



A COMMUNITY RESPONDS: ON THE WAY TOWARD CULTURAL COMPETENCE

It did not take the release of the data from the 2000 Census for citizens of Guilford County, North Carolina to become aware of the increasing diversity of our community. In a grocery store anywhere in the county one will hear multiple languages spoken. On a visit to the reception areas of any of our human service agencies, one will see people representative of many nationalities. The public schools report that more than 80 different languages are native to the children enrolled throughout our educational system. Human service providers and educators are challenged to find the way to best meet the needs of our increasingly diverse population. Becoming culturally competent is critically important.

Guilford County has a rich and deep history as a Southern community attempting to address issues of social justice. Originally settled by the Presbyterians and the Quakers, the Underground Railroad, transporting the slaves traveling north to freedom, passed through our county, with the Quakers taking an active role in assisting the slaves in their travels. At our local Historical Museum is one of the original covered wagons with the false bottom that carried the slaves to freedom. Also, the Woolworth's store in downtown Greensboro, the largest city in the county, was the site of the first sit-ins, which were an important and integral part of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Throughout the history of this county, addressing concerns of racial and social equity has been a part of the community fabric.

In spite of this history, the traditional patriarchal and hierarchical service delivery system has been permeated with issues of racism and prejudice. A disproportionate number of African American youth are placed in foster care, suspended from schools, and left



without consistent health care. In recent years there has been increasing commitment among community leaders to address institutional racism and its impact on our human service delivery systems. Addressing these deep, continuing issues—as well as issues related to the recent growth in immigrant and refugee populations—has been significant in highlighting the importance of changing our service systems in order to better meet family needs. For

example, the stress placed on the service system for translation services has been one small step in raising the awareness of the need for more cultural understanding.

As a site for the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families grant awarded to North Carolina, the community human service system in Guilford County, North Carolina, has committed to the System of Care philosophy by incorporating the core values into the service system. As we strive to build a community-based system that provides family centered services, we increasingly recognize cultural competency as the central core value. Truly we must be culturally competent in order to be family-centered!

In Guilford County, a task force, representative of the agencies on the Community Collaborative and other members of our community, has been working for the past year and a half to develop a training plan that can help us become more culturally competent in our work with families and children. The site received technical assistance from the state office administering the grant in the development of a cultural competency training plan. After much discussion among the task force members, it was determined that in order for real change to occur

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within our service systems, we must begin at the top of our organizations, gain commitment through awareness of need, and from there develop appropriate training opportunities for frontline staff members.

We took the first step in our plan with meetings to begin learning about the diversity of Guilford County's population. Family members receiving services met together with the management and leadership teams of the Departments of Social Service, Public Health, Guilford County Schools, Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Guilford Center Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Agency, Family Services of the Piedmont and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Center for the Study of Social Issues, and the Center for New North Carolinians/ACCESS. The large meeting room was packed with the directors of each agency and their respective leadership teams, family members dressed in native costume, and faculty from the university. The task force was thrilled at the prospect of our making an impact on our community's human service systems.

As people arrived, they were greeted with coffee, tea, and fruit juices, served with pastries of Greece, the Sudan, Vietnam, and Eastern Europe. The meeting opened with African drumming followed by "good morning" greetings from community citizens representing twelve different nationalities.

The purpose of our gathering was quickly defined, using headlines from the morning paper: "Census Figures Reveal Greater Diversity than Expected." Who would have thought that we could host such a significant meeting and have the local paper's lead story confirm the importance of our work? Putting this increasing diversity into context, a brief historical perspective on the settlement of our region by immigrant and refugee groups was presented. It was explained why people had left their native lands to seek freedom and opportunity. This was compared and contrasted with how people had once been treated in this country and in our county. Although it is wonderful to have community support in resettlement, many stories were recounted of incidents when language barriers and misunderstandings of culture resulted in inappropriate services or misdiagnosis for people seeking services. Also presented was the picture of our county from a demographic perspective and how it has changed over the past 10 years. The Director of the Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs in the Office of the Governor, shared information on the legal protections for immigrants and refugees and the responsibility of service providers to meet the needs of these new citizens. People

left the meeting informed and energized about the importance and purpose of our striving to be more culturally competent.

Our next step was to learn about examples around the country of service organizations that have incorporated policies and procedures that institutionalize cultural competency. We were searching for ways to increase the expectation of personnel that cultural competency was a core value of our human service organizations. What organizations, with similar purposes, had incorporated this expectation into their organizational structure so that it was incorporated "without question"? How should this be addressed in hiring practices, staff evaluations, and continuous staff development and training? How can we incorporate cultural competency into the "soul" of our organizations so that barriers to services do not exist because of language or prejudice?

We identified the University of Chicago Medical System as an organization that has made much progress in this area. They have a process for all job applicants that includes a video that describes how the organization emphasizes the importance of respect for the culture of every person, both consumers and staff. Every applicant views this video before deciding to apply for a position, as buy in to this perspective is expected for every employee. This is followed by an interview that includes questions that facilitate the candidate's reflection on cultural sensitivity. Additionally, staff evaluations and reviews include this component, as every job description includes cultural competency.

We were so pleased to identify this organization as a resource and invited a representative to come to Guilford County and present their practices to human resource personnel in our various agencies. Opportunity was provided for in depth exploration of the ways the University of Chicago Medical System had been successful in the implementation of policies and procedures that promote and support cultural competency.

This workshop led to the request that the internal diversity teams within each organization become linked in order to discuss further ideas that are applicable to our community. A series of networking meetings between community agencies encouraged the exchange of ideas, strategies, and training resources, and provided opportunities for peer support for leaders addressing cultural competency within agencies. Often, this work can be extremely difficult, as we ask ourselves and our coworkers to make profound examinations of our behaviors and actions. The peer support, the opportunity

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to discuss these challenges candidly, and the opportunity to feel connected with others facing similar situations have helped a great deal as agency leaders confront these challenges.

It was determined that all agencies would benefit from workshops that addressed cultural practices of specific ethnic groups. Utilizing the Center for New North Carolinians and various ethnic organizations throughout the community, persons from East Asian, Central American, and Central African countries joined together to present a series of workshops on their specific ethnic and cultural traditions and shared how and why they had come to our community. These workshops deepened our understanding of their specific cultures and increased awareness.

With this increased awareness of individual cultures, every person was given the opportunity to examine his or her own cultural heritage. Human service providers reflected on why their family traditions had been adopted and marveled at the great diversity among themselves in holiday celebrations, traditional foods, and music preferences. Once people gained comfort in discussing their own cultural heritage, many began hosting a series of potluck lunches and “talk times” among staff to share their own cultural practices. Informal presentations of music and exchange of literature reflective of individual cultural heritages were encouraged. After work, staff visited ethnic grocery stores and restaurants and attended movies representative of

particular cultures, such as *Monsoon Wedding*. Staff members were increasingly comfortable talking about cultural differences among themselves and consumers began to witness increased cultural awareness.

Throughout the task force’s work, family members have provided leadership to the human service providers in deepening understanding of the importance of respecting the uniqueness of each family’s individual culture. Although we had systematically addressed learning more about cultural groups, addressed language barriers inhibiting quality service delivery, and begun more selfexamination of personal prejudice, family members continually reminded us that response to a family in a culturally sensitive manner is more than a respectful response for a particular ethnic group’s cultural practices. Being culturally competent is being respectful of each individual, her values and beliefs, and her traditions and practices, and then supporting these in all interactions with the family.

We are on the way toward cultural competence... a long way from achieving it, but traveling the road together to deepen understanding.

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