

Whatcom Prosperity Action Team
Methodology: Participatory Action Research (PAR)
Current participants: John Korsmo, Adrienne Battis, Jason Dallmann, Katrina Dominique,
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Overview:

This participatory action research effort addresses poverty at the personal level within Whatcom County. Building off of momentum from the recent Whatcom Prosperity Project (2007), our goal from the outset was to create a circle of engagement and support for a small group of community members with a personal interest in learning more about overcoming poverty.

The community participants, referred to in the proposal as the ‘Whatcom Prosperity Action Team’, represent a variety of professional interests and personal experiences relating to poverty. Homelessness, single parenting, substance abuse, incarceration, untreated medical needs, domestic violence, and hunger are but a few of the obstacles faced by members of the group. However, we do not focus entirely on the deficits and challenges each of the group members are facing, but rather consider assets, networks, supports, and hope. Through our weekly meetings, and ongoing cycle of communication, action, and reflection (communicating our needs and ideas for resources; planning actions to take in addressing those needs; enacting those plans; and evaluating and assessing the outcomes and making real-time adjustments), we have experienced both individual, and collective positive outcomes.

Outcomes to date:

As part of our process we purposely discuss what it is that we are each getting out of being a part of the Prosperity Action Team. To date, some of the more notable and easy to understand (from an outsider’s perspective) outcomes include:

- Procurement of a contract with DSHS for members of our group to serve as “Community Navigators”, supporting Work First participants through sanctions. This is a reimbursable contract that we are using to employ three of our participants on a part-time, as-needed basis. This contract would not have been possible without the committed effort and networking of all participants. This is a tangible outcome in that it is an opportunity for employment and/or additional financial resources for some of our members, but is also a testament to the efficacy of our model of using relationships and engagement to work with people in poverty who are ‘caught up in the system’. (More detailed information is available regarding our Community Navigators concept).
- Scholarship/assistance for professional development and training (through NWTI).
- Education and awareness about contemporary poverty issues in Whatcom County.
- Advisement for service provision for community-based organizations.
- Personal relationships and supports in dealing with emergent life challenges.
- Expanded ‘circle of influence’ and network of service providers (shared information about where and how to receive needed services in the community – including assistance with education resources, personal finance, health care, transportation assistance, legal advice, housing, employment, etc).

- Personal friendship and attachment.
- Empowerment and support through difficult times (for all participants, regardless of socio-economic status).
- Hope and direction.

Hours of conversation have been recorded, and running themes and sound bite ‘quotes of the day’ are frequently shared during our time together. Data will be assessed and categorized to identify themes and trends in our efforts. It is our hope that the successes we are experiencing can be shared by increasing numbers of additional small groups throughout the County. We have had conversations with other groups of individuals who are interested in how we are conducting our efforts, and in what we are finding as outcomes. We fully anticipate the model of connecting through a participatory action research methodology to be replicated in different circles throughout the County.

Student and Community Involvement:

Students in the Human Services Program study change theory and experience field-based service projects supporting, implementing, and sustaining systemic change. I am sharing the process and results of this research effort with my students, as an example of community engagement at the grassroots level, and anticipate opportunity arising for students to be personally engaged in the effort. A decision was made early in the process to not *initially* invite students or others to attend who would ‘only’ serve an observational role, but rather hold space for people who share the group’s commitment to changing the landscape of poverty in Whatcom County, inclusive of the commitment of time to come to the meetings and to work on issues outside of meeting times. However, given the degree to which the group has come together and built a level of trust with each other, we are now at a place of allowing students opportunity to be a peripheral part of the process – either as observers or guests. Current students in my Human Services 404, Community Systems class and Spring Quarter Global Systems class (same cohort of students) will be invited to engage with the Prosperity Action Team over the next several months. This cohort of students have been informed in class by me of the efforts and progress of this group – as an example of one effective method of engaging community members in the process of social change. Additionally, the research team is beginning to discuss how best to incorporate this effort into my Summer Quarter Applied Research course, as it will be an exciting way for students to learn about applied research that is happening in their own community.

Aside from the University, two community-based organizations are directly involved: the Northwest Training Institute (NWTI), and Whatcom Family and Community Network. Additionally, Work First, Opportunity Council, DSHS, and the Whatcom Coalition for Healthy Communities have been involved and supportive of our efforts. We are confident that our progress will continue, that this research will shed needed light on the current issues relating to confronting poverty locally, and that through personal connections and relationships, and purposeful planning, action, and reflection progress will be made toward self-defined prosperity for each of the participants. We thank the Community Leadership Advisory Council for its support in this progressive and necessary research effort.

Submitted by John Korsmo, 2/14/08