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Are We There Yet: FSA Social Work in AGN Dekalb

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NNGO 495

Introduction

As a discipline, NNGO studies is still a relatively new field of study. Despite this, there is a growing interest to expand participation and awareness of the program and of opportunities in the nonprofit sector. Now there have been numerous writings on the strategies of the sector participants to increase their output, however there is a glaring issue which not many have proposed an answer to: expanding participation and services in ethic-majority communities. In a post-COVID age, we've seen the demand and the necessity for community assistance skyrocket in response to unemployment, food insecurity, and homelessness among many other issues. While the need is increasing dramatically, the engagement from community members has fallen over decades. In this new age as the United States and other nations are shifting their political values to either side of the spectrum, the nonprofit sector will begin to stall as some strategies may be deemed too liberal or conservative by comparison and open the organization to scrutiny by the state's political sphere. In the pursuit of creating healthier communities and fostering further intersectionality, it is important the NNGO center, and the nonprofit sector learn from the past and begin reimagining their relationships with the community. In states which are becoming more diverse and there becomes less of an emphasis on 'white,' organizations will need to press questions: what is the relationship between minority groups and community organization? To what extent are community organizations engaged with minority communities? How do community organizations market services to ethnic families and communities of color opposed to white families? In addressing these questions, organizations are likely to uncover new routes of data collection, donor funding, and volunteer participation.

It can be widely agreed that an equal approach to service is also not an equitable approach. This study is not conducted to disprove or argue already established methods but to

provide insight in hopes that strategies can be developed which are tailored towards specific

scenarios or patterns found within the targeted communities.

Literature Review

Social Work Practices

Raider's analysis of the design & development model of Practice Research is a critique

on social work with low-income African American families. Though much of the strategies he

would go on to suggest by the end of his analysis, he makes it a point that social workers

preconceived notions cause proper attention to be diverted from the African American

community. His findings during his Detroit study found that parents of children receiving school-

based services had little communication with social workers, and on the other hand social

workers did not feel the parents were involved enough in their child's treatment. Social workers

in these programs perceive the parents as inaccessible, difficult to engage and generally

indifferent to being involved in the child's treatment.[1] To mediate this, The Model of Social

Work Practice was developed, and social workers were encouraged to retrain to increase their

effectiveness in engaging parents. As Raider puts it, the process was no easy feat, and much of

the new model was formed using anecdotal data and personal experience rather than empirical

research. This model was to examine the characteristics and history of African Americans, the

barriers to service, and the practice approaches which have been proposed to be helpful to Africa

Americans; analyzing existing knowledge and the state of the area of intervention to incorporate

into the model.

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[1] Raider, & Pauline-Morand, M. B. (1998). Social work practice with low-income, urban, African American families / Melvyn Raider and Mary Beth Pauline-Morand. Edwin Mellen Press.

The analysis concluded it was important for social workers working with African American families to have a knowledge of African American culture. Five framework components were articulated which constitute the knowledge base necessary for professionals: 1) strength/resilience; 2) gender roles; 3) extended family; 4) Black Church, religion, and spirituality; and 5) trauma, grief, and loss. Specific strategies were tailored to each component. Raider's research also supported the view that work with low-income African American families is best approach using the strength/resilience perspective. Social workers who work from this perspective recognize that all families have strengths which help them to survive and function in the midst of various problems and difficulties. The strength/resilience perspective can be better illustrated through the other four components. The flexibility of gender roles in African American families shows resilience as a means of coping with oppression, however this break with traditional societal norms and can be viewed as a deficit rather than a strength. For example, African American women whose male spouses are not present in the home often take on many roles in caring for their families. From a traditional perspective, the household would suffer in the absence of a male figure. However, through a resilience perspective, social workers should view them as energetic, resourceful women who have taken on various roles in order to care for their families. Raider argues that African Americans demonstrate importance of kinship bonds, and today this expands the family unit to include friends, grandparents, cousins, neighbors, and co-workers. African Americans have a far greater trust in their personal network and use that as a means of coping with grief, sexual and racial oppression, trauma.

