
Public Housing Drug Elimination Program in Columbus, Mississippi¹

Presenter:

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Background

The city of Columbus (population over 91,000) is located in Lowndes County, Mississippi. Two state universities and two community colleges are located within a 25-mile radius. Columbus is located in what is known as the Golden Triangle Area which includes West Point, Starkville, and Macon, Mississippi.

The Columbus Housing Authority administers four public housing complexes consisting of 480 units. As of April 1, 1994, the complexes had a 98% occupancy rate, housing 1,289 residents, of which 615 were adults and 674 were children under the age of 18. The average family size is three; 69% of the families are headed by a single parent; and the average family yearly income is \$4,800. Ninety-five percent of the residents are African American.

Because there was a critical drug problem in the area, the Columbus Housing Authority implemented a drug prevention program. A summer program was also developed to deal with the large number of children who were left unsupervised during the day. In many cases, children went all day without food. Thus, the program incorporated provisions to provide breakfast, lunch, and dinner if necessary.

Program Description

Program Objectives

(1) to decrease the amount of drug distribution, arrests, and use among Columbus Housing Authority's residents;

(2) to reach and teach children at an early age through special activities about the dangers of drugs and drug use;

(3) to teach children and parents about the dangers of drugs and signs of drug abuse;

(4) to encourage parents to take an active role in the development of their children;

(5) to help children resist peer pressure to use drugs through the provision of group activities;

(6) to involve local law enforcement agencies in facilitating drug prevention and education programs;

(7) to recruit, train, and utilize community volunteers to assist with drug prevention, educational, and recreational activities;

(8) to secure additional funding from other agencies to combat drugs in public housing;

(9) to actively involve a variety of community entities in the implementation of the drug prevention program; and

(10) to institutionalize the drug prevention program.

Program Content

Specific program efforts consisted of making physical improvements to the housing units and grounds, implementing a security patrol, and implementing drug prevention, and recreation programs for youths and adults. Community agencies were actively involved in building a strong comprehensive program using a combination of both

¹ Material is taken edited by Witt, P.A., & Crompton, J.L. (Eds.). (1996). *Recreation programs that work for at-risk youth: The challenge of shaping the future*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

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individual and group facilitators throughout the program. A drug coordinator was hired to provide drug education through counseling and group meetings with reinforcement through group activities. Residents received information through drug education and prevention workshops, seminars, and group sessions.

Programs for adults dealt with the dangers of drugs and provided them with the knowledge necessary to teach their children. This was done through the utilization of videos, literature, and speakers. Group meetings were held that involved community leaders and other program facilitators. Additionally, training workshops were conducted by experts in the field of drug education on-site and throughout the state. The elderly were educated by local health department personnel, doctors, and nurses on how and when to take their medication and to the dangers of becoming addicted to prescription drugs.

Children participated in cultural and recreational activities and received lessons on drug awareness, fire and bicycle safety, dealing with peer pressure, and increasing self-esteem. The program utilized special features such as puppet shows, sing-a-longs, and skits to provide drug education. These presentations were made in small groups to both children and their parents. Older children and teenagers participated in drug education lessons through one-on-one counseling sessions and group sessions. Field trips to "Youth to Youth" conferences, mental health community services, and public libraries provided preteens and teenagers with the knowledge and training to become peer counselors for younger children.

Summer day camps were established at the community buildings at Columbus Housing Authority sites. Children were registered in the program by their parents. Camps were held for eight weeks during the summer months. On-site food was provided for program participants by the State Department of Education's Bureau of Child Nutrition. Volunteers from the community and parents assisted with the educational and daily recreational activities. The day camps included lessons on safety, arts and crafts, exercising, self-esteem, decision-making and daily living skills, and drug education. Columbus/Lowndes Recreation Authority provided recreational activities which included soccer, summer baseball, T-ball, basketball, karate, and cultural activities. Some of these programs were subsequently extended throughout the year.

Neighborhood security was important to the program's success. Security was provided from 6 p.m. to midnight Monday through Friday and from 5

p.m. to 2 a.m. on Saturday and Sunday. In addition, improved lighting was installed throughout the housing project.

The overall project also provided employment opportunities for eight residents who were trained to provide leadership in various segments of the program. This group, along with other parents who received training as part of the program, are now available to provide long-term community support for the development and leadership of other programs.

Program Facilitators

Over 40 different agencies and organizations assisted in the development and support of the program. These included:

- Friendly City Resident Council of the Columbus Housing Authority;
- Columbus/Lowndes Recreation Authority;
- Columbus Police Department;
- Columbus Fire Department;
- Mississippi Assistance and Child Abuse Prevention Center;
- Lowndes County Health Department;
- Mississippi State Cooperative Extension Service;
- Golden Security Services, Inc.;
- Mississippi Department of Education, Bureau of Child Nutrition;
- Lowndes County Chancery Clerk;
- Lowndes County Department of Human Services;
- Lowndes County Board of Supervisors;
- City of Columbus Mayor and Council Members;
- National Bank of Commerce;
- Carter's Funeral Home;
- Columbus Art Council, Inc.;
- Oliver Miller and Associates;
- AME Church Volunteers;
- Mississippi University for Women; and
- Hardee's Restaurant.

Program Funding

In 1991 the Columbus Housing Authority received a Public Housing Drug Elimination Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for \$233,464. Additionally, \$27,000 was received from the Mississippi State Department of Education's Bureau of Child Nutrition. A variety of both public and private sector entities contributed funding of \$2,000, as well as in-kind assistance. In 1994 an additional \$144,000 was received from HUD.

Program Outcomes

The Columbus Housing Authority Drug Prevention Program was highly successful because of the abundance of support received from the community. The partnerships established in implementing the program were the most significant factor in its success. These partnerships helped sustain the program during the summer of 1994 when renewal of Federal funding from HUD was delayed. This support showed the willingness of other agencies and the community at-large to take responsibility for the program. Other specific outcomes were:

- The amount of drug distribution significantly decreased at public housing sites, and the number of arrests of residents and nonresidents for drug-related criminal activities was also reduced.
- Over 1,140 children living in public housing were educated about the dangers of drug and drug use. More specifically, children were educated on how to resist peer pressure to use drugs.
- Over 1,750 children and parents received special training about the dangers of drugs and drug use. Additionally, this involved educating them on the ability to identify drug types.
- A substantial number of parents were empowered to take an active role in the social and emotional development of their children. This was done through a series of lectures, field trips, summer camps, picnics, and group meetings.
- The program was institutionalized through the use of volunteers and other community resources.
- The Columbus Housing Authority actively recruited over 75 volunteers to assist with the implementation of the drug prevention, educational, and recreational activities.
- The Columbus Housing Authority successfully engaged the services of the Columbus Police Department, Lowndes County Sheriff's Department, and Columbus/Lowndes Metro-Narcotics Division.
- The Friendly City Resident Council actively participated in the development, formation, and implementation of the drug prevention program.

In recognition of its success, the program received the 1993 Distinguished Managers Award given annually by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development at the Mississippi Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials Annual Conference for outstanding implementation of a drug prevention program.