



Housing Education— What Makes It Successful?

The lack of adequate housing is one of Virginia's major problems. Educational programming in this area has presented a significant challenge to the Cooperative Extension Service. A pilot housing program funded by Cooperative Extension funds from Virginia State College and initiated in Pittsylvania County, has demonstrated the importance of technicians in making housing education successful for families living in substandard houses or rapidly deteriorating homes.

The goal was to help families learn how to use their resources to upgrade and maintain their housing standards and help some families in their transition from dilapidated homes into new ones.

The program was designed to employ six housing paraprofessionals to work with families in six depressed areas. During their first week of employment, the technicians were given intensive training, such as house cleaning methods (which had to be the starting point for many homes), use of storage space, simple home repairs, remodeling and renovating, consumer education information, landscaping and other subject matter. Training was also provided in communications, interviewing, and techniques of establishing empathy and rapport with people. This training was continued on a one-day-a-week basis and as special needs arose. The training was presented by the local Extension staff and Extension specialists.

Families who lived in the designated areas and who expressed a willingness to work with the technicians after learning of the program were eligible for participation. Two procedures were used to recruit families. Referrals from the Social Services Agency, the Community Action Agency, and the Farmers Home Administration were investigated by the technicians. However, most of the contacts were made by the technicians "knocking on doors" and introducing themselves and the program. Later, friends and relatives of these families who wanted help were added.

The approach centered around a one-to-one relationship with family members and, as the program progressed, small groups of neighbors were formed to use the time and travel of the technicians more efficiently. The technicians interested families in the program by telling them how the technician could work with the

individual family on their housing problems and needed improvements.

Actual work began with the family's major concern at the time. Sometimes the construction of a simple wall decoration or repairing a broken window was the starting point. All the work was in cooperation with the families and not as a service to them. For example, after demonstrating how to hang wallpaper, the technician encouraged family members to "take over" and complete the job.

To determine progress and help the families more efficiently, the technicians were required to record activities and keep a file on each family. Weekly reports and quarterly evaluations were made to the county Extension agent. This unique program enrolled over 1,000 families.

In a research study of the program, it was found that the housing technicians

had sufficient knowledge and the proper attitudes to make them effective in working with families. Technicians who have opportunities to acquire training and develop positive attitudes are likely to be successful in working with families to bring about desired changes.

The Pittsylvania County Educational Housing Program was successful in helping families maintain and upgrade their housing standards. Procedures used in this informal field-based program which used technicians to help families with their housing problems could be used to start similar educational housing programs.

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