



# Susan Sands, National Chair of Minneapolis-based Jeremiah Program

Emphasis on two generations brings families out of poverty and into living-wage jobs

A Civic Caucus Focus on Human Capital Interview

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## Present

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## Summary

According to Susan Sands, Minneapolis-based Jeremiah Program is unique in its approach to attacking the problem of poverty among single mothers and their young children. Rather than focusing only on the mothers or only on the children, Jeremiah attempts to move the families from poverty to prosperity by working with both generations at the same time. The intensive program is aimed at low-income mothers age 18 or older with children age five or under.

Before a family can fully participate in Jeremiah, the mother must have a high school diploma or GED, complete a 16-week empowerment program and be accepted into a postsecondary institution. After meeting these requirements, families who are accepted into the full Jeremiah Program live in housing units on the Jeremiah campus in either Minneapolis or St. Paul, while the mother earns a career-track degree or certification at a postsecondary institution. On each campus, the children attend a high-quality Child Development Center, which aims to prepare them for kindergarten. Families stay in Jeremiah program for an average of two-and-a-half to three years.

Jeremiah Program outcomes show high levels of success, Sands reports. Sixty-one percent of women who finish the empowerment program and then enroll in Jeremiah complete the full program. Graduates earn a livable wage, averaging \$19.35 an hour, and 90 percent of them maintain consistent employment. Ninety-three percent of graduates' children are performing at or above grade level.

Jeremiah has started expanding to several other cities around the country, but Sands is quick to say that the program will only go into cities where it is invited as a community initiative. She says, though, that the cost of providing housing and limits on philanthropy in the Twin Cities area make it difficult to expand Jeremiah's program here.

## Biography

Susan Sands is chair of Jeremiah Program's national board of directors, a position she has held for the past two years, and has been involved in the program for more than 10 years. Jeremiah Program is a Minneapolis-based organization that provides affordable housing, childcare, life-skills education and other services to low-income single mothers and their children. Its goal is to move families from poverty to prosperity, ending the cycle of poverty by transforming both the mothers' lives and the children's lives. She is among a group of community leaders who actively worked to develop a St. Paul campus for Jeremiah Program, in addition to its existing Minneapolis campus.

Sands has started three companies, including S&B Properties, the St. Paul real estate development and consulting firm she created 22 years ago and still runs today. The company originally focused on renovating houses in distressed areas, working with community development corporations. Today, the company serves exclusively nonprofit organizations, helping them resolve their real estate needs.

In 1977, she and Marlene Johnson established the first state chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners. In 1982, Sands and Johnson helped establish the Minnesota Women's Campaign Fund, now known as womenwinning, a nonpartisan political action committee (PAC) dedicated to supporting prochoice women candidates at all levels of political office.

In addition to Jeremiah Program, Sands has served on several other boards, including the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches, Western Bank and the F.R. Bigelow Foundation. She is also a member of the Community Advisory Network for the University of Minnesota's Center for Spirituality and Healing. She has a B.A. degree in sociology and social work from the University of Minnesota.

## Background

The Civic Caucus invited Susan Sands to discuss Minneapolis-based Jeremiah Program's unique approach to raising low-income mothers of young children from poverty to sustaining-wage employment by working with both generations. The topic is part of an on-going Civic Caucus focus on Minnesota's human capital.

## Discussion

**The mission of Minneapolis-based Jeremiah Program is to transform the lives of low-income mothers and their children and move them from poverty to prosperity, two generations at a time.** Susan Sands of Jeremiah Program said an understanding has developed at the national level that transforming only one generation at a time is not as effective in the long term. Through safe and affordable housing, quality early childhood education, empowerment and life-skills training, and

support for career-track education, Jeremiah Program prepares determined single mothers to succeed in the workforce, readies their children to succeed in school and reduces generational dependence on public assistance.

