Introduction

In D.C., the issue of poverty affects both adults and their children. As part of the course ‘Project DC: Urban Research Internship’, the researchers collaborated with a local community services center to assess the activities of the Social Services and After-School program in meeting the Community partner’s (CP) mission. The CP was established in 1991 to eradicate poverty, its causes and consequences within the defined service area through a collaborative, comprehensive and integrated approach to social services, economic empowerment and youth development, resulting in positive outcomes for individuals and families.

Background

Having the skills to reach college or earn a degree has been noted in relevant literature as the most effective way for children to escape poverty as adults. To address both the academic and social needs of the children there are five main indicators of positive child development for college attainment. They are Competence (academic, cognitive, social, health and vocational), Confidence, Connection, Character and Caring. With respect to adult poverty, there is strong support that experiencing a loss or gain of employment is most strongly related to entry and exits and that stable housing is one of the biggest challenges to those in poverty. Studies point to the substantial benefits that can accrue to both clients and programs through service coordination, by providing more effective and efficient services and enabling client access to a wider range of aid than would otherwise be available. The CP aims to improve outcomes for individuals and families through a more holistic approach to service delivery.

Research Questions

1. In what ways is the after-school program aligned with the CP’s mission of eradicating poverty?
2. In what ways are the social service (ss) programs aligned with the CP’s mission of eradicating poverty?

Methodology

Results are based on interviews conducted with 11 members of the staff and observations of the after-school program. In order to address the research questions, respondents were asked about the missions and actions of each of their programs. Responses helped to map the missions of individual programs back to the overarching mission of Perry.

Results-in-Brief

With respect to the after-school program, much of the findings from interviews and observations were consistent with what relevant literature states as best at helping low-income children reach college. Specifically, academic competency is promoted through formal tutoring, educational games and homework assistance time. Character is also well developed as staff provide good role models and teach interpersonal skills such as conflict resolution and decision making. Confidence was also addressed in activities for boosting academic and social confidence. Staff connect with the students and express an interest in forming a close-knit community. The CP believes that time for creativity and self-expression help the children handle many of the emotional problems that they may have.

The social service programs address both financial/economic and participation challenges faced by clients. Case workers collaborate with clients to assess their needs and produce a self-sufficiency plan which serves as a strategic outline to get them “from where they are to where they want to be”. Programs provide emergency assistance (usually utility and rental) and help clients seek adequate housing and pursue educational goals or employment.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the mission of the after-school program is to develop the skills believed to help the children reach college. Activities include improving academics, developing positive characters and providing a safe environment for the children to grow. The CP is a relatively young organization, and the future will most likely show a great benefit to the young population in the community.

In order to fully realize its mission, the CP must continue to meet the needs of its clients. The differences and similarities between staff-identified challenges and client-identified challenges to clients should be more definitely determined. It is also recommended that further attention be given to the problem of mental and emotional well-being of clients. The issue of powerlessness should be assessed for relevance and addressed through client empowerment and community-building.