

FAMILY SELF SUFFICIENCY

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January 1994
Community and Economic Development
New Hampshire College

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BACKGROUND

The group of people I chose to work with were the very low income, Section 8 Rent Assisted families who are participating in the New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority's Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) Program. In addition I worked with other staff members in the Housing Management Division at the New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority, other Local Housing authority staff, and various community social service agencies and businesses throughout the state.

Family Self Sufficiency is designed to use HUD's housing assistance programs along with public and private resources including the provision of supportive services to enable families to leave the welfare system or low-paying jobs and achieve economic self-sufficiency. The flow of the program consists of a case plan being developed by a case manager which lists the steps the participant will take during the next five years to become economically self-sufficient. The participant commits to this plan and continues to receive rental subsidy throughout the program. The family must be off all forms of welfare assistance at the end of the five year program. The agency's role is to coordinate the most effective way of assuring the success of the FSS participants.

The program at our agency was at a start up phase. The first

participant to be admitted to the program were in November of 1993. The internal staff involved with the FSS at the Authority consisted of myself, the Director of Supportive Services, the Program Monitor/FSS coordinator, two VISTA volunteers and the supportive executive level staff. The participation of the Director of Supportive Services was to assist in the coordination of The VISTA volunteers and in reviewing the case plans submitted by contracted out case managers. I administer the Section 8 Existing housing assistance programs for the State of New Hampshire with my employment at the New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority.

DEFINITION OF PROBLEM

If no solution is found to the administrative barriers to obtaining support services and employment support from the local business communities for FSS participants throughout the state of New Hampshire, the success of FSS participants to gain economic independence and to reach program goals will be jeopardized.

Future funding for section 8 rental assistance is based upon the success of each Housing Authority's FSS program. Since there are over 5000 applicants on our waiting list and it is our obligation to assist as many households as we can, it is essential that we have an outstanding performance.

PROJECT GOALS

To identify and establish public and private resources for services and employment for FSS participants to enable them to obtain their goals for economic independence.

At project completion, there will be a well established Program Coordinating Committee which will serve to obtain commitments from social service providers and the business community for services or employment for participants in the FSS program. This committee will be the key to tapping into the community resources necessary for a successful program.

This initial project goal will serve the larger ideal goal of creating a job bank of employment for FSS participants who have successfully completed their contract of participation, and internship/training opportunities with business for FSS participants to assist in the participant's attaining their employment goals.

The expected outputs of the project were as follows:

1. Operating Program Coordinating Committee.

2. FSS Coordinator's role established and operating with minimal supervision.
3. Case Management services are obtained throughout all regions of the state.
4. Business Community throughout the state is actively involved in the FSS program.

METHODS

A Program Coordinating Committee needed to be set up with the service agencies and business community serving as members. The purpose of the committee is to assist in obtaining the necessary community resources and to assist in expediting and coordinating agreements between the Housing Authority and potential service providers. The committee also assists in obtaining commitments from the local business communities for employment opportunities for the local business participants.

The Housing Authority needed to establish a better defined role for the FSS coordinator. The FSS coordinator functions as the coordinator of program activities, including work with the committee and the coordinator of staff, personnel of other agencies, and clients in providing needed services. The coordinator assignment changed personnel mid-stream. This change was made due to several reasons, the first being that there was an opportunity to use a staff member with extensive human service experience in the role and the timing to make the change within the agency was right. Secondly, the coordinator role demands full time attention which was also worked into the staffing change. Last, the coordinator role ineffective having one staff person wearing two hats- one of FSS coordination and another being the Section 8 enforcer. It was difficult to build a relationship with the

participants having two roles which at times can be opposing.

In order to determine the types of service and employment commitments needed for FSS participants, several initiatives were begun. The intention also was to begin networking on an informal basis to establish the public and private resources needed.

The Housing Authority surveyed the needs and characteristics of all the Section 8 Certificate and Voucher participants. The survey's purpose was to give participants opportunities to identify which issues were the most crucial to the process of their becoming self-sufficient and to indicate an interest in the FSS program.

