Abstracts from 2014 Community Projects

Hunger in Higher Ed: Educating the Georgia State Community about the Rising Trend of Food Insecurity among College Students

MSW Students: Stephanie Frame, Lori McHugh & Tanji Mickens

Our group partnered with the Atlanta Community Food Bank to educate the Georgia State community about the rising trend of food insecurity among college students. Our approach involved creating opportunities for Georgia State community members to learn more about this issue, share personal experiences and ideas, and become equipped with resources to take action to help themselves, fellow students, and other community members. Highlights of our success include initiating conversations and providing resources to over 200 students by tabling in Georgia State’s courtyard, hosting an on-campus documentary screening with a very meaningful discussion afterward, and having the opportunity to directly share our concerns with Georgia State administrators. Through this experience, we now have a much greater understanding of the reasons and extent to which students are struggling with food insecurity at Georgia State and have concluded that significant institutional and government policy changes are needed to reverse this alarming trend.

Listening to Our Elders: An Exploration of Existing Community-Based Services

**Note: This project won the award for the best Capstone Project at the 2014 the AYSPS Public Service & Research End Event held May 6, 2014**

MSW Students: Colin Mathews, Kennesha Smith, Chelsea Sparks, Sean Stankovich, and Wendy White

As part of our MSW community project, our group partnered with Service and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE) Atlanta to identify ways to increase participation in community-based services among the African-American LGBT population over 60. Ten interviews were conducted with eight male and two female African-American LGBT individuals over 60. Interviews consisted of thirteen open-ended questions which explored adults’ perceived need for LGBT community-based service agencies, concerns about aging, barriers to accessing services, and the importance of language used to address this population. Major themes identified included a desire for services that addressed security issues (e.g. financial stability, failing physical and mental health, maintaining independence), a lack of personal resources as a barrier to accessing services (e.g. costs of services, lack of transportation, social isolation), and a lack of cultural competency among existing services. Researchers produced a list of specific recommendations for working with this cohort tailored to the needs of SAGE Atlanta. Additionally, researchers produced a community resource guide to LGBT-friendly services within the Atlanta Metro Area to be given to interview participants and further distributed by SAGE.

GSU RAISE UP Informational Forum

MSW Students: Jacquelyn Ulrich, Laura Griggs, Cecily Johnson, and Jordyn Penn

We partnered with Atlanta Jobs with Justice (AJWJ) to provide awareness to Georgia State students on the Living Wage Movement and to create a coalition of Georgia State contacts for Atlanta Jobs with Justice. A few of the tasks we accomplished were: we spoke to classes about
the event and issue, flyered and made contact with students on campus, contacted potential interested student organizations to initiate involvement, reached out to and created a panel of ‘experts’ for the event, participated in Atlanta Jobs with Justice events and meetings, and constructed the flow of the event. For example, booking the venue, creating questions, securing a camera, securing transportation for panelists, and more. The outcomes and impact of the event included attendance of 50+ people, campus awareness of the living wage movement and Atlanta Jobs with Justice, giving low wage workers a platform to share experiences and concerns, new student contacts for Atlanta Jobs with Justice, and increased knowledge of the Living Wage Movement and community organizing for MSW group students. As a group, we learned about the struggle low-wage workers face in this country and were able to convey, educate, and involve students at Georgia State in the Living Wage Movement with the help of Atlanta Jobs with Justice.

aJustATL: Connecting Atlantans for a Just Community
MSW Students: Rebecca Butcher, Jesica Eames, J. Travis Hilliard, Susan Landrum, and Gabriella Rich

aJustATL is a student-conceived community project partnering with multiple non-profit organizations in the metro-Atlanta area through a social media campaign. aJustATL was inspired by its founding members’ communities of friends, colleagues, and networks who care about issues of social justice in conversation but in action spend most of their time talking and processing rather than engaging. The project intended to generate and measure an increase in civic engagement in Atlanta through online organizing via social media outlets and the aJustATL.com website. Engagement was measured in two different capacities: (1) utilizing website analytics and social media metrics and (2) surveying attendees at an Equal Pay Day event co-hosted with 9to5 Working Women Atlanta, the sponsoring organization for this project, to learn how the individual learned about the event. Out of 56 event attendees, 24 learned about the event from aJustATL’s website and/or social media promotion. This project contributes to existing research on the efficacy of online organizing and provides preliminary support for continuing aJustATL’s efforts due to its successes.

