

Developing Support Programmes In Rural and Under-served Areas

Paulette LeBlanc, Best Start Consultant

Preventing eating disorders protects high risk individuals from pain and suffering that can affect every fibre of their being. It saves family members and friends worry and without a doubt, it is more cost effective than treatment. Yet moving a population from thinking “It will never happen to me” to “I should be careful that it doesn’t happen to me” does not happen easily.

A challenge of living in rural places like Northern Ontario is dealing with the absence of specialized medical care. For someone with an eating disorder, getting medical care locally is difficult. Many patients are flown hundreds of miles to clinics in more populated areas. A community-based committee, formed by Algoma Best Start, recognized this and developed a Body Image Resource Centre in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. The primary goal of the Centre is to prevent the incidence of eating disorders by offering education about the effects of body image and weight preoccupation. Read on to discover how this grassroots committee, with no formal funding, developed a body image resource centre.

Pulling a committee together

Our first task was to bring people together to start talking about the issue. Staff at Best Start sent letters to local service providers inviting representatives to sit on a body image committee. We made follow up phone calls and arranged face-to-face meetings with those interested. Current membership includes representatives from high schools and the social service sector as well as parents, volunteers and students.

Leadership and committee maintenance

Leadership: With a focused leader, committee members feel safe, knowing that details such as organizing meetings, communicating with partners, and committee building will be addressed. Our committee chose two leaders, one as Chairperson and the other to manage information, learning and resources. Leadership has rotated several times.

Maintenance: We focused on two major components of committee maintenance—turnover and organizational structure. On any committee, people come and go and membership always changes. As a project moves from its conception stage to planning and on to action, different skills, expertise, strengths, networks and partners are required to move it along. Committee members who were instrumental in the planning stage may

not feel that they have the skills or time to stay involved in the action stage. Being prepared was the key for us. Committee building was always on our minds. Another important aspect of maintenance was developing an organizational structure. We wanted to define clearly who we are and what we do, and therefore developed a vision statement with clear objectives. Once we identified our *raison d'être*, we identified roles and length of term. These included a chair, secretary, treasurer, student supervisor and programme champions. Individuals were asked to hold these positions for one year.

Getting down to business

Before we could do any concrete planning, we had to learn how to develop a resource centre. The committee consulted with Carla Rice, an expert in the field on body image in Toronto. Carla helped us to identify what we should plan for. We first envisioned an elaborate resource centre, but once reality set in, we decided to start small.

During the first few months we tossed around a lot of ideas. We addressed “starter projects” at regular monthly meetings, giving us something to focus on while we were working up to the larger goal of creating the centre. We first focused on school programming but discovered other agencies were already going into schools. Not wanting to duplicate services, we redirected our efforts to a communication campaign that would target teens but still get our message out to everyone in the community.

Video: We then asked teens how they would want to receive health messages and they told us exactly what they wanted: They would probably not read the newspaper or stop at a booth at school, but they would listen to radio messages or watch a television programme. A television programme, they told us, had to be upbeat and fun as well as educational. No long-winded professionals lecturing them! We then partnered with our local community college for a student intern to co-ordinate the television programme, “Some Body to Love.” Next, we partnered with others who would benefit from the development of the television programme. It took us a year longer than anticipated to complete the programme but it was well worth the wait, effort and learning.

Theatre Performance: The Committee is in the process of developing a play that will be performed in high schools. So far we have approached our local Family Life Theatre group, gained support from our school boards, and submitted a proposal to the Trillium Foundation which is still pending.

Mobile Resource Library: Another committee member wanted to see resources available to high school students and so we started planning for a mobile resource library. Having no money to purchase the required resources, we launched an Adopt-A-Book programme. In the first 6 months we received over \$2500 worth of donated books, journals and videos.

Peer Support: Our peer support initiative began when a parent called our local Health Unit looking for a support group. In response, our Body Image committee formed a small organizing committee to develop and structure a group. Close attention was paid to formatting the support meetings with an agenda, guidelines, principles, mission statement and clear objectives. We now have a support group, built on a sound structure, for friends and families of those suffering from eating disorders.

In order to actualize our goal of opening a Body Image Resource Centre we had to focus on concrete annual plans. At our first annual planning session we identified topics, programme champions and time lines. We strategized for existing initiatives and laid out plans for new ones, including developing a logo, after-care program, volunteer base and partnerships.

Gaining credibility

The committee believed that in order to attract the partners and stakeholders needed for a resource centre, we first had to develop a track record. Most people prefer to get involved with established organizations or committees that have proven success. Our smaller initiatives helped us develop the credibility we needed. When we were working on the video, mobile resource library, Adopt-A-Book and peer support group, we were developing a track record that would open doors for us later. We were now poised to invite established organizations to become partners in the development of the resource centre.

Building Partnerships: The committee believed that in order to secure such stakeholders, we would have to demonstrate that we were a capable, credible, responsible committee. We started small and kept it needs based, only approaching partners as needed for each initiative. For instance, the superintendent of the school board is helping us with the performance and with the mobile resource library. We partnered with our cable company and local community college for the video and we worked with local mental health agencies on the Adopt-A-Book programme.

Committee members discussed possible candidates for partnerships and chose those most closely linked to body image work. We identified partners by asking ourselves, “Who else would benefit from developing this initiative?” Next we prepared a presentation that pointed out how a partnership can benefit all parties involved, then met with candidates and found we had no problems persuading them to get involved.

By the time we approached identified partners to take on major responsibility for the centre, we had a credible track record, dedicated committee members, a large network of advisors, partners and volunteers, successful programmes, evaluations, donations and local interest! Along the way, we partnered with:

- A local graphic artist who donated the logo design.

- A child and youth agency that donated space in their facility, signage, photocopying and telephone services.
- The centre is staffed by a third year placement student from the child and youth worker programme at the local community college.
- A mental health agency that issued charitable donation receipts on the committee's behalf.

The body image Resource Centre and its programmes are completely community owned and operated. Without formal funding for staff and equipment, committee building and partnering is an ongoing process. We also do fundraising and stuff-raising. All this ensures that the centre has a responsible steering committee, a facility to operate from, management, staff to co-ordinate activities, equipment, supplies and support. In all, fifty-five people have assisted with the development and implementation of programmes, and over one hundred people have participated in the starter projects.

Steps to consider when developing support programmes

1. Form and maintain a committee.
2. Brainstorm and focus your efforts.
3. Plan—informally at first, then move to annual plans that identify who will do what by when.
4. Gain credibility through smaller “starter” initiatives.
5. Build partnerships.
6. Approach stakeholders.
7. Address issues and challenges as they arise.
8. Always remember to celebrate your successes along the way.
9. Create an attainable vision. One too large and time consuming could be discouraging to committee members.
10. Be open to suggestions from others.
11. Be patient and flexible.

© NEDIC 1999 www.nedic.ca