A series of educational workshops for FSS participants was organized. The workshops focus on topics related to becoming independent and self sufficient. These workshops were originally made mandatory for FSS participant attendance by the Supportive Services Director, even though this method was opposed by the other staff members. This was not a successful approach as there was much resentment by the participants. The method has since changed as a result of discussions with participants, case managers and staff. At this time the attendance is encouraged, but voluntary.

Resident committee were organized composed of participants in the FSS program. The committee is intended to assist us in developing

the FSS program in the best interest of the participants. In addition, the committee serves as a support network among the participants. These meetings along with the workshops are now in the process of being coordinated with other Housing Authorities and their FSS participants. The overall philosophy of the committee has undergone a transition in recent months from changing from "What can we do for you" to "What can you do for each other".

A mentor program was organized to give FSS participants added support and more intensive follow-up than can be provided by the present case management services. In addition to the cost advantage of utilizing volunteers rather than paid staff, the mentor program also provides an opportunity for more widespread community involvement and greater community ownership for the program.

RESULTS

Operating Program Coordinating Committee (PCC)

The concept of the PCC has undergone synthesis during the past year and a half. Originally, the method was to hold scheduled meetings with a group of selected persons. Several meetings were held in an attempt to establish the committee. Each meeting was sparsely attended and further accomplishments toward the goal of establishing case management and employment opportunities through this committee were non-existent. Unfortunately, there is no network of service providers that can make statewide decisions and commit to providing services at a statewide level.

As a result of bringing on a staff member who previously worked with Health and Human Services, she was able to add insight to the problem. She has numerous contact within the community which she surveyed to determine an alternative way of setting up the committee. The conclusion to establish a loosely structured, revolving PCC. The concept of this method is to have infrequent meetings, two or three a year, with most communication being done via the phone, fax, mail or E-mail. At this time, a revolving PCC has been successfully established.

It is interesting that everything is happening all at once with the

program. The idea of the revolving PCC has caught on statewide with other Housing Authorities. The resources for the FSS program are beginning to become pooled and the effort is becoming a statewide collaborative effort among the agencies. Most of the other authorities are just beginning to implement the FSS program and are looking to our agency to be the lead agency in the statewide endeavor to share in the PCCs. It is an exciting time for this program and the possibilities are boundless.

FSS Coordinator's role established and operating with minimal supervision

The coordinator's role got off to a sluggish start. As will be discussed in greater detail in the analysis section, there was a lack of communication and intentional withholding of information by the Supportive Services Director. The coordinator was discouraged to "take the ball and run with it". The coordinator at this time worked diligently within the circumstances. It was difficult since support and coordination was needed by all staff members involved in the FSS program.

Recently, the results have begun to change due to the change in staffing. The coordinator's role has since become well established. The program activities successfully being coordinated

in addition to the PCC Committee are as follows:

Resident Committee meetings are being held on a regular basis. The goal of this committee is to bring participants together to share their successes and struggles in becoming economically self sufficient. Each meeting has a focus topic in addition to being a support network group. The meetings tend to be sparsely attended, however there is a net gain of one or two persons at each successive meeting. Several participants who are not able to attend the meetings remain active by keeping in touch with the VISTA volunteers. The VISTA is in the process of gathering and circulating the names of the participants to one another. In addition, two participants have offered to conduct workshops for the group.

A newsletter for FSS participants, Section 8 participants, service organizations and businesses has been established. The intention of the newsletter was to network and provide public relations among participants, agencies and businesses and to provide recognition to the participants. Two newsletters have been published to date. The second newsletter was published this fall. This one had a different flavor to it than the previous one. An attempt was made to have the information less academic and bureacratic. One of the FSS participants has agreed to write an article for each publication, and another has submitted poems. Tenant participation

is actively being solicited by letter, word of mouth and through the resident meetings. It is still hoped that the newsletter will be entirely participant owned within a couple of years. Miami Florida Housing Authority has been successful in this effort, and we have solicited ideas and comments from them to help our efforts along. Several other Housing Authorities within the state have begun newsletters as a result of our efforts.

