Communities Coming Together:
Proposal Development in the
Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gary Cameron*, Mark Pancer,
Sue McKenzie-Mohr and Diana Cooper
Better Beginnings, Better Futures
Research Coordination Unit

*Centre for Social Welfare Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University
Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5

This report describes activities in seven communities. It is based on individual community reports prepared by:

Lucie Vincent-LeBlanc: Cornwall

Karen Hayward: Etobicoke

Marge Reitsma-Street: Sudbury

Jim Vanderwoerd: Guelph

Ruth Charles: Ottawa

Tonya Hood, Sharon Burke and Dawn Blessing: Kingston

Sue McKenzie-Mohr, Dia Mamatis and Gary Cameron: Toronto

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Better Beginnings, Better Futures was developed as an Ontario government primary prevention demonstration project involving the Ministries of Education, Health, and Community and Social Services with additional funding from the Federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and Secretary of State. The major goals of the project are to:

a) reduce the incidence of serious, long-term emotional and behavioural problems in children;

b) promote the optimal social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive development in those children at highest risk for such problems; and

c) strengthen the abilities of communities to respond effectively to the social and economic needs of children and their families.

Communities throughout the province were invited to develop a proposal to become a participating site. One of the major criteria for selection as a site was that children in the community were at risk for poor developmental outcomes due to factors such as economic disadvantage. Communities submitting a proposal were asked to develop programs for children from one of two age ranges: birth to four years of age or four to eight years of age. Participating communities were expected to have significant involvement of local residents in the development and operation of the program in their community, and to bring together existing community service providers to work with residents in an integrated fashion.

This report describes the manner in which individuals from each of the seven urban communities selected as Better Beginnings, Better Futures sites came together to develop a successful proposal. We hope that an understanding of this process will help other communities in the initiation of similar community-based, integrated, primary prevention programs.

The seven sites considered in this report were:

Age four to eight sites:

1. Cornwall located in the parish of Nativity

   (later modified to five primary school catchment areas)

2. Etobicoke located in the Highfield Junior School catchment area

3. Sudbury located in the Flour Mill and Donovan neighbourhoods

Birth to age four sites:

4. <u>Guelph</u> located in the Willow Road neighbourhood

5. <u>Toronto</u> located in the inner city Regent Park-Moss Park community

6. <u>Ottawa</u> located in the Heatherington-Albion-Fairlea area

    (Later Ledbury was added as a neighbourhood.)

7. <u>Kingston</u> located in North Kingston

This report covers the period from March, 1990 when the Request for Proposals was released, to January of 1991 when the seven sites selected were announced. The description presents the information summarized from each site report which was based on personal interviews with individuals involved in the development of the proposal and a review of project files. The report focuses on the process of proposal development, the participation and collaboration of service providers and of community residents in this process, and the way critical decisions were made during the development of the program model proposed at each site.

Proposal Development: Professional Participation

The process at each site typically started with one or more individuals attending government information sessions about the project and bringing information back to their organizations. Once they had ascertained that their agencies were supportive, these individuals then contacted people from other agencies and asked if they were interested in participating. In some instances, a small group initially generated a list of individuals and/or agencies that had a stake in the well-being of children and families and invited them to participate in the development of a proposal.

Individual motives for participating in such an endeavour varied. Some indicated that they had participated primarily because of their commitment to improve the lives of the people in the community they served, and to a belief that prevention and the integration of services were the best ways of achieving this. Others saw Better Beginnings, Better Futures as an innovative project that provided an opportunity for personal learning and professional growth. Some participated because they saw in Better Beginnings, Better Futures a means of acquiring more resources or a higher public profile for their organizations. Yet others participated because they saw Better

Beginnings, Better Futures as congruent with their agency's priorities. A number of individuals participated because their agencies or supervisors told them to get involved.

One of the themes that emerged in people's descriptions of how their community's proposal was developed related to the amount of time they were able to devote to the project. In all cases, a significant time commitment was required to develop a successful proposal. Some individuals were released from their normal duties so that they could work on it. Many individuals, however, had to carry on their normal work responsibilities, and consequently spend much of their own time, during lunch hours, holidays, evenings and weekends on proposal development. Some individuals and agencies had to drop out of the project because they could not sustain the time commitment necessary.

A number of difficulties were encountered as the sites began to develop their proposals. Many of these difficulties involved their interactions with the government, and the guidelines for proposal development provided by the government. Some at the sites felt that the government specifications were too constraining, and did not allow the communities themselves to define their own needs and ways they could best be met. A number of individuals from various sites found the definition of "integration" contained in the guidelines difficult to understand. Individuals from several sites also indicated that insufficient time was given for the proper development of a comprehensive proposal. Several individuals commented that the momentum for program development gained while preparing the proposal was weakened due to the long delay between when proposals were submitted and successful ones announced.

In the initial meetings at each of the sites, the proposing teams discussed a variety of issues such as the specific location in which the project should be situated, the philosophy, goals and objectives of the project, the needs and resources of the community, the design of the programs, and the challenge of how to get community members involved in the process. During these initial discussions at some of the sites, certain tensions arose among the various agencies involved. Some of these were the result of philosophical differences between the individuals or agencies. Other issues reflected the perception that certain factions or agencies within the proposing group had too much power, and that significant groups had not been involved in the development of the proposal. However, most site reports indicated that those involved had found the experience of

collaborating with individuals from other agencies and organizations to be a positive, exciting and unifying experience.

