

Strengthening Families: The Role of Community-Based and Grassroots Organizations

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Currently, hundreds of community-based and grassroots organizations (CBOs) provide a safety net of support to families and children across the state of North Carolina. The common mission of these organizations is to strengthen outcomes for children, families, and communities. The role they play in these efforts is both significant and complex. The following is an example of one North Carolina community-based organization that is typical of the work happening every day across this sector.

Background of the Down East Partnership for Children

Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC) is a nonprofit organization located in Rocky Mount, in North Carolina. Although physically located in Edgecombe county, DEPC serves both Edgecombe and Nash county. The area is a combination of small towns and communities, large rural areas, and a city, Rocky Mount (population, 55,893), which straddles the county line. The population (Nash county, 87,420 and Edgecombe county, 55,606) is racially diverse within each county and across county lines. Nash county is 61% white, 34% black, 3% Hispanic, and 2% other; and Edgecombe is 57% black, 39% white, 3% Hispanic, and 1% other. Economically, the area is a mix of upwardly mobile middle-class families and both rural and inner-city low-income families. In 2000, the median household income was \$37,147 in Nash county and \$30,983 in Edgecombe County, with 13.4% of Nash County and 19.6% of Edgecombe county residents living in poverty.¹

DEPC was created in 1993 by a group of local community leaders who were concerned about the child/family statistics in the two-county area, including high incidences of poverty, low birth-weight infants, teen pregnancy, and child abuse and neglect. These leaders recognized that strengthening the family service systems in both counties by creating a coordinated, collaborative system of services across county lines would be an integral part of improving these problems.

To accomplish this, DEPC works in collaboration with

community partners to create and implement innovative, collaborative, and family-friendly services for children and families and to create long-term change in the early care, education, and human service systems. The DEPC mission is to improve the quality of life for children and families in Edgecombe and Nash counties through advocating and supporting quality, life-long education and facilitating a trusted and coordinated system of community services.

Programs and Services of the Down East Partnership for Children

DEPC provides a wide range of direct services for children, families, and early care and education providers. Programs for children and families are designed to enhance the development of children and to strengthen families in a safe, friendly environment in which the families feel comfortable asking questions, admitting need, and seeking help. Service providers are trained to focus on families from a strength-based approach, involving them in planning for long-term outcomes and empowering them to create their own changes.

Programs for early care and education providers are designed to enhance educators' abilities to provide the highest quality of care and education for the children and families they serve. DEPC provides training to help early educators understand the importance of quality health, safety, and educational standards and how to meet those standards. DEPC strives to help them recognize and value their role as first responders in identifying families who may be in trouble and children who are at risk for abuse and neglect.

Programs for children and families include resource and referral services to help families locate early and school-age child care and increase their understanding of the importance of choosing *quality* care. A child care scholarship program helps low-income families pay for child care. The children must attend a four- or five-star rated facility to ensure they have access to high-quality early care and education. Families who receive the child

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care scholarship also agree to participate annually in eight hours of family education or family involvement activities designed to enhance their parenting skills and encourage their involvement in their child's education.

DEPC also supports families in their parenting role. Services include support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren and families with special needs children. A crisis child care program is available to help reduce the stress of families experiencing a crisis, and one-on-one support is offered to interested families to help them identify, plan for, and accomplish specific outcomes based on their family's needs.

Additional family services include a parent information library of videos, books, and other materials that families can check out at no charge; family education workshops and classes, and toddler and preschool playgroups. Finally, a variety of *Family Night Out* and *Family Fun Day* events are provided on a regular basis to reach out to families, build trust, and engage them in more active learning about parenting.

Programs for early care and education providers include training and technical assistance to help them develop and

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maintain quality care and education programs. DEPC also works to professionalize the early care and education system by working to ensure that all providers have wages equal to the important role they play.

In order to meet the needs of all families throughout the two-county area, DEPC also acts as a financial intermediary, funding 29 programs in ten partner agencies. For example, DEPC funds:

- family support programs through community-based family resource centers to eliminate typical barriers that families face when seeking services, such as lack of transportation

and fear and distrust of governmental institutions outside their own neighborhoods;

- a two-county community health program that provides health and safety education and works to ensure that all children have up-to-date immunizations and a medical home;
- kindergarten transition programs in both Nash-Rocky Mount and Edgecombe County Public Schools designed to ensure that all children enter school healthy and ready to succeed;
- a salary supplement initiative for child care providers in the two-county area based on longevity and educational level. The supplement initiative is designed to increase provider education and decrease turnover, both of which affect the quality of care and education that a center can provide.
- additional staff for the Nash and Edgecombe counties' departments of social services to enhance their abilities to manage their child care subsidy program, which helps ensure that all families have access to child care when needed.
- the management of *More at Four*, North Carolina's initiative to make quality preschool education available for at-risk four-year-old children.

