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Helping Families Transition from Welfare to Work

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Helping Families Transition from Welfare to Work

Abstract

Families remaining on the welfare rolls often face multiple barriers to move successfully into the work force. Cooperative Extension, in partnership with the Nebraska Health and Human Services System, implemented an educational developmental program, Building Nebraska Families. Building Nebraska Families works one-on-one with Employment First families, Nebraska's welfare reform program, teaching family management and life skills using an individualized, flexible curriculum to help families more successfully transition from welfare to work. The authors share a description of the program, its status, and the strategies for evaluation.

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Introduction

Hard-to-place families are families that are faced with multiple personal and family challenges that make it difficult for them to be successful in the workplace. One of the keys to helping families who must overcome or cope with an adverse array of challenges may be to draw upon their strengths that are often ignored. Providing flexible program offerings that focus on individual and family strengths, needs, and circumstances may be a powerful way to help these families become self-sufficient. (Kramer, 1998)

In response to an implicit need to help hard-to-place families in Employment First, Nebraska's welfare reform program, Building Nebraska Families was funded. This University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension program, in partnership with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, began the program in February 1999. The focus of the program is rural Nebraska because fewer resources and services for family management/life skills education are available in these areas for Employment First participants during the transition and early stages of self-sufficiency.

Program Description

The mission of Building Nebraska Families is to assist participants in acquiring skills needed to successfully maintain their families as they assume work responsibilities. At the core of this program are three participant objectives:

- a. Strengthen skills in managing family resources;

- b. Secure and maintain employment; and
- c. Identify assets to prepare them to be contributing members of the community.

Participants are referred to the Building Nebraska Families program by Health and Human Services case managers. Grant funding provides support for Extension educators dedicated to this program. The Extension educators, participants, and case managers meet to discuss a participant's ultimate self-sufficiency goal. Using a model developed by Stinnett and DeFrian (1985) in their research on the qualities of strong families, the Extension educators and participants identify family strengths and assets, set short- and long-term goals and develop an individualized educational plan.

Based on the plan, Extension educators teach a flexible program regimen, including self-esteem, decision-making, problem-solving, goal setting, anger management, parenting, healthy relationships, money management, communication skills, and other topics as necessary. Extension educators work one-on-one with participants, often in the home. Building Nebraska Families provides no job skills training.

Program Status

Building Nebraska Families currently has five Extension educators serving 23 rural counties. Since its inception in the summer of 1999, a total of 89 participants have been enrolled in the program. Thirteen participants have completed the Building Nebraska Families program and have moved to self-sufficiency.

Participants report that the program helped them learn skills they need to find and hold a job, have a place to live, start paying their bills, own up to past mistakes, and feel better about themselves. One graduate reports that she has, "landed a job she likes and is paying off . . . bills." She was amazed and thankful that she "still had money in her pocket and food in the house five days before pay day." Another participant with a poor work history due to a hot temper learned how to manage his anger and cope with criticism and now has a better job.

Sixteen of the current 66 enrolled participants are employed and have maintained that employment for at least 3 months. In addition, three participants are actively pursuing post secondary education. Others are studying to complete their G.E.D. From October 1, 1999 through January 1, 2001, 1,794 intensive individual teaching sessions were conducted.

Nebraska Health and Human Services staff have indicated an interest in expanding Building Nebraska Families into additional counties. Working in partnership with Nebraska Cooperative Extension, future site selection will be based on numbers of Employment First clients and the need for additional services.

Evaluation Strategies

The Building Nebraska Families program incorporates several evaluation strategies. The first is an entry behavior checklist that each Employment First participant completes upon enrollment. This is one of the tools used to identify each individual's areas of need for family management/life skills education. Upon graduation, participants complete an exit checklist. In reviewing the entry/exit surveys of the first nine graduates, notable changes were evident. The graduates felt better about themselves, improved their time management skills, and increased problem-solving skills. Statistical analysis on the entry versus the exit behavior checklist showed a positive change in clients' responses.

Another strategy used is success markers, developed by Barry Kibel, Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (Kibel, 1999). Success markers document the transformational changes and incremental gains achieved each month. The first step in using success markers was to write a separate, targeted outcome challenge for selected individuals, groups, and agencies working in partnership with the program. Outcome challenges for the Building Nebraska Families program were written for several partners, including Employment First participants, Building Nebraska Families Extension educators, and Health and Human Service supervisors. One example of an outcome challenge is "Employment First participants who take the necessary steps to improve their work and life skills, become self-sufficient."

Once outcome challenges were established for each partner, success markers were written. Success markers represent the actions/beliefs that indicate successful accomplishment of the outcome challenge. They are written in three categories for each program outcome: expect to see, like to see, and love to see. Examples of success markers for Employment First participants include:

Expect to see:

- Keep appointments
- Actively participate in Building Nebraska Families program
- Come prepared to lessons

Like to see:

- Identify personal assets, needs and growth areas
- Overcome obstacles to participation
- Complete assignments

Love to see:

- Maintain employment
- Take personal responsibility for meeting goals
- Demonstrate self-sufficiency based upon individual goals.

A summary of success marker achievements for the nine graduates revealed the following: completion of 100% of "expect to see," 71% of "like to see," and 55% of "love to see" success markers. The ability to handle obstacles improved, and evidence of follow through with assignments was noted. Extension educators observed that, after a period of 6 months, graduates were able to set and achieve long-term goals as well as begin to incorporate the lessons into their own value and belief system, i.e., change their life style.

Conclusion

As welfare reform continues, an increasingly greater number of those remaining on the welfare rolls may be those who face multiple barriers to self-sufficiency and are harder-to-place. Building Nebraska Families offers one strategy to help strengthen the family management and life skills of these individuals to assist them to be more successful in their transition.

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