

ESPRI Education Work Group – Meeting Highlights
April 3, 2017 3:30 – 5:00 PM
Community Action Planning Council – 518 Davidson Street

Present: Erin Cordova, Fidelis Care
Michael Del Signore, Community Member
Ian Grant, Fort Drum Regional Health Planning Organization
Leslie Keefer, Community Advocate
Krystin LaBarge, Community Advocate / Education Chair
Patti LaBarr, Watertown City School District
Leslie LaRose for Steve Todd, Jeff-Lewis BOCES
Mike Lawrence, Community Advocate
Kim Leonard, Department of Social Services
Beth Linderman, Watertown City School District
Carolyn Mantle, Community Advocate
Stacy Neddo, Community Member
Rafael Reyes, Community Advocate
Lori Sears, Watertown City School District

Peter Schmitt, Watertown, ESPRI Director
Dawn Cole, Watertown ESPRI
Bob Gorman, United Way of Northern NY
Georgia Dusckas, Jeff-Lewis BOCES
Mary Jane Mathewson, Community Action Planning Council
Christine Sutton, Watertown City School District
Rev. Jeff Nowak, First United Methodist Church

Excused: Roger Ambrose, Jefferson County Community Services
Linya Bell, Community Member
Anne Garno, North Country Prenatal Perinatal Council
Cody Horbacz, City of Watertown
Myron Jamerson, The Rock Church
Carole, McCoy, Jefferson Community College
Tammie Miller, Resolution Center
Anita Seefried-Brown, PIVOT, Alliance for Better Communities
Katy Troester-Trate, Jefferson Community College

Welcome

Chair Ms. LaBarge called the meeting to order at 3:35 PM and welcomed members of the group.

Introduction

Mr. Schmitt introduced Reverend Jeff Nowak, Bethany United Methodist Church, who is in attendance to learn more about the work of the Education group.

High School Equivalency (formerly GED)

Georgia Dusckas provided an overview of the high school equivalency program offered at BOCES. Ms. Dusckas shared statistical data, tasking the group with retaining a critical point: “the education level of the mother is the determinant for the child’s academic success.” She explained that the GED test changed in January 2014 to TASC, which is considered to be far more difficult. Statistics show a decline in the percentage of individuals passing the high school equivalency test since the switch to TASC. However, the BOCES pass rate is significantly higher than that of NYS.

Adults seeking high school equivalency through BOCES undergo a Test of Adult Basic Education, referred to as TABE. Based on the results, BOCES prepares a prescriptive program, tailored to the individual. Adults enroll in literacy orientation in preparation for TASC. Ms. Dusckas estimated the attrition rate at 50%, meaning that half of those who sign up for literacy orientation do not follow through. She explained that oftentimes adults living in poverty lose their focus on educational goals, as they struggle to deal with the distractions in their lives.

Of the 141 individuals who attended literacy orientation during the time period July 2016 – February 2017, 108 were considered to be ABE Intermediate (grades 4 – 8.9). Ms. Dusckas explained that individuals in the ABE Intermediate category qualify for entry level positions.

A question was asked regarding the common barriers that prevent individuals from completing education programs. Ms. Dusckas explained that transportation is the most common issue, followed by child care. In terms of transportation, arrangements have been made for a BOCES bus to run from Salmon Run Mall to BOCES. In response to child care issues, BOCES schedules orientation sessions during evening hours.

Ms. Dusckas cited fear of failure as another common barrier to educational achievement, especially for those individuals who were unsuccessful in the traditional classroom setting. She suggested that individuals are better equipped to work toward goals when they have access to mentor and one-to-one assistance to work through barriers. Ms. Dusckas advised that in her opinion an ideal caseload ratio is 1:5 (one mentor to five students) with a strategy of creating a pattern or habit to help individuals get on their way to reaching goals.

A question was asked regarding the organizations that provide TASC test preparation. Ms. Dusckas explained that BOCES and Literacy Volunteers of Northern NY are sanctioned to provide preparation services.

A question was asked pertaining to whether Common Core plays a role in high school equivalency, and Ms. Dusckas explained that at around the same time the school standards were changing, adult literacy standards were revised to reflect college / career readiness.

Overcoming Barriers through Ready to Work

Mary Jane Mathewson, Community Action Planning Council, provided an overview of a program called Ready to Work (RTW). She explained that RTW was a workforce development program, funded for three years through the Department of State. The program was designed to help low-income individuals gain/maintain education or employment by working through barriers. When the grant period was over, the agency funded the program on its own – albeit on a much smaller scale.

Ms. Mathewson shared her experiences providing case management support to individuals participating in Ready to Work. In addition to assistance with tuition, individuals have been provided with a variety of support services, including gas cards, bus passes, car repairs, child care expenses, uniforms/work clothing, tools, and school supplies. Ms. Mathewson explained that RTW partners include organizations such as the Jeff-Lewis Workplace, Samaritan Medical Center and BOCES.

Ms. Mathewson described a real-life scenario in which a nursing instructor from Samaritan phoned to explain that she had a stellar student who was at risk of dropping out of the program. Ms. Mathewson met with the individual and identified transportation as a major barrier to completion of the CNA program. Gas cards were provided to ensure that she could travel back and forth to classes. The individual went on to graduate from the program, earning her certified nursing assistant (CNA) designation and gaining a full-time position with benefits at Samaritan.

In another instance, Ms. Mathewson provided moral support to a woman recently abandoned by her husband and financial assistance to cover child care costs while she applied for a subsidy.

