

WINNEBAGO AND BOONE COUNTIES 2010 HEALTHY COMMUNITY STUDY FOCUS GROUP STUDY

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Prepared by



Rockford Health Council
1601 Parkview Avenue
Rockford, Illinois 61107
p: 815.395.5701
f: 815.395.5706
e: info@rockfordhealth.org
web: www.rockfordhealth.org

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This report presents the results of focus group discussions regarding health and human services needs in Winnebago and Boone Counties. The study was completed as part of Rockford Health Council's Healthy Community Study. The Healthy Community Study components include focus groups, a key informant study, a household survey, and a demographic analysis.

Focus groups are small groups of individuals formed to discuss a topic of common interest; in this case, their health and human services needs. For this study, twenty-two (22) focus groups were formed from target populations in order to gain knowledge about their views of and experiences with health and human services in Winnebago and Boone Counties, particularly within the specific population group they represent. Focus groups afford an opportunity to hear the views of certain target groups, especially at-risk individuals, who might not otherwise be heard from in other aspects of the study.

Methodology

Focus groups were organized for target populations identified by the Rockford Health Council as those likely to use or be in need of health and human services. Table 1.1 lists the 22 focus groups which were convened as well as the number of individuals participating in each session.

Table 1.1
FOCUS GROUPS WITH NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

Group	Participants	Group	Participants
African-Americans	9	Public Aid Recipients (2)	12
At-Risk Youth (2)	11	Public Housing Residents	8
Behavioral Health	13	Senior Citizens (3)	20
Blue-Collar Workers	8	Single Parents	5
Disabled Adults	12	Substance Abusers	4
Domestic Violence Survivors	8	Unemployed (2)	16
Farmers	8	Young Adults	4
Hispanics (2)	18	TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	168
Homeless	12		

Area agencies and organizations were asked to help identify individuals who would be willing to participate in the focus groups. Most potential focus group participants were contacted directly for participation by a representative of the convening organization. Although the goal was to have 10-12 participants at each focus group, some difficulty achieving this attendance level was experienced for a few of the groups. A total of 168 individuals took part in the 22 groups. The sessions were convened at sites throughout Winnebago and Boone Counties.

The format for conducting each focus group was similar. Group participants received a brief review of the purpose of and confidential nature of the discussion. Most of the sessions lasted about 30 minutes. A \$10 stipend was given to each participant at the end of the meeting as appreciation for taking part in the session.

The questions asked of the focus group participants include the following:

1. What do you like about living in your community? What are its assets?
2. What don't you like about your community? What do you see as its problems?
3. What health care services have you used? Tell us about your experiences with these health care services.
4. What type of health and human services are most needed by members of your group?
5. Do you feel these services are presently provided adequately? What important services are missing?
6. Have you used any service or contacted any agency in the last year? If so, was the service easy to use? Was the service and agency helpful?
7. Did you ever need help with a situation, but were unable to receive help? Why were you unable to get help?
8. Do you feel that there are enough mental health and substance abuse services in the area?
9. Do you think enough people in your community do volunteer work? Do you volunteer for any organization or group?
10. Overall, how would you rate the way health and human services are provided in (Winnebago, Boone) County?

For certain focus groups, questions may have been modified to reflect the experiences and views of the particular group.

This report contains an overview of the results for all groups collectively.

Chapter 2 COMMUNITY ASSETS

Introduction

The first questions asked of focus group participants involved their perception of community assets and positive aspects of living in Winnebago and Boone Counties. Groups were asked, "What do you like about living in Winnebago (Boone) County?"

Hometown; Grew Up in Area; Family

Several of the focus groups reported that they grew up in Rockford and/or had family in the area. A few said that they had left Rockford area, but came back because they missed the community. As one woman put it, "Both my husband and I were born here, and we always lived here. We like the town."

Small-Town Atmosphere

Many of the groups cited the small-town, easy-going atmosphere found in many of the county's communities as a positive aspect, while still being an urban area. Generally, residents are said to be friendly. One focus group member noted that people still have "personal contact" with each other similar to that in smaller towns.

