



**PUBLIC HEALTH**  
management corporation

**THE EXEMPLARS PROJECT:  
KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF EXEMPLARY SOCIAL  
SERVICE PROGRAMS**

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## **The Exemplars Project: Key Characteristics of Exemplary Social Service Programs**

### **Background and Methodology**

This report presents the findings from a series of interviews conducted by the Research and Evaluation Group at Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC) for Partners for Sacred Places. This work represents one component of Partners' Exemplars Project, which seeks to demonstrate the quality and impact of programs located in congregational settings by identifying exemplary programs and practices in churches and synagogues in Philadelphia. Prior to PHMC's interviews, a working group convened by the Exemplars Project identified categories of programs to be included and created a preliminary list of exemplary programs.

Building on the efforts of the working group and Partners' staff, PHMC Research and Evaluation staff identified experts in each of seven program areas to help define specific standards of program quality in each of these areas. In Winter 2010, PHMC interviewed 25 experts from the following program areas:

1. After school programs
2. Health promotion and nutrition education
3. Behavioral health and addictions treatment
4. Programs serving the homeless
5. Older adult services
6. Business and community development
7. Adult education.

The interviews were conducted with direct service staff from PHMC and other Philadelphia organizations that work in these fields. PHMC monitors the City of Philadelphia's Out of School Time (OST) programs, so the OST program monitors and program monitor supervisors were able to provide valuable insight into quality after school programming for youth. PHMC also manages many health promotion and health care programs, including behavioral health treatment facilities and programs for the homeless, so directors and staff from these programs were able to discuss successful community-based health programs.

For older adult services, business and community development, and adult education staff from other well-established Philadelphia service organizations participated in the interviews. The participating organizations include: Jewish Family and Children's Services, Philadelphia Corporation for Aging, The Enterprise Center, Local Initiatives Support Corporation, and the Center for Literacy. The full list of individuals who were interviewed for this project and their agency affiliations are provided in **Appendix A**.



Most of the interviews were done in person, although some were conducted over the phone. For after school programs, business and community development programs, and programs serving the homeless, the interviews were done in a group discussion format. While all of the experts had experience working with congregation-based programs, their levels of involvement and experience varied, and they had different perspectives on the role of congregation-based programs. Some of those interviewed also had personal opinions about congregation-based initiatives, both positive and negative, which influenced the discussions.

The interviews addressed two main questions:

1. What are the characteristics of exemplary/outstanding community-based programs from their field?
2. What are the special strengths, limitations and other considerations for faith-based organizations when hosting or providing programs and services in these areas?

For each program area, the interview respondents identified qualities of exemplary programs that were specific to that area; however, there were also many qualities of exemplary programs that were common to all or most of the program areas. Similarly, many of the strengths and limitations that were identified for congregation-based programs were applicable to all or most of the program areas.

The report begins with a discussion of the potential strengths and challenges for congregations seeking to operate or host social service programs. The next section discusses the common qualities of exemplary programs that were identified during interviews, followed by individual program area profiles that address the key characteristics of exemplary programs in each area.

It is important to note that the findings presented in this report are based on the experiences and opinions of 25 individuals, so it does not propose to be an exhaustive exploration of social service program quality standards or the role of congregation-based social service programs. Instead, it offers a snapshot of some of the key qualities of exemplary programs and offers a perspective on how the role of congregations can continue to expand as they use their many assets to help their communities.



## **The Unique Role of Congregations in the Provision of Social Services**

Congregations have a long history of providing service to the general community, especially to vulnerable groups such as children, homeless individuals and families, and those with mental health disorders or addictions to alcohol and drugs. Many congregations view community outreach as part of their spiritual mission, and they are often able to respond more quickly to new problems compared to more traditional social service organizations. Congregations have a set of unique strengths that can enable them to reach out to community members more effectively than other community organizations.

However, congregations also face particular challenges when providing social services to the general community. Interview respondents addressed both the strengths and challenges for congregations, which are interested in implementing community-based programs.

### **Potential Strengths of Congregation-based Programs**

Congregations are **located in every community**, so hosting programs and services in a congregational setting can bring the services directly to those who need them rather than requiring travel outside of their own communities. It is often difficult for older adults and those with multiple needs to travel far to obtain services, so the location of congregations can be an important asset. One of the persons interviewed emphasized the importance of location for programs that serve the homeless, “It needs to be in a location that’s close to where they are. A lot of feeding programs aren’t really where there’s a large population of homeless people. People just in the neighborhood come by...people who don’t necessarily need it, but they know these meals are available. It’s not targeting the right people because it’s not in the right location. Location is really key.”

For many communities, a house of worship is viewed as a special place that is **safe and approachable**. This positive view can carry over to congregation-based programs and encourage individuals who are suspicious of traditional services to feel comfortable and willing to come to the program. Congregation-based programs have naturally occurring relationships with the older adult community since many older adults have invested their entire lives to their particular congregation. Many older adults consider their congregation to be their one key source of trusted information, their “power base” or “safe haven.” Congregations are a natural community center for older adults, as many congregations themselves are aging.

Congregations also have **space** that is often unused during the week when the need for many programs and services is highest. Although congregations may not be willing or able to spend much money to improve their space, it may not be necessary. As one of the after school program monitor noted, “We have programs where the setting is not desirable and they’ve done a lot to improve it. They create interest areas and make the



space as interesting as possible with very limited resources.” The availability of low cost space also potentially allows congregation-based programs to offer accessible services at lower cost than other organizations.

