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Supporting Immigrant and Families Initiative

Background

In the late 1990's, The Colorado Trust, listening to a board member's idea, conducted a needs assessment within refugee and immigrant communities in Colorado. The needs assessment personnel interviewed service providers, schools, and immigrants and refugees. The findings indicated that refugees and immigrants struggled with issues of mental health and cultural adjustment. Based on the needs assessment, as well as other earlier research, The Colorado Trust put out a Request for Proposals (RFP) for agencies to apply to be the managing organization of a \$7.4 million initiative. The initiative, which became the Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Families Initiative (SIRFI), provided monies for agencies serving refugees and immigrants to administer programs relating to mental health and cultural adjustment, as well as giving technical assistance to strengthen the agencies. The Spring Institute for International Studies in Denver was awarded the role of the coordinating agency (Wildau, 2003).

SIRFI is a five-year program that was begun in 2000 and ends in 2005. It has provided twenty-three agencies with grants (on a competitive basis) for three years. The Colorado Trust has not yet decided what will happen funding-wise at the end of the funding cycle in 2005 (Wildau, 2003).

Mission

The Colorado Trust lays out the mission of SIRFI: "The mission of the Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Families Initiative is to improve the mental health and cultural adjustment of immigrants and refugees living in Colorado" (Wildau & Khalsa, 2002).

Program Overview

In its 2001 Annual Report, The Colorado Trust describes SIRFI:

Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Families Initiative provides support for the positive social adjustment of immigrant and refugees through critical services such as counseling, English as a Second Language classes, support groups and parenting classes. This initiative also supports the creation of an interpreter bank to ensure a supply of quality interpreters and to provide organizations with interpreters (p. 17).

Agencies that received grants from The Colorado Trust vary in what services they provide and the populations they serve. Together, the Spring Institute and The Colorado Trust aided by peer reviewers decided upon which organizations should be given grants. Grantees were awarded on the basis of several criteria including: location in the state,

ability to serve different populations, and a desire to improve their organization with the help of technical assistance provided through SIRFI. Some grantees are well-established organizations and others are not (Wildau, 2003).

As a part of the grant, organizations receive technical assistance. The Colorado Trust views technical assistance as, “organizational development, content based (or discipline specific) consulting, leadership development, institutional strengthening, management assistance or capacity building” (website). The purpose of technical assistance is to help agencies strengthen their organizations and provide support for integrating their vision with the work they do and thus creating a better sustaining organization (website). The funds for technical assistance are separate from the funds for service provision. The Spring Institute’s role is to help grantees decide what technical assistance they want and then connect the agency with another organization that can provide the technical assistance (Wildau & Khalsa).

Goals

In the brochure, “Providing Technical Assistance to Build Organizational Capacity” (2002), The Colorado Trust and the Spring Institute outline the goals of the project. They are as follows:

Goal 1: To provide organizations across Colorado with funding and guidance that substantially promotes their ability to implement effective direct and indirect mental health services for immigrants and refugees.

Goal 2: To encourage the coordination of services which promote the mental health of immigrants and refugees directly and indirectly through increased collaboration between agencies and enhanced referral capabilities.

Goal 3: To strengthen organizations that serve the mental health and cultural adjustment needs of immigrants and refugees by improving their capacity in arenas such as board development, staff recruitment and retention, conflict resolution, cultural responsiveness, and other key areas.

Goal 4: To enhance the ability of Colorado organizations to respond to the needs of new and emerging immigrant and refugee populations in timely and effective ways.

Goal 5: To create strategies for sustaining effective programs that enhance the mental well-being of immigrants and refugees (Wildau & Khalsa, 2002, p. II).

These goals demonstrate The Colorado Trusts’ dual commitment to providing culturally appropriate mental health services as well as supporting the grantee agencies’ growth organizationally.

After two years, the grant will be evaluated by consultants representing REFT/LARASA. REFT/LARASA will interview clients (immigrants and refugees) to determine the effectiveness of each agency in providing culturally competent mental health services (website). Using what they have learned from the initial evaluation, they will make recommendations for how to continue the last three years of the fund (“Helping Immigrants and Refugees in Colorado” brochure, 2002).

The original intent of SIRFI was to provide funding to twenty-three organizations across the state of Colorado that work with refugees, immigrants or migrant workers. The first year eleven organizations received grants; the second year, twelve more agencies were selected to complete the allocated number. The agencies that received funds are listed in the table below (“Helping Immigrants and Refugees in Colorado” brochure, 2002).

