

*GRASSROOT & LEADERSHIP
TRAINING CURRICULUM*

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HISTORY OF BRIDGEPORT

Over the past 25 years, Bridgeport has become victim of deterioration and job loss common to Northeastern manufacturing cities. Thus, making it one of the poorest and most highly taxed cities in the nation.

The West End is a gateway to the Downtown area, which is vital to establishing the image of the area. In addition, many businesses find that prospective employees are often reluctant to consider job opportunities because of the general characteristics and reputation of the area.

The West End of Bridgeport has declined dramatically during the past 15 years due to business relocation outside of the city. In its place a number of vacant and abandoned structures have become cities for illegal activities.

The physical appearance and spirit of the West End are intrinsically linked. Residents, businessmen, and visitors feel the frustration and hopelessness borne out of the enormity of the tasks necessary to turn the area into a thriving community it once was.

According to the Office of Planning and Economic Development, “much of the area’s social problems stem from joblessness and general “alienation” of local residents.” The residential community and grassroots organizations that exist in the city lack funds, skills, and leadership necessary to undertake development projects and advocacy for the well being of the neighborhoods.

The city of Bridgeport Office of Planning and Economic Development states, “retaining and strengthening the West End and its industrial base is of critical importance to the future of the West End and the City.” Area businesses provide vital contributions to the city’s shrinking tax base.

The Strategic Plan for the City of Bridgeport clearly states that Bridgeport’s economic development problems are more than the sum of disadvantages such as: high taxes, land pollution, crime, poor image, low school performances, etc. “We need to continue to coordinate and plan on a city-wide level, while empowering residents to shape their communities in conjunction with city-wide strategies.”

Redevelopment cannot simply rely on providing incentives to retain or start up a company. The expiration of incentives causes companies to move or relocate. Presently, stakeholders must make Bridgeport a desirable place to do business for the industries that the city targets. This must continue at the community level through planning which involves residents and businesses comprehensively addressing problems and creatively developing solutions.

PROBLEM STATEMENT:

If no solution is found within the next 3 years, there will be a continued lack of participation in the decision making process that will limit the residents of the West End of Bridgeport's economic condition, employment opportunities, affordable housing and access to culturally sensitive social services.

GOAL STATEMENT:

To develop and implement a grass roots leadership curriculum that improves the practice of democracy by building leadership at the community level. The leadership curriculum will focus on empowering people who have been traditionally under-represented although anyone who is interested in community leadership can participate.

PROJECT PRODUCT:

A leadership curriculum that emphasizes a specific kind of leadership. A curriculum that teaches people to solve problems through the participation of many rather than a few, how to build consensus, facilitate communication, and resolve conflicts within and community groups and institutions.

The curriculum is based on the idea that everyone can take leadership at some level. Leaders are people who take responsibility not just people who hold titles. The definition of leadership goes beyond the visible duties of a public leader and includes people's everyday efforts to plan, organize, communicate, and support others to get involved in community affairs.

EXPECTED OUTPUTS:

- Identify potential partners to design the grass roots leadership curriculum.
- Create and design a grass roots leadership curriculum.
- Finalize leadership training curriculum.
- Partner with local college.
- Identify potential funding sources.
- Register residents for the first series of leadership training.
- Hold first leadership training series.

EXPECTED INPUTS:

- Collaborate with a college on developing/modifying a curriculum for grassroots leadership.
- Collect and review information on existing leadership curricula.
- Survey residents to identify needed skills.
- Recruit residents within the targeted communities who are interested in assuming and participating in the grass roots leadership program.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN:

January - March 1999

Set up meeting with potential partners:
Sacred Heart University
Enterprise Community Organizers
Community Council leaders
Research and review existing leadership
curricula

April - June 1999

Draft outline of leadership training curriculum
Research and compile information on outline topics
Research potential underwriting resources
Research potential sites for training
Develop a marketing plan for training

July - September 1999

Complete research
Design Grass Roots Leadership Training Curriculum
Market and promote the training
Recruit 12 - 15 residents for the first training session

October - December 1999

Schedule and hold Grass Roots Leadership Training Curriculum
Conduct evaluation on Grass Roots Leadership Training Curriculum
Make revisions/modifications to training as needed

The original objectives were:

- Identify potential partners to design a grassroots leadership-training curriculum.
- Create and design a grassroots leadership curriculum.
- Finalize leadership training curriculum.
- Partner with a local college.
- Identify local presenters.
- Identify potential funding sources.
- Register residents for the first series of leadership training.
- Hold the first leadership training series.

One of the major issues in this community is the lack of resident participation. The listed objectives are necessary to bring together non-traditional players/partners (i.e. schools, religious organizations, social service agencies, businesses, and local government) to the West End community and begin addressing the issues in this neighborhood. Several meetings were held with community groups, businesses as well as, local government representatives to begin discussing ways to work collaboratively to effect positive change.

Over the past year, and many meetings, residents voiced their concern in acquiring the necessary skills they needed in order to become a leader and a voice in their community. In addition, residents felt that there is lack of commitment from city hall, businesses and institutions in their neighborhoods. This has led them to feel disconnected. Further, residents discussed the need to have training's that were user friendly and not "over their heads" and the need for them to be local.

Equipped with this information, the original objectives had to be modified in order to address the residents needs. The following are the revised objectives.

REVISED OBJECTIVES:

- Create and design a grassroots leadership training curriculum with resident input.
- Finalize the leadership-training curriculum.
- Identify local presenters.

- Identify potential funding sources.
- Identify local potential training sites and get commitment.
- Register residents for first series of leadership training.
- Hold first leadership training series.

