

## **Family Living Programs**

### **Local Collaborations Improve the Lives of Children, Youth and Families**

#### **Situation**

Issues such as hunger, child abuse, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, delinquency and crime, lack of affordable housing, inadequate health care, chronic debt and financial mismanagement, and family breakdown have serious effects on children, youth and families. These issues persist in communities despite efforts to address them. In recent years there has been a growing recognition of the important role that institutions, organizations and citizens at the local community level play in the development and well-being of children, youth and families.

Coalitions and collaboratives bring diverse stakeholders from organizations, government, and the citizenry together to work over sustained periods of time to assess conditions, devise strategies and programs, implement them and monitor and adapt them over time to achieve desired results. National research indicates that these efforts have strengthened community health and resilience by promoting development, inter-group relations, and civic participation. They have succeeded in raising funds and implementing new local service systems. They have fostered coordination at the system and the case levels. Coalitions have also enabled spin-off activities and initiatives. Finally, studies are beginning to show long term effects on policy change and individual well being. The ability of coalitions to mobilize and focus resources has contributed to these successes.

UW-Extension educators are well positioned to contribute significantly to the implementation of effective community level initiatives. Educators have considerable experience playing various roles in community coalitions and a recent assessment shows opportunities for continuing and strengthening those roles.

#### **Response**

Over the past decade and longer, Family Living Program (FLP) Educators, Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program (WNEP) Coordinators and 4-H Youth Development (4-HYD) Educators in UW-Extension have expanded their involvement in a broad array of community partnerships, coalitions and other multi-sector groups. During the 90's, WNEP programming expanded to additional counties and coalition initiatives addressing hunger, food security and nutrition proliferated. Statewide WNEP leaders provided support for this work. A statewide theme group, Creating Community Partnerships with Youth, provided leadership and support for the work of 4-HYD faculty and staff.

A study completed in 2002 showed the extensive commitment of UW-Extension educators to the support of community coalitions addressing issues affecting children, youth and families. Key findings were:

- Most UW-Extension educators work with multi-sector community groups (FLP, 94%; WNEP, 87%; 4-HYD, 73%). A high percent (81-93) of FLP and 4-HYD educators also work with traditionally supported community groups, such as 4-H Clubs and Home and Community Education clubs and associations.

- Most educators (85%) work with one to six multi-sector community groups (MCGs) as a member of the group. On average educators work with about 3.8 MCGs in this way. Thirty-seven percent work with one to three groups as nonmembers.
- Educators indicated that the importance of working with MCGs has increased over time. The percent rating this work as very important at different time points was: 45% five years ago, 67% now and 72% in future.

## **Outcomes**

A study was conducted of 44 community groups that address issues affecting families in 36 Wisconsin counties. The study showed that members are relatively satisfied with the functioning of their groups, yet also wish to make improvements in recruiting, orienting, training and retiring members. With UW-Extension involvement, the greatest gains for members and coalitions occurred in increased understanding of community needs, issues and resources and strengthened sense of capacity to make a difference by working together, while ability to generate resources needed improvement. Impacts on the community were shown in networks developed and grants written or funded. Further efforts were needed to build on these foundations and bring about changes in services, policies and conditions affecting families.

## **County Success Stories**

### **Sawyer County: Housing Awareness Task Force**

Although housing is a basic need, households affected by poverty and underemployment often have multiple needs that require inter-agency involvement and comprehensive services to support long-term housing success. Lack of affordable housing contributes to family stress, decreased school success for youth, difficulties maintaining a quality workforce and excess demand on limited county resources.

In 2002, Trinke McNurlin, Family Living Educator, brought 50 community stakeholders together to form the Sawyer County Housing Task Force. In 2003, McNurlin facilitated a group process that identified the need to increase access to housing by working with community service providers to implement a comprehensive central point of intake process. McNurlin partnered with thirteen agencies including Sawyer County Human Services, Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO) Planning, LCO Family Preservation, LCO Health Services, Sawyer Housing Authority, Vocational Rehabilitation, domestic abuse shelters; and Indianhead Community Action to develop ACCESS (Advocating Community Collaborative Emergency Service Strategies). ACCESS coordinates housing resources to assist persons in housing crisis and collect local data for use in obtaining housing funds.

McNurlin worked with ACCESS to develop a training module that has been presented to 47 Sawyer and LCO agencies. Four ACCESS client intake forms were developed and disseminated to 50 service providers. By March 2004, McNurlin will train agency partners in the implementation of ACCESS.

Seventeen Housing Task Force/ACCESS members responded to a survey evaluating the task force effectiveness from 2001-2003. Achievements mentioned were: 1) increased networking; 2) increased agency communication and trust, and; 3) development of tools required to implement ACCESS. Two respondents commented on "strengthened bridging" between Sawyer County and LCO agencies, underscoring the value of trainings for the LCO Tribal Council and annual LCO Planning conference attended by 32 LCO and Sawyer County agency participants. In 2004, McNurlin will assist with

implementing and evaluating the ACCESS process, analyzing local data and grant-writing to sustain ACCESS as a web-based system for agency and citizen use.

## **Eau Claire County: Partnership for Strong Hmong Families**

Hmong families in Wisconsin struggle to preserve their cultural identity within mainstream society. Their children are often torn between the traditional way of life and the way of their peers. Through the Hmong Family Strengthening Project, Eau Claire Hmong families gain skills in communication, support, and setting limits and family rules.

The Partnership for Strong Hmong Families (PSHF) was formed in Nov. 2000 to create a family support program for Hmong families with early adolescents. Among the community partners are a state and county UW-Extension team, representatives from the Eau Claire schools, youth and family organizations, police department, and respected members and leaders of the local Hmong community. The UW-Extension Family Living team of Dianne Weber, Mary Huser, Steve Small and Ka Youa Kong provided leadership for project implementation and evaluation with support from a two-year \$193,000 Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) grant.

Based on a needs assessment with Hmong parents and youth, the Partnership selected a prevention program that best matched family needs and community resources. Sixteen partners were trained as facilitators and the curriculum was adapted to reflect Hmong beliefs and traditions. Three, six-week series of classes were held, reaching 30 families. In evaluation surveys and interviews, parents reported a significant decrease in family conflict and significant increases in expression of affection and warmth towards their children. Youth also reported a significant decrease in family conflict, as well as a significant increase in parents' expression of praise and level of monitoring. They also reported that their parents now have a stricter attitude about drug use, have clearer family rules and are more likely to enforce family rules. When families graduated in May 2002, Hmong parents requested more classes. The PSHF continues to meet and a one-day "Booster Session" for all families was held in March 2003.

The UW-Extension team used a community-based approach to develop and implement this family oriented program, which has helped Hmong families develop better family relationships in spite of the pressures of mainstream society. The program has also helped build awareness of Hmong cultural norms that impact parent-child relations. The collaboration-based approach has made more resources available to Hmong families and created community-wide ownership to sustain the program.

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