

Sustainable Communities Project supports Hispanic families in Wisconsin



"Families are starting to feel that somebody is paying attention to their needs, somebody cares about who they are, where they come from and what kind of person they are."

— Racine County Cooperative Extension educator

Wisconsin's Hispanic population has grown by more than 50% since 2000, from about 193,000 to nearly 300,000. The change has been more rapid in some rural communities, including Waushara County, whose Hispanic population grew 124% between 1990 and 2000 and Burlington School District in Racine County, which experienced a 71% increase in Hispanic students between 2000 and 2008. Wisconsin's Sustainable Community Project focuses on involving rural Hispanic youth and their families in these areas into educational enrichment, school support and community leadership opportunities. The project targets families with school-aged youth to promote knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors necessary for fulfilling, contributing lives. A team of educators from Cooperative Extension Family Living Programs and Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development aims to engage more Hispanic youth in quality extra-curricular and out-of-school activities, build strong connections between Hispanic and majority communities and establish a sustainable structure to respond to future community needs.

UW-Extension received a five-year annual grant of \$135,000 from the United States Department of Agriculture's Children, Youth and Families At Risk (CYFAR) program to support the Sustainable Community Project. The project includes outreach efforts in Waushara and Racine counties, with a partnership of Cooperative Extension Family Living and Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development staff.

Across the state, the Sustainable Community Project sites reached 142 youth and 47 adults in 2010. More than 57% of these youth self-identified as Hispanic or Latino, as did 57% of parents. The site in Plainfield reached 60 youth in grades K-12 and 19 parents in 2010. The Burlington site reached 82 youth and 28 parents.

Engaging youth

The project sites focus on Hispanic families in two rural school districts: Burlington in Racine County and Tri-County in Waushara County. The sites in both counties developed and provide out-of-school educational enrichment and leadership development activities for Hispanic and non-Hispanic youth, focusing on those at academic risk.

- In Racine County, educators initiated a partnership to develop a dual-language reading program that connects 15 teen mentors to 15 elementary youth. The 2009-2010 Racine afterschool program focused on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) and engaged with 75 youth, 37 of whom were Hispanic.
- Waushara County afterschool and summer programs for elementary and middle school youth focus on positive youth development. The six-month afterschool program reached 15 youth in 2009, five of whom were Hispanic; the six-week summer program reached an average of 22 youth, 15 of whom were Hispanic. In surveys taken during the summer program, youth reported increased communication skills in areas including listening to others' suggestions, speaking in turn and sharing ideas. They also reported a significant increase in being inclusive, respectful and appreciative of diversity and said the program had a great impact on their leadership skills and willingness to assume leadership positions.
- In response to a request for educational opportunities for middle school youth in Waushara County, the Youth in Action leadership program was created. Youth in Action brings 10 middle school



Making edible art at Family Night in Burlington, November 2010.

and high school students together to discuss community perceptions, leadership and involvement. After focus group activities in Youth in Action, youth were able to more quickly identify leadership roles, qualities of leaders and leaders among their community. They were also more able to identify positive and negative places in their community and recognize leadership skills in themselves.

Supporting adults and families

The Sustainable community project supports Hispanic adults in areas of identified need including mental health, English skills for communicating with their children's teachers and increased social support. For adult participants, the program showed the strongest results in helping them become more comfortable with English language skills and more aware of community resources.

- In Waushara County, family-centered programming includes monthly family nights, home visits conducted by bilingual CYFAR staff and twice-weekly conversation classes. A core group of up to 16 adults have actively participated in the conversation classes and family nights for the last two years. Participants reported feeling more familiar with community resources in Waushara County, and many of the women who took part in the conversation and cooking classes stepped up to some leadership roles in community events.
- In Racine County, educators hosted two community gatherings that provided Latino families with an opportunity to connect with one another as well as reassess community and school-related needs. Families were able to identify concerns and challenges as well as strategies and resources to help Latinos successfully navigate the English-speaking community.

Building community connections

Both sites promote cultural sharing and connections between the Hispanic and majority communities by engaging program participants in planning community activities, including family nights in Burlington and a community-wide celebration of Mexican Independence Day in Plainfield. These community events help raise awareness about the needs of Hispanic families among local businesses and organizations.

- More than 120 people attended the Mexican Independence Day celebration in Plainfield, and over 20 local businesses, including supermarkets, banks and hardware stores supported the event.
- In Racine County, 20 participants from 11 community organizations participated in "Walk One Hour in My Shoes," a program designed to increase understanding of Hispanic community members. Participants reported an increased understanding of Latinos in their community and said the program would improve their ability to interact with and serve Latino clients. Organizations who attended included the Racine Literacy Council, Burlington Area School District, Burlington Public Library and St. Charles Catholic Church.

The Sustainable Community Project is now in its third year. UW-Extension has built the relationships required to connect an underserved population with university and community resources. With the remaining two years of the CYFAR grant, the team of 4-H Youth Development and Family Living educators will focus on sustainable ways to address the needs of Hispanic youth

and families. Future efforts will include making 4-H clubs more accessible to Latino youth and supporting existing school programs with training and curricula; family support will focus on strengthening community partnerships and promoting cross-cultural understanding in these communities.

For more information on the Sustainable Community Project, contact:

Matt Calvert

4-H Youth Development Specialist
(608) 262-1912
matthew.calvert@ces.uwex.edu

Mary Huser

Family Living Programs Specialist
(608) 265-3589
mary.huser@ces.uwex.edu



Waushara County afterschool programs were an opportunity to make new friends and experience new culture.