Idaho Horizons communities increase in knowledge of poverty and take action

The Situation
Rural Idaho communities are often faced with the challenge of high poverty resulting from declining population, economic decline, and the lack of motivation to do something about it. In many cases there is a poverty of opportunities to change the trajectory of the community.

To address this situation, the University of Idaho Extension partnered with the Northwest Area Foundation to address the issues of poverty and to build leadership capacity within 15 rural Idaho communities. To qualify for the program the community’s population had to be under 5,000 and their poverty rate according to the 2000 census had to be at least 10%. Communities participating in the program include: Albion, American Falls, Ashton, Butte County communities, Challis, Eden, Georgetown, Hazelton, Heyburn, Lava Hot Springs, Lincoln County communities, Menan, Ririe, Roberts, and Salmon.

Our Response
The first phase of the 18 month Horizons program included participation in Everyday Democracy’s dialogue-to-change program, “Thriving Communities working together to move from poverty to prosperity for all.” The train the trainer model was used as the community coaches were trained by Everyday Democracy in the community dialogue process also known as the Study Circles. The coaches went back to their communities and trained 125 community members in how to facilitate community conversations. From October - December 2008, at least 3 small groups of 10 people in each community met for 10 hours to discuss poverty.

Topics included:
- How are we connected to our community and to poverty?
- What does poverty look like?
- Why is there poverty in our community?
- Reaching our vision and reducing poverty.
- Moving to action.

Program Outcomes
Eight hundred forty four community residents participated in Study Circles. Participants found this process to be very helpful in gaining an understanding about their community and each other. “Study circles was an exciting entry into the Horizons Program. Getting people to talk about the community in a productive way was a huge step in identifying issues.”
In one of the study circles one participant stated, “The tone in the room changed some when one young woman described her struggle as a young mom with children who had disabili-
ies.” Through spending time together and focusing on pov-
erty, participants were motivated to work together to provide opportunities for everyone to thrive. In the Horizons communities, 65.9% of the study circles participants have already taken action to reduce poverty.

Post program survey data measured the participants’ knowl-
edge and understanding of poverty before and after particip-
ating in study circles. Overall, 81% increased their knowl-
edge of poverty.

The Future
This is the first step of the Horizons program. At the conclu-
sion of Study Circles, the communities hosted an Action Fo-
rum in which they identified areas they could work on as a community. As they continue to move through the next phases of the Horizons program they will learn more about reducing poverty and building leadership capacity. During January – March 2009 the communities will be learning leadership skills by participating in a leadership development program.

As the communities moved through the dif-
ferent stages in Horizon they will build upon their new found knowledge of poverty and will work together to create an environment where everyone has a chance to thrive.

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