Abundance of Human Services

Participants in seven of the focus groups mentioned the abundance of human services in Winnebago County. A few individuals mentioned the ease of obtaining services when compared to Chicago. One homeless individual stated "you can't go hungry in Rockford". The availability and variety of services to help those looking to secure employment was mentioned as an asset, although available jobs are currently very scarce.

Parks/Recreation/Activities

Several of the groups named the park systems and recreational activities as an asset in Winnebago County. Individuals noted that the area had plenty of available activities, both for individuals and families. One person stated that when out-of-town friends came to visit, she could always find plenty of places to take them. Another man particularly enjoys the fishing in the area.

Public Transportation

Members of four of the focus groups cited the public transportation system in Rockford as an asset. These individuals said that the bus system made getting around town much easier for them.

Other Community Assets

Focus group members named several other community assets. At-risk youth enjoy being with their friends. Several of the teen girls like the ample shopping which is available in the Rockford area. Individuals in two of the groups believe their children are getting a good education, while

members of two other groups noted that Winnebago County is “affordable” when compared to similar areas.

One person likes Rockford’s downtown, while another man is appreciative of the Veteran’s Administration medical facilities which are now located in Rockford.

Boone County Assets

The main asset named by almost all of the Boone County focus group participants is living in a smaller town or rural area, saying they enjoyed the quiet living. Some of the Boone County individuals also mentioned the improved access to medical facilities and accessibility to shopping without having to drive to Rockford.

Chapter 3 COMMUNITY PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

Introduction

In an effort to ascertain community problems and issues, all of the focus groups were questioned about their perceptions regarding negative aspects of living in Winnebago and Boone Counties, and the problems and challenges faced by their communities.

Five problems or issues (named by five or more groups) emerged from the focus group discussions: economy/unemployment/lack of jobs, crime/violence/gangs, activities for youth, educational issues, and a negative perception of the Rockford area.

Economy/Unemployment/Lack of Jobs

The current economy, high unemployment, and lack of available jobs was cited as a major issue by almost half of the focus groups, with many of the participants voicing concern about the perceived worsening economy

In discussions with several of the focus groups, the loss of manufacturing jobs was a concern. As one person in the homeless focus group stated, "We want to get off the streets, and there is not enough work. Period."

One of the groups of senior citizens said that, although the economy is bad locally, "it's bad all over, not just in Rockford. Some residents seem to feel Rockford can't ever progress." This group believes that the negative perception of the local economy may hinder businesses coming to the area.

A related problem was cited by the group of unemployed individuals. They believe that little help is offered to those who are working and struggling to make ends meet, but those who 'play the system' get 'everything'. As one individual put it, "if you need somewhere to go to get a little help for a particular month, you are told you do not fit the criteria. What they say is a lot of money, to me is not a lot. To get help, you have to be broke. "

One of the disabled individuals reported having suffered a stroke at age 45, which he attributed to the added stress of having to travel more for work, and he feels that the high unemployment level presents an obstacle to individuals trying to reach self-sufficiency.

Crime and Violence

Nine of the focus groups named crime and violence, including gang activity, as a major problem in Winnebago County, especially in Rockford. Some of the individuals participating in the focus groups reported feeling unsafe in their neighborhoods and on the street, especially at night.

One of the at-risk youth groups said that Rockford is becoming 'like Chicago' regarding violence and drugs. A group of Hispanics feels that Rockford used to be a calm place to live, and it was safe to walk with your family down the street. Today, there is more fear. Members in this group also believe that violence in schools is increasing, particularly among girls. One person reported a situation with a 15 year old neighborhood girl who attends a RPS #205 school.

When she got off her school bus, a group of gang members were waiting for her to beat her up. Her grandfather had to be out there with her to watch so that this didn't happen.

Individuals in one of the Public Aid Recipients groups feel that gangs have taken over, and more should be done to take our streets back. Several noted that when they were growing up, they felt safe walking around the community, but not now – they do not believe they are safe even in their own parking lot. One individual reported that she was driving down the street and came to a group of young people in the middle of the street and they told her to 'get out of here'.

Lack of Activities for Youth

Five of the twenty-two focus groups said that Winnebago County has a need for more activities and programs for youth.

