

POSSIBILITIES: NEIGHBORS IN ACTION

(Formerly FAMILIES FIRST!)

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Families First! (FF!) is an effort in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area to improve the lives of residents by increasing the capacity for individual, family and neighborhood self-sufficiency. The project is attempting to do this by helping to build bridges between neighbors, blocks and neighborhoods and by linking neighborhoods to resources and policymakers.

Families First! is organizing around the dual premise that everybody has innate abilities and assets that can be developed, and that families are the infrastructure of their communities and need to be strengthened. Families First! defines families as people connected by caring; families can be small groups or entire neighborhoods. “We know that the best prevention [for communities] is finding people’s positive assets and developing those assets,” says Linda Larason, the acting coordinator of FF!.

There are four parts to the framework of Families First!:

- Clusters are made up of multiple neighborhoods and have populations of 12,000 to 15,000 people. The three county area including Oklahoma City has been divided into 22 Clusters. Volunteer leadership and a paid coordinator will be recruited from within each Cluster.
- Capacity-Building. FF! will partner with cluster residents to do their own assessments, analysis, presentations, prioritizing, planning and action steps that will enable residents to affect the future of their neighborhoods.
- The Resource Team is comprised of persons with linkages to governmental and non-profit human service delivery systems. Their purpose is to help the cluster gain entry and access to the system of services in the larger community in the areas of health, education, housing, criminal justice, economic development and the arts.
- Community Partners are corporations, small businesses, universities/colleges,

church coalitions, and/or hospitals/health care providers that serve as voluntary resources for the cluster. Oklahoma City’s four major hospitals are serving as anchor community partners for the initial clusters.

Families First! is a project of the Community Council of Central Oklahoma and is one of 12 initiatives to emerge from Central Oklahoma 2020, a broad-based region-wide planning effort. Families First! is modeled on The Atlanta Project, founded in 1991 by former President Jimmy Carter. The Atlanta Project has coordinators working in each of

meetings they identified some key areas to work on including economic development and neighborhood safety.

They are now working to expand both the number and diversity of people involved in their efforts. According to Linda Larason, acting coordinator of Families First!, they are trying “to reach outside of the already identified leadership in areas and reach out to untapped leaders.”

One early achievement of the Near Northwest Neighbors was the creation of the Rolling Thunder Bike program. This program for disadvantaged kids is managed by community leaders but run completely by the youth participants. The program meets in Paseo at the home of a local resident. Kids learn bike safety and repair and also develop respect for each other, according to Deb Johnson of World Neighbors. They also receive free bike helmets for participating in the program. This program is entirely funded by the community, with much of the money having been raised at the community festival. “One of the benefits of this program is that the youth are seeing a positive adult influence,” says Johnson.

Using community development techniques from developing nations

Families First! is working in partnership with World Neighbors, an Oklahoma City-based organization that works on grassroots community development overseas. In Oklahoma, the partnership is designing a participatory community development project using many of the same techniques that have been used in other countries. A major part of the participatory project design is teaching problem analysis—helping people look closely at symptoms and root causes of problems. Families First!, along with World Neighbors personnel and local community development professionals, is developing a comprehensive Capacity-Building Training Manual for use in the clusters. Trainers, to be selected by Families First!, will work in teams of one skilled facilitator and one cluster resident.

Deb Johnson, the development communication coordinator for World Neighbors who is working with Families First! explains the benefits of grassroots community development: “Once the community members become organized and know what they want and need they can tap into resources from all over the place. We have started to pull these five neighborhoods into a community. We don’t really have community feelings; people shut their doors. We are starting to break down those barriers, getting people

Possibilities Neighbors in Action



A completed “tortilla” diagram is now ready for “interviewing” by the participants, the next step in the process of analyzing institutional relationships.

its 20 clusters, has registered over 100,000 volunteers and has formed partnerships between clusters and 20 major corporations and 18 colleges and universities.

Working with the community

Near Northwest Neighbors, the first cluster, was established around the Paseo neighborhood of Oklahoma City in June 1995. The core group, composed of 15 community leaders from the five initial neighborhoods, organized a cultural festival which took place at a local middle school on August 1. Although there was a heavy rainstorm, 250 people came to the festival. They followed the festival with community-wide planning events on August 3 and 5, but the turnout at these events was lower than they had hoped. At their community

out talking to people they hadn't met before."

