

Summary of Professional Contributions and Scholarship

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Dunn County Family Living Agent, 2006 - present

A majority of this narrative reflects on my work as the half time Family Living Agent in Rusk County. The lessons I learned in those formative years transferred to my new position as the full time Family Living Agent in Dunn County. I will reflect on each of these counties below.

Rusk County: Situation and Background

Rusk County consists of 24 townships, eight villages, and one city within a 936-square mile radius. The county's population is 15,469. Within this population, nine percent of the families and 15 percent of the children live in poverty. Rusk County's industry mainly consists of factories and logging companies. The types of jobs afforded by these industries do not provide high incomes for workers. According to the 2000 census report, the median household income for Rusk County ranked 70th out of 72 counties in Wisconsin. The geography of the county contributes to the financial stressors many residents face. With only 4,000 of the people living in Ladysmith, the county seat, the majority of the population must travel to access many of the businesses, services and agencies located there. Based on findings from a 2002 countywide strategic planning process, family stress, inaccessibility of employment, parenting skills and financial management emerged as priority issues to be addressed.

Rusk County has seen a continual increase in negative teen choices and violence. A Search Institute Survey conducted by local school districts in 1999 revealed a disturbing and significant increase in the number of youth experimenting with marijuana and alcohol. It also uncovered alarming statistics involving violence among youth in the county. Violence among males rose over 47 percent in one year and 24 percent in females during the same time period. These statistics as well as anecdotal observations from local school teachers and school counselors made it clear that positive youth development was a program priority.

Understanding the unique dynamics of Rusk County would prove critical in program planning. Almost immediately, I was aware that this county was plagued by inter-agency turf wars and funding disputes. And, because agencies did not enjoy cohesive, long-standing collaborative efforts, many of the services offered were fragmented and isolated. Rusk County Health and Human Services turned to out-of-county agencies for parenting education, frustrated by non-sustainable, inconsistent programs in Rusk County. Those agencies working with low income families were not able to address the need for financial management due to restricted resources within their agency and inadequate resources outside of their agencies. The Family Living Agent position was vacant for over a year before my arrival. Additionally, there were almost no existing programs in place to continue. I embraced these challenges knowing such limitations within agencies gave me the flexibility to utilize the resources UW-Extension had to offer and build programs that could meet the basic needs of the county.

The Rusk County UW-Extension office was in transition when I arrived. The rapport between the office and the Agriculture and Extension Committee was strained. Years of relationship building and the addition of new staff members gave way to a partnership that enjoyed mutual respect and trust. The office staff worked hard to build trust within the office and worked to build a new image in the county and the state.

Given the dynamics of the county, I did some experimenting with programs to find my niche. I decided it was important to build trust and respect for Extension programs with county agencies. I became active in the Families and Communities Together (FACT) coalition and the Youth

Partnership for Rusk County to gain visibility within the agencies. To gain similar visibility within a geographically isolated community, I wrote articles related to family stressors in the Ladysmith News (**Exhibit 1**). I built partnerships with local schools by inserting the UW-Extension publication "Who's Kid's? Our Kids!" in the Bruce School's monthly newsletter.

All usual Extension programming ceased on September 3, 2002, the day a tornado destroyed the business district of Ladysmith. The immediate role of UW-Extension was to set up a command center and provide assistance to business and home owners affected by the tornado. At the request of FEMA, I toured affected homes and helped homeowners fill out paperwork necessary to receive aid. The majority of the families affected had low-to-moderate incomes with some hindered by illiteracy. Although the tornado brought financial and emotional devastation to Ladysmith, community leaders, agencies, and businesses came together to help in time of need. As citizens struggled to bring their daily lives to some sort of normalcy, they welcomed the support and assistance of this unique outreach. I was able to provide valuable information about where to receive temporary shelter or necessary supplies. Additionally, I discovered a deep sense of camaraderie and solidarity working with people from multiple agencies. Ironically, before the tornado, collaborations on just about anything were difficult and tenuous at best. But after the disaster, I found these newly formed relationships provided an opportunity to not only learn the history of Rusk County but magnified the enormous issues and needs this community faced.