Several individuals in the group of African-Americans compared today's available activities to those of a few years ago such as ING skating rink, Sunset Park, and other options. They thought that community centers were open more hours and had more programming for youth after school, but due to lost funding not as much is available today. Also, the group's perception was that funding is not 'going to go to certain areas because that neighborhood is not desirable', citing an example of the Boys and Girls Club, believing that more of that organization's funding is invested in their east side locations than at Blackhawk or other 'less desirable' locations. The group also agreed that because of lifestyle changes, the youth of today have a different idea of having 'fun' – being part of gangs, etc. – and parents have lost control.

Virtually all of the at-risk youth said not enough activities for teens are present in Winnebago County. Two of the boys commented that Rockford does not have enough for kids to do "other than get into trouble." Other youth feel that everything costs too much money, and with the bad economy and the difficulty finding jobs, especially among teens, many youth do not have a lot of money to spend on activities. When asked what types of activities would be of interest to teens, answers included a teen club and go-karts.

The young adults reported that the area offers few activities specifically for their age group, with one of the participants saying "everything closes at 9:00 p.m. There is nothing to do after that hour except to either sit at home bored or get into trouble." The group also agreed that the area particularly needs things to do for young adults during winter, when people can't always be outside. One member gave the example of intramural sports programs for young adults in the Chicago area, which Winnebago County lacks.

One of the senior groups also agreed not enough affordable activities exist for youth. Going to a movie is very costly, and many parents don't have money to give their children, which leaves the child out on the street. As one senior noted, "For a town the size of Rockford, you would think they would put more effort into children, especially poorer children." There is much disrespect in young people today, due to the lack of coaches and mentors for youth, which results in youth 'left to the streets'. As one individual put it, "If a town doesn't invest in their children, you get what you get". The group agreed that this issue appears to go ignored.

Education Issues/Poor School Systems

Some local school districts came under fire from several of the groups as a major problem locally. One hearing-impaired person reported that she became very frustrated in middle school because of things that were written into her Individualized Education Plan (IEP), requirements that she felt were unwarranted given her specific situation. She feels strongly that many kids are simply placed into self-contained classes with no attempt made to transition them into normal classes as they are able. She herself was never in such classes and believes this is because she began to attend her IEP meetings and advocate on her own behalf. She feels that

it is very important for all students with disabilities to attend their own IEP meetings and become their own advocate to ensure they receive a quality education.

A person from the Blue Collar Workers focus group believes that South Beloit's school system is much better than either Rockford or Harlem School Districts. He reported having 'gone around and around with Harlem', and said that the Harlem School District did not do a good job of providing an education to his child in that a Harlem staff person reportedly said they 'did not have time for him'.

The group of blacks discussed educational attainment and the local school systems in general. They feel that, today, there are many "kids raising kids", which hinders their educational attainment. Children today are also allowed to, for example, use a calculator in math classes rather than having to learn how to do the work by hand; the group believes that this also hinders their learning. The group stated that teachers today are often blamed for lack of student achievement, but parental involvement in their children's learning is the primary problem, not the teachers. As one individual put it, "This generation of parents don't know either", which is part of the reason for lack of parental involvement. Lack of funding for after-school programs was also seen as an issue. The group believes that potential for good after-school programming exists, but with no money to ensure safety and security, parents will not send their children. The focus group participants also noted that in times past, more parents would volunteer in schools, but today both parents often work. Some of the African-Americans also questioned whether students who graduate high school from the Rockford Public Schools are truly ready to attend college.

Negative Perception of Rockford Area

Five of the focus groups expressed concern about an overall negative perception concerning the Rockford area, both within the community as well as to those outside the area.

A senior citizen focus group stated that a general undercurrent of negativity about the community seems to exist, much of which is undeserved. Comments are often heard concerning the lack of safety in the community or the poor quality of the school system. The group of single parents mentioned the lack of positive local media, feeling that the media tends to focus on negative things in Rockford, even when there are positives to report.

Other Issues and Concerns

Other concerns voiced by at least three of the focus groups included a need for an improved public transportation system, especially extended hours and routes for RMTD; the need for improved roads in the area, and a high tax structure.

Boone County Issues and Concerns

Participants of focus groups in Boone County cited far fewer negative issues than did those in Winnebago County. The increasing gang problem was named by two of the Boone County groups, as was the rapid growth and "suburbanization" of the County. Also mentioned as problems were high taxes, the lack of public transportation, and high unemployment.

