

Project STRIDE: Welcome Revivals

Executive Summary

Project STRIDE has been the source of many personal success stories since it began at Keys Community Center in August 1997. But looking deeper, what have this demonstration program's results been for individuals, Keys Community Center and its partners, and the community? The City of

Stories from Project STRIDE

Larry beamed as he described the first job interview of his life. He said that he felt positive about how he had done in spite of being nervous. In fact, Larry was already scheduled for a second interview at the same firm. He credited Project STRIDE with giving him the skills and confidence to get himself back on track.

Hadco, the first company to work with Keys Community Center on Project STRIDE, has gained 12 employees thus far at its manufacturing facility at 36th and Atlanta Streets. At the time of this report, four people had worked there for more than a year.

Phoenix contracted with Morrison Institute for Public Policy (School of Public Affairs, Arizona State University) to evaluate the demonstration project and to provide input on replication in other city neighborhoods. This report describes Project STRIDE's activities and development over an approximately 16-month demonstration period and offers recommendations for the future. Information was gathered through interviews and discussions with staff, instructors, and participants, observations, and reviews of various program records. This is the second and final evaluation report on Project STRIDE. The first report was completed in June 1998.

Project Stride's Development

Before Project STRIDE, Keys Community Center, which is one organization under the umbrella of Southwest Leadership Foundation, had had a variety of employment and education services. However, at the time of the application, the agency was not operating a "full-service"

employment program.

Morrison Institute's initial evaluation report likened Project STRIDE to a new company. At the beginning of the program, STRIDE's leaders were coping with the same start-up challenges faced by many new business owners. Although the partner providers, such as the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Service and Integrity Systems, Inc., had long-established curricula, a coherent STRIDE "course" did not exist. Essentially, everything from outreach materials to training schedules to participant forms had to be created from scratch. An executive committee was designated to develop and oversee the program, and a case manager was hired to assist the Keys executive director. Staff changes in the first half of 1998, including the resignations of the case manager and the executive director and the hiring of a new executive (who also serves as vice president for operations at Southwest Leadership Foundation) brought Project STRIDE and Keys Community Center through the start-up phase.

By the time dedicated program staff and better systems were in place, Project STRIDE, which was funded for only one year, lagged in terms of placements and job retention. The need for “numbers” put substantial pressure on everyone connected with the program. The positive aspect of this stress was that it forced the organization to learn rapidly, to seek out information and assistance, and to reflect continually on the people in the program and the delivery of services.

Program Components

Now, as at the beginning of the demonstration, Project STRIDE's components include a Community Jobs Team, group employability training, goal-setting, computer training, job seeking and retention skills, linkages with EC-area employers, case management, and followup. On-the-job training was used

at the beginning of the project with the major manufacturing employer, but was discontinued because it did not fit the needs of the program at the time. Instruction continues to be primarily through partnerships and contracts with the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Service, Arizona State University Career Outreach, Integrity Systems, Inc., and South Mountain Community College. Case management still plays a critical role in participants' experiences. STRIDE's emphasis is clearly on the participant. But, employers are also an important

Figure 1 Program Inquiries and Participation

213 inquiries \$ 157 educational assessments \$
107 started training \$ 77 graduated \$ 51
began jobs \$ 7 more went to additional
training/education \$ 19 were not working and
still in the area or unknown

“customer” for STRIDE and are treated as such. Serving both employers and EC residents is one of the most significant aspects of the job linkages strategy.

The major components of STRIDE's contractual agreement were to: recruit 80 participants; train at least 40 in employability skills; assist 28 EC residents to obtain employment at \$8.00 per hour with benefits and retain for at least 120 days; assist 9 EC residents to obtain employment at 20 percent above minimum wage and retain for at least 120 days; develop career ladders with at least 40 EC residents.

Results for Individuals

During the demonstration, Project STRIDE responded to 213 inquiries about the program. (See Figure 1.) Of these “starters,” 72 percent (77 people) completed the STRIDE class. Three-quarters of these “completers” began jobs or went to school or training. The remainder did not follow through or left the area. As of January 15, 1999, 41 “completers” who had started jobs were still working in the same or another job or were in training or school. A total of 36 training completers had quit or been dismissed from their jobs or had not followed through with getting a job. Thus of the 77 training completers, 53 percent were working or in school by the beginning of 1999; 47 percent had not followed through.

