PRELIMINARY RESEARCH FINDINGS ON

OPERATION DIG

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This is an interim report. It will be followed in July, 1969 by a comprehensive study on Operation Dig. The points made in this report are tentative, since much of the research data is still to be fully processed and analyzed. THE RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION OF THIS REPORT ARE NOT NECESSARILY HELD BY COMMUNITY ACTION PITTSBURGH, INC. NOR BY ITS BOARD OF DIRECTORS. THIS IS AN INFORMATION PIECE ONLY.

The purpose of the report is to inform CAP, Inc. of the progress, problems, and perspectives of Operation Dig to date. This report will be divided into six main parts.

I. What is Operation Dig?

II. Who is Operation Dig?

III. How does Operation Dig Work?

IV. What are the Problems and Perspectives of Dig?

V. What have been the Payoffs of Dig So Far?

VI. Appendix: Preliminary Statistics on Operation Dig.

I. WHAT IS OPERATION DIG?

Operation Dig is a one-year program designed to train 67 "hard core" men in the Pittsburgh area to become heavy equipment operators (40), carpenters (15), pile drivers (2), and teamsters (10). Trainees are guaranteed employment and union membership upon approval of Dig's Director, who is solely responsible for evaluating their progress.

Dig, however, is many things, not just a training and employment program. Dig is a veritable "grass-roots" program, a by-product of social disorder, a model program which redresses job discrimination, challenges traditional industry and union training and employment practices, and inspires others.

A. Dig - A "True" Grass-Roots Program:

The idea of training blacks to become skilled craftsmen instead of laborers has been the dream of many. Nate Smith, Dig's project director, had this dream for many years, and came to Community Action Pittsburgh, Inc. (CAP, Inc.) with his idea in December of 1967. CAP's response was positive, and thus began the slow process of drawing up a viable program with an eye toward the next fiscal year in July, 1968. However, events speeded up the process and assured implementation of the program earlier than anticipated.

B. Dig - A By-Product of Social Disorder:

The events that triggered off Operation Dig must be understood in the context of the very tense period following Martin Luther King's assassination early last year. Pittsburgh was under martial law for a couple of nights as

looting and fires occurred in certain sections of the city. In the Manchester section of Pittsburgh, a group of black "militants" discussed the many construction projects in their neighborhood. New highways, a new sports stadium, and an industrial park had literally torn up the area. This group began to wonder why they saw only white faces operating the machines and only black faces working as laborers. Why weren't there more black men working in black neighborhoods? This group, composed of "Swampman" (now the assistant director of Dig) and a few others, sent an ultimatum to the city government that something had to be done about the lack of blacks on jobs, good jobs; they wanted jobs in their neighborhoods and they wanted them now. They gave the city 72 hours to respond.

The negotiation process which resulted involved the industry and the unions, the Human Relations Commission, CAP, and Nate. The end product was a program to train and employ 67 blacks in the skilled trades, which would guarantee them "union books" upon successful completion of the program. Nate became director, Swamp assistant director, and the program became a reality.

C. Dig - A Program to Redress Job Discrimination:

Dig became a program to open opportunities that were traditionally closed to blacks in certain craft unions. The discriminatory practices of craft unions have been argued and proven, time and time again. Blacks have traditionally been denied opportunities in Pittsburgh's craft trades, as well as throughout the nation. The fact is that few blacks become journeymen. Many in the industry are relegated to lower-paying laborer tasks.

Other blacks who operate heavy equipment often do so without "union books" and for scab wages. They do not have either the job security that union membership provides or equal pay for equal work. Dig attempts to redress this historic process, with a small local effort in a few trades.

D. Dig - A Program Challenging Traditional Industry and Union Training and Employment Practices:

It is well known that many immigrants from Europe who could never read, write, or speak English, or who were unskilled, could come into the skilled trades through personal connections or job shortages. For blacks, this avenue has been generally closed. Only during war-time, when manpower demands in industry rose, could blacks find openings.

There are varying approaches to becoming a journeyman in the skilled trades. One is to come through the four-year apprenticeship training program; another is to be trained on the job. The apprentice program gives the union sufficient power to limit and select new entrants in their field. Keeping the number of trained craftsmen down guarantees them higher wages, because industry's manpower needs are increasing faster than the unions are willing to supply men. The imbalance between supply and demand creates much overtime and a strong bargaining position for the crafts.