A computerized service directory/resource guide intended to encompass all services throughout the state is being completed. The ultimate goal of this guide is for the computer program to assess the needs of participants taking into consideration their career goal and economic situation. At this time there is no encompassing source of information for the low income citizens in our state. The VISTA volunteer is obtaining the information necessary for the guide. As a result, program promotion is being accomplished. It is intended that this guide will also be used as a promotional feature for the agency which will result in additional support for the program especially within the agency.

Case Management services are obtained throughout all regions of the state

The original goal of the PCC committee was to obtain support from agencies to provide case management for FSS clients since many of

these agencies are already providing these services. This was not a successful endeavor. There are numerous jurisdictional issues which arise when this idea is presented to providers. Economic issues also come into play. Agencies are not willing to do something for nothing, and our agency is unwilling to provide funding or exchanges of subsidy for services.

At this time we still remain with two contracted out case managers who were given the contract to assist their non-profit agencies over their ability to provide professional case management. This is definitely a weak link in our ability to have a successful program. Much debate has arisen because of this problem, but there is overall little support for the human services aspect of this program within the agency. In the next few months, the FSS coordinator will be acting as a case manager as we begin to offer the program to ten additional families. At some time, this issue will have to be dealt with by the parties involved for the program to develop as intended.

Business Community throughout the state is actively involved in the FSS program

This goal is in the fledgling stages of development. Interaction with several of the Department of Employment Security representatives has begun. A personal friend of the FSS

coordinator who is a CEO of a large NH company has given preliminary corporate support and assistance in networking with the business community. The newsletter has been sent to local businesses and a business highlight is being developed for the newsletter. Local businesses have been sent correspondence in an attempt to gather information of their in house training programs, volunteerism, and what civic programs they are involved in. It is hoped that this effort will serve not only to educate, but to generate interest in and support for the program.

Investigation into micro-enterprise development and self employment is also in the beginning stages of development. Many of the FSS participants have expressed an interest in having their own businesses.

ANALYSIS/CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

There were several problems impeding the success of the project. The one which effected the overall success had to do with the cooperation of staff members within the Authority. There were intense territory issues with the Director of Supportive Services. Initially, this person's role with the program was to assist with the coordination of the case managers and VISTA staff in obtaining support from social service providers in the community which she has had contact with. Unfortunately, this person also has an agenda of self promotion and an unwillingness to work with others.

Most of the time the FSS coordinator and myself were left in the dark as to what actions were being taken in the program. As a result, at our request we would have meetings to discuss what plan of action to take with the program, but often times this was set aside in the implementation phase. When questioned concerning this, the answers would be evasive or hostile. Overall it was not a good situation. As a result of these conditions, there was no collaborative effort made to implement the program.

Finally, after recognizing the difficulties being encountered with the program, the executive level staff allowed for this director's removal from the program. I am glad I stuck it out and have since

had the opportunity to begin to gain some success with the project. Quite frankly, I do not know what changes could have been made to make it work with this staff member without going into all of the management problems occurring at the agency.

Another roadblock has to do with the agency itself. There has traditionally been a lack of commitment to programs which involve social services aspects. Of course however, public relations would show this to be the contrary. Interestingly, though the whole field of housing has been undergoing a slow change in philosophy resulting in the slow acceptance has social services being an integral part of the provision of low income housing.

I also believe that I had an unrealistic idea that government agencies are willing and able to work with one another, even with cooperative memorandums of understandings which have been executed among HUD and many of the agencies involved. Perhaps it is just a bit too cutting edge just yet for this region. I do believe that this approach will be possible in the future. The political climate is changing by the day. Welfare reform is right in sync with the FSS movement, and HUD is undergoing a dramatic upheaval.

In light of all this though, the basic need to have employment opportunities is essential. All the education and training in the world is not going to put food on the table. Future plans for this

project must incorporate a job development piece. Program specific we can investigate self employment, internships, job shadowing and other initiatives working between participant and business. Overall, this is a difficult part of the puzzle to solve as it is a comprehensive social issue rather than a program specific issue.

In summary, this past year has been a difficult year with minimal reward for the most part. However, the old adage of try, try again is certainly worth adhering to. At the end of this project year there has been a complete turnaround in the success of the project and the personal enjoyment in watching the changes blossom day by day. I am sure there will be other dips and turns along the way, but I feel we are on the road to something great!