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Practice Concepts



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Public programs for youth and older adults have both been affected by decreases in governmental funding. This paper describes an intergenerational service program designed to use the skills of each generation to meet the needs of the other. Screening, training, and a variety of placements for the teenage and older adult participants are reviewed, and ongoing program benefits are discussed.

Key Words: Community programs, Intergenerational

Intergenerational Service Programs: Meeting Shared Needs of Young and Old¹

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This society's adolescent and elderly populations share many needs and characteristics. Both often have little access to meaningful social roles. For example, neither is likely to be fully integrated into the work force and, consequently, both groups tend to have high rates of unemployment (Pearl, 1978; Shepard, 1976). Moreover, their family roles tend to be in transition. Teenagers are in the process of gaining independence from their parents while many older adults face changes such as the loss of a spouse or decreased family power relative to their middle-aged children. The lack of meaningful social roles has been blamed for youthful antisocial behavior (Greenberg, 1977) as well as for increased mental illness among the elderly (Clark & Anderson, 1967).

Most social service programs are designed to serve one age group. Recently, however, social policy planners and programmers have become aware of

the potential benefits to be derived from using the two generations to meet each other's needs (Brache, 1980; Powell & Arquitt, 1978). A number of encouraging intergenerational projects have been conducted. Among the better known of these are Project YES, in which high school youth work as in-home aides for the frail elderly (Spitler et al., 1982); Project LINC, which established neighborhood-based multi-generational helping networks (Pynoos et al., 1984); Teaching Learning Communities, which use older volunteers as classroom assistants in public schools (Tice, 1980); and Foster Grandparents, a program in which older adults establish ongoing relationships with non-related young people (Tramel-Seck, 1983; Yuknavage, 1980).

Similar to these projects, the intergenerational service program described here sought to use the skills and needs of each generation to meet the needs of the other. It is offered as a model for communities and individual agencies facing cutbacks in services to youth and older adults.

Community Profile and Program Development

In June, 1982, the City of Gardena's Human Services Department was awarded a grant from the State of California's Employment Development Depart-

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ment to develop and implement an intergenerational service program. Gardena is located in the greater Los Angeles area. It is a multi-cultural and multi-racial community of 45,165 persons (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980).

The Gardena Intergenerational Partnership Program was designed to address several problems facing this community. First, government funding cut-backs are jeopardizing programs designed to serve older adults and youth. Second, an unemployment problem exists among local youth, especially minority youth, and among older workers aged 55 and older. Third, as previously discussed, the two groups often have little access to meaningful social roles. Cut off from productive work and community involvement, both youth and the elderly may experience alienation and dissatisfaction, and these feelings may be further exacerbated by negative social stereotypes that portray them as unproductive members of society.

To address these shared needs, the City of Gardena's Human Services Department consulted with a number of interested community agencies (including nursing homes, schools, etc.) and, with their input, designed the Gardena Intergenerational Partnership Program. The Human Services Department has a 10-year history of cooperation with local agencies in serving the Gardena community. Because of positive past experiences with the department and the city's high credibility, very little community resistance to the project was encountered from the beginning. Good relations were further fostered by frequent interagency communication throughout the program's duration.

The Gardena Intergenerational Partnership Program consisted of two service groups: the Youth Service Corps (YSC), in which youth served older adults in need, and the Older Adult Service Corps (OASC), in which senior citizens worked with high need youth.

The Youth Service Corps

Since its initiation, approximately 70 young people have worked in the Youth Service Corps. To join the program, these youths were screened by Human Services Department staff, who assessed financial need and emotional maturity. Although careful screening was essential to the program's success, this does not mean that all "problem kids" were precluded from participation. Many YSC participants were referred to the project through juvenile diversion programs which seek to prevent criminal activity among high-risk youth, and at least five were members of local gangs. Thus, rather than avoiding young people with problems, the program was able to serve a number of them.

After being accepted into the program the teenagers were given a week of pre-service training in gerontology. In response to criticisms from the adolescent participants, the original training format was restructured and shortened. In its final form, the pre-service training was conducted for 2 to 2½ hours a

day on 5 days with a break in the middle of each session. Topics discussed were Human Development Over the Life Span, Myths and Realities of Aging, the Importance of Social Contacts to Late Life Adaptation, Ways to Prepare Now for a Long and a Healthy Life, and Common Disabilities and Health Problems among the Frail Elderly.

The youths also received on-the-job training in agricultural or health care skills as well as formal in-service training in gerontology throughout their participation in the program. The topics included Communications Skills, Institutionalization and Senile Dementia, Social Problems of the Elderly (crime and safety), Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation Certification, Special Concerns of Minority Elderly (Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians), Retirement, and, most importantly, Job Search Skills.

To maintain the youths' interest, the training incorporated small group techniques and audiovisual materials wherever possible. An attempt was also made to highlight the relevance of each topic to the youths' own lives. For example, an understanding of the importance of social contacts to late life adaptation was personalized by having the youths list the most important people in their lives. In small groups led by staff, they discussed how these relationships enriched their lives and shared an experience in which they had lost someone or something close to them. These experiences were then used to help the youths better understand situations that they might encounter while working with socially isolated nursing home residents.

Staffing for the training sessions was provided by Human Services Department staff, invited speakers from local universities, service providers, and older adults residing in the community. An attempt was made to expose the youth to many high-functioning older adults during the training in order to start breaking down some of their stereotypes about the aged.

After pre-service training, the youth participated in one of the following intergenerational service activities.