Chapter 4 HEALTH CARE ISSUES

Introduction

Focus group participants were asked about various health care issues, including access to health and dental care, quality of health care received, and experiences with the health care system.

Access to Health Care

Most of those taking part in the focus groups have utilized medical care during the past year, including physician offices, hospital emergency departments, immediate care clinics, dentists, and pharmacies. The three major local health systems (Rockford Health System, SwedishAmerican, and OSF) all had been utilized by participants in the focus groups, along with Crusader Clinic.

Few of the focus groups said that accessing local health care is a problem for them. Members of a few of the groups noted access issues, however, primarily those with a medical card or who have no medical insurance.

Focus group participants noted the perceived lack of providers in Winnebago County who accept Medicaid. One disabled person tried for several years to receive medical assistance, but was denied. He was forced to go to Crusader, which provides services at a reduced rate, "but it is still money coming out of your pocket". Another person in that group stated that she has both Medicare and Medicaid, which in some instances created a catch-22 in that some services which Medicare refused to pay for, Medicaid subsequently also denied coverage "because I had Medicare".

One individual reported visiting Crusader and paying the \$20 copay, and a month later, he received a bill for the remainder of his visit. He subsequently learned that the sliding scale is only available to those who apply and are accepted into Crusader's charity program. Upon applying, his visit was 75% covered and he was responsible for the remaining 25%, which "was still a lot of money for someone on unemployment."

A few of the groups believe a need exists for more comprehensive medical services at Crusader. The group of homeless individuals related that, although Crusader is great "as far as they went" and for prescriptions, if an individual needs surgical services or "anything requiring ongoing treatment", such services are unavailable. Medicaid covers emergency services, but as one individual put it, "If you need surgery on a bad knee, you can't get it".

A few complaints were voiced regarding Crusader's appointment system, with individuals saying the system is difficult to use. One woman stated that she was at the desk at Crusader trying to make an appointment, only to be told to go home and call in. Another woman noted that she always starts calling Crusader at 8:00 a.m., and the line is always busy. She usually actually has to go to the clinic to make an appointment. A third reported that when she calls at 8:00 a.m., she has gotten through but been told that there are no appointments available and to call back tomorrow.

A few people discussed COBRA insurance or CHIP – HCTC health insurance through the State of Illinois, saying the coverage was prohibitively expensive. One unemployed focus group member stated that he was paying \$171 per month to only cover him, not his family who had been on his work insurance. Another individual said that she was unable to pay the fee for COBRA so she had to go without insurance until HCTC was approved. Even then, it is costing them half of her unemployment per month to maintain the insurance.

A few focus group members reported access problems because of a language barrier. For example, one of the Hispanic men said that he called Crusader to try to schedule an appointment. He pressed the number for Spanish-speaking assistance, and was instructed to leave his phone number. Three days passed without a return call.

Many of the individuals with a medical card complained that only one or two dentists locally accept the card. Crusader provides dental care, but services are limited.

Satisfaction with Health Care Received

Generally, most focus group participants were satisfied with the medical care they received at all facilities. However, a few exceptions were found in the groups. For example, a woman reported that, when she needed knee surgery, the doctors at one hospital first operated on the wrong knee.

Several of the single parents who had used SwedishAmerican Hospital expressed dissatisfaction with the medical care they received. As one of the group members stated, "they don't take care of you there", and she feels that SwedishAmerican treats people differently depending on race. She believes that the attitude at the hospital is that blacks are not as important as other races. She reported that the SwedishAmerican ER staff told her that her issue was not serious. Two days later, she went to Rockford Memorial's ER for the same issue, and had to be admitted to the hospital. Another single parent believes that care received at SwedishAmerican is variable depending on which nurse you get.

One person who went to Crusader does not feel that she received quality services in that the doctor did not help with the skin problem her son had. She felt that the exam was inadequate. The doctor just prescribed an ointment, which did not cure his issue.

One woman reported going to the doctor (unknown facility) but feels that there was no logic to the way she was treated. The provider only looked at her chart, and did not do the pulse or blood pressure himself. He checked her quickly and said "this is the problem, you must now decide whether you want to have surgery." She felt pressured to make an immediate decision. She feels that there is a lack of ethics and doctors care more about money than the outcome of your health.

