

**VALUES, PROCESS AND COMMITMENT:
BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES
PROJECT ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Gary Cameron & Jim Vanderwoerd

First Version May 1997

Revised December 1997

Revised July 1998

This research was funded under contract by the Ministries of Health, Education and Training, and Community and Social Services, Ontario. This report reflects the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Ministries.

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This report examines how seven Better Beginnings, Better Futures prevention projects were organized and managed from early 1991 until June 1995. It is the fifth report prepared by the Research Coordination Unit describing project development issues in the seven urban Better Beginnings, Better Futures demonstration sites.

This report includes more of an assessment and an interpretation of the Better Beginnings project experience than any of the four previous cross-site reports. This is partly because of the five-year time period covered, the many topics included in this report plus the more interpretative nature of the individual site reports on which this report was based. However, the cross-site report cannot capture the details of project organization and management at each site. Rather, it focuses on the similarities and differences between the sites, and the questions these patterns raise.

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES GUIDING PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

- community involvement and participation emerged ahead of all the other principles outlined in the Better Beginnings, Better Futures document “Integrated Model for Primary Prevention” as being a guiding principle for project development at all the sites
- another value that was clearly articulated by all but one site was the notion that the Better Beginnings projects represented “a new way of thinking and acting”

GOVERNING STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

- there were widely varying arrangements among the sites in their governing structures and processes:
 - membership on the sites’ main decision-making group ranged from 7 to 22

- resident membership on these groups ranged from 50% to 100%
- the sites faced two competing dynamics in the development of their governing structures and processes:
 - facilitating resident involvement and developing efficient organizations
 - ambivalence about whether their organizations should be autonomous or under the auspices of a sponsor agency

DECISION MAKING

- four sites (1, 2, 3, 5) reported using some type of consensus model of decision making; two sites (4, 7) reported more use of majority decision making; while one site (6) reported a mix of consensus and majority decision-making procedures

STAFFING PROFILES

- number of employees ranged from 15 to 26
- residents held 49% of all positions (57% of front-line positions, and 15% of management positions); however, the proportions of residents in all positions varied across sites from 31% to 75%

STAFFING

- a prominent characteristic of staff relations and management procedures at these demonstration sites has been the very substantial amount of time and effort invested into group processes between staff, between staff and managers, and among staff, managers and resident volunteers
- at most sites there was a strong concern with the personal development of staff and, in some instances, an emphasis on working “with the whole person” and a nurturing approach to staff support and growth
- hiring residents was described as a priority at every demonstration site, and was seen to be empowering both those employed as well as their communities, and increasing the economic resources available to the host communities

MANAGERIAL EXPERIENCES AND PROCESSES

- at several sites, Project Coordinators/Project Managers were described as being very important to project development, as well as being heavily burdened by the workload

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- two sites (2, 5) reported using team supervision methods and two sites (1, 7) reported using more formal, individual methods, while the remaining sites were somewhere in the middle
 - hiring a complement of staff was described in most site reports as being a huge and somewhat intimidating undertaking

HOST ORGANIZATION

- there was substantial variation in how much the demonstration projects were considered to be part of the host agencies; at some sites there was confusion about what authority rested with the project and what power the host agency held over the project
- in every case except for site 2, the host organization continued to hold legal and financial responsibility for the demonstration project

INDEPENDENCE AND SURVIVAL

- as of 1996, three sites (2, 5, 7) had incorporated, while the other sites were at various points on a continuum between autonomy and being integrated into the host organization as one of its projects
- except for sites 2 and 7, the site reports suggested that there was not a clear vision of what was wanted as a long-term organizational status at any of the demonstration sites

GENERAL THEMES AND PATTERNS

Important Differences and Similarities

- there are some broad similarities among sites' project organization and management, including a commitment to resident participation, strongly-held values to Better Beginnings, and an emphasis on processes
- despite these similarities, each site has created quite different approaches to project governance, involving residents, staffing, management, relations with the host agency, and project independence and long-term survival. Arrangements at any particular site cannot be assumed to be representative of organization and management for all of Better Beginnings, Better Futures

Commitment and Principled Approach

- paid and volunteer participants in all sites have been very committed to Better Beginnings, Better Futures and have invested substantial amounts of time and energy into creating these demonstration projects.

A Great Deal to Do

- the mandate originally given to the demonstration sites, combined with the additions to these original objectives added by the sites, led to project ambitions that appeared to be greater than what could have been completed within the time and with the resources available

Participatory Processes as the Defining Characteristic

- a central element of almost every demonstration site is the importance given to the processes of working with people or how people are to be involved in and cared for in the development of the projects

Varied Patterns of Staffing

- the Better Beginnings projects represent a high level of resident employment (49% of all positions, 57% of frontline positions) compared to most social service organizations
- the proportions of residents employed in frontline positions varied widely, from 31% to 75%
- five sites appeared to be allocating most of their program staff resources to one or two program approaches, while two seemed to have many different kinds of program workers engaged in a variety of program activities
- we draw two conclusions from these staffing patterns:
 1. It seems important to understand each demonstration project on its own terms before looking for patterns which may hold true for all of Better Beginnings.
 2. Considering the differences across sites in program staffing profiles, the central importance of participatory processes at many sites, and the expanded prevention mandate at some sites, we need to look closely at each site in order to understand how they are approaching prevention and in order to situate their efforts in relation to the original terms of reference for Better Beginnings, Better Futures and the prevention literature.

“Inbetween” Organizations

- two sites (2, 7) had articulated a definite long-term organizational status for themselves. In both cases, the desire was to be an autonomous, incorporated community agency focussing on prevention. However, only one site (2) was currently operating its prevention initiatives as a separate corporation. The rest of the sites appeared to exist in a state “inbetween” being a project under the auspices of a host organization and having autonomous control over their policies and programs. This “inbetweenness” (having unclear project autonomy without final administrative, financial or legal responsibilities) may not be satisfying or sustainable in the years ahead.

Concluding Remarks by the Authors

- participatory and empowering project creation and management processes were identified as fundamental to site organization and management as well as to good prevention at most sites. Better Beginnings, Better Futures has a great deal to teach others about these participatory and empowering processes.
- Better Beginnings, Better Futures is an original undertaking. It has evolved over time to take its specific form of project organization and management as well as prevention programming. We see a need to engage each site in explaining their overall approach to prevention as a guide to our understanding as researchers of the nature of Better Beginnings, Better Futures.
- this report highlights the need to consider each site separately before assuming there are standard approaches to project organization, management or programming for Better Beginnings, Better Futures. This is not a criticism. It is simply a recognition of the evolutionary character of Better Beginnings, Better Futures and the different community settings in which the projects have been created.