Ms. Mathewson shared a story of a man who visited the agency's food pantry and indicated that he was looking for a job but lacked the skills. Ms. Mathewson helped him to enroll in the Manufacturing Tech program at BOCES and provided transportation assistance and case management support. The individual graduated the program and gained employment at NY Air Brake.

Ms. Mathewson explained that she usually meets with RTW individuals on a bi-weekly basis with regular phone calls in between meetings. A question was asked regarding how many RTW customers she works with in a given year; Ms. Mathewson explained that she generally handles a caseload of 7 – 9 and that another staffer at Community Action sees roughly the same number. She estimated that over the course of a year, she works with 20 – 25 individuals through Ready to Work.

A question was asked regarding how individuals access RTW. Ms. Mathewson explained that often they come from the agency's existing customer base – i.e.) visiting the food pantry or accessing other services. Other times they are referred by partner agencies, including the Workplace. Income-qualifying individuals (at or below 125% of the poverty level) receive

tuition assistance – with Community Action Planning Council covering a portion of the tuition and the Workplace covering the remainder.

When asked about the cost associated with RTW, Ms. Mathewson agreed to provide information subsequent to the meeting. UPDATE: Ms. Mathewson provided the following information – RTW participants receive between \$800 - \$2,400 in support services (out-of-pocket tuition costs, uniforms, gas cards, help with rent, child care, etc.). Services are tailored to the specific needs of each individual. Average cost of supports per customer, over the past year, is \$1,100 (excluding salary).

Connecting Community Supports

Christine Sutton, Watertown City School District, gave examples of models for connecting families in need with resources. The 211 Directory is used as a tool to identify potential resources. A new program, entitled CNY Health Home, provides assistance to families with children with specific diagnoses. The Anchor Recovery Center, sponsored by Alliance for Better Communities, is a peer support center designed to encourage healthy habits. Single Point of Access (SPOA) and Single Point of Entry (SPOE) are models for accessing mental health related services for children and adults. Families and providers are brought together for a panel discussion to determine the appropriate case management approach and blend of services to address the issue(s).

Ms. Sutton described her idea of an effective model – a central location with walk-ins welcome where individuals have access to information about virtually every available service in the community.

A question was asked regarding 211 Directory usage, and Mr. Gorman agreed to research and provide information for inclusion in the minutes. UPDATE: Mr. Gorman shared that in the past year, the 211 Directory has been accessed via the phone 60 times in Watertown, with health care and utility related inquiries making up nearly half of all calls. Visits to the website total 3,507 for Watertown (roughly 12% of Syracuse web visits); 2,714 of visits are categorized as new users. The average visit to the site is 1 minute and 45 seconds in duration with 7 pages viewed.

Engagement Update

Ms. Cole reported that eight community engagement sessions have been conducted to date, reaching 82 individuals. An additional engagement meeting is scheduled for Centennial Apartments on April 12. Overall, participants have been willing to share, enthusiastic and pleased at having been included in the process. The community engagement sessions reinforce what we learned through the Task Force and Work Groups, with the same barriers noted. Participants often referenced the need to be motivated in order to successfully move out of poverty. The benefit cliff was talked about frequently, including the idea of one step forward and two steps backward. The benefit cliff is often a disincentive to taking on more hours and seems especially challenging in terms of subsidized rent increases. Overall, there appears to be a lack of awareness of current resources – among target population and some confusion as to

what is available among providers. From time to time, participants expressed that some organizations appear inflexible, adding to daily stress levels.

Per Ms. Cole, barriers specific to education identified by community engagement groups include:

- Lack of vision to recognize strengths
- Lack of education holding people back from reaching their potential
- Cost of education
- Child care – cost and affordability
- Transportation – public bus last run from JCC is 5:20
- Lack of information about available resources – not just tuition but support services to address barriers
- Interest in financial management education (short and long term)
- Lack of preparedness for higher education
- Lack of access to technology

Mr. Schmitt shared that as part of the engagement process, a number of individuals indicated that they could not afford to go to college. Mr. Schmitt met with Jefferson Community College officials and confirmed that individuals living at or below 200% of the poverty level qualify for free tuition. In addition, these individuals receive a stipend of up to \$2,000 to help with ancillary costs, such as child care and transportation. It was noted that the biggest challenge is getting individuals in the door!

Next Steps

Mr. Schmitt indicated that Liz Morrissey, Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, will be attending the next meeting of the Steering Committee on April 12, at which time a revised timeline will be discussed. The Steering Committee will also be reviewing a draft survey, slated to be released later this month.

Open Discussion

Mr. Schmitt shared that the other work groups were closing in on specific initiatives to review. He opened a discussion, tasking those present with narrowing the focus and identifying specific strategies to eliminate barriers.

A suggestion was made regarding a centrally-located information site, such as the Chamber of Commerce, where individuals can access information. A discussion ensued around whether the Workplace is an information site, and it was pointed out that given the focus is on employment, the perception is that it is not “open” to all. Additionally, the Workplace does not offer evening hours.

Given that measurable outcomes must be achieved within a one-year time period, it was suggested that early childhood education may not be the best fit for ESPRI. A conversation ensued around young adults and whether school guidance counselors are providing enough support to students. It was thought that guidance counselors spend the majority of their time helping students deal with the chaos in their lives with little time left to focus on college / career preparation.

The group discussed whether to focus on high school students or adults returning to education. In contemplation of Ms. Dusckas' statement regarding the education level of the mother predicting the child's academic future, it was suggested that focusing on adults would have both an immediate and long-term impact on poverty.

Next Meeting

Mrs. LaBarge thanked the group for their time and closed out the meeting. The next meeting will be scheduled once the timeline has been confirmed.