Black Empowerment

To the reader's satisfaction, Solomon opens her novel *Black Empowerment* with its intended purpose. This book was written primarily for social workers in training and in practice who are seeking more effective strategies for helping clients in black communities achieve personal and collective goals.[2] Solomon reasons that because, not just African Americans, but most minority groups placed a higher value on the collective instead of the individual, community work would seem more attractive since it focuses on collective good.

1. Dysfunctional communities are those which do not provide adequate resources "housing, police protection, health care, medical facilities) to support the effective social functioning of its residents.

2. Minority communities are less functional than other communities due to institutional inequities which limit access to resources. Because resources translate into power, these communities are therefore essentially powerless.

3. There is a reciprocal relationship between individuals and communities, that is, functional communities support individual growth and development while functional individuals support community growth and development. Conversely, dysfunctional communities do not support individual growth and development while dysfunctional individuals do not support community growth and development.

4. Community social work practice in minority communities is aimed at reducing powerlessness of the community's residents to act collectively. This inevitably involves assessing and coping with institutional inequities.

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[2] Solomon. (1976). Black empowerment: social work in oppressed communities / Barbara Bryant Solomon. Columbia University Press.

5. Community social work practice in minority communities may involve a variety of theoretical approaches as identified in this volume; however, any approach will be implemented through a relatively stable social agency system.

Institutional Racism & The Social Work Profession: A Call to Action

The purpose of this document is to address structural racism, clarifying how it is relevant to the social work profession, and detailing how it is manifested in the social systems within which social workers engage. The aim is to offer a vision for how the social work profession can address structural racism, in terms of both limiting its negative influence and creating conditions for effectuating realistic, achievable positive outcomes. The assumption is that people enter the profession with good intentions and the desire to help, so rather than focus on whether individual social workers are engaging in biased or racist practices, the National Association of Social Workers focus on the societal, institutional, structural maintenance of racism and the social worker's role in reference to this macro-level issue.[3] The NASW concludes the responsibility of individual social workers is to recognize that structural racism plays out in their personal and professional lives and to use that awareness to ameliorate its influence in all aspects of social work practice, inclusive of direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation, administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation.

Theory and Practice of Community Social Work

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[3] Craig de Silva, Elvira. (2007). President's Initiative Weaving the Fabrics of Diversity. *Institutional Racism & The Social Work Profession: A Call to Action*. National Association of Social Workers. p. 3

Describing community social work practice would have been drastically easier had it been done earlier than the 1960s. To that point, social work efforts were problem-solving oriented and used only two methods: 1) the socio-therapeutic approach and 2) the rational planning approach. From the planning perspective, social action is most often related to improving the social environment by providing needed services or organizing citizens and professionals to press for social reforms. In the socio-therapeutic approach, social action involved enabling community groups to become active participants in the democratic processes of society so that they could engage in problem-solving activities or reform efforts that were intended to change societal organizations and institutions.[4] Taylor examines the community liaison approach, which suggests that agencies must inventory the talents and knowledge of their staff when appropriating training and project assignments. For example, some agencies value recent graduates over veterans for their knowledge of younger audiences and more relevant learnings. The approach is examined in three key areas to judge its efficacy: commitment, competency, and legitimacy. Competency should be thought of as a precursor to formal policy, symbolizing the conscious and deliberate decision of the organization. In practice, this should mean that agencies inventory the talents and knowledge of their staff. In some agencies, for example, recent graduates are more sought after for their new world perspective and knowledge of younger, more energetic audiences.

Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping

Ghate and Hazel provide an important reminder that many families in poor environments manage without the need for additional services or prefer not to use them and manage well

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[4] Taylor, S. H., Roberts, R. W. (1985). Oppressed Minority Communities. *Theory and Practice of Community Social Work*. / Samuel H. Taylor. Columbia University Press. p. 4

enough. A finding from this study is that, despite the lower levels of use of all forms of support, ethnic minority families were no more likely than white families to be in the 'non-coping' or 'sometimes not coping' groups.[5] This disadvantage to this resource is that Ghate and Hazel's analysis focuses on families in Britain rather than the United States. There are a few fundamental differences to address before comparing this study to the research question. 1) It is accepted that the experiences of African Americans and black Britons have different connotations. while elements of racial group consciousness are present among blacks in both societies, racial group consciousness is generally more prevalent and politically significant among blacks in the United States. 2) Ghate and Hazel negate the strength/resilience model, instead attributing coping mechanisms to the horrors of the modern world instead of past trauma. There is a general sense in the UK by black Britons that they are underrepresented, and this gravitates them to African American culture in place of their own. This also has made them more sympathetic to African American trauma and more people have begun to identify with the effects of unrecognized trauma.

Professional Rural Social Work in America

Modern social welfare grew out of the social disorganization of the 19th century. Early urban social workers believed the rural world was immune to the same disorder due to how decentralized those areas typically were. After debate I the late 1890s, social workers gave a new priority to rural social problems, especially coming into the post-war and pre-Great Depression era. Swanson notes that it's during this time that case workers experimented with ways public

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[5] Ghate, D. and Hazel, N. (2002) Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping. London: Jessica
    Kingsley Publishers. P. 170

and private rural welfare programs could apply urban-developed social work principles to rural family disorganization, rural child abuse, rural poverty, rural delinquency, and other rural social problems.[6] Up until World War II, the rural special welfare structure grew rapidly with the absence of primary household heads during the wartime years and the outcry for support during the New Deal, but organizations like the Red Cross would loss interest in the South altogether by the 1950s. Some social workers who were involved in these efforts would later return to develop a permanent welfare structure. A view by Josephine brown states that rural and urban work or fundamentally similar but require substantial modifications of urban techniques in order to apply them to the rural world. For example, in urban areas homes were available for unwed mothers, but a rural mother usually remains in either her parents' or grandparents' home until delivery, giving caseworkers different set of problems. In the city, there were also specialized agencies for particular types of problems: family and child welfare organizations, juvenile court, truancy officers, probations workers, and a hospital, as well as a referral system. In rural areas, social workers are typically by themselves and there is too much to do.

Methodology

This research focuses on a case study of the Family Service Agency of Dekalb County operating in Dekalb, Illinois. This organization was chosen as the subject of this study due to their network within the community and the level of activity the organization has engaged in

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[6] Swanson, M. (1972). Professional Rural Social Work in America. *Agricultural History*, *46*(4), 515–526.

http://www.jstor.org/stable/3741197 p. 516

Dekalb since its creation including their work in the local housing crisis, and assistance laying the groundwork to add community assets to the Annie Glidden North neighborhood.

Family Service Agency now run six programs out of their offices; Children's Advocacy Center, providing child-sensitive support to children; Youth Programming, providing mentoring for children; Center for Counseling, providing licensed clinical therapy for a multitude of subjects; Senior Services, helping community seniors maintain their independence; Community Action Program, helping low-income families achieve and maintain their self-sufficiency; and more recently, Youth Services Bureau. Beyond the services provided, the FSA coordinates efforts with other local programs within Dekalb county, closing any gaps in coverage with the local community. Their services are provided both in-person and virtually since the COVID pandemic.

Having an abundance of material from the host organization, research includes present and past data showing over time how methods in marketing and provided services have changed in relation to changing demographics in DeKalb County since 1956. One document I specifically acquired was a copy of FSA Dekalb's strategic plan for 2022-2025, which highlights four strategic issues the agency will tackle. Strategic issue 2 is crucial in the expansion of social services in Dekalb County. Data was also be collected from the community at-large where raw data can be collected in the Annie Glidden neighborhood where community efforts have been focused in recent years. According to demographic information, BIPOC groups make up for 35% of the township population, with around half of Black residents below the poverty line, compared to around 23% of White residents and 26% of Hispanics. The Annie Glidden North (AGN) neighborhood is the general area where most DeKalb township aid is concentrated.

