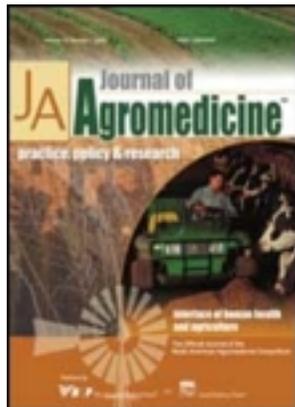


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Family Services for Migrant and Seasonal Farm Workers: The Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA) Model

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ABSTRACT. Agricultural employers and work supervisors strive to keep children out of worksites, but oftentimes migrating farm worker parents lack accessible or affordable options for childcare in a trusted environment. Thus, children may not have a safe, appropriate place to be while their parents are conducting agricultural work. Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA) of Florida is a community development organization that creates and fosters opportunities for the children of migrant and other low-income rural families. To better understand the RCMA system, an in-depth assessment of its program was undertaken to identify both its standard and unique features. Results revealed many attributes contributing to RCMA's success. Based upon RCMA's 48-year track record, employers, agribusinesses, and communities are encouraged to adopt strategies to meet local and regional childcare needs where parents are working in agriculture.

KEYWORDS. Agribusiness, agricultural employers, childcare, family services, farm worker children, farm workers, migrant families

INTRODUCTION

Data reveal that nonworking children account for nearly three fourths of nonfatal injuries to children on farms.¹ Child safety advocates strongly encourage parents to keep young children physically separated from agricultural work sites; and agricultural employers strive to keep underage children out of labor-intensive production sites.^{2,3} But many times children do

not have a safe place to be when their parents are working in agriculture. This is especially true for migrant and seasonal farm worker families who, in addition to having limited financial resources, may experience barriers to education, health care services, and housing.⁴

Universally, working parents desire a safe and trustworthy setting where their young children can be cared for and nurtured. Parents and employers alike realize that work productivity

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improves when parents are not distracted with childcare concerns. Some major corporations offer on-site childcare as a benefit of employment, and most urban settings have a wide range of childcare options from which parents can choose. In contrast, rural settings present major challenges in providing services for children of working parents.⁵

Peer-reviewed and gray literature reveals no evidence of “model” childcare programs for migrant and seasonal farm workers. With respect to families living on farms, a comprehensive review of childcare needs was conducted by Reschke who emphasized characteristics of model childcare needed as being trustworthy, available when needed, and affordable.⁵ However, this review did not delineate unique needs of migrant and seasonal farm workers’ families.

The purpose of this paper is to describe features of a model program that provides services for farm worker families in Florida, followed by an explanation of attributes contributing to its success. Recommendations for potential modeling of similar services in other regions are then provided.

METHODS

In order to better understand the Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA) program, a process that was both systematic and opportunistic was employed. Overall an exploratory, noncomparative approach was employed. Methods included a review of published literature and historical documents; viewing of videotapes developed by and/or about RCMA; in-person and telephone interviews with key informants; and discussions and consensus development with RCMA executive staff; then generating a concise program description with recommendations that could be disseminated for potential replication.

Two site visits were conducted at the RCMA headquarters in Immokalee, Florida. Interviews with the RCMA Director and staff members were held. Tours of the main facility and several smaller centers provided opportunities to interact with many staff and also to observe childcare services in action. Interviews with two members

of the RCMA Board of Directors, representing agricultural business, were conducted, one by telephone, the other in-person. Annual reports and newsletters as well as the Web site provided background information and current programmatic details. Organizational charts and budgets were reviewed. Videos of the early years of RCMA, describing its history and growth, as well as several more recent RCMA descriptive videos were viewed. Other promotional videos and Web sites of Florida growers that reflected their relationship with RCMA were noted. The RCMA Executive Director accepted an invitation to participate in a plenary presentation at the 2013 North American Agricultural Safety Summit and this required advance preparation of a poster and handout materials. The 12-month process also involved teleconference calls and exchange of draft documents to generate findings and develop consensus on implications and recommendations.

