

idea corner

Helping the Helping Person

Extension's goal, "helping people help themselves," goes beyond the *basic* needs of life. A recent programming effort in Carver County, Minnesota, is an example of going beyond this level and toward a higher level of individual and family well-being—using the community and neighborhood as support for growth.

The program recognized that people and families often want and need help from sources outside the family, but not necessarily from helping professionals. In all communities and neighborhoods, certain people are viewed as "natural-thought-amateur" listeners, counselors, helpers. It was hoped that using this network of helping relations Extension and the county Mental Health Center could increase its potential and learn from it as well.

With Extension leadership, planning was done by community lay people and mental health professionals. Goals were established to: identify and contact people in the county who fit the

description of "helping people" (for example, *professional* helpers would not), plan and conduct a workshop for this audience, and plan and operate a *follow-up to the workshop based on expressed need*. The committee viewed this as an opportunity to learn from and give training to the clientele group.

Members of community Extension Homemaker Study Groups were instrumental in planning this effort. This was proof of the value of the Extension communication network. Other names came through different channels.

Personal contact and invitations to the workshop proved to be a successful motivator—85% of the original list of invited persons attended. The main elements of the one-day workshop were: recognition and encouragement of the role of helper, participants sharing what the role was like, the building of a support system among participants, informing participants of local resources to help them in the role, and an opportunity to express needs for training, support, etc., that might be a long-range plan.

Evaluation and feedback from the day showed the need for this kind of attention to "help people help others." There was unanimous encouragement for a follow-up program and the confirmation that a "helping persons" network was possible.

The follow-up for the new Helping Persons' Project is still in its initial stages. The plan includes: clarification and continued assessment of training needs (that is, communication skills, knowing when to refer, etc.); using the mailing list to publicize locally available training opportunities relevant to helping persons

(in the fashion of a clearinghouse); making available the opportunity for small group meetings with a mental health professional to provide skilled *support and counsel to the helping persons*; and finally, the opportunity for ongoing personal growth and enrichment in regularly scheduled small group sharing (not to get answers to situations they're involved in, but to have this chance for support and self-growth).

Extension's involvement in this program effort had payoffs beyond the goal of "helping people help themselves." Being part of a new non-traditional program helps break down Extension's narrow stereotype held by some people. The visibility of this program helped to show the public that the scope of Extension family living goes beyond those stereotypes.

The process was also a successful try at community resource development—meeting the challenge to use and develop the networks of people within our communities. The benefits of an interagency approach were great. Combining expertise and resources increased the educational input each of us might have had independently.

The joint programming effort resulted in mutual respect for the goals and resources of each organization toward a common end—improved individual and family well-being.

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