

Lava Hot Springs study circles increase awareness of poverty

The Situation

Lava Hot Springs, like many other small rural Idaho communities suffers from a high rate of poverty amongst its residents. With a population of 521 and a poverty rate of 25.1% Lava Hot Springs has many economic challenges. The child poverty rate is 32.5% and the median household income is \$23,472 making it difficult for many of these families to provide the basic necessities. However, poverty in a community is not only monetary, it can mean lack of opportunity and facilities to allow the community to grow.

To help small communities like Lava Hot Springs address the issue of poverty, the University of Idaho has partnered with the Northwest Area Foundation to create "Horizons." This partnership has increased civic engagement and helped communities across the northwest learn how to help their members thrive. The first phase of this program is an opportunity for community members to participate in a poverty awareness program called Study Circles.

Our Response

Horizons is a program designed to increase civic engagement by developing leadership skills and empowering members of small rural communities. These communities must meet the criteria set by the Northwest Area Foundation of a population of 5,000 or less and a poverty rate above 10%.

Lava Hot Springs was one of 15 communities in southern Idaho to participate in the Everyday Democracy's program, "Thriving Communities: Working Together to Move from Poverty to Prosperity for All."

Missy Cummins, University of Idaho Extension Educator serves as the Community Coach for Lava Hot Springs. She has guided the community through the



Members of the Lava Hot Springs community participate in Leadership Plenty, the second phase of the Horizons program.

required four phases of the program. These phases are Study Circles, Leadership Plenty training, Community Visioning, and Community Action to Reduce Poverty. The program started in August 2008 and will continue through April 2009.

Program Outcomes

Study Circles: Six members of Lava Hot Springs were trained facilitators that led three study circle groups of 8-12 community members each. Twenty-six community members participated in these Study Circles.

In the Study Circle meetings, participants discussed the following five topics:

- How are we connected to our community and to poverty?
- What does poverty look like here?
- Why is there poverty in our community?

- Reaching our vision to reduce poverty.
- Moving to action.

Increase in understanding of poverty: Participants in the study circles completed before and after surveys measuring community members' knowledge and understanding of poverty before and after participating in study circles. Poverty definition was discussed by each of the study circles. Participants determined that poverty is not limited to a lack of money but rather an inability to thrive. This could mean few ways to keep families connected to the community, few opportunities for youth to engage with the community or even not seeing the community through the eyes of an outsider coming into the community.

The survey results show a substantial increase in knowledge of poverty by study circle participants as well as an increase in their desire to help reduce poverty in this community. One study circle participant said, "(Through the study circles) I learned more about how extensive the poverty is in Lava and felt moved to find a way to be part of the solution. It fostered discussion and openness and honesty which brings everyone one step closer to seeing clearly, defining and acting responsibly."

According to the survey results, 80.8% of participants increased their knowledge of poverty; 61.5% have already taken action to reduce poverty; 42.3% are very likely to take individual action in the future to reduce poverty; 46.2% are very likely in the future to join community action to reduce poverty and 42.3% are very likely in the future to support policies to reduce poverty. Many members of the community have stepped up to organize a youth mentoring program empowering youth and develop a community resource guide giving community members names of people with specific skills.

Community Action Forum: A conclusion of the Study Circles was a small group discussion. Eighteen members of the study circles came together to further discuss and prioritize potential community items. At this forum community members identified four action items they wanted to work on. Those items were a community resource list, mentoring program for their youth, electronic bulletin board, and no and low income housing. Mike Vice, the chairman of the eight member Steering Committee is moving the community forward to complete these projects over the next three to five years.

The Future

Members of Lava Hot Springs are in the final phase of the Horizons Program, "Community Action to Reduce Poverty." They have recently created three action teams that are working to increase the community's ability to thrive. These action teams are community resources, communication, and youth

support. They are working on creating a website for Lava Hot Springs locals to inform each other of opportunities within the community, a river walk, and a community garden.

Communities who complete the four phases of the Horizons Program can expect to benefit in the following ways:

- Increase in leadership skills amongst its community members;
- Increase of community organization communication and networking;
- Increase in economic development;
- \$10,000 for training, technical assistance and program development.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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