Proposal Development: Collaboration and Organization

Once the core participants were recruited in each of the sites, the proposal development process began in earnest. Some of the sites had no formal organizational structure and did not have a chair or secretary for any of their meetings. Others formed small working groups or steering committees from the larger group of individuals and agencies interested in the project. Yet other sites developed a more formal organization, with different committees to handle the various tasks involved in generating the proposal (e. g., a Coordination and Integration Committee, a Proposal Drafting Committee, and a Budget Committee). One of the most striking features of the decision-making process was the fact that all seven sites used a consensus model to make decisions, although the definition of consensus did vary across the sites. Consensual decision-making was seen as vital to ensuring good participation and commitment to the project.

There was substantial amount of variation in the time invested at the various sites in proposal development. Some sites did not get started in an intensive way until two months before the submission deadline of July 13, 1990, while others worked intensively for the entire seven months between the call for proposals and the time the proposals were submitted. Most sites had smaller working groups meeting weekly or even more often during peak periods of work. In general, work was accomplished on the basis of self-selection; whoever felt they had the expertise and time available for a job would take it on. The completion of tasks was made somewhat more difficult at a number of sites because of the changing composition of the working groups, with some original members withdrawing and new members being added.

The $5,000 grant provided to the communities to develop their proposals was generally used to hire individuals to work on the needs assessment or on proposal writing and to support the direct costs of participation in the process. One site used the money to pay a community worker to form a local residents' group which then had direct input into proposal development. Representatives of one group complained that they did not understand that the money could be used to hire staff support and, as a result, they did not use all of the money given to them.

In general, the individuals involved at each of the sites appreciated the opportunity to work collaboratively on the development of the proposal. The ideas and principles behind the Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project appeared to inspire participants and to sustain their involvement, despite occasional conflicts concerning issues such as how the project resources were to be allocated and the kinds of programs that would be implemented.

Resident Participation

Meaningful participation of community residents from the earliest possible point was seen as a priority by the government sponsors and by many involved in the development of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures site proposals. Despite this, with a few exceptions, resident involvement was generally minimal during the proposal development process. For four sites, resident participation amounted to no more than seeking information from residents while assessing community needs. A few of the sites attempted to involve community members in a more substantial way, and did a number of things to actively encourage participation (e.g., by providing assistance with child care or transportation, or by consciously making meetings less formal and intimidating).

One of the main barriers to resident involvement was the time allowed by the Ministries to prepare the proposal. This was a source of great frustration to those involved in proposal development. A related concern was the perception that the proposal process was very complex and required comprehension of specific kinds of technical information. In order to involve residents in a meaningful way, time had to be taken to familiarize residents with the issues involved. In addition, a number of those interviewed expressed a concern about raising the hopes of community members and then facing the possibility of not getting funded.

Another set of perceived barriers had to with residents' involvement with professionals and service providers. Residents were often intimidated and overwhelmed by the professionals participating in the work groups, and by the language and decision-making procedures used in the meetings. In addition, many residents had negative experiences with professionals in the past and were especially fearful of individuals from agencies such as Family and Children's Services and of the possibility of neighbours' censure about being involved with them. The fact that many

meetings were held during the day and heavy time commitments were required also prevented many residents from becoming more involved in proposal development. Some site reports commented on the built-in inequality between professional and resident participants in terms of remuneration for time spent on the project as well as class, cultural and language barriers.

One notable exception to the general pattern of resident involvement occurred in the site that used its program development grant to hire a community developer to form a residents' association to assist with the development of their proposal. This led to higher levels of resident participation in the development of the proposal at this site than at other sites. A second site also reported success at involving residents in proposal development by making this a priority consideration from the beginning.

Development of the Program Model

Proposing groups were required to make a number of important decisions about the kind of program that would be provided at their site. One of these decisions concerned the age group on which they would focus. In the original submissions, five of the groups chose the birth-to-four age focus, and only two chose the four-to-eight focus. It was suggested to one site and accepted that a change from a younger to an older cohort would benefit the Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project. Three of the groups indicated that there was some difficulty in deciding on which age group they would focus. The remaining groups decided on their age focus without difficulty.

Another decision faced by the proposing teams concerned the location of the project. The request for proposals indicated that each site was to have "identifiable geographic boundaries of service" and be located in a community that was economically disadvantaged and demonstrated a high risk for healthy child development. With the exception of one group, which had a great deal of difficulty choosing between two needy communities, the decision as to where to locate the project was decided quite easily.

The most challenging and complex decisions facing the program groups concerned the goals and objectives of the program and the program activities/components that would be implemented to meet them. All the sites reported having a great deal of discussion and debate in deciding on what the major program activities and objectives would be. In setting objectives, a

few of the sites based them on the needs that had been identified in their needs assessments. The other groups relied primarily on a process of brainstorming and discussion among knowledgeable service providers. The groups varied widely in how they went about generating programs. The decision-making procedures, consensual on the whole, seemed to vary from a few professionals setting out the basic program elements to a back-and-forth process between larger and smaller committees with many participants.

Conclusions

The process of proposal formulation proved to be a crucial stage in the development of programs at the various Better Beginnings, Better Futures sites. It was both a difficult and rewarding process for many of those involved. The limited time available for proposal development, the complexity of the Better Beginnings Better Futures model, and the many technical requirements for the proposal made it difficult to involve residents in a meaningful way in developing proposals and to plan a clear and complete program. The communities involved would likely have benefited from a longer allocation of time for proposal development, and greater assistance and support in understanding the Better Beginnings, Better Futures approach. Despite the many difficulties encountered in developing the proposals, those involved appeared to be inspired by the principles and objectives of the initiative. The process also provided the stimulus for service providers and residents to begin to work together to better the communities in which they work and live.

c:\bbbf\develop.sum