

From Research to Practice

MAY 2008

Indiana-Based *Getting Ahead* Program Sees Strong Movement Toward Reducing Poverty's Grip

A Problem

The YWCA of Saint Joseph County, Indiana, specializes in residential, non-residential, and outreach services for women and children in four primary areas:

- Domestic violence
- Sexual assault
- Chemical dependency
- Self-sufficiency programs

Two years ago the Indiana folks were struggling with a problem. In their community, individuals in poverty seemed to be cycling through social service agencies but remained “stuck” in their lives.

So when Linda Baechle, YWCA executive director, received a small grant from St. Mary's College Center for Intercultural Leadership that allowed them to pay for an expert consultation, they decided to bring in Philip DeVol, a senior consultant with aha! Process, Inc. From what DeVol shared with the YWCA and St. Margaret's House, another local agency, the *Bridges Out of Poverty/Getting Ahead* model seemed the ideal method for giving individuals the tools they needed to break the cycle. “We saw a model that we thought was the ‘missing link’ in the services we provide,” said Baechle.

A Program

The problem Baechle and her colleagues identified isn't unique to Saint Joseph County. It's why *Getting Ahead* was developed: to provide applications that individuals in poverty can use to improve their lives and their communities by decreasing day-to-day dependency on social services.

The YWCA of Saint Joseph County, like many agencies, works with people who are often overlooked in the wider community. For individuals in poverty, one of the basic elements of their daily lives is instability. What many upper-class and

middle-class members of a given community may think of as life's “givens”—like the ability to hold down a job or purchase weekly groceries—become uncertainties for those without sufficient resources. In uncertain, unstable lives, planning for the future becomes less important than survival. And abstract thinking—what life might be like in two weeks, a month, five years—is replaced with concern for tomorrow. When this kind of instability continues for more than one generation, change becomes increasingly difficult. The poverty cycle begins to create unstable individual lives, as well as unstable communities.

Personal Resources Defined in *Getting Ahead*

Financial: having the money to purchase goods and services

Emotional: having the internal control to choose behavioral responses

Mental: having the innate abilities and acquired skills to deal with daily life

Spiritual: belief in a higher purpose and guidance

Physical: having bodily health and mobility

Support systems: external community and personal resources to support healthy behaviors

Relationships: access to individuals who can serve as role models

Hidden rules: knowledge of the unspoken cues and habits of a group or groups

Language registers: knowledge and application of different ways of speaking that are appropriate to the occasion

Motivation: ability to self-govern behavior in ways that will improve one's personal situation



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Implementing *Getting Ahead*

The research-based *Bridges/Getting Ahead* program offers agencies two instruments for implementation—one for determining the level of an agency's approach (model fidelity) and one for determining individual participants' improvements (outcomes). On a philosophical level, it doesn't give answers to participants or communities. Nor does it make the argument for change. Instead, it assumes the responsibility of providing tools to create change and seeks to give participants (called *investigators* within the context of the program) the opportunity to evaluate and create their own motivation, insight, and life plans.

Investigators are simultaneously exploring the impact of poverty on their own community, which provides valuable information for communities looking to work toward sustainability. Through workbook study, investigators focus on building resources in areas determined to affect poverty, as well as applications for such areas as family life, economic development, and managing in times of change. Upon completing *Getting Ahead*, graduates have developed a clear understanding of their individual situations, the hidden rules of economic class, and their wider community through a co-investigative process.

What are the "hidden rules"?
Hidden rules are social cues that govern how we think and act in society.

At the YWCA of Saint Joseph County, a staff member co-facilitates the *Getting Ahead* group alongside a graduate of the program who is an individual from generational poverty. Group classes of 10–15 investigators are taught in 15 three-hour sessions over seven and a half weeks. Incentives are paid to group members for

attending and for providing information and insights toward community sustainability. After completing the series of 15 classes, clients graduate and are involved in a monthly "networking group" with all other past graduates. This allows the YWCA to track the progress of the graduates over time in areas defined by the *Getting Ahead* framework.

Goals and Outcomes

All 58 participants of *Getting Ahead* were tracked through two six-month periods (or "quarters") during the year. Outcomes were reported by participants themselves. In the words of one *Getting Ahead* group member:

I was impressed with what I was able to learn, such as the way out of poverty begins with me, setting small goals which are reachable, learning to use your resources, and more. I also learned about the "hidden rules." These are the rules that different classes use to operate at home, work, and in the community. Understanding them is the key to success. I learned to use the tools in this class to set goals within my reach and to work my way out of poverty, instead of looking for a hand-out. The class has taught me I don't have to stay stuck.

—Brenda, graduate

In May 2006, at the end of the first quarter, the *Getting Ahead* program had a completion rate of 57%; by July 2007, at the end of the second quarter, the program completion rate was 87%. It was a strong improvement, which Baechle attributes largely to increasing the frequency of payments to clients for attending (without increasing the total sum over the duration of the program).



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YWCA of Saint Joseph County <i>Getting Ahead</i> results	<i>Getting Ahead</i> —Quarter 1: positive change	<i>Getting Ahead</i> —Quarter 2: positive change
INCOME	26%	84%
EDUCATION	36%	69%
EMPLOYMENT	32%	63%
SUPPORT SYSTEMS	13%	84%

As attendance improved, the YWCA also saw positive change for *Getting Ahead* participants in other areas.

The extent to which a client has attained set educational goals improved between Quarter 1 and Quarter 2. In the first quarter 36% of the group showed movement toward achieving additional education; in the second quarter 69% of the group had moved toward meeting their goals. In the area of employment 23% had improved their situation in the first quarter. By the end of the second quarter 63% of the group had moved toward full-time, self-sufficient employment. Quarter 1 clients showed a 13% change in establishing access to friends, family, and community services, and by the end of Quarter 2 the group's overall change was 84%.

"I'm thrilled to show these kinds of outcomes," concluded Baechle.



For information about the *Getting Ahead* program's research and development tools, visit the **aha!** Process website: <http://www.ahaprocess.com/r/tools>

For more information about the *Getting Ahead* program, please call **aha!** Process at (800) 424-9484.

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