Aside from firsthand accounts from residents, interviews with community organizers and FSA staff were planned to help explain further the development in DeKalb township and the potential for expanding community partnerships. To give total coverage, a member of each FSA community program was chosen for interview. Accounts from these social workers are necessary to give a proper administrative view of how resources are allocated, and the long-term impact programming is having on the organization's network. FSA works closely with DeKalb County school boards, local churches and food pantries, and other DeKalb County nonprofit organizations. This gave plenty of options and a wide range of testimony to bring in a personal aspect to the research rather than relying on hard facts. I chose to collect testimony this way because our lessons have taught us that organizations can sometime stray too far from their original mission or from the targeted population's needs. I believed proper program success should not be measured by finances or total impact as viewed by the organization or donor, instead it should be dictated by consensus in the community. If, for instance, FSA data reports record number of applications and foot traffic on media sites or in office, this is indeed positive, but only for the organization. These numbers could easily be skewed to be made up in majority by one group of people, completely missing the target audience again. If the community deemed the organization of falling short of its goal, the organization's methods will need to be altered according to where that support could be going instead.

Over a period of three months, I launched a short survey and engaged sixteen Dekalb residents in the Annie Glidden North neighborhood of various backgrounds who have interacted with the FSA and their services in some way. Each interviewee was asked a set of three questions: 1) how long they have been a resident of Dekalb; 2) if they have utilized FSA assistance and how; and 3) how they would rate the service on rating scale of ten. Though

quantitative data collection may not be applicable, these interviews gave qualitative details and

helped illustrate an informal consensus or community perspective on the agency. In launching

the online survey, it was quickly evident that people were either hesitating to engage and give

out information or there was a sense of unimportance and lack of personal gain in filing it out.

Several attempts were made to distribute the survey via pamphlets, including altering times of

distribution, location, and marketing designs. An additional question was asked to 6 of the 16

interviewees: 4) has there been a major shift in daily life in the past two years which still affects

you. This was after a discussion with the host site highlighted COVID-19 as a driving factor in

aid cases and could influence a family's options and decision to seek aid out.

Results, implications, and recommendations

Results

      Dekalb is a changing region, and its practices demonstrate this. Census data proves that

the demographics of Dekalb have become increasingly diverse with the population increasing

9.8% since 2000. Proportionately, the Black and Hispanic populations have grown by 4.9% and

5.4%, respectively, in the same period. Dekalb is also considered to be 'urbanized' due to its

high volume of metro-born residents, therefore social workers may see cases which are more

similar to models on urban social work rather than rural approach. According to data obtained

from FSA Dekalb, programs have seen a slight uptick in the last five years, with the exception of

COVID. This past quarter, 101 individuals were processed for cases. Some data is proportionate

to township census data such as gender demographics (near 50%-50% split for both identified

genders served and identified gender demographics of the town). However, one third of clients are reportedly unemployed; 65% of clients rely on Medicaid; and African Americans make up 60% of total clients served. Contradictory to the strength/resilience model, African Americans in Dekalb are more accepting of social work aid and do not carry religious or social stigma behind its use. In fact, the local Black Church structure works with FSA Dekalb and local nonprofits to maximize efforts and identify vulnerable families for assistance. While the data breaks the strength/resilience model's assumption that African Americans would be more reluctant to aid, the model does explain the strong relationship between African Americans and social work when the church is involved. On the part of FSA, there is also a growing effort to meet the families closer and create more personable bonds, especially those with young children. School boards collaborate with the office to bring counselors into the school setting to meet families 'halfway' and create a higher level of comfort to keep parents engaged. They also offer in-office counseling to provide children with a stable environment for observation. This transparency keeps clients engaged and improves trust by dispelling negative assumptions around social work.

In my interview with residents, my questions generated various responses. On average, the interviewee had been a Dekalb resident for approximately 4.25 years. All were single-parent households; between 23-46 years of age; and had 0-2 children. 9 out of 16 had utilized at least one service offered through FSA. These were younger parents aging 25-32 and would have at least one household member with a preexisting health condition. All but one of these families had applied for the Help IL Families assistance program for rental or utility assistance, many stating they've had issues with work or health since the COVID pandemic. Two families were considering counseling services for their children. Directly, the agency was not affecting these peoples' lives. However, they had stories of people in the community they knew were on hard

times and used their services. They were pleased with those stories of success, but in the end expressed no real need for the aid offered unless they also fall on harder times. As one father put it, "we made it through COVID all right, I got it from here." The reluctance in the community is prideful as it recognizes the usefulness of the agency but acknowledge the falling demand in aid assistance which isn't monetary.