**Jeremiah is the only program in the state that works with both generations to allow the mothers to complete their education.** "If you're going to affect the children, you must work with the mothers, as well," Sands remarked. She said she doesn't know of any other program in Minnesota that works with both generations and offers housing and child development services.

**Jeremiah Program started in Minneapolis in response to civic leaders.** In the early 1990s, Minneapolis Mayors Don Fraser and Sharon Sayles Belton put out a call to business and religious leaders, saying the city could not sustain itself, given the growing number of children being born to single mothers in poverty.

According to Sands, Fr. Michael O'Connell at the Basilica and clergy from other downtown churches started a free daycare center in a church near Loring Park for women attending Minneapolis Technical College (now MCTC). The center closed after four months. The women told interviewers that daycare was not their primary need; they needed safe housing.

Fr. O'Connell put together a collaboration of business, philanthropists, education and the churches in the area to see what could be done. "That was the beginning of Jeremiah Program," Sands said. Northern States Power (now Xcel Energy) owned a vacant lot behind MCTC and contributed the site to the program.

After several years of program planning and fundraising, Jeremiah opened 18 housing units on that site in January 1998. In 1999, the Child Development Center (CDC) opened in a temporary on-site space. In 2002, the Minneapolis campus expanded to 39 housing units and space for 66 children in the full-service CDC.

**Early on, Jeremiah's leaders realized the importance of a full range of services, in addition to housing.** They developed a program that addresses cognitive change, Sands said. The program is set up for mothers and their kids, with the intent of ending multigenerational poverty. To qualify for Jeremiah, the women must be 18 or older and have a high school diploma or GED. Their children must be five years old or younger.

**Before being accepted as Jeremiah residents, the women must go through a 16-week empowerment program.** Sands said the empowerment program "sorts out the women who are really committed to this kind of change." She explained that during the 16 weeks, the women work with a life coach to establish goals for themselves and their children. The women also do some evaluation to determine where their skills and interests would be best used. While they're completing the empowerment program, the women don't live in Jeremiah housing.

"When the women go through empowerment, we look for a cognitive transformation to happen," Sands said. "Empowerment teaches them they are responsible for themselves and for their lives and for the children they've brought into this world. It's not, 'you did this to me' or 'the system did this to me.' You are responsible. You then understand that you have control. People who last through the 16-week empowerment program are committed to making cognitive change."

Sands noted that about 80 percent of the women who start the empowerment program make it all the way through. "They really are determined to make a change in their lives," she said. "It really becomes primarily for their children. They participate in family goal planning for themselves and for their children. It's something pretty new for most of the women."

**Only after completing the empowerment program and being accepted to a postsecondary education institution can the women apply to become Jeremiah residents.** Sands said Jeremiah emphasizes that education is a key to overcoming poverty.

**The women participating in Jeremiah Program are required to work part-time or volunteer in the community and to participate in a life-skills program held once a week.** Sands said the life-skills program covers budgeting, nutrition, parenting and communication. It emphasizes to the mothers the necessity of being involved in their kids' education.

**Jeremiah looks at careers, not jobs.** The program, according to Sands, works with two-year and four-year colleges in the state to provide career-track education to the women, with the intention that those finishing the program will be able to earn enough money to support and sustain their families and themselves.

**Jeremiah's supportive community makes the program work.** "The women can see they're not the only ones who have to push themselves or struggle with kids on a given day," Sands said. "They're not alone in this. A community develops. They haven't had a supportive community from their neighbors and families before."

**The profile of a typical Jeremiah client indicates that she's a low-income single parent at least 18 years old.**

- She has a high school diploma or a GED and has enrolled in a postsecondary institution.
- She's living below the poverty level and is likely on public assistance.
- She's likely to have had no permanent shelter before entering the program. About 60 percent of the women entering the program are without permanent homes; most are "couch-hopping" rather than living on the street, because of their young children, Sands said. (Under a new state definition, people are only considered homeless if they are living on the street.)
- She is largely isolated and living without much hope. She's frustrated about how she will support her family.
- She is likely to be dealing with abuse or addiction.
- She lacks self-confidence.
- Her average age is 24.
- She's likely to be a woman of color, as 60 to 70 percent of participants are women of color.