FINDINGS

RCMA Program Features

The RCMA is a community development, not-for-profit organization that creates and fosters opportunities for the children of migrant and other low-income rural families.⁶ RCMA was founded in 1965 by Mennonite Church volunteers and began with three centers, serving approximately 75 children in the Homestead and Florida City area. RCMA retains “Christian” in its title to honor its founders, but it is not a faith-based organization. By 2012, RCMA served nearly 8,000 children ages 6 weeks to 12 years in 87 centers and three charter schools in 21 Florida counties. The children are 83% Hispanic, 12% African American, 3% biracial, and 2% white. With an annual budget of \$60 million and about 1,600 employees, it is now the largest nonprofit childcare provider in Florida. More than half of RCMA’s childcare centers are nationally accredited. RCMA is also well equipped to serve children with disabilities, having assisted about 500 children with disabilities to access special educational services and needed therapies in 2012.⁷ RCMA is built on principles of incorporating the family into

child development, health care, and educational activities; and hiring and training staff from the communities served.

It is important to view RCMA as more than a provider of childcare. Services to family and children underscore its overall mission. However, it is the focus on community development that enables RCMA to serve as a model organization. Through its capacity building and investment in staff hired from the community, there is an important and positive impact not only on the staff hired, but also on the families of the staff. Ultimately, this commitment to the community results in broader development and empowerment.

Many of the centers are innovatively planned with architectural design that fosters a physical space with a focus on the children. For example, at the headquarters in Immokalee, all of the administrative windows look out onto playgrounds or gardens. Classrooms are open with windows to the outside and windows allow visibility between each room. The internal floor plans of rooms are conducive for staff to interact appropriately with infants through adolescents. The hours of operation of each center are determined with parental input. Some centers open as early as 6:30 AM. The centers serving primarily migrant families are opened 7 to 8 months a year. Workers are temporarily laid off from RCMA when the center closes.

RCMA offers a number of parent programs. English and literacy classes are offered for adults who are given the opportunity to finish their education in both the Florida and Mexico school systems. Additionally, centers host monthly parent meetings in the evenings. The content and topics of these meetings vary and offer important opportunities to provide parents education and information pertaining to their own health and safety as well as that of their children. To facilitate parent attendance, food, childcare, and transportation are provided; and the meetings are conducted in Spanish, the dominant language of the families served. If there are attendees who do not speak Spanish, translation services are provided.

RCMA uses the primary language of a child's home from birth to three years, then staff strives to incorporate increasing proportions of English.

Staff members speak various languages, including English, Spanish, and Creole. Like other organizations dealing with immigrant populations, RCMA is challenged by the changing demographics, languages, dialects, and needs of different immigrant groups such as indigenous populations from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.

Families are selected based upon need and poverty level. Almost all RCMA families are at or below poverty level. Even with the income requirement, more than 2,500 eligible children remain on waiting lists. A community-based selection process is used that involves parent advisory committees that participate with staff to select families. Beyond family services, each center includes one or two family support workers who offer case management to assist families in navigating social services and accessing health care. Transportation is also an important service provided.

Most RCMA centers are federally funded by Head Start, Early Head Start, and Migrant Head Start comprehensive child-development programs that serve children from birth to five years, pregnant women, and their families. All Head Start programs are supported by the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families in the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), which awards grants to RCMA. In addition to these federal programs, RCMA maintains a unique and innovative partnership with the State of Florida to target the children of farm worker and former farm worker families wherever services are needed throughout the state. Voluntary prekindergarten is available to eligible 4-year-olds and programs strive to increase the school readiness of young children in low-income families. RCMA also has three charter schools with students grades K-8.

DISCUSSION

Attributes of Success

The RCMA model believes that when groups align around a common mission and focus on children, they can resolve otherwise contentious issues between employers, workers,

and communities. It is no secret that Florida's grower-worker relationships have had a contentious history, yet with a focus on children, RCMA has successfully engendered respect and support from local growers and agribusinesses. RCMA makes an effort to acknowledge the best employers affiliated with their services. Some of their grower partners engage with RCMA because they have corporate social responsibility principles that include services for their farm workers. Others are simply motivated by a desire to support a stellar organization. This united purpose of improving conditions for children of farm workers has helped address local concerns associated with the social, economic, and labor needs of seasonal agriculture production and a migratory population.

