



Southwest Madison Community Organizers and Department of Public Health Madison & Dane County

Developing and Supporting Local Leaders

Introduction

In 2009, two nurses from the Health Equity Team, a program in Public Health Madison & Dane County (PHMDC), began working with neighborhoods in Southwest Madison with the goals, driven by the communities, of building social capital and increasing access to healthy foods. The Health Equity Team worked with community residents to sponsor community suppers, start community gardens, and establish a farmers' market run by neighborhood residents.

The focus of these efforts changed when a 17-year old boy was murdered by two other teens in the Southwest Madison Meadowood neighborhood. This event galvanized Meadowood and three surrounding neighborhoods -- Greentree, Orchard Ridge and Prairie Hills. Neighborhood residents recognized that poverty, dilapidated housing, traffic safety, access to healthy foods, loitering and violence were not just issues in Meadowood but in surrounding neighborhoods as well. The partnering of community members from these four neighborhoods evolved into Southwest Madison Community Organizers (SWMCO). Working with the Health Equity Team, SWMCO began the process of addressing the root causes of violence and poor health in Southwest Madison.

Fast Facts

Community/Organization: Dane County, Wisconsin. The Southwest Madison Community Organizing Committee (SWMCO)

Problem/Issue: After the murder of a teen in Southwest Madison, four neighborhoods partnered together to address and reduce violence. This partnership evolved into SWMCO

Impact: SWMCO, since its inception, has evolved into the organizing body for the neighborhoods in Southwest Madison, by coordinating, supporting and building leadership.

Differentiating Feature: SWMCO is a grassroots collaboration led by community members who represent the communities' diversity.

Leaders/Lead Organization: SWMCO is a self-directed organization.

SWMCO's efforts have launched active workgroups with focus areas including Traffic Safety, Community Suppers, Front Yard Gardens, Area Leaders, and Technology. These focus areas represent identified community interests; groups are comprised of community residents with active SWMCO members facilitating.

Results

Since its inception, SWMCO has evolved into the organizing body for the neighborhoods in Southwest Madison, focusing on coordinating, supporting and building local leadership. SWMCO also seeks out new resources to support community building and health improvement in the participating neighborhoods. SWMCO received a grant in 2011 to extend its organizing work in the Meadowood neighborhood to another neighborhood in Southwest Madison. PHMDC recognized SWMCO's efforts to improve health and neighborhood safety with a Partnership Award in 2011. SWMCO is still a young organization and has yet to complete a thorough evaluation of its work, but has already had significant success with mobilizing and organizing residents in Southwest Madison.

Identified Themes Supporting SWMCO's Success

Partnerships/Connections –SWMCO's success is rooted in the fact that its membership and participation includes residents of four neighborhoods. People living in Southwest Madison recognized that to address their common concerns, they had to partner together. The transient nature of a significant portion of the community's population means that building community among long-term and short-term residents requires adopting different strategies. A member of SWMCO noted that the neighborhoods have worked very hard to be inclusive and to also communicate their expectations of what it means to be a resident of the neighborhood to one another. SWMCO members have committed themselves to meeting monthly as a way to stay connected. The Meadowood Neighborhood has continued the community suppers, begun by PHMDC, which are open to all and create an avenue to talk about issues in the community.

Infrastructure – The Health Equity Team was originally an important facilitator in SWMCO's creation and in the early recruitment of SWMCO members. One member of SWMCO observed, "Public health nurses are the natural people to funnel into our group because they are out in the neighborhood and are able to feed people into the group." The Health Equity Team still supports SWMCO by having one nurse actively attend the meetings. Other key partners include police officers, the mayor, local politicians and the university.

The Meadowood Neighborhood Center serves as an all-purpose gathering place for community members and gives SWMCO a place to meet as well as a gathering place for community suppers. Youth programming, resume building and working with the unemployed also take place at the Center. SWMCO members feel very fortunate to have such a resource.

Awareness –The community SWMCO serves is one of the most diverse in the city of Madison, by race and socio-economic status. This diversity has at times resulted in significant cultural divides among residents of Southwest Madison neighborhoods. SWMCO addresses these issues head-on and actively works to find solutions, using relationships and existing networks to recruit members from all segments of the community. SWMCO also acknowledges that recruiting a truly representative group to the table may not always be possible, but SWMCO members strive to represent the point of view of all aspects of the community in all they do.

Challenges

Hiring a Community Organizer –SWMCO members have other responsibilities and therefore cannot devote all of their time to the organization. They would like to have a community organizer whose full-time job is supporting and advancing SWMCO's efforts.

Sustainability – SWMCO wants to be a self-sufficient group of residents working together to address community issues. They believe strongly that leadership has to come from community members and community organizations. While they do not want to rely on outside assistance, they recognize the importance of their current partnership with PHMDC.

Next Steps

In 2011, SWMCO hired an organizer for the Youth Organizing Initiative, which seeks to develop leadership and organizing skills among youth in Southwest Madison neighborhoods. This initiative provides training for youth leaders in identifying and researching issues that are important to them and also provides support leaders in organizing for systemic change around these issues. In addition, SWMCO would like to hire a community organizer and is working to be administratively self-sufficient by 2013.

For More Information

To learn more about SWMCO, visit <http://swmadison.org/>.

To learn more about the work of the Health Equity Team of the Department of Public Health Madison & Dane County, contact Judy Howard at jhoward@publichealthmdc.com.