**The profile of Jeremiah Program's children indicates that they're between six weeks and 5 years old.**

- Five percent of them are diagnosed with special needs.
- Sixty percent have seen the effects of drugs or alcohol in the home.
- Thirty percent have witnessed or experienced violence.
- Their average age is three.
- Seventy to 80 percent are children of color.

"These are not typical little kids we're dealing with," Sands said. "That's why we really focused on a child-development center, rather than child care."

**Families are in Jeremiah Program for an average of two-and-a-half to three years.** Jeremiah participants must leave the program and housing within six months of completing their postsecondary program. Mothers still working on their educational program may stay at Jeremiah when their children reach school age. The program helps the mothers know what to look for when they are choosing a school for their children.

**The philosophy of Jeremiah is that the women are responsible for themselves and for their children.** Sands said women may choose to be in relationships, but the focus is on self-responsibility.

**Jeremiah tries to create community in its housing.** Sands said community also develops in the different educational institutions. When the women leave the program, the coaches tell them the importance of getting into a community, something larger than themselves, that will help support them and what they've been involved with in the program.

**Jeremiah Program outcomes show high levels of success.**

- Sixty-one percent of people who finish the empowerment program and then enroll in Jeremiah complete the full program. Sands said other programs serving a similar population have completion rates around 30 percent.
- When women graduate from Jeremiah, they have career-track employment. On average, they earn a livable wage of \$19.35 an hour.
- Most Jeremiah women have relied on public assistance before coming into the program. After graduation, Sands said, they quickly reduce or remove their dependence on public assistance. The reason this doesn't often happen immediately is that sometimes families must stay on public assistance to receive health-care benefits.
- Forty-seven percent of recent Jeremiah graduates obtained a four-year degree; 53 percent obtained an associate degree.
- Fourteen percent are continuing their education or completing certificate programs.

- Ninety-three percent of Jeremiah graduates' children are performing at or above grade level. The program's goal is that they'll be ready for kindergarten.
- Ninety percent of graduates maintain consistent employment.

**For every \$1 invested in a Jeremiah family, there's a \$4 return to the community.** Over the lifetime of 100 participants, Sands said, there is a \$41 million return to society through taxes, earning ability and the fact that they're not drawing on public assistance.

**The program was designed as a model that could be replicated in other places.** Jeremiah's first expansion began in 2004 when St. Paul community leaders approached the organization's leaders about expanding to a second site. In 2007, after several years of fundraising and extensive input from citizens throughout the city, Jeremiah opened a St. Paul campus with 38 housing units and a CDC in the Summit-University neighborhood.

**In 2009, Jeremiah formed a national board, in addition to the Minneapolis-St. Paul board, that is responsible for expansion of the program outside of Minnesota.** Sands said the organization, with the help of a class at Hamline University, identified 10 to 12 communities around the U.S. as possible locations for replicating Jeremiah. Criteria used in identifying the communities included jobs, opportunities for education and the cost of housing. "This is an expensive, intensive program," she said. "You really need to have the commitment from a community to do that."

Rather than Jeremiah establishing itself in a community "like a franchise," Sands said, "we had decided we wanted to be invited by a community. We're looking at the push-pull; it must be a community initiative."