Empowering Black Minds: Black Mental Health Net.com
MSW Students: Samone Williams & Vaya Fraley
In collaboration with Georgia State University Master of Social Work (MSW) students, Vaya Fraley and Samone Williams, worked with BlackMentalHealthNet.com (BMHN) to accomplish the primary goal of expanding the organization’s campaign to “empower the Black community by promoting mental health awareness” (BMHN, 2011). This community project was able to promote mental health awareness by developing 3 written mental health stories, pertaining to the African-American community. We also contributed to raising awareness via facilitating 2 community outreach events focusing on the impact of trauma on mental health among African-Americans and increasing the number of BMHN’s Twitter followers from 425 to 473, through the posting of daily news stories relevant to mental health in the community. With this community project we learned, expanding mental health awareness is still a much needed and worthy cause for the Black community, because “ethnic minority groups, who already confront prejudice and discrimination due to their group affiliation, suffer double stigma [or additional discrimination] when faced with the burdens of mental illness” (Faye, 2005, p. 982).

First Step Volunteer Pilot Program Development
Our group partnered with First Step to assist in creating a volunteer program for their organization. We recruited key stakeholders of First Step to do a Needs Assessment in order to decide what volunteer positions were needed. We then researched best practices for volunteer programs. Our final project consisted of the group creating a complete volunteer manual as well as a volunteer coordinator manual with volunteer recruitment strategies to help guide the volunteer program. The outcomes of this project will provide a foundation for the volunteer program at First Step. This will allow First Step to increase the quality and quantity of their services of aiding individuals who are experiencing homelessness achieve stability and independence. The lessons learned from this project include the importance of establishing and communicating a shared vision, gaining commitment from all key stakeholders and managing time effectively.

The Growing Stronger Community Wellness Initiative – How education and gardening can improve the lives of women of color with HIV/AIDS.

The Growing Stronger Community Wellness Initiative [GSCWI], a project launched by the Growing Stronger cohort comprised of Colleen Carrington, Ashley Jones, Thomaesa Brundage, Monique Rackley and Miriam Dunson; alongside SisterLove Inc. endeavored to determine and engage constituents around gardening as a vehicle to improve the lives of women of color with HIV/AIDS. A proposal initiated by MaryAnne Adams – Director of Community Research/Community Engagement Core at Georgia State University’s Public Health Department, and Lisa Diane White – Director of Programs with SisterLove Inc., presented an outline in which to develop said initiative. With assistance and inspiration from Yvonne Miller (Vinson) master gardener and Executive Director of The Mindful Community Institute Inc. [MCI] and support from Dazon Dixon Diallo President and CEO of SisterLove Inc.; the group executed a small number of meetings and two primary gardening events. The preliminary event initiated a planting of aromatic plant seeds, and the culminating event produced a community garden standing on the grounds of SisterLove’s Motherhouse. Beyond the aforementioned outcomes, the impact of the project was evidenced through direct knowledge of uncomplicated gardening techniques that serve SisterLove constituents in exercising greater autonomy, and transferring their newly acquired skills to the larger community; and produced revolutionary knowledge around gardening as an act of political resistance.

Beating the Rhythm of Eviction: An OOHA Benefit Concert

Our group worked with Occupy Our Homes Atlanta (OOHA), a grassroots organization that works to empower Atlanta neighborhoods and individuals that have been impacted by the housing crisis (Occupy Our Homes Atlanta, 2010). We planned a benefit concert with the goal of raising funds for the organization, as well as increasing support for the organization and raising awareness around the housing crisis issue. This included booking artists who we thought matched the vision of the organization and promoting the event to those populations who the organization wanted to reach. The concert took place on April 12, 2014 and raised a total of $731. Approximately 60 people attended the event, who were encouraged to take part in the
Can Coaching Improve College Outcomes for Homeless and Foster Care Youth?

