

FAITHWORKS START-UP HISTORY

For several years, the Anderson -Cottonwood area of southern Shasta County had a history of over 14 churches working together in a common ministry of providing emergency food and other referrals to local needy families through a non-profit corporation (Anderson-Cottonwood Christian Assistance). The pastors of these and other local churches also met monthly for prayer and fellowship as Anderson-Cottonwood Christian Leadership and to plan joint community activities such as baccalaureate services for graduating seniors at the two local high schools, inter-faith Thanksgiving and Pentecost services, and to exchange information regarding community needs.

Meanwhile, in the greater Redding area two distinctly different ministerial organizations were meeting regularly: Shasta County Inter-faith Forum (SCIF) which was mostly comprised of main-line churches plus the Jewish and Mormon congregations and the Shasta County Evangelical Ministers Association (SCEMA) which was mostly comprised of Baptist and non-denominational churches. These groups also met monthly, usually in a luncheon setting, for prayer and fellowship and to discuss community needs.

The Redding ministerial groups were also attended by members of the ACCL group and efforts began to try to extend the involvement of churches in county wide issues. The SCIF group participated in a multi-agency task force on General Assistance in the county and also as part of the development of the Health Information Plan. The SCEMA group had begun to sponsor events such as the National Day of Prayer, Mayor's Prayer Breakfast, and Men's Night Out (associated with the Promise-Keepers movement).

Early in 1998, discussions regarding welfare reform and the possible participation of churches in developing programs to deal with the unemployed and under-employed began with the County Welfare Director. Two representatives, one from SCIF and one from SCEMA (who co-incidentally were also ACCL participants), were invited to join the county's Welfare Reform Community Council which was involved in developing the county plan to be submitted to the State. The county's Welfare Director was convinced that implementation of welfare reform would require the participation and cooperation of the entire community, business, education, the traditional employment and training agencies, as well as the religious and non-profit community. The consensus of the Welfare Reform council was that an opportunity existed through the issuance of RFP's for the participation of many agencies and groups in implementing programs for welfare clients which would involve a wider portion of the community.

Shortly following upon the initial discussions at the county level, a study/steering committee from all three ministerial groups was formed, with two representatives from each group plus geographic representatives from the eastern inter-mountain area of the county. As it became apparent that there would be a definite opportunity for the religious community to become involved, a non-profit corporation was established under the name 'FaithWORKs Community Coalition' with the steering committee becoming the corporation's board of directors.

Questions arose as to the parameters under law which would have to be observed in order to actually involve the faith-based community. Fortunately, the 1996 Welfare Reform Act (PWORA) contained the 'charitable choice' provision, and through former contacts in the Washington DC area, a copy of the provisions was obtained. Charitable Choice made evident the "rules of the game" under which faith-based groups could compete for county contracts for services supported by TANF funding.

In April of 1998, the county welfare department issued an RFP for 'Faith-based Liaison Services'. The newly formed FaithWORKs Community Coalition submitted a proposal and budget and was the sole 'bidder' for the contract which was refined through negotiations with the county. Since FaithWORKs did not as yet have its incorporation and 501(c)3 status finalized, it chose to use Northern Valley Catholic Social Services, an existing non-profit with a good previous history of working with county contracts as its fiscal agent.

When the contract was drafted, it included in its initial provisions a reference to Charitable Choice as the guideline for the contract. The Faith-based Liaison's responsibilities were to recruit and maintain contacts with local congregations and their leadership, provide training and mentor match-ups, coordinate their activities with the other non-profit and public agencies involved in the welfare to work partnership, and provide intake and guidance/referral activities for welfare clients.

Since FaithWORKs was composed of direct representatives from the three ministerial associations, we already had their endorsement for the program and an avenue from which to approach individual pastors and congregations. A series of informational meetings were held for each ministerial association group and follow-up activities with individual congregations and pastors were pursued. A monthly newsletter was developed which was bulk mailed to all pastors and congregations and a local 'community prayer intention' authored by a different pastor each week was published in a display ad on the religion page of the local newspaper. Through their membership activity in the local ministerial associations, FaithWORKs counted upon over 78 participating congregations. Brochures describing the program and mentor training opportunities were distributed widely through these churches.

