2001

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Recommended Citation
Rosmann, Michael, "Building Hope in the Heartland: a training program" (2001). Leopold Center Completed Grant Reports. 170.
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/leopold_grantreports/170

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Building Hope in the Heartland: a training program

Abstract
Funding was used to help sponsor a workshop, "Building Hope in the Heartland", on March 14, 2000, in Dubuque, Iowa. Attendees included parish nurses, social workers, and pastoral counselors.

Keywords
Human systems, demographics and beginning farmer programs

Disciplines
Public Health Education and Promotion
Abstract: Funding was used to help sponsor a workshop, "Building Hope in the Heartland", on March 14, 2000, in Dubuque, Iowa. Attendees included parish nurses, social workers, and pastoral counselors.

Activities funded

At their meeting in September 1999, the Leopold Center Advisory Board expressed concern about the accelerating agricultural financial crisis and the associated stresses on the farmers and their families. The board asked the staff to take some modest steps to relieve the situation, using the director’s discretionary funds.

"Building Hope in the Heartland" was one of the two efforts selected to receive funding. The training session for parish nurses, clergy, and others interested in assisting rural church congregations and farming communities was held on March 14, 2000. The program was intended to help participants understand how the farm crisis affects individuals, families, and rural communities. Presenters stressed the principles of empowerment, which participants could take back to their local areas and share with individuals or groups. Attendees practiced setting up empowerment committees and developing action plans.

The program, with 31 participants, was held in conjunction with the Rural Ministry Conference sponsored by the Center for Theology and Land of Wartburg Seminary and the University of Dubuque Seminary. This seminar was coordinated by the Sharing Help Awareness United Network, SHAUN. (SHAUN is a nonprofit organization, headquartered at Harlan, which provides peer support and professional counseling to farm families dealing farming-related injuries, fatalities, and stress.) Continuing education credit was offered to parish nurses, social workers, and one pastoral counselor. Center funds were used to support honoraria for parish nurses and others attending.

The seminar was videotaped and can be viewed by persons who were not able to attend the day’s session. (Copies are available from the Center for Theology and the Land.) Reverend Sarai Beck made a brief presentation about the Ecumenical Ministries of Iowa, which also is conducting programs to help farm families cope with the tensions created by the rapidly changing agricultural economy.

Leopold Center funds were used to provide scholarships for some of the parish nurses, to videotape the sessions, and to reimburse speakers that included including a western Iowa farm couple who talked about battling through the times of financial and personal stress.

Results and discussion

Those who attended the workshop were asked to complete an evaluation form, and nearly all responses were very positive. Two months after the conference, Michael Rosmann sent out a follow-up message that asked how the attendees had applied the techniques they learned in the March workshop. The limited number of responses indicated that various activities were being tried, but with mixed success.
As a result of the Leopold Center contributions and encouragement to the participants and sponsors, other actions have been initiated to help farmers cope with the latest economic downturn:

- SHAUN and the Ecumenical Ministries of Iowa have agreed to collaborate on a three-year rural outreach grant to help improve networking and support services in rural communities,
- The Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) is helping to sponsor training for mental health professionals and lay outreach workers in Iowa farm communities;
- SHAUN is coordinating the training, with assistance from the Iowa Concern Hotline, ISU Extension, and Ecumenical Ministries of Iowa,
- An agricultural mental health curriculum is being developed, in conjunction with the National Association for Rural Mental Health, to train mental health professionals and lay outreach workers in Iowa on a pilot basis in early 2001, and
- Efforts are underway to develop a national agricultural mental health support system for all food producers, with backing from numerous agricultural and psychological service agencies.