RCMA's governing structure is critical to its success. Overseeing RCMA is a volunteer Board of Directors (BOD), drawn from the geographic regions where RCMA operates and the constituencies served, including parents, educators, attorneys, financial experts, growers, and other representatives from the agribusiness community. There is substantial representation by the grower/producer community, including leadership of the BOD. It is not uncommon to hear farm organization leaders and growers speak on behalf of the value of the RCMA program and its influence on the success of Florida's agricultural outputs. Avocado grower Medore Krome, whose family has donated a large endowment to RCMA, stated, "My father was involved with RCMA since its inception . . . our family continues to believe in its principles . . . and to the farming community this is an organization like nothing else."⁸

RCMA embraces the concept of shared governance and shared decision-making. There is an extensive needs assessment process to gather parent input, understand community concerns, and obtain feedback on its services. Their strategic planning and expansion is based on results of the needs assessment. Expansion is often a response to an immediate need or even a community tragedy. For instance, one RCMA center opened after the death of young child from an



agriculture-related accident on a farm where the child's parents worked.

Staff recruitment, retention, and commitment is another attribute of success. RCMA staff represents the community it serves—85% of staff is community members. Many employees are former farm workers and parents who benefited from the childcare and family services offered by RCMA. Staff members are encouraged to achieve credentials required to provide childcare ranging from a Childhood Development Associate (CDA) designation to an associate's or bachelor's degree. Many of the classroom teachers and family support workers start as entry staff, receive professional development, and then are promoted to higher positions. Recently, RCMA celebrated the college graduations or professional development of 98 staff members. Staff retention is particularly impressive, as many centers close down 3 to 4 months each year as workers migrate north to work in crop agriculture outside of Florida. Staff members are eligible to receive unemployment benefits during this time. RCMA offers a token loyalty bonus to returning staff when centers reopen.

A diversified funding base has been a trademark of RCMA's sustainability, which is funded by local, state, and federal grants, United Way, agribusiness, and other corporations, community foundations, and individuals. State and federal agencies represent over 90% of RCMA's funding. Florida growers, businesses, community foundations, social service agencies, and concerned individuals provide land, buildings, services, and expertise to help open doors to opportunities for farm worker families. Additionally, local school districts provide grants and reimbursements for certain programs and services provided by RCMA. The United Way, community foundations, civic groups, and corporate and individual donors provide vital support, as RCMA must raise \$500,000 annually from local sources to qualify for certain grants. For every \$1 donation, RCMA can receive up to \$16 in matching funds. In-kind contributions and volunteer activities augment other revenue sources. RCMA does not have a development director or any staff

solely dedicated to fundraising. They also do not rely on revenue generating activities.

Although multiple revenue sources are accessed, it is important to note that the primary source of support is federal Migrant Head Start. Many of the features of programming and governance are actually required for eligibility of Migrant Head Start grants, including parental involvement and community participation in governance. RCMA maintains numerous community connections and is supported by a variety of partners and in-kind contributions, along with a large pool of volunteers. The regional art community is also very involved with RCMA through special projects as well as through the charter schools, where there is a particular emphasis on the arts.

Limitations

This initiative was not a formal research study but rather an exploratory assessment of a known program that has received awards and national recognition from numerous entities including agribusinesses. A limitation of this RCMA program review was the absence of comparisons or contrasts with farm worker childcare programs in other states. Given that this program review was general in nature, there are several factors that warrant further assessment. Future assessments could include reasons for employee job satisfaction; factors contributing to staff retention; attributes associated with the shared values between employers and employees; and an in-depth analysis of strengths and weaknesses associated with agribusiness partnerships.

