make to the Department's overall performance? Do you think this can be sustained over the long run?
  
7. Can you provide me any examples of management actions that have been taken that increased the productivity of WEP workers?
  
8. Can you provide me with any examples of management actions that have decreased the productivity of WEP workers?
  
9. Do you have any suggestions that you would make to other cities and organizations that are about to begin these programs that might assist them in the management of a workforce drawn from welfare recipients?

Thank you for your cooperation.

Name of Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Steven Cohen is the Vice Dean of Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. From 1985 to 1998, he was Director of Columbia's Graduate Program in Public Policy and Administration. From 1987 to 1998, he was also Associate Dean for Faculty and Curriculum at the School of International and Public Affairs.

He is a graduate of James Madison High School in Brooklyn (1970), Franklin College of Indiana (1974) and the State University of New York at Buffalo (M.A., 1977; Ph.D., 1979). In 1976-77, Dr. Cohen was a Ford Foundation Fellow in Urban Environmental Policy, and in 1978-79, he was a Rockefeller Foundation Fellow in Public and Environmental Policy and Implementation.

Dr. Cohen served as a policy analyst in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency from 1977 through 1978 and from 1980 to 1981, and as consultant to the agency from 1981 through 1991, and from 1994 to 1996.

Cohen is the author of *The Effective Public Manager* (1988), and the co-author of *Environmental Regulation Through Strategic Planning* (1991), *Total Quality Management in Government* (1993), *The New Effective Public Manager* (1995), *Tools for Innovators: Creative Strategies for Managing Public Sector Organizations* (1998), and numerous articles on public management innovation, public ethics, and environmental management.

Dr. Cohen has taught courses in public management, policy analysis, environmental policy and management innovation. In 1982, Dr. Cohen developed and has since directed Columbia's Workshops in Applied Public Management and Applied Policy Analysis, which bring practical professional education into the center of Columbia's public administration curriculum. He has conducted professional training seminars in total quality management, strategic planning, project management, and management innovation.

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