1. *The Gardena Families Project* — Youth provided emotional support, companionship, and personal services for frail elderly who were either homebound or residents of nursing homes. Bilingual elders were paired with bilingual youth. Older adults who were initially resistant to having minority youth working in their homes were individually approached by a Human Services Department staff member, and in all identified cases, the elderly participants became more receptive.
2. *Gardena Senior Citizens Day Care Center* — Youth provided companionship to frail older adults and participated in group activities. The addition of the young workers to the staff enabled the Center to accommodate several older adults needing individualized attention, such as those with advanced Alzheimer-type disease.
3. *Gardena Gardens* — Youth worked at one of several community gardens with senior citizen gardeners, from whom they learned agricultural skills. The produce generated from this partnership then became the property

of the older adults for their personal consumption or for sale at a local farmer's market.

The participating agencies provided on-site supervision for the youth. More importantly, however, several older adults were hired as "mentors" to provide guidance, the benefit of their accumulated knowledge, and supervision for the YSC. Mentors were assisted and supervised by staff from the Human Services Department Youth and Senior Citizens Bureaus.

The Older Adult Service Corps

Corps

The Older Adult Service Corps was initiated as a pilot project, but, due to several difficulties, it was never enlarged. Few interested elders were able to pass the project's stringent financial criteria, and several financially needy applicants dropped out because of fears that employment would endanger their Social Security payments. Other applicants did not pass screening because of language barriers, emotional difficulties, or rigid attitudes toward the special youth populations with whom they would be working (pregnant mothers or developmentally disabled youth). Eventually, six OASC members were hired. These adults received approximately 12 hours of pre-service training in adolescent development. The training, which covered the topics of Psycho-Social Adolescent Development, Adolescent Sexuality, Peer Pressure, and Communication Skills, was led by a health educator from a local community health clinic and her two teenage assistants. Additional training was provided on the job.

Two of the OASC members were placed at a community health clinic to serve as surrogate grandmothers for teenage mothers. Their role was to provide emotional support, resource information, and other assistance to pregnant adolescents and teenage mothers. The other four OASC members participated in the city's Recreation Department program for developmentally disabled youth. Their role was to help maintain various socialization programs for the developmentally disabled, including Special Olympics, dances, excursions, and skills classes.

Evaluation of Program Benefits

Although the Intergenerational Partnership Program was funded only during a year and a half trial period, the benefits gained by the agencies, their clients, and the participants continue. For example, due to their positive experiences, most of the participating agencies have made an ongoing commitment to continue the intergenerational contact, either by using volunteers or through private and public funding sources. The Gardena Gardens project has continued on the same scale through the participation of older volunteers and agriculture students who receive course credit at their high schools. Similarly, older adults are working as volunteers in the program with developmentally disabled youth. The Gardena Senior Citizen's Day Care Center is actively

pursuing private funding for teenage program assistants, and five youths are currently employed at the Center through a variety of funding resources. The Center finds that the intergenerational work concept allows them to approach a broader spectrum of private foundations for funding, including not only those concerned with the aged, but also those which give solely to programs for youth.

Unfortunately, the Gardena Families Project did not continue. Although participating nursing homes wanted to maintain the intergenerational contact, they did not have the resources to recruit, train, and supervise new young workers. One nursing home, however, did hire a YSC member to be an activities assistant. Similarly, the surrogate grandmothers for pregnant teenagers project did not continue. This is attributed to both the difficulty in finding suitable elderly to carry out this sensitive work and to problems that the host clinic experienced in integrating the OASC workers into a relatively new program.

The Gardena Intergenerational Partnership Program was successful in providing meaningful service roles for the majority of its young and old participants. For example, the positive program experiences of several local gang members led them to recommend the program to their younger sisters and brothers. Several of these youth who were at high risk of joining gangs became involved in the program and, subsequently, in other diversion activities.

All Youth and Older Adult Service Corps participants were asked to complete subjective evaluations of their program experiences. As can be seen from the comments below, their comments were overwhelmingly positive.

It had a positive effect on me because it brought me down to the ground as far as teenagers are concerned because I've been away from that for a while. It made me see that teenagers are still teenagers just like I was a teenager. It was an awakening. (M.S., age 59, Developmental Disabilities Project)

In this summer for the first time of my life I feel helpful because I have been doing a lot for the senior citizens and I hope I can continue to help them. I think senior citizens appreciate what the youth of Gardena are doing for them and this summer has been a great experience for them too. (M.P., age 16, Gardena Senior Citizens Day Care Center)

As I go to work each day and see these people, I guess it is sort of depressing. It's so sad to see many of them are just put in there without any families or friends. That's why it makes me feel good sometimes when I leave there and leave a good feeling in them. I want to make them happy and let them know that we are not only there for work but to care for them too! (A.M., age 14, Gardena Families Project)

I really started off hating this job, after I found out how much work we had to do, but ever since the senior citizens arrived they sort of ease things off for me; you can say they sort of made me feel like I was the most important thing that ever happened to them. (S.P., age 17, Gardena Gardens)

Similarly, the nursing home residents, day care center participants, and senior gardeners also expressed their great appreciation for the program and for the opportunity it gave them to receive affection from and give it to their young companions.

Conclusions

The Gardena Intergenerational Partnership Program successfully met many diverse needs in the local community. It is a program that can be implemented in a variety of settings using either paid workers or volunteers. It broadens the range of possible funding sources which can be approached by providing a service to both youth and older adults. Furthermore, it is a program that uses one generation's skills and needs to meet the needs of the other, thus providing socially meaningful roles for both.

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