E. Dig - A Model Program Inspiring Others:

Nate, apart from the Dig trainees, has undertaken the task of opening certain other unions to blacks. He forced one building site to hire black iron welders. He has gotten about ten other men into unions during the last year; they have a "book" and a job which offers better wages and security than they had before. Union and industry people, fearful of the program's

threat to them, and fearful of damages from riots and public social pressure, have made financial and job commitments that will directly benefit blacks in the skilled crafts.

Dig is also widely known throughout the city. T.V., radio, and newspapers have taken interest in the program. A Pittsburgh Press series on the program is about to appear as I write this report. Dig has set off a process which hopefully will bring a new era in black opportunities in Pittsburgh's skilled trades.

II. WHO IS OPERATION DIG?

Operation Dig is composed of the supervisory staff, instructional staff, and the trainees. The supervisors are Nate, the director, and Swamp, Joe and "Big Jack". Nate has been working as a heavy equipment operator for 18 years. Swamp, the assistant director, was part of the original "militants" who fostered the project. Joe is "the counselor" who lends an open ear to trainee problems (as do the rest of the staff), and also keeps the project moving on a day to day basis. "Big Jack", too, helps keep the program moving by aiding trainees with problems and taking care of special problems when they come up. All are "grass-root".

The instructional staff includes six men. They take care of the day to day training of the trainees. They are all journeymen, all but one is black, and all have at least ten years of work experience in heavy equipment.

The trainees were generally unemployed or underemployed the year before the program. Some were on welfare all year, a couple were in jail, many were switching from one menial job to another. (This information is about to be processed so I can be much more precise and authoritative about their employment history and job skills at a later time). Prior to Dig, many were engaged in menial occupations such as janitor, message boy, car washer, etc. For most the training salary ($100 per week) was the best "deal" they ever had. It was steady and higher than their previous weekly earnings. For a handful, however, the program has meant a drop in salary and a slight sacrifice. These men worked in construction, some as operators, some as laborers.

They generally could operate equipment machinery but either haven't been given the opportunity or are being paid scab wages for doing it now because they are black. The program will enable them to get their books and refine their skills, if need be. Some of these men act as instructors, helping others who never did this kind of work before. The following are some characteristics of Dig trainees, based upon a preliminary processing of the questionnaires. The figures only represent those in the heavy equipment school and not the carpenters and teamsters. (Other items of information will be processed at a later date).

a. Almost 60% married

b. 32% in military service

c. 57% with police records

d. 66% were at one time on welfare

e. Last year median weekly income level was $64.50 per trainee

f. Last year median yearly income was $3,200 per trainee

g. Over 27% are high school graduates

h. Median education level 9.2 grades

i. Median number of dependents are 3

j. Median age was 28

(See Appendix to this report for frequency distribution)

III. HOW DOES OPERATION DIG WORK?

Dig was set up as a one-year program with three phases. The first phase consisted of OJT (5 months), the training school (4 months), and finally OJT again (3 months).

The program was funded by the Department of Labor under an MA-3 contract with Constructors Job, Inc. (a non-profit corporation set up by the Construction Association of Western Pennsylvania to meet labor specifications on OJT programs). Constructors Jobs, Inc. set up a small administrative staff to do payrolls and to handle expenses and the general paper work entailed in running a program. Nate and Constructors Chief Administrator, Ray Crow, have at best, a tenuous relationship. Nate runs the program, Crow pays the bills.

At the beginning a joint committee was established (4 citizens, 2 industry and 1 union representative) to oversee the project. But this committee essentially dissolved after a few months due to its inability to influence the program.

The trainees are selected by Nate and his staff after an interview. The staff also makes decisions on dropping trainees from the program when they do not demonstrate sufficient interest and aptitude. When a trainee drops out he is replaced by another one, so the 67 slots are continually filled.

IV. WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES DERIVED FROM DIG?

A. OJT Before Training School:

The program would have been much stronger if the training school component was first and the on-the-job training part last. Instead the program was just the opposite, with OJT first and the training school second, with another OJT later on. The reasons for training school first are as follows:

1. Men on-the-job were green and unused to work schedules and brought with them a variety of positive and negative attitudes about work, people and discipline. The training school could have better worked out their personal and work problems.

2. The trainees were not treated too well by the union men and the contractors during on-the-job training. Some never got an opportunity to run any machines. They often stood around all day and watched. Trainees got varying time actually operating machines. Operators frequently explained that they "have a job to do" and "a schedule to meet" and "don't have the time to spend teaching them."