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Area served</i>
1. A.F. Williams Family Medicine Center	Metropolitan Denver
2. Asian Pacific Development Center	El Paso County
3. Adult Education Center of Durango/La Plata Unity Coalition	Four Corners region
4. Boulder County Immigrant Collaborative	Boulder and Weld Counties
5. Catholic Charities Northern	City of Greeley and Weld Counties
6. Catholic Charities Pueblo	Crowley, Otero and Pueblo counties
7. Colorado West Regional Mental Health Center	Routt and Moffat counties
8. Crawford Family Resource Center	Aurora
9. Ecccos Family Center	Metropolitan Denver
10. Family Ties West Family Center	Montros, Delta, San Miguel, Ouray, Gunnison, and Hinsdale Counties
11. Family Visitor Program	Garfield and Pitkin counties, and the Basalt/El Jebel area of Eagle County
12. Focus Points Family Resource Center	Metropolitan Denver
13. Hmong American Association of Colorado	Metropolitan Denver
14. Jewish Family Service	Metropolitan Denver
15. Muslim Women’s Association and the Faith Community Action Team of Findthegood.org	Metropolitan Denver, Fort Collins and Colorado Springs
16. Plan de Salud del Valle, Inc.	Adams, Boulder, Larimer, Morgan and Weld counties
17. Rocky Mountain Survivors Center	Colorado statewide
18. Rural Communities Resource Center	Washington and Yuma counties
19. San Luis Valley Christian Community Services’ Immigrant Resource Center	Alamosa, Conejos, Costilla, Mineral, Rio Grande, and Saguache counties
20. Servicios de la Raza, Inc.	Metropolitan Denver
21. St. Mary’s Family Practice Residency	Mesa County
22. Summit County Family Resource Center	Summit County
23. Vietnamese Elderly Association of Colorado	Adams, Arapahoe, Denver and Jefferson counties

Key Accomplishments

Accomplishments for a grant-making project are harder to measure than for an individual agency. According to Rich Wildau, Project Director, the difficulty of assessing accomplishments in such a multi-agency program, lie in knowing if goals have been achieved or are still “in progress”. Furthermore, how much can be attributed to this initiative separate from the influence of other factors? Nonetheless, several things have been accomplished (Wildau, 2003).

One accomplishment is an awareness that cultural adjustment is a mutual process. As immigrants and refugees adjust to the United States and living in communities in Colorado, so also do the communities in which they settle and adjust. Grantees are beginning to work with communities to help them understand their new neighbors while working with refugees and immigrants to learn how to live in the U.S.

Another accomplishment is the networking that is occurring between grantees. Nine of the original grantees have joined together to apply for grants from national organizations. Agencies are also visiting one another and discussing best practices for service. Through networking between grantees and other organizations in the state, the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition was started (Wildau, 2003).

Lastly, organizations are becoming stronger. The technical assistance has helped them to realize that they need to not just work directly with their clients, but also that they need to work within their organizations to ensure they are healthy. This includes helping all employees to work toward the vision and educating the community of the mission; creating cohesion between the vision and mission of the organization and the actual work done by employees and perceptions of the community by the agency (Wildau, 2003).

SIRFI has encountered some difficulties. One challenge is the scarcity of bilingual/bicultural professionals. At times bilingual/bicultural people are present but do not have the professional skills needed. Other times, an agency will create a position for a bilingual/bicultural person, however, no matter the salary, the agency is still too far away from an applicant’s support network and therefore the agency cannot recruit the person (Wildau, 2003).

A major difficulty has been working with immigrants and refugees in a post-September 11th world. Since September 11th, anti-immigration bias has increased and many people have linked immigration (including refugees, students, migrant workers, and immigrants) with security issues relating to terrorism. Colorado is a politically conservative state, which has made this issue more prevalent. Pro-immigration movements (worker amnesty legislation, drivers license legislation, etc.) that were in process at the time of September 11th have cooled off since then. One such example is was the movement to obtain more guest worker visas for the ski resorts. After September 11th, the movement cooled and the ski industry suffered from a lack of workers for a few winters (Wildau, 2003). Another difficulty has been determining precisely the extent to which mental health services for refugees and immigrants have been enhanced due to the efforts of the grantees (VanArsdale, 2003).

Policy Recommendations

Rich Wildau, the SIRFI Project Director, mentioned that in working with underprivileged people, service providers juggle a number of different roles including providing services and advocating. As a professional social worker, I have worked with clients directly as well as with organizations that serve immigrants and refugees. Based on my conversation with Wildau, my own experience, and the Social Work Code of Ethics, I believe that a project such as SIRFI should incorporate components of advocacy.

Services can always be provided; however the ultimate purpose of most human services is to eradicate injustice. Without efforts to advocate for more just laws and cooperation between agencies to create networks for advocacy, injustice will continue. Thus, it is important that SIRFI create means for agencies to advocate for fair laws for immigrants and refugees, educate the public about the injustices committed against immigrants and refugees, as well as educate the public about the richness of culture that immigrants and refugees bring to their communities, and reach out to create spheres of communication between immigrants, refugees, and their neighbors using the funds provided. Presently SIRFI encourages networks to develop among agencies in order to strengthen service provision and educate the public. However, advocacy about the underlying issues that create the problems that create the need for services is not permissible using SIRFI funds (Wildau, 2003). Therefore, SIRFI could be strengthened through incorporating advocacy as a part of the project.

Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Families Initiative (SIRFI) is committed to supporting organizations that work with refugees and immigrants. SIRFI is a five-year, \$7.4 million grant that enables twenty-three agencies to better serve immigrants and refugees in areas of mental health and cultural adjustment. Funded by The Colorado Trust, these agencies in Colorado have enhanced their service provision to refugees and immigrants. These agencies have begun to collaborate in order to seek out best practices and provide more comprehensive services. Additionally, SIRFI has given technical support to organizations in order to strengthen their missions, goals, and structures.

Works Cited

The Colorado Trust. (2001) 2001 Annual Report of The Colorado Trust. Denver, CO: The Colorado Trust

SIRFI Website. Frequently Asked Questions: <http://www.spring-institute.org/pages/sirfiques.html> accessed 28 April 2003.

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