



Focused Analysis of Unidos para la Familia



The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI) at Rutgers University - Camden produces and highlights research leading to sound public policy and practice, and with that as a foundation, aims to convene and engage stakeholders in making the connections across research, policy, and practice in support of Southern New Jersey residents. From 2013 to 2022, WRI has conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the Pascale Sykes Foundation's Whole Family Approach initiative across 12 nonprofit collaboratives in Southern New Jersey. The Whole Family Approach is a preventative, family-led strategy that provides adults and children tools to set, plan for, and achieve goals together. Collaborating agencies work together with families with two adult caregivers to develop long- and short-term goals to thrive. WRI's evaluation of the Whole Family Approach includes:

- A longitudinal, quasi-experimental evaluation of families' changes in forming healthy relationships, child wellbeing, and financial stability,
- A process evaluation to understand how the Whole Family Approach was implemented across collaboratives, including observations, interviews, focus groups, and document review, and
- Multiple focused evaluations that examine the impact of the Whole Family Approach in areas of interest including student social, emotional, and behavioral growth, service model delivery, family-community partner relationship development, and the cultural responsiveness of the Whole Family Approach.

Funded by the Pascale Sykes Foundation, Unidos para la Familia's (UPF) collaborative operates within the community to improve and to strengthen immigrant, working-class families by providing training and support to parents to promote child well-being and stronger family units through financial stability, improved resident status, and the development of community leaders.

WRI has evaluated UPF's work, processes, and results since 2013. The families within the UPF program develop lifelong skills thus transforming the lives of working, low-income families, by empowering all members of a family to work together to set goals, establish stability, and plan for the future they imagine while building social support networks through the work and outreach of the staff and collaborative partners.

Evaluation of programming within UPF shows significant improvements in several key areas. General health for adults and children, coping with stressful life events, and relationships improved over time, while financial hardships like borrowing money decreased over time. Since engaging with UPF, rates of attending school or participating in training programs increased over time.

UPF MODEL

The relationship between UPF and the families they serve is founded on the principle of communicating openly and honestly in a way that supports disclosure of culture, family dynamics, and personal experiences to meet the individual needs of every family and child. This process is organized through family advocates and family engagement models. Family advocates provide family coaching sessions free of charge. These family advocates provide families with ongoing support, social resources, goal setting techniques, encouragement for growth, and accountability. Family engagement encourages and empowers families to be their own champions, working toward case goals that they have helped to develop based on their specific family strengths, resources, and needs. Effective family engagement starts with establishing a culture in which families are essential partners. There has been a push for community agencies to provide evidence-based treatment and, in an effort to bring "best practices" to broader community-based groups.

There is evidence to suggest that minority families find group and community programs more attainable than traditional social services (Cunningham et al., 1995). When all members of the family are respected, and when their strengths, challenges, and cultural differences are recognized, this strengthens the relationship with the family advocate. This creates confidence in the process that increases the chances of successful outcomes.

Reports consistently identify community partnerships, school, family, parent, and community advocates as key elements of successful programs (Gil, 2019). The work that is done through UPF views families as the experts on their unique challenges and seeks to support them in developing solutions that are sustainable and encourage growth. This strengths-based approach empowers and encourages families to work within the community via UPF to utilize the best services and resources to ensure positive outcomes for families and the community alike.

METHODS

Since 2013, WRI has collected data from adult caregivers and adolescents in UPF. A longitudinal survey is used with questions that focus on areas critical to overall family well-being, including general health and well-being, financial health, relationships, social support, and education. Researchers survey families at the beginning of their involvement with UPF. Families are then surveyed at 6, 12, and 18 months to see if their involvement with UPF significantly improves their physical, social, and emotional outcomes, as well as their overall stability, all goals in which UPF outlines in their mission. Due to attrition and eligibility, approximately 15 Families were taken into account in the analysis, with a total of 29 individuals. The majority of primary adults were females; the majority of secondary adults were males. The age of adults ranged between 24-50 years old, with the majority reporting ages between 30 and 39 years old. Education levels vary, with 43% having a high school or GED equivalent; the adults who have some high school education, are working toward obtaining their degree with the assistance and support of UPF. 51.2% of adults have a fulltime job, 19.5% have a part-time job. The majority of adults reported working between 35-45 hours per week during the data collection periods.

RESULTS



EDUCATION ADVOCACY. Both adults' rates of attending school or participating in training programs increased over time, including but not limited to, GED Classes, ESL classes, Cumberland County College, Pathways Program, ACT Digital Photography, and more. The majority of adults reported that they found attending college and high school very important in order to successfully reach their life goals. Primary adults reported that they found graduating high school and college very important for their children in order to successfully reach their life goals.



GENERAL HEALTH. Both adults' ratings of general health perception increased over time. The majority of adults reported their health as good or excellent. At no time since engaging with UPF did any family go hungry. Primary adult's rate of smoking decreased over time.



FINANCE. Both adults' instances of borrowing money from friends or family to pay for bills decreased over time. Both adults' instances of borrowing money to pay for rent decreased over time. Borrowing money from friends or family decreased over time.



RELATIONSHIPS, SUPPORT, AND COMMUNITY. Both adults' coping abilities in stressful events was steady over time. Primary adults' perceptions of social and emotional support increased over time. Feelings of being loyal and having trust in their neighborhood increased overtime for both adults. Overtime both adults were both better able to make it through stressful events. Both adults identified their relationship with the children had increased from a good relationship to excellent relationship overtime.

CONCLUSION

There are many factors that influence success within collaboratives such as UPF. Through the holistic system that UPF has employed, there is a level of complexity in the widespread network of resources, staff, and targeted services available to families. At the same time, there is also a straightforward, caring nature in the relationship cultivated by family advocates with families and their ability to match their needs. Family advocates plan and implement family-specific programs aimed at building adults' capacity to support education advocacy, health and wellness, financial stability, and community relationships. UPF family advocates reduce barriers that interfere with engagement while developing partnerships among community members. The staff empowers and provides culturally sensitive services and resources that are responsive to each family's needs, and families are able to direct their involvement in productive and healthy outlets. UPF's successful implementation embraces family participation and engagement, focuses on family strengths and assets, finance strategy, health and wellness resources, and educational advocacy. Rather than using a single tool, UPF's comprehensive model represents a mindset and approach that carries extensive long term benefits for families through culturally sensitive services.

REFERENCES

- Cunningham, C. E., Bremner, R., & Boyle, M. (1995). Large group community-based parenting programs for families of preschoolers at risk for disruptive behavior disorders: Utilization, cost-effectiveness, and outcome. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 36, 1141-1159
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