As the county began to recover from the tornado, families began contacting agencies such as Kinship and the Marshfield Clinic for information on how to cope in the event of severe weather. Parents realized the magnitude of devastation that can result from a storm. Children became terrified of storms, with some experiencing night terrors and anxiety. I responded to this need by co-authoring four fact sheets (**Exhibit 2**). These fact sheets were provided to community members through various agencies such as Marshfield Clinic and the Rusk County Library.

As the community began the long rebuilding process from the tornado, I began to refocus my attention once again on the programming needs for the county. About the same time, funding cuts to the local Family Resource Center (FRC) and subsequent loss of the director seemed to deal yet another blow to the families in this beleaguered county. UW-Extension was the only entity left that could program to all citizens residing in Rusk County. Because of this, Indianhead Community Action Agency looked to UW-Extension to take the lead in developing and shaping the new Family Resource Center. Together we picked a new director who shared the vision and philosophy we felt was central to a resource center; a nucleus for the information of countywide resources. A new direction for the resource center was evolving and it was agreed that the resource center would work with UW-Extension to develop parenting programs. The new director and I developed a Parent Advisory Committee that encompassed agencies that worked with families and community members. This new committee, under the guidance of UW-Extension colleagues, worked to create a strategic plan that included a focus for programming, securing of funds, and the building of county wide capacity (**Exhibit 3**). In an effort to sustain the FRC, I developed a PowerPoint (**Exhibit 4**) that built support for the Family Resource Center. The director of the FRC and I met with area businesses and agencies to ask for their support either financially or through resources to continue to help families in the County.

The gradual dissolution of turf wars and the development of the FRC's strategic plan gave agencies the opportunity to work together. As reflected in my plans of work, my programming became more focused as I found my niche in the county. I established basic programming priorities: Stressed Families and Positive Youth Development. Because the need for financial security was also too significant to ignore, I partnered with UW-Extension colleagues to develop a comprehensive Financial Management Program. These two areas are outlined below.

Supporting Stressed Families: Parents of Children Ages Birth to Teen

The need for quality parenting programs was evident from the beginning. The challenge was for agencies to recognize UW-Extension as a resource for parenting programs that were both credible and sustainable. Initially, I had developed topical programs that addressed isolated parenting needs but a much more comprehensive approach was needed. My introduction to the Strengthening Families Program 10-14 (SFP) propelled me in the right direction.

The Strengthening Families Program (SFP): for Parents and Youth 10-14 is a parent, youth, and family skills-building curriculum designed to prevent teen substance abuse and other behavior problems, strengthen parenting skills, and build family strengths. It has reached the highest level of rigorous evaluation standards and has been recognized as an exemplary prevention program by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Institute on Drug Abuse, and the Department of Education. A unique characteristic that enticed me to explore this program was its family strengthening component. Parents meet separately with a parent facilitator for the first hour while their youth meet with two youth facilitators. During the second hour, the parents and youth come together as a family. Knowing a program of this caliber would require a local partner, I invited a social worker from the Department of Family Services to attend training with me. Implementing the program was a struggle. The SFP is a time and resource intensive program that not only requires at least three facilitators but seven weeks of commitment from both facilitators and the families. Additionally, a meal must be prepared before each session and childcare provided. We first needed to gather the support of partners to help with and refer families to the program. I created a PowerPoint (**Exhibit 5**) and a promotional brochure (**Exhibit 6**) and made presentations to the district attorney's office, the school districts, and to social services. The social worker and I wrote several successful grants for the project and received notification from social services that they would now refer families to this program. A significant challenge was not only promoting this program to local agencies, but finding enough participants to run a complete series. After two trial runs, we found that word of mouth was our biggest advertiser. Eventually, we actually had to develop waiting lists! We were able to offer the program twice yearly by working with a number of different partners. Ultimately, we completed a total of seven series of the SFP with excellent evaluation results (**Exhibit 7**). I am gratified to know that this valuable program continues to be offered in Rusk County even after my departure.