Funding

Families First! has received a Presbyterian Health Foundation grant of \$50,000 to fully fund the work with World Neighbors in the first cluster. FF! has a grant pending with the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention of the Department of Health and Human Services for \$300,000 per year for three years. If received, the grant will focus on youth development within the Families First! target area.

The rest of the financial support for FF! will be coming from corporations. FF! is seeking three year funding commitments from corporations and they are getting that from most of the companies that are contributing. They are close to reaching their goal for 1995 for corporate contributions. This will make it easier for FF! to fundraise from other sources in the future because they will only have to ask each corporation for money every three years.

Connecting people to human resources

Linda Larason explains one way that FF! will be working to bring human services closer to the neighborhoods: "In the area where we are working right now there is a lot of substance abuse. Three treatment programs are spread all over town but aren't accessible. We would like to see accomplished a 'one stop shop' for services, a family resource center in local neighborhoods. Then they wouldn't have to negotiate the maze of services."

Once Clusters are organized, the role of Families First! in relation to organized Clusters will be to serve as a bridge between human service agencies and the Clusters and to help the Clusters access the Community Partners and Resource Team.

Learning how to work with the community

One of the greatest challenges for Families First! has been how to interact with the neighborhood groups that are part of the program. "We're trying to steer them and provide guidance without taking over the project," says Linda Larason. She feels that Families First! did not explain clearly enough to people in the first cluster what their mission is and what grassroots community development is all about. She explained that they had a day-long community planning session after the cultural festival, but that the turnout was much lower than hoped for. The staff of Families First! were afraid that this might happen but they didn't want to seem like they were steering the

How to Get in Touch with Possibilities: Neighbors in Action (formerly Families First!)

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Scope: Oklahoma City metropolitan area

Inception Date: 1995

Participants: Neighborhood residents, service providers

Project type: Process-oriented planning, comprehensive community development

Methods used: Grassroots community development

Lessons learned: For a new project to be successful, it is important to constantly go back and assess what worked, what didn't work and why.

community groups. "We learned that sometimes we should share our experiences with them and not steer entirely away from providing direction. That is a real fine line to walk and will always be a fine line to walk because we don't want them to look at us for direction."

Families First! doesn't want participating groups to think of themselves as Families First! groups but to have their own identity and their own name. "We bent over backwards initially to avoid looking like we were imposing an agenda on the neighborhoods and in doing so did not articulate well the Families First! philosophy and purpose," says Linda Larason. "That was confusing to people. It made it more difficult to explain. We will not do that again. We do have a purpose and we do have a philosophy. We will state that up front and they can decide whether they want to participate."

Linda Larason says that one of the key elements to the success thus far of Families First! is that the idea came out of Central Oklahoma 2020, a regional visioning process, "I think the fact that it came out of the community planning process that involved a broad cross section of people from social

service providers and government people to community volunteers to business leaders, that it evolved from that group of people gave it legitimacy even though it was a brand new idea."

– *Jobs & Environment Campaign*



UPDATE

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Families First!, renamed "Possibilities: Neighbors in Action," has begun to work cooperatively with other organizations in order to address common problems. After receiving funding from the Center for Substance Abuse, it hired a full-time outreach worker and joined with Starting Right, a drug prevention program aimed at middle school children, and members of the World Neighbors staff on a neighborhood drug program. Because the racial and ethnic diversity of the outreach group mirrors that of the community, they have successfully implemented "on the street" efforts to build trust and create common ground in the target areas.

The major thrust of Neighbors in Action activities has been to involve the disenfranchised in neighborhood revitalization. Start-up projects include a community newspaper published by youth and a successful chess club for middle school children. An insurance company executive has given employees leave time to tutor elementary school children in the target areas. Residents have also initiated projects, including English as a Second Language classes, percussion lessons, and ethnic cooking classes. These activities are important for connecting different ethnic and racial groups.

Neighbors in Action stresses that residents should lead and take credit for activities. They have learned that the original target areas were too large for manageable projects and that a team approach would be important for support and creative ideas. Because racism and distrust block progress, multicultural and/or intergenerational projects are necessary to understand the problems and strengths of diversity. Neighbors in Action feels that envisioning a better future is the first step to achieving one. Therefore, volunteers and target area residents developed benchmarks. The list includes economic development, increased tolerance, new leadership, better schools, and the end of "helplessness."

– *CONCERN, Inc.*