



Project Reaches Out to At-Risk Families, Teens, in Rural Washington State

Rural family group support network

SUMMARY

Parent Trust for Washington Children established a Rural Family Group Support Network to expand its presence beyond urban settings, and into Washington's rural counties to reduce families' social isolation that can lead to child abuse and neglect.

From 2001 to 2004, project staff assessed the communities in which they planned to work to identify service gaps and to find partners who would refer clients to the new programs being developed.

The grantee adapted its support group model to fit the needs of these rural communities where isolation is often compounded by transportation problems.

Referrals ultimately came from Child Protective Services, public health nurses, school counselors, childbirth education agencies and others.

Key Results

- Parent Trust tailored the family group support model it uses in urban areas to the special needs of rural areas and small towns in four counties in eastern Washington. During the grant period, it developed and ran three programs under the Rural Family Group Support Network.
- Parent Trust established a local office with two full-time coordinators in eastern Washington to develop and maintain community contacts and to raise funds.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) supported this program with a grant of \$120,000 from October 2001 to September 2004.

THE PROBLEM

Just as many urban families face poverty and a lack of connection to the community, so, too, do rural families, who have experienced significant societal upheaval, including out-migration that vacates their neighborhoods and erodes their social bonds. Family support and development programs have emerged as a response to the changing context of family life, including Parent Trust for Washington Children, a statewide nonprofit agency founded in 1978 that runs family support groups to reduce the risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect.

THE PROJECT

This *unsolicited* grant was intended to strengthen families in rural Washington State by creating community-based family support programs in four counties: Yakima, Walla Walla, Benton and Franklin, all in the eastern part of the state. The grantee, Parent Trust for Washington Children, adapted its support group model to fit the needs of these rural communities where isolation is often compounded by transportation problems.

Project staff assessed the communities in which they planned to work to identify service gaps and to find partners who would refer clients to the new programs being developed; referrals ultimately came from Child Protective Services, public health nurses, school counselors, childbirth education agencies and others.

Other Funding

The Stuart Foundation provided \$160,000 in funding during the grant period, United Way provided \$6,000, and a number of other donors provided a total of \$2,500.

RESULTS

The project director reported the following results to RWJF:

- Parent Trust tailored the family group support model it uses in urban areas to the special needs of rural areas and small towns in four counties in eastern Washington. During the grant period, it developed and ran three programs under the Rural Family Group Support Network:
 - In *Yakima County*, Parent Trust established an Intensive Parent Training and Support Program to reach high-risk families in their homes before an incident of child abuse or neglect occurred. The program served 184 family members over the three-year grant period, with families reporting an average 32 percent increase in family management skills after 12 or more sessions, according to a Parent Trust survey. The program served 17 fathers, who are often overlooked by other parenting programs.

- In *Walla Walla County*, Parent Trust created a support group for teens in outpatient chemical dependency treatment. Weekly sessions with facilitators included an hour for frank discussions about staying clean and sober, and another hour for recreation and informal interactions. Some of the teens went on to attend leadership classes in Seattle, returning home to become more active in their communities. The program helped 43 teens over the grant period, providing more than 400 hours of services; teens who completed the 13 group sessions reported an 18 percent increase in life skills in a Parent Trust survey.
- In *Benton and Franklin Counties*, Parent Trust and Catholic Family and Child Service jointly hired a Latino Network coordinator to develop six support groups for Spanish-speaking families to reduce the risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect. Referrals typically come from local hospitals and other organizations that do not have services tailored to this community. Parent Trust served 348 Latino families during the grant period, providing more than 3,000 hours of service. Families who attended 37 or more sessions reported a 35 percent average increase in social support, according to a Parent Trust survey.
- Parent Trust established a local office with two full-time coordinators in eastern Washington to develop and maintain community contacts and to raise funds. One coordinator is responsible for marketing, outreach and fundraising; the other is responsible for networking with social service providers; recruiting and training staff; supporting ongoing programs; and providing direct services through the Intensive Parent Training and Support Program.

Communications

Project staff reached more than 4,000 people in the four counties served by the project through presentations to state and local agencies and community boards. Staff also operated information booths at two state conferences, the Washington State Behavioral Conference in July 2003 and the Children's Alliance Conference in October 2003.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Working with families in extreme poverty may require adjusting methods of outreach.** Parent Trust had expected to start family support groups in Yakima County but discovered that many families were not ready to join a group. Parent Trust adjusted its support model to focus instead on home visits, and on educating families about group work. (Project Director)
2. **It is critical to satisfy basic human needs before offering counseling.** Parent Trust learned that it had to help address such problems as scarce food and open sewage before staff could talk to families about parenting techniques. (Project Director)
3. **Child abuse may be avoidable if referral agencies identify chronic neglect as a problem.** Parent Trust educated referral agencies to look for early signs of failure-to-

bond or poor communication between parents and children as a sign that the families needed additional support. (Project Director)

4. **Facilitators had to make home visits to cultivate relationships with Latino families, especially the fathers, before they were willing to participate in a support group.** Their attendance also depended on knowing other group members beforehand. (Project Director)
5. **Quelling the concerns of parents and agencies about bringing together recovering teens required adjusting the program model.** Parents and agencies feared that groups of teens recovering from chemical dependencies would be unruly and breed trouble. Parent Trust eased fears by adapting a support model that included a very clear structure. (Project Director)

AFTERWARD

Two groups provided funding to continue the project: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation awarded \$125,000 for three years beginning in June 2004 and the Washington Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect awarded \$105,000 in March 2004 for a three-year grant to replicate the Intensive Parent Training and Support program for Spanish-speaking families and for fathers.

Parent Trust is now starting a family support group in Yakima County, building on several years of home visits, while the group programs in Benton and Franklin Counties are continuing. In Walla Walla, the teen support program became a drop-in center for teens run by other agencies. Under contract with the Washington Division of Child and Family Services, Parent Trust has adapted its Intensive Parent Training and Support program model for the state's Alternative Response System, which provides home visits to families with one reported incident of abuse or neglect. Parent Trust has served 51 families under that contract.

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