Client brochures were then developed and distributed as a part of the orientation process for all new welfare clients. FaithWORKs staff began to make presentations in the first week of the Job Club/Job Readiness classes that were being conducted by the Private Industry Council for new and existing welfare clients. A FaithWORKs office was established for client intake and referral in available space in the Redding Downtown Mall which was also the 'campus' for other welfare to work programs such as PIC, Shasta College and other programs. This 'neutral' space assisted in making clients feel welcome as well as separating FaithWORKs from any individual church or denominational sponsorship.

Over the first few months, FaithWORKs had to win the confidence of both welfare clients and other non-profit and public agency partners. Of key importance was the sense that there truly was no religious pressure on clients and clients themselves were free to select which faith group they would feel comfortable with (or even no faith group in particular). It quickly became apparent that the primary need of clients was for some individual attention and moral support for their

difficulties. FaithWORKs staff became more involved as resources for knowledgeable referrals, advocacy for clients with other agencies, and often just as a hospitable place where a client with difficulties could just find someone to talk to on a drop-in basis. Gradually, several clients were matched with mentors from local churches and the involvement of the general faith community was enlarged. Many clients found this new involvement of people from the religious community a welcome and refreshing change from their other experiences with county and welfare to work 'programs.' An added advantage was that the FaithWORKs staff was not limited in the amount of client contact it could maintain or resources that it could use. Through active networking, effective solutions to housing, transportation, child care, job training and resumes, job searches and personal legal problems began to be resolved. A local volunteer attorney was particularly helpful in assisting clients to navigate the very difficult problems of child support, family law, and drivers' license fines and suspensions. The FaithWORKs office developed on-line computer access to job listings where clients could do some focused job search activities. We developed a 'Hot Jobs' board from community referrals, temp agencies and local resources that encouraged clients to immediately apply for employment. In cooperation with the RSVP and literacy programs, we developed a volunteer-run introductory computer class held twice a week. Free copies of resumes and job application assistance were offered as well as a fax machine available for client use.

While helping clients to focus on immediate job search activity objectives, it often became clear that many other barriers existed to their journey from welfare to work. Strong connections were formed with the Women's Refuge for family violence interventions, with the Good News Rescue Mission and Shasta Homeless Shelter Coalition for emergency shelter and transitional housing services, and with local emergency food programs operated by churches and other non-profits.

For many clients, it was the first time they had anyone to talk to about their greater personal and family needs and someone to brainstorm with (either a mentor or FaithWORKs staff member) about possible solutions. Since the traditional welfare to work providers operate mostly 'self-service' programs, it became apparent that clients needed a significant amount of help in navigating the 'system.' Too often they had been discouraged by the difficulty in getting an appointment for help, by regulations they did not understand, and by lack of awareness of available help.

As advocacy and interventions became more successful, FaithWORKs began to receive inquiries from many other agencies and non-profits and client referrals. Peer referrals from clients who had worked previously with FaithWORKs also began to grow significantly. FaithWORKs staff members began outreach activities to the local one-stops operated by PIC and began to maintain a weekly or twice weekly presence at the one-stop locations. This developed into a team approach among the one-stop agencies, often using FaithWORKs staff in concert with other strategies and programs to more holistically deal with individual clients.

Through use of a web-site developed for the FaithWORKs program (www.faith-works.org) and workshop presentations made at state level conferences, several inquiries flowed in from other jurisdictions. The FaithWORKs coordinator traveled to the neighboring counties of Siskiyou and Lassen to make presentations to gatherings of ministerial associations. These gatherings were sponsored by the local county welfare to work partnership and resulted in a 'cloning' of the

FaithWORKs program in both counties. Later the program was copied substantially in Yolo County and in Grant County, Wisconsin. Materials continue to be exchanged with various California and out of state groups and agencies and visits from these agencies to the FaithWORKs office for program ideas and concepts have been hosted in several instances. FaithWORKs was also featured in a satellite broadcast to participants in the Calif. Institute of Mental Health as well as in a video produced by the Calif. Council of Churches. FaithWORKs has been a workshop presenter at conferences of the Calif. Welfare Directors Associations, the annual Cal Works Conference, and the Family Strengths Conference as well as at the Welfare Reform and Faith Community National Conference (New Orleans, Nov. 1999).

FaithWORKs has been cited in national journals including the Calif. Council of Churches Dec. 1998 newsletter, the Wall Street Journal, the Welfare Information Network, and studies by the University of Southern Calif. Center for Religion and Civic Culture and the Center for Public Justice (Washington, DC). FaithWORKs is the subject of a current study of the involvement of the faith community being produced by the Interfaith Community Ministry Network under a grant by the Ann Casey Foundation.