Project MAGIC In Northern Nye and Esmeralda Counties

Amy L. Van Poperin, Northern Nye and Esmeralda Counties Extension Educator
Marilyn Smith, Area Specialist, Youth Development

INTRODUCTION

Making A Group and Individual Commitment (MAGIC) is a University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE) program that targets 12-18 year old first time juvenile offenders using an after-school life skills training program. The program was implemented in Northern Nye and Esmeralda Counties, in 2000, to address high juvenile incarceration rates. These counties also served as a pilot site for the Parenting Wisely course, part of the MAGIC program. Impact data collected over a six-year period indicate that MAGIC is making a difference for youth and parents in Northern Nye and Esmeralda Counties.

HISTORY OF MAGIC

During the initial development phase of the program, Nevada had one of the highest juvenile detention rates in the United States, with 407 youth per 100,000 incarcerated, an almost 50% increase over the previous decade (Horner, 1992). At the request of the Elko County Board of Commissioners, a collaborative team of Cooperative Extension faculty sought to determine what educational needs were necessary to reduce youth risk for delinquency (Bicket, et. al., 1993). Discussion groups were conducted in Nye County (Smith and Cobb, 2000), where approximately 20 citizens expressed the need for intervention programs. Unsupervised youth, high school dropout rates, drug use, poorly developed parenting skills, high rates of problem behaviors, homelessness of youth, and lack of resources to deal with such issues were highlighted as major concerns needing to be addressed. After a one-year pilot, a five-year grant was awarded to support the MAGIC program in Northern Nye and Esmeralda Counties. Local dollars, currently totaling approximately $14,000 annually pay for program costs.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION AND COMPONENTS

Research Base
UNCE is the outreach college of the University of Nevada, Reno which brings research-based knowledge to communities and individuals helping residents solve problems and deal with critical issues. MAGIC’s approach to preventing delinquency is grounded in literature surrounding adolescent development, family studies, and community systems. The MAGIC curriculum has evolved to include positive youth development conceptual frameworks which reflect the need to identify and build upon youth strengths, rather than just addressing negative behaviors or deficit reduction (Smith and Evans, 2000).
Collaborative Components
MAGIC utilizes the ecological model (Bogenschneider, Small, and Riley, 1991) of program development, which recognizes the influences of family, community and school in the lives of youth. The participation and support from several local agencies and organizations is invaluable when looking at the success of MAGIC graduates. The sheriff’s office, juvenile probation department, judges, school administrators and teachers, along with UNCE faculty and staff, provide informal mentoring, resources, encouragement, and teamwork contributing to positive results. Parents and other caring adults are a crucial component helping to make the difference.

Sharing the goal of providing an adolescent life skills program that includes parenting and community learning components, the community and various agencies are offering support that is critical to the success of the program, and are demonstrating an alternative to juvenile detention. Additionally, campus-based faculty work with the local team of instructors and project directors. Professors in Criminal Justice, Human and Community Sciences, and Education from University of Nevada, Reno provide program and technical support. The MAGIC curriculum includes youth, parent, community and school components.

Youth Component
Youth, ages 12-18, are referred to the MAGIC program, with preference given to the younger offenders just beginning to enter the juvenile justice system or who have low incident rates. In addition, school administrators can refer middle or junior high school youth. Participating probation departments and public schools identify youth with escalating delinquent behaviors that could benefit from after-school programming. MAGIC assists these youth in learning skills and behaviors that can help them become productive, contributing members of their community. MAGIC groups in Northern Nye and Esmeralda Counties have typically consisted of between 5 and 10 youth.

MAGIC program goals for youth include skill development in conflict management, communication, decision-making, cooperation, goal-setting and the development of positive relationships with adults. They participate in a 21-session after-school life skills training program, addressing risk and protective factor research related to delinquency. In addition, they identify and conduct a service project they would like to work on in their community. This provides youth the opportunity to demonstrate their newly acquired skills and behaviors. It enables them to feel more connected with their community as they recognize and address their community’s needs. Throughout the after-school training program and the community project, participants develop a portfolio, later used for self-reflection and to measure progress.

