

## **COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION RESEARCH AND ORGANIZING AMONG “ROOFLESS WOMEN”**

A faculty-member's work with homeless women a decade ago provides a dramatic illustration of how used participatory action research to support organizing and leadership development among very poor people. Professor Marie Kennedy of UMass Boston began working with six homeless women on the issues they were most concerned about, documenting how they were treated by shelters and other service providers. They became informal principal investigators, completing 150 interviews with homeless women and learning research and community organizing skills on the job. To guide and support the project their faculty supervisor created a steering committee of formerly homeless women and representatives of groups concerned with homelessness, poverty, and domestic violence who committed themselves to collaborating in seeking policy changes and to consult directly with homeless women in their decision-making processes.

The evaluation elicited women's insights into how their homelessness could have been prevented, what their situations were before they became homeless, and whether they knew their housing rights. They then publicized survey findings, went to policy-makers and led successful campaigns to influence state policies and programs. The professor then helped the six women enroll in the College for Public and Community Service and pursue bachelors' degrees in community planning and advocacy with free tuition, a stipend and reimbursement for child care and transportation. They were given course credit for their experiential learning conducting the research.

In empowerment terms, the development of the six women investigators has been called "phenomenal." All have done well in school, all have new jobs, all have joined boards of non-profits, and all are confident public speakers and advocates for changes in public policy to benefit the homeless. Together they built a powerful organization of "Roofless Women", demonstrating that though they had not had roofs they had made homes for themselves. The University of Massachusetts built from this success to create a special program called Women in Community Development to educate and support low-income women in community development work.