



The South Shore Family Resource Association

Introduction

The Community Action Program for Children (CAPC) funds community groups to establish and deliver services that address the health and development of children from birth to age 6 who live in conditions of risk.

The Program is based on the principle that communities are best positioned to recognize the needs of their children and have the capacity to draw together the resources to address those needs. CAPC is one of three community-based programs run by Health Canada to ensure that children have a healthy start in life. The other programs are the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program and Aboriginal Head Start.

The following story demonstrates that the development of community capacity takes time and can involve growing pains. The implementation phase needs to be recognized as a legitimate part of project development.

The South Shore Community

The South Shore of Nova Scotia includes three counties – Shelburne, Queens and Lunenburg – that cover an area of 7,603 square kilometres, edged by the Atlantic Ocean.

Shelburne County's 17,000 inhabitants live mainly in small coastal communities. The principal industry is fishing, which creates only seasonal employment for many families. Thirty percent of lone-parent families, the majority headed by females, rely on social assistance.¹

Queens County is a rural community of approximately 13,000 people. The unemployment rate for households with children is 12.3 percent. About 17 percent of families are headed by single parents, and the average annual income in female-headed lone-parent families is \$18,020.

Approximately 48,000 people live in Lunenburg County. Sources of employment include

skilled trades, manufacturing, the fishing industry and other natural resource sectors. More than 14,000 children and youth live mainly in rural communities. Close to 19 percent of families in the county are headed by single parents, and nearly 41 percent of youth between the ages of 15 and 24 leave school before finishing their education. The rate of unemployment among these young people is 28 percent.

The South Shore Family Resource Association

The South Shore Family Resource Association is a coalition of community organizations providing free programming to families in the three counties. The coalition delivers a variety of programming, which varies from site to site and is divided into activities focussed on children, parents, families and communities. Most programming is delivered at three main Family Resource Centres, but there are also outreach programs (a total of 19) for families in more isolated areas.

The programs are well attended, and families continue to request additional services and opportunities. The majority of families served by the Family Resource Centres are young, often headed by a lone parent, and have limited resources. Many are geographically or socially isolated.

The Association believes in a participant-driven model of program delivery. Programs are developed and delivered through the collaborative efforts of parents and service providers. Parents often become the facilitators of the programming and eventually train others to carry out the work.

The work of the Association is supported by a strong and dedicated group of volunteers, the majority of whom were participants who value the CAPC project, feel a sense of ownership and want to give back to the project.

Growing up

The South Shore Family Resource Association began to take shape in 1993, following the announcement of the Community Action Program for Children (CAPC). Health Canada indicated that it would prefer that one proposal be submitted by a coalition of the three counties, and in 1994, funding was received. Initially, the offices of Family and Children's Services in the three counties acted as sponsors of the project, each administering its portion of the funding.

In February 1995, the South Shore Family Resource Association was incorporated and assumed entire responsibility for the management of the project. The board includes four representatives from each county, about half whom are parents, and meets on a regular basis to develop policy and consider issues of funding and staff support.

Each of the three centres is managed by a coordinator and an Action Committee. The Action Committees are composed of parents and volunteers, and make decisions on the day-to-day operations and financial management of the individual centres. The committees recommend appointments to the Board of the South Shore Family Resource Association and put forth policy issues to be worked on at the Board level. These committees are also responsible for the performance appraisals of the local coordinators.

The past six years have not been without rough waters. First, there was the question of location. Although Lunenburg County already had an established family centre in Bridgewater within which the new CAPC project could be housed, finding the right locations in the other two communities proved more difficult.

In Shelburne County, the CAPC Family Resource Centre originally shared space with the local Family and Children's Services in the



A 'Mother Goose' program in full swing.

largest community, the town of Shelburne. This arrangement did not prove successful, and the Family Resource Centre is now located in a former elementary school. It shares the space with several other nonprofit organizations, including Big Brothers-Big Sisters, the Early Childhood Development Association and the Food Bank. This provides 'one-stop shopping' for families in search of services and programs.

Queens County began with a small office in the facilities of Family and Children's Services, and programming was carried out two days per week in a church hall. Fortunately, after a year of searching, the CAPC Family Resource Centre found a permanent home in a former elementary school.

The coalition itself faced barriers. The travel for staff and board meetings was time-consuming and expensive. Staff immersed in addressing the challenges regarding the development of their individual sites had to 'switch

gears' and perform as a coalition whenever the need arose. How to evaluate such an organization became a key topic of discussion, and it took a long time to write policies and procedures that would work for everyone.

