

**Better Beginnings, Better Futures:  
Resident Participation in the Project's  
Early Years**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Mark Pancer & Gary Cameron  
Better Beginnings Coordination Unit  
Centre for Social Welfare Studies  
Wilfrid Laurier University

May 1993

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.

# **BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES: RESIDENT PARTICIPATION**

## **Executive Summary**

This report documents the nature, extent and impacts of residents' involvement in the seven non-Native Better Beginnings Sites in the project's early stages, from January of 1990 until September 1992. The research contained in this report was based on field notes taken at each of the sites and interviews with professionals, staff and residents at each site.

Nature of Resident Participation. Residents participated in the project in a variety of ways:

- they sat on steering committees, sub-committees and program development work groups, in many instances chairing, co-chairing or facilitating meetings of these groups
- they worked as full- and part-time staff on the projects
- they organized special events and activities, and performed many of the tasks necessary for these events to be successful (e.g., child care, food preparation)
- they participated in staff selection and staff performance appraisals
- they made presentations to a variety of groups in the form of news conferences, speeches, and theatre productions to make people more aware of the project
- they organized the delivery of specific program components (e.g., clothing room, toy library, home visiting, drop-in centre)
- they helped with the maintenance of the grounds and premises
- they participated in residents' groups or committees
- they participated in lobbying and social action activities
- they provided translation assistance
- they assisted in fundraising

There was considerable variation, however, in the degree of participation in program administration (i.e., program steering and subcommittees) with three of the sites reporting large numbers of residents (between 30 and 40) involved, two of the sites report moderate numbers (3 to 10), and two of the sites report only minimal involvement of residents (3 or 4) on their key planning and decision-making groups. In addition, in the early stages of program development, certain groups within the community appeared to be under-represented on project committees: men, those who were physically more distant from the neighbourhood centres, higher income families, and ethnic or linguistic minorities.

Barriers to Participation. While most sites were quite successful in involving residents in many aspects of their program, a number of obstacles and barriers had to be overcome before residents could participate in a meaningful way. These included problems with the scheduling and location of meetings, difficulties in finding child care for those who were involved in meetings or other program activities, the lack of familiarity many residents had with meeting and decision-making procedures, the heavy demands placed on residents in sites with fewer residents serving on committees, partners' unhappiness with the amount of time the residents were devoting to Better Beginnings, and language and cultural barriers for certain groups within the community.

Strategies for Overcoming Barriers. A great deal of effort has been invested in overcoming these barriers. These have included the setting of concrete objectives concerning the proportion of steering and subcommittees which would be comprised of residents, the simplification of meeting and decision-making procedures, encouraging professionals to avoid "unnecessary jargon", encouraging residents to take on responsibilities such as chairing meetings and making reports from sub-committees, providing training and orientation to residents before they took on tasks such as attending or chairing meetings, increasing the numbers of residents serving on committees to reduce the workload for those who participate, holding meetings at times convenient to residents rather than during professional working hours, arranging for child care during meetings, providing help with transportation, and providing compensation for lost salary or revenue incurred in attending meetings. A number of strategies were also employed to increase the participation of different language and cultural groups. These included hiring staff from minority groups, having written publicity in different languages, developing programs specifically for these groups, using interpreters at meetings and events, working with associations and organizations which represent these groups in the community, and having separate organizational structures and program development groups that operate in different languages.

Relations Among Residents, Staff and Service-Providers. For almost all of the sites, residents and service providers developed a relationship of trust and respect only after some time and much hard work. However, the majority of sites reported a dramatic change in the relations between professionals and residents as time passed. The most important factor in improving these relations appeared to be the opportunity for professionals and residents to get to know each other as individuals by working together as equals to plan programs, or by sharing meals and celebrations. Another important aspect of this relationship was the balance of power between the two groups in project decision-making. In the early phases of most of the projects, agency representatives outnumbered residents, and were perceived to play a dominant role in decision-making. As time passed, residents in most of the sites began to feel that a more equal partnership was developing between themselves and the service providers. This was due to many factors: increases in the number of residents who sat on committees; open communication and attempts to resolve issues between the two groups; empowering of residents by having them participate in hiring staff, making presentations, and chairing meetings; the emergence of strong leaders among the residents. It should be noted, however, that in a couple of sites, and for some segments of the community, relations between residents and service providers were still somewhat uncomfortable by the end of the period covered by this report.

---

Relations between residents and program staff were, for the most part, quite positive, right from the time project staff were first hired. There were several possible reasons for this: residents were involved in hiring program staff, and perceived them to be working for the community; many of the staff hired in the various sites were members of the community, and were well known to many of the residents; the staff were generally friendly and approachable (a key factors in hiring them); residents had frequent contact with the staff, because they constitute the “front line” of the projects.

Impacts of Resident Involvement. The active involvement of residents in Better Beginnings Better Futures produced a number of positive outcomes, at the individual, program and community levels. At the individual level, participating residents experienced an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem, acquired new skills and knowledge, gained opportunities for jobs and additional income, made new friends and gained additional social support, obtained needed relief from boredom and child care responsibilities, felt less apprehensive about talking to social service providers when a problem arose, and also had better knowledge of how the various agencies and organizations in their communities operated. In addition, participating residents reported that their children also benefitted from their parents’ involvement; pride in their parents’ involvement was said to enhance the children’s self-esteem.

At the program level, residents were described as playing a key role in program development: they participated in hiring program staff; they helped make decisions about the location of neighbourhood centres and programs; they brought other residents out for programs and events; they provided a knowledge of what kinds of activities were possible in their communities and which were not. In addition, resident participation had a beneficial impact on local service providers, helping them to forge a more collaborative relationship with residents.

Many sites have also begun to see an impact at the community level, as well: some communities were reporting a “sense of community” developing in their neighbourhoods; people from different ethnic and income groups were interacting more freely; residents were beginning to take action for needed programs and services in their neighbourhoods and were working together to help themselves.

Conclusions. In general, the evidence indicates that residents who were involved in Better Beginnings, Better Futures experienced substantial personal growth as a result of their involvement. This was particularly true for residents who participated in the planning and development of programs as members of steering and working groups, who worked as program staff, or who had spoken on behalf of the project to outside audiences. The evidence also indicates substantial benefits for the programs provided at each site; when residents are involved in planning, managing and providing program activities, better programs result. While it is too early to gauge the effects of the project on the community level, there is some evidence that Better Beginnings communities are beginning to manifest a “sense of community” which didn’t previously exist. One of the greatest challenges for the future development of Better Beginnings, Better Futures will be to maintain and perhaps even increase the level of involvement that they have already attained.