Walter Stafford's Approach to Research
on the Condition of People of Color

In anticipation of a proposed call for papers/conference to build on the work of Walter Stafford, this concept paper attempts to identify some of the unique features of his approach to the agenda of social justice in America's urban communities. Walter's commitment to urban social justice found its most clear expression in the research he did on conditions in New York City. What follows here is a description of: 1) the objectives of Walter's research as it evolved over time; 2) the importance he placed on collaborative relationships with "players on-the-ground", namely, policymakers, practitioners, and activists; and 3) his methodology. Observations of these are amplified by some examples of his research. We hope that what is described here might suggest some direction for current research on urban issues.

Walter was deeply committed to social justice in his professional life. He saw himself not just as a researcher, but also as an activist, an inheritance from his involvement with the civil rights movement. He came to describe himself as an "activist scholar." Walter understood that research is never neutral; that it tends to have policy implications. Therefore, he consciously attempted to bridge the gap that exists between research, policy, and practice. He believed that a researcher genuinely committed to justice bears a special responsibility to do the kind of work that can lead to genuine social change. This orientation of combining research with a commitment to social change was inspired by the work of scholars like Kenneth Clark, Louis Harlan, Robert Weaver, and others, some of whom Walter was fortunate to know personally.

Walter's commitment to justice and social change engaged him in a life-long quest as to what constitutes justice and how to advance it. He came out of the civil rights movement as a researcher who provided voluminous evidence that "equal rights" for Blacks and other groups of color was far from being achieved in a number of fields, particularly in public and private sector employment and in higher education. To better understand the experience of Blacks, he examined inequality experienced by other groups in American society and in other parts of the world, such as Palestinians, Jews in Nazi Germany, and women. He immersed himself in the work of scholars such as Edward Said, Hannah Arendt, Jurgen Habermas, Walter Benjamin, Amartya Sen, and Martha Nussbaum, among others. Through these efforts, Walter deepened his understanding of inequality and justice. He came to understand inequality fundamentally as an experience of "suffering" rooted in inhumanity, caused not only by explicit social arrangements but also by the implicit, unexamined orientations of institutions responsible for remedies. In this, he included academic researchers who he believed too often neglected to look at the real-life conditions of people as they experienced them. He believed that institutions of all types failed to understand the multifaceted nature of social ills. Walter's notion of justice moved beyond trying to advance "equality" for people of color to framing their condition as a matter of human dignity and basic human rights. His thinking on this was very much influenced by the work of Sen and Nussbaum. An example of Walter's evolution can be seen in the transition that he made from seeing poverty as merely an issue of employment, income, and education to using the UN's Human Development Index. He used it to examine the more complex roots of poverty in the 52 Community Districts of New York City, work that he was doing just prior to his death. In this work, one can also see Walter's effort to elevate social justice from the ground up.

As Walter sought to transform the nature of his own orientations, he worked with a variety of on-the-ground "players." These included members of the NY City Council, foundations, and others who were responsible for the allocation of resources, as well as practitioners in organizations and institutions involved in the delivery of services. They, in turn, came to see Walter as their "go-to" person to get a handle on why programs were not working and how to make them more effective.

Walter's methodology in identifying the complex causes of social problems was based on the following observation: researchers typically do not have intimate knowledge of conditions on the ground regarding causes and services. While policymakers, foundations, and practitioners are more familiar with these conditions, they do not have the resources to do the "hard" research to understand the underlying causes of what they observe. Typically, they operate on anecdotal evidence and lack conceptual frameworks. They also tend to gear remedies to available resources rather than sound research of causes and effects. As a result, resources are not maximized, resulting in the failure of programs to effect real change. Walter, therefore, combined in his work a research approach (i.e. data-driven and conceptually-based what institutions, organizations, and practitioners had on the ground) with the real-life conditions of those victimized by inequities. This was done through interviews. This approach gave him additional insights as to causes that lead him to explore other databases. There was a constant back and forth between his views and their reports that lead to him to refine his conceptual frameworks. As noted above, this approach allowed him to elevate social justice from the ground up and to root justice in human needs. Examples of this approach can be found in his studies of HIV services, welfare reform, segmentation in labor markets, the population in special education, and the HDI measure applied to New York City.

As a social scientist, Walter understood that change occurs at the level of social institutions. His research was designed to point to institutional failures and to hold institutions accountable. His work was sometimes characterized as too vast and problematic for that reason. However, he never relented. Given time, he might have been able to address this problem and more clearly challenge the research agenda of contemporary scholars.