A Formative Evaluation of Orange Duffel Bag’s Coaching for College Completion Program

MSW Students: Gloria Jackson-McLean, Jonai McCoy, Melissa Nyarko, Darcy Olsen, and LaShawna Scott

Our group partnered with Orange Duffel Bag (ODB) to evaluate their Coaching for College Completion (CCC) program at Georgia State University (GSU) and Atlanta Technical College (ATC). We created evaluation tools and conducted midterm evaluations in March and final evaluations in April. Nine students at GSU participated in the midterm evaluations and 17 students participated at ATC. For the final evaluations, 12 students participated at GSU and 14 students participated at ATC. The results suggest that the participants are satisfied with the program as 100% would refer the program to a friend. The results of our evaluation will assist the OBD team with future program planning and can be shared nationally to assist other homeless and foster care youth achieve college success. This project has taught us the importance of a comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) at a project’s commencement and increased our awareness of challenges faced by this population.

The Community Engagement Toolkit

MSW Students: Shira Heffernan and Rebecca Richard

Our group worked with Golden Key International Honor Society to help them develop a Global Service Initiative, which aims to impact and improve the lives of at-risk youth aged zero to seventeen through literacy, education, and real-world preparedness. We specifically developed a tool kit for this initiative to create resources for chapters throughout the world explaining the initiative, the importance of community service, service learning- connecting service to the classroom, and how to establish and engage members in community service activates. This tool kit also included literature and articles about the benefits of service and how ‘millennials’ (college aged students,) can incorporate service into their lives. The tool kit we developed will be sent to every chapter associated with Golden Key allowing them to make tangible and lasting impacts on their communities and the world. Overall we learned the benefits of volunteerism within a large scale organization and what impact we can make on a global scale.

Fort Gillem Community Project

MSW Students: Nathan Heald, Julie Nguyen, Lisa Palmer, Sidra Rahman, Bekkah Sperry

We partnered with GreenLaw, a non-profit environmental justice law firm, to empower community members to advocate for environmental justice. Toxins buried at Ft. Gillem, a closed military base, have leaked into the groundwater and may be polluting the air. We developed and administered a community health assessment. Community members reported multiple health and community concerns, and a desire to attend a community meeting regarding these issues. At the community meeting, we shared the history of Ft. Gillem, information about the toxins and
potential health effects, the results of the health assessment, and the status of the cleanup and redevelopment efforts. A toolkit was provided to empower residents to advocate for their community. We learned that community organizing requires building trusting relationships with partners and community members, which can be time-consuming. Additionally, community members should be involved from the start in order to increase engagement.

Keywords: Environmental justice, community organizing, health assessment

No Stress Before the Test
MSW Students: Ebony Brown, Lidia Mengisteab, Bryesha Smith, Chidinma Udokoro, and Whitney Wilson

Our group partnered with the Wholistic Stress Control Institute (WSCl). The primary objective of our project was to work with sixth graders at Sylvan Hills Middle School in Atlanta, Georgia to teach them testing anxiety techniques, to aid them while taking mandated Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT). Group members conducted ten classroom presentations on Tuesday and Thursday. The objectives was to educate the youth on how to prepare for CRCT tests, and provide students and teachers with tips on how to manage test anxiety in order to improve outcomes. After classroom presentations, group members culminated our presentations with a “No Stress before the Test Expo” on Friday. Students were able to learn information and participate in various activities from different stations including study techniques, yoga, stress relief and diet/ nutrition. The youth were also able to learn about stress before the test in order for techniques to assist them while taking their exams. In addition, students did exceptionally well on post-tests that were administered after classroom presentations. This community project taught group members the importance of communication, collaboration, and developing mutual interests in partnerships.