Recommendations

Given the justification to address the needs of farm workers' children as well as the benefits to workers, employers, and society, this highly regarded, successful RCMA model deserves to be replicated beyond Florida. Seven recommendations for employers, child safety advocates, and community leaders are provided, with the goal of adopting all or some of the components of this model:

1. *Start the conversation with company (agribusiness/employers) leaders regarding the value and existing models of child/family care programs.* Emphasize a return on investment regarding employer involvement in childcare. Employers seek a steady, reliable labor force for seasonal work. Providing childcare is an incentive to recruit and retain employees with young children.
2. *Assess prevailing conditions, including worker demographics, existing services, and labor needs.* Secure the facts regarding the current and projected labor force, current options for childcare, and anticipated needs for services, noting both changes in production agriculture labor needs and fluctuating availability of workers.
3. *Bring potential stakeholders together—*service providers, farm worker representatives, community and business leaders, faith-based groups, and other local stakeholders. Share information regarding model programs and projected needs to raise awareness about opportunities for improving childcare and family services for workers/parents associated with local agricultural employers. Gauge the interest in further discussions and identify a few champions to help with next steps.
4. *Conduct a feasibility study.* Before making any decisions for or against a major initiative, due diligence is warranted. A feasibility study will reduce the risk of making poor decisions, and findings will garner increased support for recommendations. Convene a task force to expand the information regarding current and forecasted conditions. Components will include (a) financial assessment including start-up costs, revenue, and expenses; and potential in-kind/donated facilities and services; (b) current and projected enrollment based upon agribusiness labor needs; (c) potential competitors or duplicative services; (d) implications for the community; and (e) other threats or opportunities.
5. *Prepare and share recommendations from the feasibility study.* Task force participants should seek further input to ensure there is general consensus on recommendations generated from the study. Focus groups, town hall meetings, or sharing of draft documents can be used to refine conclusions and recommendations for action. A brief, clearly written feasibility study report can be useful for justifying next steps, including securing financial support of potential contributors. Ensure that current and future stakeholders receive a copy of the report and understand its implications.
6. *If moving forward, seek guidance and consultation.* It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel, when the experienced RCMA program serves as a model. Additionally, other resources pertaining to starting up childcare businesses are readily available. If possible, visit existing programs and call upon consultants to help streamline decisions and processes. People involved in not-for-profit childcare are likely to welcome the opportunity to help individuals in other locations address the needs of farm worker families, including accessing available public grants and private-sector financial resources.
7. *Plan and launch a new childcare program or provide financial support to augment existing programs for children of farm workers.* Move forward with a flexible yet realistic business plan, establishing desired outcomes and timelines for the initiative. It may be a multiyear strategy that starts slowly. Track and report the process and issues so that careful assessments and decisions can be made.

CONCLUSION

Feedback from the many people associated with RCMA in Florida confirms that there is widespread agreement that this is a win-win situation for all stakeholders involved. The RCMA system has many standard and unique features, and clear attributes contributing to its long-standing success. Certainly there have been challenges and problems that have marked the

nearly 50-year history of RCMA, but these are greatly overshadowed by the positive impact that RCMA has had on communities, farm workers, parents, growers, agribusiness corporations, and most importantly, children. The best indicator of success is the people who were once served by RCMA and have now grown up to be educated, hard-working contributors to society. In fact, some of RCMA's graduates are teachers, licensed childcare providers, farm owners, lawyers, pharmacists, physical therapists, and successful business owners. The strong support of Florida's agricultural industry for this program has garnered mutual respect based upon relevant family services, ensuring that all stakeholders benefit. What it all comes down to is that when the family needs of agricultural workers are met, everyone benefits.

NOTES

The RCMA Web site (www.rcma.org) provides extensive information regarding services, locations, charter schools, employment opportunities, and contact information. Annual reports, newsletters, and videotapes produced by RCMA are available upon request (phone: 239.658.3625). The authors welcome opportunities to discuss this model program and facilitate conversations regarding local interests and needs.

A 4-minute video description of RCMA and its elements of success is available online at www.ashca.org or by request to the National Children's Center at 800.662.6900.

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