Treatment by Staff

Some of the individuals in the various focus groups noted concerns about both treatment and staff attitude at local health care facilities.

A Public Aid recipient reported that while she was in one of the local emergency rooms, an individual who was to pick her up arrived and was told by hospital personnel that she was not there; when the person picking her up returned, the hospital personnel threatened to call security.

A young adult reported that his grandfather recently passed away, having been in and out of the hospital for the past 18 months. His family had used Rockford Memorial, and were dissatisfied with their services. They ended up moving the grandfather to Beloit Hospital. They felt that RMH "didn't have their stuff together, and the nurses were mean – they could have done a lot better job". Also as relates to hospice care, the grandfather passed on before receiving hospice care and the family feels that hospice should have come sooner.

However, many focus group participants were very pleased with the way staff treated them. One woman, who had utilized SwedishAmerican, said that she very well, and believes that the hospital provided her with both good physical and mental health care.

Boone County Health Care

Those who participated in focus groups in Boone County had few medical care issues. Access to care does not appear to be a problem, and most were satisfied with the care they received. A few individuals expressed gratitude that Boone County again has a hospital to serve the area.

The farmers in Boone County experienced some issues with health insurance. One farmer mentioned that he is having difficulty finding health insurance. He was previously on his wife's insurance, but she is losing her job, so they need to find another option. Another mentioned that he and his family have insurance, but they pay a lot for it. Their son has kidney issues, so they cannot change insurance because no one will insure him. Their premiums are very high, but they do have good coverage. One gentleman reported having had a finger injury which resulted in a two-day hospital stay at a cost of approximately \$20,000, while another had a hip replaced for which the stated cost was \$44,000, but was settled for \$7,800.

Chapter 5
HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES GAPS AND BARRIERS, EXPERIENCES
WITH AGENCIES AND OVERALL RATING OF SYSTEM

Introduction

In an attempt to ascertain the human services needs of target populations, several questions were asked of focus groups. These included:

What type of health and human services are most needed by members of your group?
Do you feel these services are provided adequately? What services are missing?
Have you used any service or contacted any agency in the last year? If so, was the service easy to use? Was the service and agency helpful?
Did you ever need help with a situation, but were unable to receive help? Why?
Overall, how would you rate the way health and human services are provided in (Winnebago, Boone) County?

Health and Human Services Needs and Gaps in Service

The groups interviewed in this study named many, diverse needs for their target group. The need for additional mental health treatment, especially inpatient, was named by six of the focus groups. Inpatient services for children was seen as a particularly important need. As one person said, "A lack of psychiatric inpatient services for children exists, and the community suffers for it." The Behavioral Health group noted a need for more therapeutic day-schools for children with mental health issues. Currently, there is no local option for these services, and children requiring them must be bused out of the community.

Various services for the elderly was seen as a need by several of the focus groups. These services include senior group homes, and respite care for caregivers. More available activities for seniors is desirable, especially volunteer opportunities, with one person saying, "everybody needs to feel productive". A suggestion given was some type of intergenerational activity, possibly linking volunteers from a senior living facility with a pre-school environment. One group of senior citizens see a need for someone for seniors to discuss such things as do-not-resuscitate orders, legal and medical power of attorney issues. Seniors should be able to have a non-partisan individual named as legal and medical power of attorney rather than a family member who may or may not adhere to their wishes. Several of the elderly participants also desire additional doctors specializing in senior care. Health systems need to be more responsive to the fact that the general population is aging, with a greater focus on prevention and managing chronic disease. One senior group noted that health systems should do more to help the elderly manage their health to ensure optimal health over the remainder of their lifetime.

Affordable housing and housing assistance was an important need for some of the focus group participants, including homeless individuals, who cited "a place to stay when it's cold" as their major need. Currently, this is very limited. The Rockford Rescue Mission was called a 'train wreck'. The group of homeless individuals felt that RRM is run very poorly, and "makes up rules as they go." The group also agreed that the Salvation Army provides good services but needs to move more quickly. Some individuals noted that they had slept overnight at the new Justice Center, "sleeping in a chair, but at least you're inside" as one individual put it.