The above were typical comments. The end result of on-the-job training was that few trainees got good training, many got a bitter taste of the industry, some dropped out in disgust, and many got used to getting paid for standing around. This situation only created growing antagonisms between Dig and the contractors. The trainees said that they "weren't given an opportunity" and the contractors said "they didn't show up for work". Both were right. However, the non-cooperation of contractors and union men sufficiently discouraged many to not show up for work when it meant just standing around. There were also trainees who

wouldn't cooperate. The exact reasons for trainees leaving the program will be studied soon as a part of this report. One trainee, however, reported that he frequently swept up during his on-the-job training, because he got so tired of just standing around.

B. "Marginal" Trainee, Non-Compliance and Transportation During OJT:

At the beginning of the project, trainees were assigned to contractors, generally in small groups of two or three. They were not, however, put on individual company payrolls, as stipulated in the original contract. The trainees would learn more, it was assumed, if they traveled around from site to site, from contractor to contractor. In this manner, the trainees would become acquainted with all facets of the industry, and with different machines, different types of projects, and different personnel. However, in practice this situation made the trainees "outsiders" or marginal for the companies.

Moreover, the trainees could not get to the field sites because they didn't have any cars. Often these sites were far from public transportation. In one case trainees walked a mile from the bus stop to the site for a number of weeks to get to the job. Thus the Dig staff, principally Joe, had to continually juggle men in cars to the available sites. This situation was even more aggravating when the men couldn't get proper training at the sites. In such cases Nate, Swamp, Joe and others would shut down a site until the company would comply. Many trainees were often transferred to more cooperative sites.

The transportation problem was never really solved. At one time four Volkswagon buses were rented, but the lease was cancelled due to accidents. At the South Park training school site, they have used the city bus to transport trainees. This solved the problem for the training school quite well. Transportation will again become a major problem during the on-the-job training to come in the next few months, although some trainees have acquired cars since the program began.

C. Lack of Equipment:

In the initial negotiation for the project, the city government implied or stated (orally, not written) that they would supply the equipment for the training school. It was also assumed the contractors would contribute some additional equipment. However, when the training school began in December, Nate found that he could get only three pieces of equipment. These pieces were loaned by the Allegheny County Government, which also allowed the program to locate in a deserted section of South Park. The equipment was good but a bit old.

The city reneged on its part, explaining that they do not have equipment of their own. They lease equipment as they need it. The contractors claimed that they were not responsible for the equipment; moreover, they were in no cooperative mood. They were disenchanted with the funding problem and Nate's "methods".

Nate, seeing the whole program about to collapse, made a contract which he personally signed with a local contractor, Lou Viglione.

The contract was to lease nine pieces of equipment for $12,500 per month for three months, totaling $37,500. At different times from January on, various attempts were made to attain funding for the equipment. The contractors refused to acknowledge the debt as part of program expense. The Department of Labor representative complained they could do nothing because of the "nature of the contract". Local institutions were called by CAP to help resolve the situation. Finally in late March the Allegheny Conference on Community Development (ACCD) loaned the funds to Dig to pay for the equipment. The loan will be repaid by Contractors Jobs, Inc. by the end of the program. Nate is still trying to obtain funds for another month's operation which would be instructionally of great help for many of the trainees who still need some more training.

D. Idleness:

In the training school there are seven to eight functioning heavy equipment machines at any given time for the forty-five men. Although there were previously about twelve pieces of machinery in operation, some of the machines have broken down. For example, a machine might need a new clutch, have a flat tire, need a new battery, or be taken away by the County.

This situation meant that everyone could spend about an hour a day operating a machine. An optimal ratio would have been about one machine for every three or four men, or a total of about eighteen

pieces of equipment for this program. In this manner each man could have been operating or participating for most of the day. However, during most of the day many trainees were idly standing around in the cold and trying to keep warm. This is not the best atmosphere in which to teach skills, obviously. It should be noted that the trainees weathered the four months from December to March, sometimes in sub-zero weather. There was snow, rain, and mud on a site which had few social amenities, like a toilet or running water. They set up their own bonfires to keep themselves warm, and they played cards or other games among themselves to keep occupied. Given these conditions it is a wonder why so many stayed in the program and not why so many dropped out.