Parent Component
Parents and/or guardians of MAGIC participants also participate in the program. During three evening meetings, adults learn to positively communicate with their teen, manage anger during conflict situations, recognize symptoms of drug and/or alcohol abuse, and positively discipline their children.

In addition to attending parent meetings, they also complete the Parenting Wisely (SAMHSA) course. The self-administered, computer-based program teaches parents important skills to reduce family conflict and child behavior problems, such as stealing, vandalism, defiance of authority, bullying, and poor hygiene. Parenting Wisely is conducted through a CD-ROM format and is highly interactive. This teaching method accelerates learning and allows parents to use new skills immediately. Semi-literate parents can use the Parenting Wisely program as it provides the option to have the computer read the text aloud and printed program portions are written at the fifth-grade level. The course encourages parents to choose family scenarios relevant to their lives and to resolve challenging situations by choosing from the three problem resolution methods presented.
SHORT-TERM IMPACTS

Since program inception, 76 youth and 11 parents in these two counties participated in MAGIC program evaluation. Evidence suggests that youth benefit from involvement in this program. For example, upon completion of the program, youth reported that they missed significantly less school, that school work is significantly more meaningful, and that they believe there is significantly greater risk related to smoking marijuana.

Youth portfolios and self-evaluations are measurements designed to assess growth in knowledge, skills and attitudes. The average percent improvement on youth portfolio scores was 163% and the average percent improvement on youth self-evaluation scores was 52%. These scores suggest that youth have succeeded in developing critical tools needed to become productive members of society. Parents also appear to benefit from the program. For example, upon completion of the program, parents reported school was more important for youth later in life.

MID-TERM IMPACTS

Youth program graduates are living their lives in such a way that suggests the program is accomplishing its goals (Cobb and Greber, 2006). The primary goal of MAGIC is to reduce juvenile incarceration rates. The results indicate that most program graduates are able to successfully complete probation and avoid incarceration to live productive, contributing lives. Success in this area can be measured by examining how many MAGIC graduates have re-entered the justice system in Nye County. This statistic is impressive. Of the 76 alumni, only eleven (14%) have been incarcerated as juveniles in Nye County since their participation in MAGIC.

Not only have 86% of MAGIC graduates avoided incarceration, but a surprising number have entered the military or gone on to higher education. In fact, twelve alumni have made this decision, representing 16% of those 65 who did not re-enter the system. Despite initial negative experiences with the justice system, one graduate is a criminal justice major in college, another is a military police officer, and another is a civilian police officer. In addition to career choices, there appears to be a sense of pride and commitment to community, as demonstrated by one graduate who returned home to single-handedly repair vandalism damage to his MAGIC community project.

Although further research needs to be done to verify the direct impact of MAGIC on alumni, it is clear that graduates made decisions which have resulted in lower incarceration rates, positively contributing to their communities, and enhancing their career options—all topics covered in the curriculum.

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

There are many youth and family needs that must be met in Northern Nye and Esmeralda Counties. MAGIC is addressing one important need. The program is significant in that it represents the first time Northern Nye and Esmeralda UNCE was involved in youth programming outside of the traditional 4-H program. MAGIC embraces a holistic approach to addressing youth issues by engaging new audiences for UNCE with strong support from local communities. A recent community situation analysis conducted in Northern Nye and Esmeralda Counties (Van Poperin, 2006), revealed that community development and strengthening families in crisis are critical issues that need to be addressed. Echoing the ecological model that MAGIC embraces, we can see connections between positive youth development, strong families and healthier communities. In conclusion, short- and mid-term evaluations indicate that MAGIC is making a difference in the lives of youth, families and communities in Northern Nye and Esmeralda Counties.

REFERENCES

Facility and Juvenile Justice Programming.


