Sowing the Seeds of Hope: Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Farm Families

Statewide Agriculture ~ Health

The Wisconsin Office of Rural Health wrote a grant proposal to fund mental health services for farmers in the upper Midwest who were experiencing distress due to weather and poor commodity prices. The Office of Rural Health Policy and Bureau of Primary Health Care in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funded a $300,000 grant to provide services in 7 states: Iowa, Wisconsin, Kansas, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Minnesota. The Wisconsin Primary Care Association administers the regional grant. Each state was asked to develop services that would meet their unique needs, using a collaborative approach. The Wisconsin Farm Center was asked to lead Wisconsin’s initiative.

Accomplishments

A dozen different entities helped plan and execute Wisconsin’s response. With a budget of $50,000 for one year. Wisconsin opted to provide stress management and communication workshops for farm couples via all-expense-paid weekend retreats. Farmers could receive stipends to offset their labor and child care expenses. Sixty couples participated in retreats held at various locations. A new communication booklet for farm families was developed entitled, “It’s All in the Farm Family,” and distributed to participants and others. A series of professional/natural helper trainings was offered around the state to help people who work with farmers understand the effects of cumulative stress and learn how to make appropriate referrals for assistance. Over 350 people attended the trainings, including personnel from all 60 Farm Service Agency offices, food safety inspectors, and others. All licensed mental health and AODA clinics were surveyed about availability of sliding fee scales and interest in working with the farm population. The data will be incorporated into Farmers’ County Resource Guides for referral purposes. A youth component is also being developed to address stress farm children may be experiencing. Well over $20,000 of in-kind resources have already been donated to the project by collaborating entities.

The Spirit of Partnership

Organizations involved include: Wisconsin Farm Center, Wisconsin Dept. of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection (DATCP); UW-Madison - Professional Development and Applied Studies; 4-H Youth Development - UW-Extension; Iowa County Extension; Wisconsin Farmers Foundation; Catholic Charities; Lutheran Social Services; Lutheran Disaster Response; Wisconsin Primary Care Association; Wisconsin Office of Rural Health; and the Marshfield Clinic. Services were developed by consensus using brainstorming techniques and discussion to plan programs. DATCP administers Wisconsin’s grant as an in-kind donation and all of the entities have given freely of their time and resources. Regional information sharing occurs via monthly teleconference calls with the 7 states.

Community Impact

The funders have agreed to a second year of funding at current levels. Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association is looking for alternative future funds on a national and/or corporate/foundation level and is helping states look locally for assistance. Wisconsin is currently exploring ways to make mental health care for farmers more systemic. The current project teaches tools to farm families and the people who work with them. These tools will help reduce stress and make referrals to local resources easier and more effective. Networking among agencies that most often work with distressed farmers has been strengthened significantly by participation in the project.
Community Model

Pulling together a broad spectrum of agencies with similar interests in a particular problem can rally resources and focus attention to an issue. Because the grant amount was small, all the entities knew they would have to share the resources and provide in-kind contributions. Each entity had a true concern for farmers so it wasn’t difficult to obtain commitment. We projected $16,000 of in-kind contributions but have already exceeded that midway into the grant. That level of commitment has allowed us to accomplish much more than would have been possible on $50,000. Numerous press releases have been issued calling attention to the issues and the project which increases awareness and builds support for future funding.

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