As of January 1999, the wages among all workers ranged from \$5.50 to \$12.60 per hour with an average of \$7.70 per hour. Approximately three-quarters of those working received benefits, including health insurance. According to the program coordinator, STRIDE participants had earned an estimated total of \$304,000 over the course of the demonstration program. STRIDE's program costs ranged from \$2,596 to \$4,876 depending on whether figures for completers, placements, or workers are used. Per person earnings at the close of the program spanned from \$3,928 to \$7,414 also depending on whether the average is figured on the number of completers, placements, or workers.

Profile of STRIDE's Graduates

This profile focuses on STRIDE graduates (training completers) because employers—the second most important STRIDE customer—draw from this pool. Women outnumbered men in Project STRIDE; sixty-one percent were female, while 39 percent were male. Sixty-eight percent of the women graduates (19) were single heads of household. A total of 95 percent of graduates were members of racial or ethnic minorities. Seventy percent of the graduates were African-American; and nineteen percent were Hispanic. The majority were between 18 and 25 years of age. Forty-two percent had less than a high school diploma, while 49 percent had a diploma or GED. These credentials, however, often did not indicate a mastery of basic skills.

Among the 77 graduates, 69 had held their last job (and that job may not have been recent) for less than a year. Twenty-one graduates (27%) had criminal records; 14 had experienced both substance abuse and the criminal justice system (18% of graduates and 67% of those with criminal records). The STRIDE population illustrated, as other programs have, that those with more barriers are less likely to join the workforce successfully, or perhaps more slowly, than those with fewer issues.

Participants' Outlooks on STRIDE: Feedback from Surveys

Participants almost always came to Keys on the strength of a family member's or friend's recommendation. The positive feelings about Project STRIDE reported in surveys of participants at the end of training were maintained at the 120-day retention mark. The great majority of those interviewed continued to feel that the program had helped them and prepared them well for work. As in the first evaluation report, those interviewed most often noted the focus on self-esteem and goal management as program strengths. However, a few people did not feel that the program had delivered what had been promised. In general, this minority group had expected much more in wages and status without making necessary changes in their personal lives or learning new skills.

"We want you to get you a life."—A Team Approach to Change

STRIDE has always depended on a team of instructors to deliver its training. Currently, six primary instructors interact with participants throughout the course of the four-week session, and two others provide shorter segments. The instructors reflect the multi-ethnic background of the participants.

The primary instructors and staff members viewed themselves as a team and felt positive about their work together and their contributions to STRIDE. As they gained experience with the clientele, the instructors and STRIDE staff worked together to match the training more closely to participants' needs. The instructors related how they uncovered similar personal values and perspectives about the participants. In their experience, the team approach allowed the instructors to learn from one another, and it broadened the range of viewpoints and experiences to which participants were exposed. From an administrative perspective, the combination of instructors was perceived to have reduced the overall cost of the program.

The instructors brought a great deal of program experience and neighborhood knowledge to STRIDE. They also brought a healthy dose of skepticism to the program because in the past they had seen many good ideas be implemented poorly. STRIDE turned out to be a pleasant surprise for them. According to the group, STRIDE's mission and goals were being met, and the program was doing what they and

other planners intended it to do. The group cited Managing Goal Achievement as the most important part of STRIDE. However, they also saw a need to reinforce and extend the personal development after the STRIDE training. Attracting people back to Keys to build on STRIDE was identified as one of the program's biggest challenges.

Results for Keys Community Center

The STRIDE experience seems to have been positive for Keys Community Center. For example, the project appeared to:

- , offer the organization new opportunities for service and growth
- , create new networks for the center
- , refocus the agency's mission on employment
- , begin to establish an organizational environment that values experimentation and innovation.

The STRIDE experience, according to some interviewed, has taken some of the "mystery" out of local businesses. There is a better understanding now of the dynamic, competitive environment businesses are coping with, as well as the particular cultures of firms. The various relationships have shown the differences among companies' hiring practices and standards and underscored the myriad factors that affect who is hired, and when. Many businesses are viewed by some of those interviewed as seeing their role in programs of this type as simply providing jobs to neighborhood residents, and thus are not players in addressing the most difficult community problems. However, some of the interviewees predicted that that situation will change as relationships deepen and become increasingly productive.