- In **Austin, Texas**, where a large contingent of Minnesotans moved with 3M in 1982, people knew about Jeremiah, she said. As the program has expanded to Austin, the community has raised \$4 million, with an additional \$2 million in tax credits. Phase one of a Jeremiah campus in Austin opened in fall 2013. A permanent campus will break ground in January 2015. Austin has Head Start money that brings down the cost of the child development center dramatically.
- A funder in **Fargo** approached Jeremiah about starting a program there, but the advisory committee in Fargo had to spend considerable time there convincing people they had this problem in their city. Fargo is now launching a \$4 million capital campaign for the program.
- Gloria Perez, the national Jeremiah Program CEO and executive director, was invited by the Aspen Institute to participate in an effort called **Ascend**, which was organized to deal with multigenerational poverty. In addition to Perez, the effort involved policymakers, philanthropists, educators and media people, which raised the visibility of the issue in a number of communities. In **Boston**, the Ascend effort has resulted in a partnership with Endicott College in which Jeremiah and the college are running a pilot program in an existing housing development and an existing local childcare center to see if the program can be successfully operated using existing infrastructure.

- Sands said groups in **Brooklyn** and other cities have also expressed interest in Jeremiah, after hearing about the program. "We really feel it needs to be a community initiative," she said, "not something we're forcing on a community."

**The first 18 units built in Minneapolis were financed totally by private fundraising.** "It became overwhelming," Sands said. When the Minneapolis campus expanded by 21 units, the program used some enterprise zone public money, with the rest of the funding from private sources. When the St. Paul campus was developed, the program used public low-income housing tax credits, as well as private fundraising.

**Each year, Jeremiah in Minneapolis and St. Paul must jointly raise \$2 million to subsidize the program.** Sands said the annual cost for the 38 or 39 residents in Minneapolis and their families is \$1million, with the same cost in St. Paul. Jeremiah's operating cost annually is \$25,000 per family. There is some subsidy from the state for childcare that goes through the mothers in the program to the child development center. These figures don't include any of the costs of the participants' postsecondary education, which Sands said are worked out with the postsecondary institutions.

**Recruiting volunteers is important to Jeremiah's operation and to spreading knowledge of the program.** Sands said fundraising is a major role for the organization's board.

**Some fathers are involved with their children during the program and can spend time with them.** In life skills training, Sands said, the mothers begin to understand what they want from a relationship. She said the program's coaches and the resident council determine how involved each father can be. Some fathers help out by dropping off or picking up their children from the child development center.

She mentioned a new program in the community called **Ujamaa** , which is aimed at empowering young black fathers (ages 18 to 30) coming out of incarceration to change their behavior.

**Transportation is generally not a critical need for the program participants.** Because 60 percent of Jeremiah residents drive cars and because the program in St. Paul is located within two blocks of public transit, Sands said transportation is not generally a barrier for the participants. The women's greatest needs are for the housing, coaching resources and child development offered through the program.

**Last year, Jeremiah served 250 people, including children.** In addition to the resident participant families, Sands said, that figure also includes people going through the empowerment program, as well as nonresident children, such as children from the neighborhood or children of program graduates, who come to the child development center.

**Many program participants have more than one child.** Sands said one recent participant had twin infants and often times, mothers have a three-year-old and an infant.

**The cost of housing and limits on philanthropy make it difficult to expand Jeremiah's Twin Cities program.** Jeremiah could well be serving more women and children in the Twin Cities, but Sands said the program "is bumping up against the limits of philanthropy in this community." The board continually debates other ways to serve more people, she said. The housing is very expensive,

but Jeremiah residents have a negative reaction to not having housing be part of the program, because of the community that develops there. "The largest cost of expansion is to build a building," she said. That's why the pilot program in Boston is experimenting with using existing housing to make it possible to serve more families and to come into a community more quickly.

**Jeremiah doesn't keep people on waiting lists.** Jeremiah's announcement of an upcoming 16-week empowerment session usually filters to potential participants through county social workers, educational institutions or word-of-mouth. Sands said the 20 to 25 slots in the program usually fill based on those sources of information. Jeremiah doesn't schedule a new empowerment session until enough people graduate from its full program to make room for at least 10 new families to move in. "When you're dealing with homelessness, It doesn't work very well to keep people on a list," she said.