Fortunately, once we gained access to e-mail, began using conference calls, maintained a central location for meetings and developed effective work plans, things started to fall into place. In order to develop a personnel policy, we formed a working group which met and wrote for two years before everyone felt comfortable with the document. The Board began to hold a yearly Board Development day to orient new members and set the work plan for the upcoming year. Staff made decisions about sharing the work associated with biannual reports, administration and evaluation. We also formed a team to work with the evaluator to prepare our first three-year evaluation. This proved to be a lengthy but rewarding process. Three parents – one from each site – worked on the

team and gained valuable skills in the area of evaluation.

Just as progress was being made, a new dilemma occurred in Lunenburg County. As a result of staff changes in our partner organization, the family centre began to move away from the participant-driven model. The partnership was in jeopardy, but with strong support from participants, volunteers and our determined Board, we were able to resolve the situation. We developed clear, concise policies and guidelines to provide a solid base for our partnership with Family and Children's Services, and a rewarding working relationship has emerged. The seamless delivery for which we had been striving has finally taken shape.

Travel has always been a challenge. The cost and time required to attend meetings are but two of many issues. Most families in rural communities with which we work have little or no access to transportation. All three sites have attempted to find a solution to this issue. When the Shelburne centre began to do more outreach, it faced the problems of how to do this work with only two staff members and how to deal with the increased costs of travel. When the Queens centre changed sites, it ended up a considerable distance from the centre of town, and participants had difficulty attending programs. The staff obtained the appropriate insurance and began driving participants to the centre. The demand for this service increased and the workload took its toll on the three staff. Five years later, they are trying to find a different solution to this ongoing problem.

In Lunenburg County, staff also had been providing transportation for participants. In 1997, the CAPC site purchased a van and trained volunteers to do the driving. After three years of fundraising, the van is paid for, but funds still must be raised for maintenance, insurance and gas. Demand for the transportation service has

increased dramatically, and it is a constant struggle to find enough volunteer drivers to share the workload. Staff are once again assisting with the overload.

Funding limitations also have created struggles for the coalition. At first, we wrote proposals for every funding opportunity that arose. This approach not only required a tremendous amount of staff time, but often forced us to add another component to our already stretched agenda. After six years of chasing small grants which required much work, we decided that we will attempt to secure funding only if it allows us to build on what we are already doing.

Worth the Effort

Today, the coalition delivers an array of programming.

- *Child-focussed programs* include School Readiness, Transition to School, Taming the Dragon (an anger management program), Child Play Groups and Circle Time (a literacy program). These initiatives seek to provide positive early childhood experiences, encourage social interaction and promote an increased readiness to learn.
- *Parent-focussed programs* provide support, information and learning opportunities for parents. They include parenting courses such as Nobody's Perfect, Active Parenting, and Parenting Through Separation and Divorce. There are also activities centred on anger management, self-esteem, assertiveness, health education, breast-feeding support and stress management; young parent support groups; prenatal education sessions and home visiting; a nutrition course; and 'parent breaks' which allow some respite for parents.



Volunteers at a training session.

- *Family-focussed programs* consist of parent and tot play groups, the Mother Goose literacy program, clothing and toy exchanges, resource libraries, a baby book program, collective cooking and collective gardening sessions, family fun days and Crafts for Parents and Kids. These activities are designed to promote bonding, experiential learning and fun.
- *Community-focussed programs* include family resource fairs, children's fairs, special event days (such as National Children's Day), peer leadership training, volunteer training, facilitator training, income tax preparation courses and open houses. These initiatives encourage community involvement, support the building of skills within the community, develop relationships and promote partnership. They are all lots of fun.

Volunteers

Volunteers are the backbone of the South Shore Family Resource Association. Without dedicated trained volunteers, our organization

could not provide a fraction of the services and programs that we offer.

Volunteers sit on the Board and committees, do shopping, drive participants, cook, carry out administrative tasks, work on program development and delivery, prepare newsletters and calendars, help with child care, raise funds, gather statistics, deliver public presentations and evaluate our project. The parent volunteers who gained evaluation skills were able to develop, prepare and write our last three-year evaluation report.