Displaced workers believe that housing assistance is needed, both to help people stay in their homes and avoid foreclosure, as well as a place to live for those who do lose their home. According to the group of low-income individuals, the number of vacancies in low-income housing is inadequate. One individual felt that affordable housing units should stop being

placed in 'clusters', and that they should be more spread out. Members of a few of the groups reported that there is an extremely long waiting list at Rockford Housing Authority.

Additional dental and vision services is a gap expressed by several of the groups, especially low-income individuals, those with a medical card or without health insurance, disabled persons, and domestic violence survivors. One woman in the domestic violence survivor group stated "Many victims of domestic violence have injuries that require dental care, or repaired or new glasses, but no service is available."

Additional drug treatment programs is seen as a need by three of the focus groups: African-Americans, Public Aid Recipients, and Substance Abusers. Also named by three groups was services for teen parents, including family planning and parenting classes. Hispanics see a need for more Spanish speaking staff at government, health, and human services agencies.

A few of the groups see a need for services for the "working poor", those who don't quite meet most eligibility requirements at most agencies. Persons in this group sometimes just need a helping hand, but cannot qualify for most services, frequently leaving them in dire circumstances. One single mother reported that she was having financial difficulty, but her income was "just barely" over the limit for her family size, so therefore she did not qualify for any assistance. She expressed frustration that "those who sit doing nothing, get everything" in terms of benefits. Another individual echoed similar sentiments. She reported that she is unable to work due to her son requiring constant attention. Her family could not afford to pay the required premium for Kid Care, so they were dropped from the program and forced to wait three months to get back in. In the meantime, her husband required hospitalization, which led to additional financial strain due to those expenses.

Several other gaps in services were mentioned by the focus groups. Affordable child care is seen as lacking by two of the focus groups, while the at-risk youth see a need for counseling for teens with sexual addictions, and increased health education. Other gaps named include additional food pantries, better local public transportation, a VA hospital in Rockford, and increased utility assistance.

Boone County Needs and Gaps

The focus groups in Boone County mentioned a few service needs and gaps in services. The seniors would like someone to call with questions about health care, including Medicare. An improved public transportation system in Belvidere is seen as a need, as well as Spanish-speaking staff at agencies.

Barriers to Service

The most common barrier to receiving services, according to focus group participants, appears to be lack of awareness of available services. Almost all of the groups stated that the general public is unaware of services or agencies, saying many services exist that people are unaware of and thus are unable to utilize.

A few of the groups believe that many social service agencies don't know what other agencies offer, which makes the system very disorganized. One person suggested that agencies should better educate their staff on what other agencies or services are available or provide an Information and Referral specialist. Many of the individuals in the focus groups mentioned that word of mouth is the most common method for finding out about services in the community

One of the Public Aid Recipients group stated that even many people who receive Public Aid 'don't realize they could fit into other services', as one individual put it. They mentioned that people are generally aware of the 'Health Department', but are unaware of all the specific programs and services the Health Department provides. However, this group feels that the Health Department does a good job of educating and referring people to available services – both within the Health Department itself and other community resources. They provide a lot of information, and when walking through the halls of the Health Department, there are posters with information “everywhere”.

Members in a few of the groups stated that they would be willing to support a 311 telephone information and referral system, saying such a system would be very helpful. The group of Boone County senior citizens reported that the Keen Age Center is working to become certified in I&R, as is NIAAA. One problem is that there is now no central place to call for help.

One man in the group of young adults stated, “Everybody knows about Rosecrance, but nothing else”. There are counseling services on the RVC campus, but no substance abuse services. A very small mentoring program to help direct students which direction to go for help, which also provides phone numbers for referral is also available at RVC, but many students are unaware of the program's existence.

The group of Behavioral Health individuals suggested one way for agencies to advertise their services. The medical community puts out a flyer once a year listing many of the doctors in town. Possibly, non-profit agencies could put together a similar resource guide listing where to call for various services. The group noted that such a guide needs to get into the hands of everyone in the community and could be mailed or inserted into the newspaper.

Hispanics said language could be a barrier to receiving services if an agency or organization does not have any Spanish-speaking staff, while a few participants noted that transportation, such as getting to services, could be a problem for some people.