Community Jobs Team

The active participants of the Community Jobs Team changed somewhat over the course of the demonstration. More employers became involved, such as B.F. Goodrich and the Volt staffing service, as did community organizations such as Wesley Community Center. Clergy members became less involved. The instructors and Keys staff continued to take part in the group. Planning sessions which were held in September 1998 to discuss the future of STRIDE and the Community Jobs Team resulted in a new organizational structure and priorities. A decision was made to initiate an employers council which would meet twice per year. The community groups will continue to work together to guide and develop the program.

Keys and STRIDE became almost synonymous during the demonstration program. Community feedback, according to those interviewed, has been largely positive. However, STRIDE is not without critics. Those interviewed described some community members as feeling that the program has not delivered on high-paying jobs as anticipated. Southwest Leadership Foundation and Keys Community Center have committed to maintaining the program at the conclusion of the City of Phoenix funding. Keys anticipates serving about 120 people in 1999.

Results for the Community

Because of the barriers participants face and the inadequacy of some community services, such as housing and mental health, STRIDE appears to have acted as a catalyst for the creation of a community development agenda in support of employment. Changes in the community may now be related to supporting employment and keeping new workers in the neighborhood.

Discussion and Findings

Notable Revivals

Based on the data compiled over the demonstration period, Keys Community Center and its partners have created a significant job linkages program in one of the Enterprise Community's most distressed neighborhoods. Their efforts resulted in notable revivals for some EC residents and for Keys Community Center. If the positive developments can be sustained and enhanced over time, STRIDE will be playing an important role in the revival of the entire neighborhood. STRIDE offers a viable model of small-scale, local employment services to other areas of the City of Phoenix. The STRIDE model of job linkages can be replicated. The key elements are the understanding of local employers, the use of temporary services, strong case management, quality staff and instruction, and continuous learning and improvement.

Lessons From Project STRIDE

- , Strong relationships with a finite number of employers in various fields offer participants a range of options and the staff a manageable work load. Hires result from positive relationships with employers, solid training, and strong case management.
- , Place-oriented employment services work for neighborhoods. But, matching jobs and interests is as important as connecting "local people with local jobs." The choice of employment is critical to the individual's success. Thus, a variety of employer relationships is necessary.
- , Positive relationships with temporary services provide valuable routes to many types of jobs. Staffing companies allow participants to try different jobs and build a work history. They may also provide the only access to long-term quality jobs with some important employers.
- , STRIDE participants benefit from the program's combination of skills, learning, and support. The group experience is an important factor in preparing for the realities of the work place. Focusing on the combination is more effective than providing one without the others.
- , Program and staff development must focus on knowledge in four areas: the economy and employers; the best adult education/learning techniques; organizational, human resources, and career development; collaborative community problem solving.

STRIDE has refocused Keys Community Center on employment. This positive step should be the first of many for the center so that it becomes a leader in employment services for local residents. To achieve that goal, STRIDE's basic training must become increasingly sophisticated in terms of the economy, learning, and skills, while maintaining the personal support. If a "community support network for employment" is one of the primary goals of job linkages, a community development agenda is one of the primary means to achieve it. The organization's work has created a new community asset.

However, STRIDE still faces some substantial challenges. The future of STRIDE will depend on the vision and actions of the leaders of Keys Community Center and Southwest Leadership Foundation.

Recommendations

- , Develop a vision and plan for Keys Community Center and STRIDE that includes the activities identified by the Community Jobs Team and focuses on related developmental activities for the program, individuals, and the community.
- , Invest in staff development and cross-training so that employees and contractors are aware of the connections among adult education and economic, organizational, and career development, and can apply “lessons” from other fields to STRIDE and future employment programs.
- , Continue technical assistance from practitioners and experts in training and development, program development, collaboration, and related fields.
- , Continue to increase the ability of the organization to respond individuals’ and community needs on its own and in conjunction with other public and private organizations.
- , Institute a long-term followup system for STRIDE completers.
- , Increase the number of staff members to allow for a growing caseload and the program’s continuing development.

‘ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