

THEory into ACTion

A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice

Community Psychology's Role in Preserving Culture and Improving Life

By Michael Lemke

One of the strengths of Community Psychology is its wide-reaching applicability. The skills, tools, and values held by many practicing Community Psychologists allow for fruitful engagement and collaboration with any number of communities, regardless of cultural background. The work of Dr. Jordan Lewis with the Denali Center in Fairbanks, Alaska is a prime example of the broad usefulness of Community Psychology approaches. For nearly two years now, Dr. Lewis has worked with the Denali Center, which is a long-term care facility with a high proportion of Alaska Native residents. Among these Alaska Natives are elders from various tribal and rural communities across the entire state.

Because of the rich cultural heritage among residents of the Denali Center, Dr. Lewis has worked with staff to collect and digitize stories, videos, documentaries, and languages to make available for Alaska Native residents. In an effort to meet the technological demand for this work, he used funds provided through the SCRA Mini-Grant program to purchase vital technology, including a large touch-screen desktop computer that is used to store the digital materials collected through this project. Soon these materials will be sorted and placed in folders based on Alaska Native cultural group on this computer, thus allowing residents to engage the stories, videos, songs, and live stream cultural activities of their group. These partners are also developing a manual consisting of cultural protocols, native food recipes, and cultural

information which will be used both in the skilled nursing facility and in other facilities in the state which serve Native elders. This collaboration continues to work on other projects aimed at enhancing the availability of cultural resources at the Denali Center as well.

Vital to the success of projects initiated by this collaboration are the use of Community Psychology principles and tools, including being open to true collaboration, sharing ideas, and using a community-based participatory research framework. The approach taken by Dr. Lewis includes a healthy dose of humility, as he believes that he can learn as much from his community partners as they can learn from him, as well as that executing a successful project relies on involving stakeholders who are the most affected by the project, as they best understand their own contexts and communities. Finally, results are always brought back to the community to solicit their input and feedback, and findings are never presented without first being both approved by and reflective of the communities and their elders to which they pertain.

Through this collaborative effort, the partners involved on this project have developed a “trusting and open working relationship,” where staff and the social worker at the Denali Center have come to trust him and seek his assistance on other projects. It is not that this work is without difficulties, however. One challenge for Dr. Lewis is disengagement, which is mitigated in this collaboration through teaching Community Psychology skills to community partners and showing them how to develop sustainability in a project. Another major challenge is finding the time, as often times stakeholders may be extremely busy, thus presenting a challenge in keeping the project moving forward. This is mitigated by helping community partners to prioritize needs in the hopes of keeping the momentum of these projects going forward.

The success of this partnership has been noteworthy, including being published in the Provider Magazine and presented at the Annual Tribal Long Term Care Conference in Denver.

However, for Dr. Lewis, what is most fulfilling is being able to witness tribal communities successfully applying what they have learned from this collaboration to take action, such as securing grants and developing new programs or services. He truly believes it is an honor for him to have the opportunity to work with community partners who are healthy, dedicated, and engaged – three attributes that all Community Psychologists themselves desire. Perhaps just as important, he has come to value the relationships that have emerged from this work, finding great joy in returning to these communities and sharing in the excitement of these reunions. “It is an incredible feeling to see them smile and engage you in questions and dialogue about the project,” says Dr. Lewis, “and you feel they trust you a little more with their stories and experiences.”

This is part of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.