What forced these changes?

A meeting with the Resident Advisory Council was held to discuss the leadership training material, potential funders, potential presenters, and training site. The Council did not agree with the training site. The training site identified was a university located in the city but they use a Fairfield address. This led the Council to the conclusion that the university does not want to be associated with Bridgeport. In addition, the Council felt that their main interest was to put their name on the training and appear “community minded.” The Council expressed the need for the training to be held locally.

The training was going to be partially funded by the Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC) and an area foundation. Unfortunately, LISC has lost their funding and will no longer have a presence in the city of Bridgeport. This has created the need to search for other funding sources and presenters.

In the meantime, Family Services Woodfield a social service agency located in the target community has committed to become the training site for the leadership training. The following is background information on the agency.

Family Services Woodfield (FSW) is a non-profit 501(c)(3) human service organization with a long history of serving individuals and families in the greater Bridgeport area, and surrounding towns of Easton, Fairfield, Monroe, Stratford, and Trumbull. The agency is headquartered in Bridgeport, a city that continues to address years of economic stagnation, homelessness, and high rates of crime. Branch offices located in Monroe, Grasmere Eldercare Center in Fairfield, and the Fairfield Senior Center serve special needs in their communities. FSW is accredited by the Council of Accreditation of Service for Families and Children, Inc., is a member of the national organization, the Alliance for Children and Families, and the United Way of Fairfield County. The State of Connecticut as a licensed mental health clinic certifies FSW.

FSW’s services are offered from several units within the agency: Parent, Child and Youth Services, Older Adult Services, HIV/AIDS Services,

Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services, Deaf Outreach Services, Employee Assistance Services, and Community Development Initiatives. Each area offers clinical and case management, as well as other interventions and programs according to specific needs. Some of the specialized services offered address housing and homeless issues, people with psychiatric needs, children at risk of abuse or neglect, victims of violent crimes, individuals and families coping with HIV/AIDS, community youth involved with the juvenile justice system, the hearing impaired, and the elderly. The centralized Intake and Assessment process helps clients access all appropriate agency services. Referrals to other agencies are made when appropriate services are not available on site.

The mission of FSW demonstrates its commitment to make a difference. In fact, “Serving Families and Strengthening Communities for 150” is a mission that is reflected in all of our efforts. In keeping with the mission, FSW is committed to offering programs and services that support the self-sufficiency of individuals and families, and promote the development of communities. There have been dramatic changes in the greater Bridgeport region in recent years. More individuals and families are facing increasingly complex problems. FSW is successful at making a real difference in the community because of its ability to anticipate evolving needs of the community, and to design, modify or expand services in innovative ways.

What key activities carried out throughout the year?

Several surveys were conducted in order to learn what were the main concern/issues for the residents of the West End of Bridgeport. The results from the surveys indicated that the majority of the residents shared the same concerns about their neighborhoods. In addition, the residents were interested in getting involved to make positive changes in their community. However, their primary concern was not having enough “know how” to get started.

In order to learn what services, businesses, religious organizations, educational facilities, etc. were in the target neighborhood an assets mapping project was initiated by residents and a team of volunteers. Through this asset mapping, residents became aware of services needed in their neighborhood. This led to several activities such as, clean-up efforts, community gardens, youth and children activities and the creation of a merchants association.

What were the major successes/failures?

One of the major successes in this process was the development of relationships with residents, business owners, social service agencies, religious organizations, schools, and City Hall. Another success was getting a commitment for the training site and in-kind financial support for copying the training material from a business owner. In addition, residents were identified for the leadership training and presenters were recruited. These successes have motivated the residents to go through the training and get involved in their community.

The failures were few but significant. The loss of funding, presenters and support led to postponing the leadership training. The training was originally scheduled for October 1999. The training is being scheduled to be held in the Spring.

Lessons learned:

- Patience!
- Building capacity is a long term process
 - a. organizations and funding sources do not understand this concept
- Everyone has a different agenda
- Recruiting assistance is essential for a successful project

How participatory was the project (give examples)?

There was a lack of participation at the beginning of the project because residents did not trust me. They did not know what was my motive/gain to work in their community. Residents are all well aware that I do not live in their neighborhood. However, in meeting with residents, they learned that my motive was to link them to services they needed as well as bring support (i.e. local government, police department, etc.) into their community.

The business community welcomed the opportunity to learn about services available to them as well as meeting other small and large business owners in their community. The belief that only the big businesses received all the services and support from the city is slowly changing. Business owners have expressed interest in starting a merchants association to begin

networking and addressing some of the common concerns in their neighborhood.

Local government officials have been frequently attending community meetings to address residents concerns. The residents have received this positively and they are beginning to establish relationships that were once thought of as impossible.

What is sustainable about what you have done?

As the number of residents and diversity of partnerships expecting to be part of any community decision increase, so must the process for making these decisions become more open and accessible. Bringing diverse players together to find common ground, defining shared interests, is a process of self-realization whereby all community members can discover that they have the talent and ideas necessary to improve life for themselves and their neighbors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Grassroots Leadership Training Curriculum will teach residents the skills they need to effect positive change. Once the residents begin to employ these new, more inclusive tools and approaches, cynicism and paralysis will dissipate. This new approach to dealing with challenges can restore a community's faith in itself.

No problem is insurmountable and no single entity or individual can undertake the process needed to create sustainable community change. However, investment in capacity building is essential in order for resident to take a leadership role in their community. Residents must first look within for resources and priorities as they set about to renew their community.