

Community/Neighborhood Resource Centers **(Part 1)**

by Robin Kimbrough-Melton

In the not too distant past, schools often were at the center of activity in rural communities and small towns. It was in rural schools where youth and adults alike gathered to discuss community concerns, to celebrate milestones, and to participate in cultural events. By serving as a gathering place, rural schools provided opportunities for citizens to participate in matters affecting the community, to build social relationships, to seek and receive help for problems facing children, youth, and families, and to establish a culture of values and norms that governed the community. In short, by bringing people together, rural schools contributed to the development of a “sense of community.” When residents work together to solve community problems and to establish shared values, communities are more likely to be safe and supportive of children, youth, and families.

In some rural communities (and urban communities for that matter), schools, including those once closed due to consolidation or lack of enrollment, are being revitalized as centers of community activity and service provision. Although schools continue to be a popular setting for locating services, community resource centers can also be found in rehabilitated houses, abandoned grocery stores, storefronts, shopping malls, and faith-based organizations. Even though many neighborhood resource centers have a location at which services are provided, centers frequently locate some services and activities in other locations throughout the neighborhood, such as workplaces, churches, schools, and recreational facilities. In fact, “virtual” community centers, where nearly all services and activities are provided in locations

throughout the community, are emerging as a strategy for locating activities and services close to citizens’ homes.

Strengthening Families and Communities

The community or neighborhood resource centers of today, as in the past, are often designed to bring children, youth, and families together in various activities, including recreation, support groups, community chats, and cultural education and enrichment activities. Many centers strive to strengthen and support children and families and to improve the quality of the communities or neighborhoods in which they live. Many centers also provide services to youth and families generally, or to specific populations (such as families in which child abuse or neglect has occurred). Some centers are even providing justice services as a way of improving the responsiveness of the justice system to the community when crime occurs and the accessibility of services to address social problems, such as drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, and family violence.

Regardless of the purpose and location of a community center, effective community resource centers become part of the community. They respect the intimate relationships and cultural heritage that define people’s identity and enrich their lives.¹ In short, they are welcoming places for children, youth, and families. These programs are most likely to be supportive of youth and families and to strengthen the community when the center’s programming is directed towards:

- ***Facilitating participation of children, youth, and adults.***

Information and education (including training programs) are provided to enable children, youth, and adults to make informed decisions about matters affecting them personally (e.g., health, employment, etc.) and their community (e.g., crime, youth issues, poverty, lack of resources, racism, etc.) and to develop appropriate solutions. In many centers, computer and internet training and access are provided.

- ***Stimulating the development of social relationships and networks.***

Most youth and families thrive when they have meaningful social relationships and networks of trusted friends. People are more likely to express a “sense of connectedness” to others in the community when community institutions foster and support such relationships. Community centers can be instrumental in reducing the isolation that youth and families may experience, especially in high crime and disadvantaged neighborhoods, by providing opportunities for youth and families to develop supportive relationships with others in the neighborhood.

- ***Providing comprehensive services and supports to youth and family in a non-stigmatizing location.***

Community centers strive to provide comprehensive services close to where residents live. In doing this, families frequently have greater access to a wider variety of services. Families may also have an easier time accessing appropriate services than if they have to travel to a downtown office or some other central location. Services provided by community centers often include health-related services, drug and alcohol treatment, counseling, job training and recruitment, parenting support, assessment and screening services, and case management.

Although services are usually provided to help

youth and families address needs, community centers also strive to build upon and enhance the strengths of families. This happens in several ways. Community centers often engage families in mutual support activities where family can receive help but also have opportunities to provide help to others. Effective community centers also typically encourage families to participate in decision making about their services and to share in the responsibility for improving the quality of life in the neighborhood.

- ***Providing opportunities for community involvement.***

Community members are integral to the success of most resource centers. Members of the community are often involved from the inception of a project in defining the needs and assets of a neighborhood. As the resource center matures, community members may serve on advisory boards, coordinate fundraising activities, provide staffing support, and participate in the various services and activities provided by the center. In justice resource centers (see Red Hook description, Part II), community members may have a central role in mediating disputes, sentencing offenders through various community processes, and monitoring community service work.

What kinds of activities and services are commonly provided in community centers?

The specific types of activities and services provided by a community or neighborhood resource center are driven by the purpose of the center, available space, volunteer support, financial support, and existing services or programs within the neighborhood. Services and activities commonly provided include:

- Family support and strengthening programs (e.g., child development classes, financial management, nutrition, child care, mutual support groups, parent to parent groups, mentoring for youth);
- Recreational activities for youth and adults (e.g., sports, cooking, or sewing classes, dance classes);

- Human and social services (e.g., drop-in counseling, health services, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health referrals, GED classes, job training and referral, literacy classes, anger management, conflict resolution, and domestic violence services, case management services);
- Cultural programs and events;
- Leadership programs (geared both to youth and adults);
- Community forums or other opportunities for identifying and resolving issues of concern to the community;
- Education, information, and referral (e.g., access to information about community programs and services; training programs on topics of interest to the community; access to computers, referral to services); and
- Clubs (e.g., 4-H clubs, after-school homework clubs, teen groups, service learning opportunities, summer day camps).

Part II of this series describes three existing community resource centers. For more information about community resource centers, contact the National Center on Rural Justice and Crime Prevention, 864-656-6285.

The National Center on Rural Justice and Crime Prevention seeks to stimulate the development of partnerships between local justice systems (e.g., law enforcement, courts, prosecutors) and residents, organizations, and institutions in rural communities and small towns to prevent and reduce crime and violence. The Center focuses on research, education, technical assistance, and information dissemination.

Endnotes

- ¹. Melton, G. B. (January 14, 2001). Family centers are the heart of community. *The Greenville News*, 3F.

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