E. Weekly Salary Problems:

Over the last few months, Crow and Nate had to fly to Washington on numerous occasions to process salary requests for that week. This problem was created by the contractors' lack of familiarity with government payment procedures, sloppiness (forgetting to request salaries for at least one week), and disgust or apathy towards the project, and by government reluctance to enforce better administrative and financial controls on the project.

The trainees have every right to expect weekly payments on time; it is their prime source of income. The solution to this problem has been worked out by Department of Labor reimbursing the trainees faster and by establishing a reserve fund at a local bank to give Contractors Jobs, Inc. a cushion to work with. (CAP suggested establishing this fund).

F. Dig "Gets It Together":

The instructional and supervisory staffs are rated very highly by the trainee. The trainees had no major complaints outside of the lack of machinery. In fact, they feel that everyone was being well and equally treated by the staff. There have been problems-fights between trainees and staff -- but this has lessened considerably since the program straightened out many of its initial problems. The group has become much more cohesive as the program has progressed. Uncooperative trainees are generally thrown out and new trainees come in to take their place. I am currently studying staff discipline and modes of handling the men. Generally, staff has treated everybody with respect and demanded it in return. The discipline is fairly loose. The trainees are encouraged to discuss their personal problems with their supervisors. Many trainees commented that they were quite satisfied with the way supervisors went out of their way to help them.

It is a grass-roots staff with "no big shots" or "college educated" running around. Although they haven't kept many written records, they have managed the program quite well considering the problems that they have had. (This researcher has just provided a format of written records for them to follow so that the progress of the program will be documented). It should be noted that the program's staff has been crisis-oriented by necessity. As a press reporter noted, Dig was "born in 'crisis'"; I am continually amazed at how well the staff has run the program. Much credit must be given to Nate for locating the funding sources and straightening out larger problems when they occur. Also, much credit should be given to Joe for handling the day to day administration of the program.

G. Lessen Training Time:

Such a program to train heavy equipment operators could be successfully done in six months given sufficient equipment, instructors, supervision, and facilities. In the coming expanded report on Dig, I will outline how this could be done in an ideal program situation. Moreover, the shorter time period could lessen many anxieties and frustrations that plagued the hard core. They're "non-believers". There are many trainees who still doubt that this whole program is for real. To lessen the training time would be beneficial, even if you limit the amount of men in the program. In fact smaller groups would be better. This would insure better personal relations between staff and trainees, more individual attention, less distractions caused by training conflicts; and the need for less machinery at a given time. Since no program like this has been tried before, there are no successful "graduates" for the trainees to point to. The sooner they see somebody successfully working in something, the more confident they will be that this program is for real and not another "trick bag" of the white man.

H. On Going Research - Retention Rate:

The Dig dropout rate or retention rate is now being studied. This investigator plans to assess the number of dropouts, the reason for leaving, and their current status. Also, there will be an analysis comparing those who dropped out with those who stayed in terms of family size, attitudes, age and income, etc. There have been 62 dropouts.

V. WHAT HAVE BEEN THE PAY OFF OF DIG SO FAR?

Dig has become a widely known program in the city. Other groups, seeing Dig's success, have initiated new efforts to improve conditions for blacks in the craft trades.

a. There have been twenty trainees to date who have applied for their journeymen's books, and six have already been placed on jobs. The outlook for the rest is fairly good, too. There will be a few who will not make it, but the concensus is that the overwhelming majority will.

b. Nate has gotten another ten blacks into highly restrictive unions, as mentioned earlier.

c. The Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC) apprenticeship school, the Apprentice Information Center, the Bidwell Cultural and Training Center, have all benefited from the project. The project has pushed contractors and unions to move in hiring more blacks and to contribute funds to institutions and programs which train blacks.

d. Other proposals are now in the works to set up Dig-type programs. For example, a proposal to train the hard core in one year for the teamsters in the heavy construction industry has been submitted to the state government for funding. Other programs are in the discussion stage.

e. The Human Relations Commission in Pittsburgh has taken a stronger stand on enforcing non-discriminatory hiring in city projects. They have established their own compliance and affirmative action regulations. This past week (March 25) one plumbing contractor may lose his bid because he lacked an acceptable affirmative action program. This stronger stand will undoubtedly help improve employment conditions and opportunities for blacks in the skilled trades previously closed to them.

Dig, thus, has come a long way. The fruits of it are now being realized. It is however, too early to assess many of the possible implications and lessons from Dig. This researcher, as stated before, hopes to produce a more comprehensive document shortly that will explore the factors that contribute to Dig's success and failure and the policy implications of these factors.