Experiences With Agencies

Numerous agencies and services have been accessed by focus group participants during the past year, including Illinois Department of Public Aid, Illinois Department of Employment Security, Janet Wattles, La Voz Latina, the Winnebago County Health Department, LIHEAP and RAMP. Generally, satisfaction levels with accessed services were high, although a few concerns were raised about “red tape” and bad treatment by agency staff. Several participants voiced their opinions about services received, mostly positive.

One domestic violence survivor had utilized the Domestic Violence Assistance Center at the Winnebago County Courthouse for help in securing a restraining order and said the service was extremely helpful. Another reported that Easter Seals had provided some support with her pregnancy, with weekly group meetings.

Several individuals received H1N1 shots through the Winnebago County Health Department, and reported the process went smoothly. One man had used Workforce Connection to help with his employment situation. As he put it, "I have the training, but now I need a job". He stated that he found Workforce Connection very beneficial, but that he has not "reaped the benefits yet", as he put it.

Some of the at-risk youth have utilized the NCenter, which is generally well liked. One boy stated that in order to play basketball or use the NCenter gym, you have to pay 'NBucks', which are earned by attending programming at the Center. Several of the girls enjoyed the Ncenter's pool, exercise machines and the computer lab. They stated that it has “everything”. They also appreciate that a WIC office is in the building through the Health Department, and that parenting classes are offered as well.

The Department of Employment Services (IDES) was mentioned, with a couple of blue-collar workers reporting that services at IDES have improved. Previously, you had to wait in a long line, but now a person can go into the office and get on a computer to take care of most unemployment needs. It is no longer necessary to see a live person, and you can call to confirm eligibility rather than visiting the unemployment office.

A few of the farmers in Boone County had gone to the Boone County Health Department to receive H1N1 shots or routine immunizations for their children.

Some of the groups discussed a general need for additional customer service training for human services staff system-wide. They sometimes a lack of respect shown to those who are seeking services.

Inability to Receive Needed Help

A few participants experienced an inability to receive services when needed. Reasons for not receiving the service were not knowing where to go or how to get the service, being ineligible for the service, and, in one case, a woman was homeless with no place to stay and the homeless shelter was full.

Overall Rating of Health and Human Services System

Groups were asked to rate the overall local health and human services system on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 10 (excellent). Little agreement existed among and within some of the focus groups as to an overall rating of local health and human services. Ratings ranged from 2 through 8, with disagreement even among members of the same focus group in some instances. A few groups, instead of giving a numerical rating, just gave the system a “very low” or “ok” rating.

Chapter 6 MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE SERVICES

Introduction

The opinions of participants regarding the availability of mental health and substance abuse services were probed during the focus group discussions. The groups were asked, "Do you feel that there are enough mental health and substance abuse services in the area?" A few of the groups did not feel informed enough to offer an opinion.

Mental Health Services

The vast majority of individuals in the focus groups believe that Winnebago and Boone Counties does not offer sufficient mental health services, especially for children and youth, with members in a few of the groups particularly stressing the need for inpatient treatment services for both children and adults.

The Behavioral Health group noted a need for more therapeutic day-schools for children with mental health issues. Currently, there is no local option for these services, and children requiring them must be bused out of the community. There are long waiting lists, and long wait times for appointments. Individuals stated that people often have to wait months for their first appointment. Also, people from Rockford are "hospitalized all over the place", primarily the Chicago suburbs. When they are released, they often have no support and no place to go; they are being released into homelessness. One individual related that her sister had been in and out of various mental institutions with many problems for some years. She eventually was hospitalized (as an adult) in a facility in East Moline. When she was released, she took a taxi all the way from East Moline to Rockford to get home. There was no contact with the family upon her release. As she put it, "Thank God she knew enough to get a taxi to get home".

Many of the groups stated that Janet Wattles is the main source of mental health treatment in the area. They agreed that Janet Wattles does a good job, but that the need for these services is greater than Janet Wattles can meet. The single parents believe that Janet Wattles does not have enough openings, staff, or funding. Several of the single parents have known individuals that sought mental health services, but were not "severe enough" for Janet Wattles to take them. Also, the group believes that many people feel there was a stigma associated with Janet Wattles that keeps them from getting help.