Taking into account the FSA data, one could conclude that Family Service Agency Dekalb is not only attuned to the strength/resilience model but exceeds research expectations on levels of engagement with ethnic minority communities. While this assumption is based on empirical data, it cannot be understated that there is still a sizeable population outside this community which has less knowledge. The exposure of the agency and its relationship with the Dekalb community are relative of each other.

Limitations of Study

When interviewed, one resident (who was not counted among the 16 mentioned previous) was unaware of the full scope of the organization and its programs. After presenting the programs and how she could benefit, the resident still seemed hesitant. She finally asked two questions: 1) can you apply for assistance without documentation; and 2) would they take away her child. She found relief in my answers knowing she had a new resource to call upon for aid. There is still some misunderstanding, both of the agency and how some of their programs work. This was the first time the resident had heard of FSA or of a program which she could qualify almost instantly for. Other interviewees were only mildly aware of the child services offered, many of them finding the agency through a friend or online search. Information from FSA otherwise does not typically come across their personal networks. In alignment with the strength model, these people are relying on their personal sources to advise on their situation, and

although they all expressed positive sentiments about the organization, they are less likely to look for help when they don't feel they need it.

This study was on a strict timetable, and I was attempting to engage during high traffic times when children are coming and going to school. Families in the area have created a tightknit community due to some having kids in the same classroom or being babysitters and I was failing in my initial data collection since I had been unfamiliar in the area. It wasn't until I discovered a coworker of my own lived in the area and dropped kids off for the bus. Through this connection, I was able to get in touch with one new parent at a time.

Recommendations

FSA's new strategic plan lays out four strategic issues of focus, however I see issue two as the more prevalent: community leadership and outreach. It is outlined in three goals: 1) Develop a cohesive and comprehensive branding initiative that clearly expresses the organization's current size, offering, and reach as it relates to the five key programs and builds long-term relationship; 2) Provide collaborative leadership and advocacy to support the mental health of county residents particularly in the area of prevention services; 3) Create a public relations strategy that communicates program outcomes internally and externally.

With the recent merger of Youth Services Bureau, FSA is in a unique position as the agency 'absorbs' the program and their network. Through the reshaping, YSB has stayed in touch with their social media base, providing regular updates and with a bright, colorful brand. Social media is not the largest proponent of spreading information, but it is a method of visually displaying information. This would keep FSA relevant with younger audiences and help reach interested individuals without the physical means to travel.

FSA would also need to inject staff into the community to speak with people on a casual basis. There is an implicit feeling of separation in the AGN neighborhood which some community leaders have tried to address. They feel over policed by law enforcement and feel wronged by irate landlords. For them, sometimes it's nice just to have someone ask how their day is going. This would also be helpful in regard to strategic issue 4: geographic access to programs. With the main office being located in the Dekalb/Sycamore area, it is a challenge otherwise to disseminate information outside that area unless there are local liaisons to help facilitate.

As an African American male who also lives in the Annie Glidden North neighborhood and have received social aid in my life, I feel qualified to add my perspective to the research. For the African American community to trust social work and fully utilize agencies like FSA, the community needs to know those organizations are on 'their side.' The agencies and their staff need to show they are dedicated to the struggles against injustice. This goes beyond a DEI statement and hiring practices, whether the method is trending or not. Like all consumer goods, there needs to be appeal, and as I keep referring, the strength model says it all. The agency needs to be unconventional to spread awareness. Tap the shoulder of a few local leaders; enlist the help of student organizations from NIU; support a community outing and hand out information as people walk through the doors. In my opinion, FSA does not have a simple personnel or marketing issue. People's perception of 'normal' is shifting, and much of that involves suffering in silence.

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