

Community Planning in Rural Areas

The “Partners for Success” Model in Pittsfield, MA

Countywide Challenges

- Geography - the regions served by adult literacy programs in Berkshire County consist of 30 small towns and two cities spread out over a large geographic area
- Lack of Resources – these small towns and cities rarely have adequate resources to address adult literacy issues on their own or provide support for such critical services as affordable housing, health care, day care and transportation
- Limited Pool of Stakeholders - with fewer people living in the region, their participation in community planning is often severely limited by time and budget constraints
- Continuing decline in population including an increasing proportion of higher skilled young adults leaving the region
- Low graduation rate in Pittsfield Public Schools
- Mismatch in skill sets between available workers and jobs
- Rapidly growing immigrant population that is largely uncounted
- High rate of teenage pregnancies
- Increasing number of single parents with children under the age of 6 living in poverty



The Rural Community Planning Model

Participates in existing collaborations

Benefits: minimizes duplication of effort, maximizes resources, reduces “burn out” among community participants, allows us to bring the adult literacy message to a much broader group of stakeholders, and allows for more effective communication among diverse stakeholders in a large geographic, rural region

Note: The Pittsfield Partnership meets annually to determine progress and recommend new strategies for the Strategic Plan goals.

Goals are short term and action oriented

Benefits: promotes more immediate and tangible results, encourages broader community participation, and provides realistic building blocks for longer range goals

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Community Planner interacts with education, business & government leaders

Benefits: actively strengthens their understanding of and support for adult literacy in the region, enhances overall communication, and as a result, often builds broader support in the community for issues related to adult literacy.

Partners for Success

This regionally based, strategic plan for adult literacy serves one city and eight surrounding towns with an estimated population of 64,616 residents located in a 255 square mile area in central Berkshire County.

The goals of the partnership are to improve the exchange of information among diverse stakeholders, address the adult literacy needs of the rapidly increasing immigrant population as well as the growing number of young adults who are dropping out of high school, develop additional resources to supplement case management initiatives, and improve the visibility of the Pittsfield Adult Learning Center in the community.

Examples

Shorter term actions with existing collaborations and agencies that provided broad support for the partnership’s information exchange, case management and enhanced visibility goals and specific outreach to the following stakeholders in the community.

Immigrants

- ▶ **Cross Cultural Action Network (CCAN)** - serves on the Steering Committee of this informal partnership and facilitates bi-monthly networking sessions that bring social service agencies, education providers, religious institutions and businesses together who share a common interest in immigrant and minority cultural issues in Berkshire County
- ▶ **Changing Face of the Workforce in Berkshire County** – co-sponsored a forum held February 2007 that attracted 100 CEOs, Human Resource professionals and media attention to explore support options for the growing immigrant labor force in the region
- ▶ **Welcoming Community Initiative** - launched in 2008 by the Cross Cultural Action Network with a goal of collecting 500 signatures by September in support of the statewide program

Family Literacy

- ▶ **Strategic Planning** - facilitated two-day session for the Berkshire Children & Families agency to identify and prioritize resources and actions to take in support of the Even Start family literacy program
- ▶ **SWAT Team** - served on a crisis team formed to keep the former *Even Start* program operational and provided meeting facilitation, resources and marketing support

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Young Adults

- ▶ **Project Reconnect** – provided support for an education & job fair that attracted more than 150 HS dropouts in 2007 with participation from the Adult Learning Center
- ▶ **Youth Build** – advised the Pathways 21 program coordinator and team on key strategies for this on-going initiative that helps qualifying young adults obtain a GED education (at the Adult Learning Center) and job skills

Higher Education

- ▶ **Project Link** - brings community planning perspective to this transitional program at Berkshire Community College
- ▶ **Multi Cultural Outreach Program** – provided adult literacy updates and a community planning perspective to efforts by Berkshire Community College to develop outreach to the immigrant community

Government

- ▶ **Berkshire Legislative Delegation** - facilitated meetings during critical funding cycles for adult literacy programs
- ▶ **Fact Sheets** - prepared one-page information sheets for community leaders and legislators to use in advocating for adult literacy

Workforce Development

- ▶ **Promotes adult literacy education and training options at events** sponsored by the Berkshire Chamber of Commerce, Human Resources Association of Berkshire County, and Training Alliance of the Berkshires
- ▶ **Advices** the Berkshire County Regional Employment Board, Berkshire Chamber of Commerce, Pathways 21 and Western Mass. Office of Business Development on adult literacy issues and emerging trends
- ▶ **Facilitates Roundtables** for the Training Alliance of the Berkshires and serves on its steering committee.

Adult Literacy

- ▶ **Adult Literacy Committee of Berkshires County** – chairs this countywide group of providers and supports who meet quarterly to explore specific issues, identify trends, and update each other on their programs
- ▶ **Research** - summarizes and shares selected research findings of special interest to partners in the community; and tracks countywide statistics on adult literacy

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