Several of the Hispanic group members believe that finding Spanish-speaking mental health providers is difficult. Only a few bilingual counselors are located in Rockford, and some Hispanics are uncomfortable talking through an interpreter.

Some members in three of the focus groups, however feel that adequate mental health services exist in the area. These included one of the at-risk youth groups, the domestic violence survivors, and the group of homeless individuals.

Substance Abuse Services

When asked about the availability of substance abuse services locally, the focus group participants could not agree. Some participants said that the area has enough substance abuse services, but others disagreed.

Several of the groups noted that all local agencies providing substance abuse services, including Rosecrance, TASC, and PHASE, have lengthy waiting lists, usually several months.

One of the teen groups stated that many people, especially kids, need treatment and have nowhere to go to get it unless they have insurance.

The group of single parents reported that, currently, no treatment option for a single parent with children is available, which is a barrier for some individuals who might otherwise seek treatment. This can be very discouraging for someone who is trying to correct the problems in their life. The group noted that Rosecrance formerly had an inpatient substance abuse treatment program that single mothers could bring their children with them to treatment. However, this program no longer exists, although this is a huge need.

The Public Aid Recipients believe the substance abuse treatment system is under-funded. Also, one member of the group said, more services are needed for those who lose their job and/or home as a result of drug abuse. As she commented, "When they are discharged from rehab, with no job and no place to stay, where do they go?"

Hispanics in Boone County would like to see substance abuse services located in Belvidere.

Among the groups who believe substance abuse services are adequate in the community were blue-collar workers, homeless individuals, and substance abusers, even though this group said that the need for these services is huge.

Finally, a couple of the groups noted that people don't realize the correlation between mental health and substance abuse issues, and that both need to be treated. Some believe both issues should both be addressed at the same time, while others disagreed with that viewpoint, stating that individuals working with this group should be trained enough to know the difference between the two issues, and that they should not both be treated at the same place.

Chapter 7 VOLUNTEERISM

Introduction

Focus group participants were asked about the adequacy of volunteerism in their community, along with their own level of volunteer work. The specific questions were: "Do you think enough people in your community do volunteer work? Do you volunteer for any organization or group?"

Adequacy of Community Volunteerism

Virtually all of the groups believe that more volunteerism is needed in Winnebago and Boone Counties, saying that most people in the community do not take the time to volunteer their services. Some feel people are too busy with their own lives, while others believe that people "just don't care enough to get involved."

Those in the group of African-Americans believe part of the reason more people do not volunteer is due to the fact that so many families are dual-income, but they see an upswing in the number of volunteers recently. They attributed this to the weak economy. When there are no jobs, people have time to volunteer. However, the group of domestic violence survivors believe the weak economy is having the opposite effect, with some of the women in this group blaming the economy for a perceived decline in volunteerism. One domestic violence survivor stated, "People are too worried about their own situation to worry about other people's."

Participants in one of the youth groups believe that most people "won't do anything unless they get paid." As one of the youth put it, "Rockford is too selfish to care".

A few of the groups noted that, generally, people do not know how to go about finding volunteer opportunities. As one of the Public Aid recipients said, "I used to look for opportunities to volunteer, but they were so difficult to find, I gave up". The young adults agreed that many college students are unaware of available volunteer opportunities. Also, many students (especially those from outside Rockford) just "come to school and leave". One individual stated that he would volunteer more if he knew of more opportunities to do so.

The Boone County farmers responded that fewer and fewer people are doing volunteer work. Years ago, moms stayed home and had time for some volunteer work. Now, in most families both parents work. One farmer reported that North Boone School District is requiring volunteer hours for graduation. She believes this is a good start, and hopes that the lessons learned by those students are carried through life.

Volunteerism Among Focus Group Participants

Many of the individuals in the focus groups have volunteered themselves for organizations or agencies, especially their church or their child's school. Other agencies at which focus group participants have volunteered include local food pantries, Salvation Army, Meals on Wheels, Remedies, Rockford Sexual Assault Counseling, Collier Gardens, NCenter, Rockford MELD, and ShareFest.

Again, a few of the participants mentioned that they might like to volunteer, but do not know how to find volunteer opportunities.