

What Works

Simply Successful **A Boston nonprofit's simple mission attracts sustained support and helps working-poor families**

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With so many options for giving, many individual donors have a hard time deciding which organizations to support. And with so many needs to address, many charities are likewise perplexed about which services to provide.

Baby Basics, Inc., a Boston-based nonprofit, has discovered that sticking to a simple, unique mission allows the organization both to attract individual donors and to succeed at meeting an important need: The organization distributes diapers to working-poor families twice a month for as long as their babies need them (usually about three years).

That's it. Nothing else.

Founder and executive director Jean Ann Lynch created the organization in 1992 after noticing that while many charities offered food, formula, and clothing to struggling parents, none offered diapers on a consistent basis. Nor did any program specifically address the needs of working-poor parents, who earn too much money to qualify for welfare but who nevertheless struggle to make ends meet.

Lynch says that Baby Basics' streamlined goal of providing only diapers to only one part of the community appeals to individual donors, as does the fact that Baby Basics funnels 100 percent of its donations to purchasing diapers. These organizational features prop each other up: It's easier to put all of an organization's money toward one mission when that mission is so narrowly defined. And it's easier to focus on a single mission when you know exactly who needs your help. Finally, the more transparent an organization's operations, the more willing individual donors are to provide ongoing support.

For example, Jennifer O'Donnell, a New Jersey resident and longtime Baby Basics donor, says she finds comfort in knowing exactly where her money is going. "Today, you can't always be sure," she says, referring to other, bigger charities with more paid staff members, overhead, and broader programs. With Baby Basics, however, O'Donnell knows that every cent will go to diapers, which board members purchase from wholesale stores at negotiated rates. The all-volunteer staff then distributes the diapers twice a month from a church that donates the use of its basement. Local social workers or healthcare providers refer all of the recipients.

Providing diapers to the working poor turns out to be a



Jean Ann Lynch, executive director of Baby Basics, holds one of her clients on diaper distribution night.

compelling cause that has received little attention. A year's worth of diapers cost upwards of \$500. Since working-poor families do not qualify for food stamps, they sometimes have to choose between buying food and buying diapers.

"We do work, we do earn decent money, but it's not enough," says Cynthia Pimental, whose two children, Bianka and Adriel, wear diapers provided by Baby Basics. Pimental works as a customer service representative at a local bank, and makes more than minimum wage, but still struggles.

In the absence of free diapers, Lynch relates, parents have been known to hang disposable diapers to dry on a clothesline, or to remove solid waste and then reuse diapers. Dirty diapers can lead to painful diaper rashes and extremely unhappy babies. Lynch notes that some cases of child abuse have involved inconsolable babies with rashes that developed



because their parents could not afford clean diapers.

Cautious Expansion

Lynch opened the first Baby Basics in Ridgewood, N.J., modeling it after a church-run program that offers an array of necessities year-round. She liked the church's idea of providing comprehensive assistance, but knew that she wouldn't enjoy the same level of financial backing as that program. She also noted that clients could not always rely on the church-run program for any one product, including diapers. She therefore created Baby Basics to be a low-cost, self-sustaining organization upon which its clients could rely for uninterrupted diaper distribution.

In 1997, Lynch moved with her husband to South Boston, Mass., where she opened a second Baby Basics with \$2,000 in donations. Shortly after she left New Jersey, the original Baby Basics was taken over by the Red Cross, which maintained the program's just-diapers operation, but changed facets of Lynch's vision. (For example, they hired a full-time staff person.) Therefore, it was in South Boston that Lynch had the opportunity to fully develop her ideas and her organization.

South Boston, or "Southie," is home to a large population of precisely the working-poor people that Baby Basics aims to help. It is sometimes described as one of the nation's largest white urban ghettos. More than 15 percent of its households are below the poverty line, according to the 2000 U.S. census. Almost as many households hover just above this line – and out of the purview of federal poverty programs.

Lynch first collected a handful of dedicated board members and researched the community to ensure that she would not be duplicating any service. She then gathered referrals for five babies, and, not knowing how long she could sustain the assistance, capped the number of beneficiaries there. By starting with a manageable load, Baby Basics gradually earned a positive reputation among community aid workers, and today, the South Boston program has modestly grown to serve 50 babies (with the goal of growing by 10 or more within the year) whose diapers cost \$21,000 total per year. Families are promised three years' worth of diapers, and so Baby Basics ends up spending more than \$60,000 over the course of 50 children's diaper-wearing lives.

Board members have resisted the urge to expand to other endeavors. When they mention growth, they're talking about adding some babies to their roster, or finding another distribution site – never branching out to provide

other categories of service. Since donors like Baby Basics' no-overhead, focused approach, the organization has a dedicated donor base that contributes not only money, but also time, access to computers and copy machines, and elbow grease.

After more than a decade, Baby Basics is cautiously expanding to other communities, including Naples, Fla., Wilmington, Vt., and to another Boston neighborhood, Hyde Park. This community-by-community approach ensures that the small organization can guarantee sustainable, reliable aid to a population that gets little of either.

The Cost of No Overhead

"We have a working board," explains South Boston board president Alicia Stedman (who is also Lynch's daughter). "We all roll up our sleeves."

This is because Baby Basics' channeling of all donations toward diapers leaves no extra money to spend on administrative costs, which can add up to more than \$1,000 per year. The all-volunteer board must keep its mailing lists to a manageable size, and members do much of the administrative work – such as maintaining the Baby Basics Web site, or holding fundraisers – in-house.

One drawback of having no administrative funds is apparent in the organizations' publicity materials. "Our materials are not slick," Lynch admits.

At the same time, keeping their materials simple has its benefits. "I think part of what makes us attractive is that our newsletter is very down-to-earth, very personal," Stedman says of the biannual Baby Basics mailing that board members create and send to donors. "And a lot of us, we have little kids, and we can relate to what these parents are going through. We can really connect."

Not asking donors for staff or overhead support has another advantage: When a specific project comes up (last year, for example, the South Boston group had to build extra storage space for its growing supply of diapers), board members feel comfortable asking for donations earmarked for one tangible task.

In South Boston, the 14 board members are discussing the possibility of occasionally distributing diaper cream and baby wipes along with diapers. Even an expansion like this one is treated as a major diversion from their focused path. "I think it's really important to have a core," Stedman says. "Diapers are our core. ... If you think about what a lot of organizations do, it's hard to put your finger on what it is exactly." Baby Basics' success? "I think it's in its simplicity." □