

Oregon Opportunity Network Newsletter

October, 2009

Capacity Matters – Part 5

Bienestar, “Putting Resident Services Above the Line”

Capturing the full impact of nonprofit community development organizations is often hard to measure. Indicators such as the size of an organization’s rental portfolio or number of units developed are the most common way their success is evaluated. It is more difficult and uncommon to measure the positive outcomes that result from their grass-roots nature and these nonprofits’ positioning within their communities. Arising from within their communities, they are connected to and in tune with, community needs. When the capacity and expertise to quickly respond to need and opportunity is added, extraordinary things can happen. Many of the most important accomplishments of Oregon ON’s membership result because of their ability to respond quickly to circumstances in their communities as they arise.

For the next 9 months, Oregon ON will be running a series of feature articles that highlight the many ways that community based nonprofit capacity strengthens and builds communities.



The following is an interview with Karen Shawcross, Executive Director of Bienestar, about the explosion in services and capacity building they have pursued in the past two years.

Over the past two years we've been ramping up resident services programs like crazy for kids and adults, and we're having to increase our capacity and raise new funds to support them, because of the way our projects are funded.

We have 10 properties with 458 units, 9 in Washington County, and one in Columbia County. While five are funded through partnerships, five properties are funded by government Rural Development programs, which don't let you take any money out for resident services programs at all. And with tax credit funded properties, the cash flow is so poor, and resident services funding is way down in the waterfall provisions of the partnership agreements. This is something Oregon ON has been talking about with funders and legislators, putting resident services 'above the line' [building resident services into funding structures], and badly needed by our industry.

In 2007 we had one adult program funded by the United Way, the Promotores program, and one project called Listos for youth funded through Work Systems through a Department of Labor grant.

Promotores are peer leaders, community connectors. They are paid a small stipend because we demand a lot of them; they make 40 home visits annually within their apartment communities, identify needs and provide info and referrals on resources families need. They meet once a week, and have two coordinators that coach and mentor them; they are trained like many outreach social workers are on community resources. For example, if a family is having legal troubles, the Promotores know how to refer them to Legal Aid, or they can get them connected with Essential Health Clinic at the Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center. They are our legs and arms and eyes and ears into the community. We have built, through them, trust and credibility with residents, and guaranteed high participation in the on-site resident services we offer.

But both the Promotores and Listos programs were funded through three-year grants, and they ended in 2008. We conducted a door-to-door resident survey in 2007 with help from our Promotores (we had about 8 of them at the time), and they got 322 in-depth surveys from families that identified program priorities, which turned out mostly to be around educational needs. In response, we gradually established a whole suite of programs for adults: ESL classes, GED classes, computer classes both basic and intermediate, financial literacy training that goes for 3 years basic to intermediate, then in the third year moves to a homeownership track or a small business track linked to an Individual Development Account program. We began a community gardens program, a free tax prep program, and this year added a job club and an emergency cash assistance program. We have special events and presentations, and an organic farming microenterprise program with Adelante Mujeres.

Most of the families identified as their top priority their kids' success in school. The parents are 98% Latino, most are immigrants, most have a 7th grade education, and most are monolingual in Spanish, and therefore it's difficult for them to help their kids succeed in school. So we run three afterschool homework clubs, science clubs, a summer reading program and summer lunch, Explorador Camp with the Audubon Society, Financial Fitness for Life program, and special events and projects like Zoo to You and Kids on the Block. We have a basketball club, and in spring we'll start a soccer club.

Starting next week is a program for pre-teen girls, called Adelante Chicas, through a partnership with Adelante Mujeres.

We are also introducing a new mental health services program, because families who have increasing desperation from being laid off and other economic problems, are suffering from depression, anxiety, and family problems. We'll be hiring a bicultural, bilingual Masters in Counseling professional trained in cognitive behavioral therapy. In Washington County, there are very scarce resources for people without insurance, and even with insurance, finding a bilingual and bicultural counselor is challenging.

All those programs cost a lot of money! We are fortunate this year to have a big portion of our adult programs funded by a new three-year United Way grant, but all the other programs, we have to find funding for.

Over the past year and half we have written 83 grant applications; about 1/3 get funded, 1/3 get declined, and a 1/3 are pending. They range in size from \$350 for our summer lunch program, to yesterday, we got word we are being awarded a Meyer Memorial Trust grant for \$100,000 in unrestricted operating funds – and we had asked for \$50,000! It's unbelievable! It's early Christmas in Hillsboro! We are so relieved.

I think we have been successful in fundraising because we haven't gone to grantors for 27 years. We were self-supporting through developer fees, and we didn't have as many programs. The MMT grant is a bridge grant to keep our doors open until we can get back into developing housing and collect those fees again.

I think we've also been successful because we have cobbled grants together from many places: foundations, corporations and individuals. For example, we got a Collins Foundation grant to support our youth programs, The Standard supported our summer reading program, and we went to the Hardy Plant Society for our garden program

We accomplish these programs with a resident services staff of 3.5 FTE, volunteers and partners. We've been very fortunate to have received grant funds, but they require enormous time resources to obtain and they are time-limited. Having grant-funded staff is not the best long-term solution for effective management practices, and sustainable above-the-line funding would mitigate this. A sustainable solution would be to build them into property operating budgets.

In these challenging economic times, the need for resident services programs are more critical than ever. Our programs are helping to keep the families in their housing with adequate food and clothing as well as educational programs to help them move to self-sufficiency. Where resident services programs are built into operating expenses we can build capacity and make them sustainable over time. This is how we will achieve our mission to build housing, hope and futures for the well-being of working families.