

# HOW TO MAINTAIN FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

By Aubrey Spriggs

*Parents who become leaders in family support initiatives have motivations for doing so and expectations for what they will do and achieve. Those who facilitate parent involvement can help parents fulfill their own goals and expectations.*

They should provide correct and sufficient information on the specifics of parents' involvement. They should connect parents with tasks or jobs that will make satisfy them and make good use of their talents. And they should compensate parents in a personally meaningful way.

## **Tips for Facilitators**

When families are first recruited, ask them what would make participation easiest for them, what they hope to gain from involvement, and what skills they bring to the initiative. Provide families with options from which they may choose, but be open to suggestions that parents have for their participation options. Check in with parents periodically to see if they wish to be reassigned to a different sort of task.

There are several steps to making sure parent leaders have a satisfying experience:

### **1. Remove the barriers.**

The most obvious barrier to parent leadership is the concrete barrier. Ensure that all sites – all places to which parents will need to go in order to fulfill their roles as leaders – are accessible. There should be transportation that is reliable, that is safe, and that operates at all necessary hours. Lack of safety can be a barrier: make sure meetings are not held in high-crime locations or in gang territory, and that parents don't need to cross gang territory to reach a meeting. Meetings can be rotated among different areas in the neighborhood, perhaps among participants' homes.

Meeting times should not conflict with parents' work hours, or with childcare availability. The program or initiative may wish to write into its by-laws that a certain number of family participants must be present before a meeting can begin.

Family-related barriers to involvement must also be considered. For example, parents can be invited to bring their families to meetings, or childcare can be provided. Also, stipends to cover transportation and other participation expenses prevent money issues from blocking participation.

Beyond concrete obstacles, there are also psychological barriers. Parents must not be intimidated by the process or by other participants with whom they may not be used to interacting as equals, including business leaders, employment supervisors, and social service professionals

## **2. Provide general supports.**

Beyond removing barriers to participation, family support initiatives should provide general supports to parent leaders and professionals working with them. Be flexible in arranging schedules, meeting locations, attendance requirements, the variety of roles available, and job – or task-sharing among individuals.

Parents may be encouraged to share jobs and meeting attendance requirements, so that they can work out problems with time constraints and also get experience with time constraints and also get experience with more tasks. However, these arrangements may decrease parents' sense of ownership over their tasks and lessen their familiarity with issues involved in the initiative.

Work groups, including community residents, should be provided with technical assistance upon request. This can help participants value each other's contributions, help them learn ways to resolve conflicts, and maximize their use of all participants' skills and knowledge.

Finally, parent leaders should receive supervision, so that they can get feedback on their work and find ways to increase their effectiveness and their own satisfaction. Parent input can be used in the supervision and evaluation of other parent leaders and of professionals involved in the initiative.

## **3. Provide meaningful activities for participation.**

For parents to continue their involvement in any initiative, they need to feel that their work is meaningful. Ask families about the type of work they want to do when they become involved, and try to fulfill those requests as much as possible.

Give parents meaningful tasks that are visibly attached to some outcome which is important to them. Don't just ask parents to stuff envelopes. Entrust them with work that is as complex and important as that which professionals do, sending a strong message that their contribution is every bit as meaningful. Give a range of participation options with different time requirements, individual versus group work contexts, and educational level required.

Finally, be sure to link residents with jobs that utilize their skills, so that parents are likely to experience success and to not be overwhelmed by the tasks.

## **4. Provide compensation.**

Just as different parents find different tasks rewarding, they also differ in the types of compensation they find rewarding. Provide a variety of compensations. Use gatherings and parties to provide families with social and relationship-building opportunities and recognition for their work. To foster neighborhood cohesion and excitement, sponsor rallies.

Give parents access to institutions and resources outside the neighborhood through an exchange of favors. For example, give museum employees access to parenting education recreational activities in exchange for free admission for parents leaders at the museum. Provide links to education and training, so that parents can improve their skills and their lives, and climb the career ladder.

Recognize each participant's particular expertise in his or her neighborhood – do not discount anyone's opinion. Find ways to compensate parents through salaries, stipends, expense reimbursement, and in-kind reimbursement.

Finally, have food at every meeting. Food helps people enjoy each other's company and talk as equals, as well as providing nourishment and energy for the work to be done.

*Adapted from an article written for the St. Louis Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative, this provides social services and community economic development efforts for targeted neighborhoods. Recommendations suggested here are loosely based on the original article, and do not necessarily pertain to the initiative.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Spriggs, Aubrey. "How to Maintain Family Involvement" America's Family Support Magazine, Family Resource Coalition of America, Chicago IL., Spring 1999:34-35