All DEPC programs are managed through a performance-based contracting, monitoring, and evaluation process that has been in effect since 1994. All programs must support the DEPC mission and be working toward one or more of the following goals: (1) Universal Access to Quality Education; (2) Improved Parenting and Parent Involvement in Education; (3) Elimination of Barriers to Services and (4) Improved Transition to School. Annual outcomes are negotiated for each activity and program and must support clear progress toward five-year community-wide indicators/benchmarks of child/family well-being. For complete program and evaluation information, please see the DEPC web site at: www.depc.org.

Strengths

While DEPC is one of the hundreds of nonprofit CBOs in North Carolina working to improve the quality of life of children and families, all CBOs share a similar set of strengths that many government or for-profit organizations lack. For example, CBOs have the ability to create trust, are multi-sectoral, are mission driven, are able to meet family needs quickly, have limited bureaucracy, are not surrounded by a “government stigma,” and have local support.

Because CBOs are community-focused, they are able to create an environment where parents and children feel nurtured. Having this environment helps develop trust and allows learning to occur. Over a period of time this creates a culture of success in both the families and ultimately in the community they live in. In addition, working with a CBO does not involve the stigma of seeking help from the government. Working without this stigma helps normalize and encourage all families to improve their support systems and information base.

Most CBOs operate more entrepreneurally than government

agencies and thus, can be more innovative and adaptive to their communities' needs. Because they may also have limited bureaucracy, they can model the pro-active behavior that families and children need to be successful.

Meeting community needs is also enhanced by the CBO's ability to work across agencies, organizations, and disciplines to create holistic supports and solutions for families and children. Since CBOs are mission-driven, rather than profit or insurance driven, the services are almost always free, which eliminates the financial barrier that families often face when seeking help.

CBOs also share a strength in being able to act as both a triage and a feeder system. Acting as a triage system, CBOs help divert families from needing more intensive and expensive services (e.g., foster care, special education). Acting as a feeder system, CBOs help connect families in need with appropriate services when such services are needed.

Finally, CBOs have the support of the local community, in terms of volunteers, funding, and political influence. This support is critical to the change process not only in individuals and families, but also in the community.

Challenges

Being a CBO also has its share of challenges. During this recent period of record budget shortfalls, CBOs have faced increasingly difficult financial challenges. For example, many CBOs lack stable funding that is unrestricted and financial support for infrastructure and resource development. Some CBOs find it difficult to stay on mission and maintain a local agenda, as they are forced to follow funding or face closing. Funding issues also make it difficult for CBOs to hire and retain staff who have the skill level necessary to both implement evidence-based programs and operate in an environment of continuing change. Qualified staff are competitively sought after and can make significantly more money outside of the nonprofit sector.

The demand for immediate results presents another challenge for CBOs. Changing family systems and documenting child and family outcomes is both time and money intensive. Funders can be impatient with the change process and reluctant to commit long-term resources to the services and evaluation needed to produce evidence of long-term program success. Along with the challenges, is the ever-increasing demand for

accountability. While certainly understandable from a public-trust standpoint, most CBOs have multiple funders with varying reporting requirements and timelines. The time and energy required to satisfy multiple funders can be staggering.

Conclusion

While the work of community-based and grassroots organizations may not fit easily into a scientific, evidence-based model, it undeniably creates a system of support missing in today's transient society. Providing support that previously came from extended families living in closer-knit communities, CBOs connect people to each other and to the help that we all need to be successful parents. These family services play an essential role in decreasing risk factor for abuse, improving outcomes for children, and helping families and communities create long-term change. Perhaps consumer voices explain the benefits that this sector contributes best. Below are comments from some of the clients and staff involved with the DEPC programs.

"I really enjoyed the group because it gave me a chance to hear others talk about their household and changes that I can make."
(Playgroup participant)

"I learned how to be a better advocate at school meetings."
(Effective parenting workshop participant)

"I learned how to control my anger and not take my frustrations out on my daughter... We are communicating better and our relationship is improving." (Parent Information Center user)

"I often discuss tips for kindergarten success with parents. One parent told me what a difference I had made in her life. I asked her 'Don't you mean in your child's life?' She said, 'No, my life. Your kind words of encouragement really help me display that same attitude in my parenting.' To reach a child, I must first reach a parent." (Early Childhood Contact)

"DEPC gave me confidence that I can help solve community and family problems." (Community Fellow Graduate) **NCMedJ**

REFERENCES

- 1 US Census Bureau. 2000. Available at: <http://www.census.gov/>. Accessed September 8, 2005.