We have devised a system of Volunteer Orientation and Preservice Training that provides new volunteers with valuable information about who we are (our mission, goals and objectives), what we do and the kinds of volunteer positions that are available. The training was developed and is delivered by volunteers. It allows both the volunteer and the organization to ensure a good match. Peer Leadership Training and Facilitator Training are also provided. Many outreach sites in rural communities are operated by trained volunteers.



Participants in a 'Transition to School' group.

Volunteers can use their current skills or work to develop new ones. Many move on to paid employment, school or other community work, so continued recruitment and training are necessary. Although training requires time and effort from both paid and volunteer staff, it is worthwhile, because an informed and supported team is essential to the well-being of any organization. We value, respect and recognize the work of our volunteers through training opportunities, appreciation days, gifts and – most importantly – remembering to say ‘thank you’ for a job well done.

Partnerships

The collaborative efforts of many service organizations are required to support and build stronger, healthier families. Much of our Association’s success can be attributed to rewarding partnerships developed with the provincial department of Public Health, the Learning Network,

Early Childhood Intervention Services, Family and Children’s Services, and local hospitals.

Our partnership with Public Health has resulted in a number of valuable programs, including a prenatal education initiative for young women. In discussions during our Young Parents groups, we learned that many young single women did not attend prenatal programming offered in the community. They reported feeling out of place and intimidated in the traditional setting. A committee of young parents, health professionals and other service providers came together in an attempt to address this issue. The result was a program called ‘Baby ‘N Me,’ which is delivered by Public Health nurses, a nutritionist from the hospital and a previous participant. The eight two-and-a-half hour sessions are delivered around evening meals, with games and prizes. Participants receive vitamins, bags of groceries, and free baby clothing and equipment from our exchanges.

More recently, a new partnership with Human Resources Development Canada has allowed us to build on this program. We now can offer home visiting to these young women from the time of referral until their babies are six months old. This same partnership has enabled us to offer a back-to-school support program for young, single female parents who are furthering their education; an outreach centre in an apartment complex that historically has housed low-income families; and programming for older children and their families.

Lessons learned

The development and operation of the South Shore Family Resource Association have been a continuous learning process. Here are some of the lessons we have learned.

1. *Coalitions take time to develop.* It is challenging to bring together large numbers of people with varied personalities and different ways of thinking and acting. It is essential to give careful consideration to the hiring of staff for such a venture. Those chosen must be ‘team players’ and be able to adjust to working in a wide variety of groups. Once the ‘gelling’ has occurred, the rewards are countless. Together, we have a stronger voice. We have a wealth of skills and knowledge that can be tapped whenever the need arises. We support each other, ground each other and, most importantly, care about each other.
2. *Always develop work plans and attempt to stay on track.* When you are ‘the new resource on the block,’ there are many pressures to be everything to everybody. Decide what you are able to do, what you can do well and when you will do it. Otherwise, you will be pushed to grow before you are ready.
3. *Develop winning partnerships.* In a good partnership, everyone shares the load as well as the rewards. Work together to create policies and guidelines for the partnership that satisfy everyone.
4. *Ensure that every aspect of development and planning encourages parent involvement and ownership.* In a participant-driven model, you must be prepared to ‘walk the talk.’ When you ask the question, you must be prepared for the answer. Only genuine involvement leads to true ownership.
5. *Parents are able to do the work if others are willing to let go.* So let go.
6. *Continued training for staff and volunteers is essential.* Sometimes as an organization grows, everyone is so busy that training and development are left on the back burner. Learning is an important factor in the healthy development of the Family Resource Association, which keeps us from becoming resistant to change. Exposure to new ideas fosters innovative thinking.
7. *Recognize your supporters in the community.* Value their input. Say ‘thank you!’
8. *Don’t lose your focus for a few added dollars.* Writing proposals for funding is a lot of work. Focus on funding opportunities that will build on the work you are already doing.
9. *Start where people are and move forward together.* Don’t assume that because you are ready, everyone else is or should be.
10. *Be willing to take risks.* This is probably the most important lesson that we have learned. Just because something has not been done before does not mean that it can’t happen.

Don't be discouraged if things don't go as planned. Gather up the learnings and move on. Remember, someone did walk on the moon!

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Endnote

1. Population statistics from a 'Child and Youth Profile' compiled by the Population Health Research Unit of Dalhousie University.

For more information about Health Canada's community-based programs, visit the website at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/childhood-youth/

Cette histoire communautaire est également disponible en français.

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