Because the successful implementation of this program became recognized at the state level, I was asked by the State Program Liaison to join the Family Living Parenting Education Team. During the summer of 2005, I was given the opportunity, with five colleagues, to become a Strengthening Families Trainer. In 2006, I co-facilitated three separate SFP trainings to professionals; Vilas County, Middleton, and Menomonie. Evaluation results indicated all three trainings were effective in preparing participants to facilitate the program in their own counties (**Exhibit 8**). I have increased statewide awareness of the SFP by presenting at the School Counselors Conference and at the Wisconsin Associated County Extension Committees. I have also collaborated with colleagues and presented 'Strengthening Families: Lessons Learned' (**Evaluation Exhibit 9**) at the Wisconsin State Prevention Conference.

Strengthening Families – Preschool Program is a program I developed as the need for parenting to this age group was brought to my attention by childcare workers and Head Start. I adapted material from two separate research-based curricula (1234 Parents! and DARE to be You) to create an innovative preschool program developed specifically for childcare centers and the two Head Start facilities in Rusk County.

I modeled the program after the SFP where parents and youth meet separately and then together as a family. I developed a PowerPoint for each session to capture the different learning styles of the participants. The evaluation results for the pilot program (**Exhibit 10**) showed that parents

increased their knowledge of discipline practices, self esteem in kids and child development. The success of the SFP 10-14 allowed me to work with many different partners and earn a reputation for developing sustainable programs. Such credibility opened the door for me to begin addressing other critical issues of need for stressed families in Rusk County.

Supporting Stressed Families: Financial Management

Results of a county wide needs assessment indicated that Rusk County families needed financial guidance. I partnered with my Extension colleagues to bring a comprehensive financial management program to the county.

Having taken on the role of the Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program (WNEP) Coordinator, I was able to maneuver resources WNEP had to offer and combine them with a program tailored to Rusk County. A two part financial management series was developed. Part one involved clients working one-on-one with myself to create a spending plan, develop debt repayment strategies, and develop money goals. Part two involved working with the nutrition educator on stretching the food dollar. I created two informational brochures. One brochure (**Exhibit 11**) was designed to describe the program. The second was a more generalized community resources brochure (**Exhibit 12**). Evaluation results indicated that the program had impact and my teaching strategies were effective (**Exhibit 13**). A two-month follow up showed that the majority were still utilizing approaches taught and were following a spending plan (**Exhibit 14**). Additionally, I developed a group presentation that gave an overview of money management. Agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services, Head Start, and the Office on Aging adapted these materials for their own audiences. Evaluation data is reflected in **Exhibit 15**.

Summary

Reflecting back on my five years in Rusk County, I felt I made significant, positive contributions to the communities and families I served.

Because building capacity and sustainable programs was a priority, I feel I achieved those goals by introducing research-based programs that not only provided training to local agency personnel, but attracted funding that will secure such programs into the future. My assistance in the development of the Parent Advisory Committee allowed agencies to come to a common table and work together, enhancing community resources. With the help of new office colleagues, we mended the broken ties between the UW-Extension office and the Agriculture and Extension Committee. We were extremely gratified by their decision to open interviews for a new Family Living Agent. My successor in Rusk County will be able to build on programs and relationships that now view Extension as a valuable contributing partner. And, those experiences in Rusk County have positioned me well to address the needs and unique challenges of Dunn County.

Dunn County: Situation and Future Planning

Dunn County is a rural county in west central Wisconsin with a population of 39,858. Six percent of families and 14 percent of children live in poverty. The University of Wisconsin – Stout is located in the heart of Menomonie, the county's only city. This move from a resource-scarce county to a resource-rich county comes with its own advantages and challenges. Being familiar with UW-Extension and programs they provide has been an asset while I begin my duties in a new county. Although local agencies may offer some well-established programs to the citizens of Dunn County, I am already working on a needs assessment that I have developed with the help of Ellen Taylor-Powell. I am following the model of a county colleague and meeting with key informants in the county to gain insight to what they feel the needs are. After I compile this information, I will begin the process of developing a program plan and begin implementing programs to meet the identified needs. I look forward to the challenges and opportunities ahead of me in Dunn County.