Another asset that congregation-based programs often have is **access to volunteers** from within the congregation. Volunteers can greatly enhance the work of the program by contributing their time to a wide range of tasks such as food preparation, clean-up, childcare, painting and repairs, providing food and clothes and leading activities and field trips. Many of the individuals that were interviewed stressed the important role that volunteers can play in both congregation-based and other social service programs. They also emphasized that volunteers “have to be managed very carefully with quality scheduled time for volunteers and time for supervision.” Having a volunteer coordinator is critical to the success of this aspect of the program. In the words of one interview respondent, “There’s so much that volunteers can do, and they’re free services. When you look at that, the volunteer coordinator’s salary is nowhere compared to the amount in return.”

The assets that congregations can bring to the delivery of social service programs are many and varied. The interviews also identified potential challenges for congregations that provide or host social service programs, and some of these challenges represent the flip side of potential strengths discussed above.

### **Potential Challenges for Congregation-based Programs**

Congregations’ commitment to outreach and service to the community can become a limitation if the **spiritual values and practices of the congregation are imposed on the individuals served by the program**. One interview respondent commented that some of the Christian programs that serve homeless people are “so mission-driven that proselytizing colors what they do.... it’s all about the mission and the converts.” While it may seem obvious that congregation-based programs should refrain from being judgmental and moralizing towards those receiving services, respondents also noted that program participants are sometimes required (or at least encouraged) to attend faith services or participate in faith activities in order to receive services.

The key to realizing the potential benefits of the spiritual component of a congregation-based program is to be sure that **participation in faith-related activities is completely voluntary**. The director of a residential treatment program was originally opposed to letting a Bible Study group come in from a local congregation but she realized that it was very good for some of the women in the program and since it was voluntary, no one was being coerced into attending. She noted, “It involves women with the community. Women who are addicted feel isolated and have not had healthy role models. Being part of the community, they get outside of themselves.”



Although congregations are located in all communities, there may be vast **cultural differences** between the congregation and the population it wishes to serve. These differences can be detrimental to the congregation's ability to attract and retain participants in their programs if the congregation doesn't take steps to minimize them. In discussing her experience with older adult programs, one respondent noted that "people from one faith may be reluctant to go to another faith's site" and she recommended that programs interested in attracting a diverse group of participants select a name that is not associated with a particular faith.

Limiting program participation to members of your own faith can also make it difficult to sustain the program. One of the after school program monitor noted that, "I had a couple of programs that struggled immensely with attendance because they were only wanted to serve kids who come to their church. They were not willing to look more broadly in the community for kids to participate."

The **space** that is available for a congregation-based program can also present a challenge. Many of the experts described programs in "church basements" that were "dark", "uncomfortable", and the polar opposite of what is needed for an exemplary program. The director of a residential treatment program stressed, "You need light...a program in the basement of a church makes the women feel that they need to hide. You don't really need a lot, but it should be bright, homey and comfortable." The physical space doesn't only contribute to the quality of a program, but to safety as well. Older buildings may not be well suited to host programs for older adults because they cannot accommodate their mobility needs. Senior-friendly buildings should have ramps, elevators, wide aisles, railings and other accommodations to that older adults can move around the building safely and socialize in a welcoming environment.

**Space and safety considerations** are also critical to services for children. One of the after school program monitors noted, "I think one of the big challenges with a lot of the (church) sites is space. I'm thinking of three or four in particular, and they had incredibly bad space that it's safe to say was unsafe. We have encouraged all of our programs to become licensed, but there was no sort of buy in or enthusiasm from church administration to put out the cash to make those kinds of improvements and there was a lot of that church basement, up-the-rickety-stairs to the attic type of thing that really compromised their ability to do quality programming there."

Access to volunteers is a potential strength of congregation-based programs, but it is important for congregations to recognize the **limits of relying on volunteers** to staff their programs. All program staff require some experience and training, and volunteers are no exception. A director of programs for the homeless remarked, "On the faith-based side, the people are always really well-meaning, but people aren't really capable or well-qualified to really do what they do." Several of the individuals who were interviewed for the project noted that by relying on "well-meaning" volunteers, congregation-based programs can sacrifice quality. Respondents stressed the need for volunteers to be trained, regardless of their position in the program, and noted that work with some groups



also requires special training. The director of a residential treatment program noted that all volunteers must go through “Addictions 101” training before working in the program. She noted that “Volunteers must abide by a code of ethics or they may think they are helping when they are not.”

None of these potential challenges to congregation-based social service programs is insurmountable, but consideration of these issues is part of the decision-making when a congregation seeks to manage or host a social service program or service. The interviews provided some insights about opportunities for congregation-based programs that require varying degrees of commitment, resources and expertise.

### **Finding the Best Fit**

Interviews with social service professionals revealed a myriad of examples of congregation-based programs in a wide range of program areas. It is possible to think of a hierarchy of programs that congregations can provide or host from those that require the highest level of commitment, resources and expertise to those that can be managed with a small volunteer staff. In order to capitalize on the strengths that a congregational setting can bring to a program and minimize the challenges, congregations should consider the interests, abilities and resources within the congregation as well as the needs in the surrounding community when planning to provide or host a social service program. For example, if a congregation wishes to capitalize on the benefits of their community location they should focus on the needs in their immediate area.

In terms of expertise, a health promotion or nutrition education program requires trained staff, but a congregation may be able to draw from within their own membership to staff health screening or other events that benefit the community. A congregation, assuming that they have ample space and volunteers, can also host programs that provides food and/or shelter. Similarly education-based programs such as adult literacy, GED or after school programs require trained staff, but training is available for volunteers who are interested and quality standards are available to provide guidance.

Some of the other kinds of health and social service programs that were examined in this project require a level of training and expertise that may be outside the scope of a congregation-based program. These include the delivery of primary health care and behavior health and addictions treatment. Business and community development programs also require extensive resources and expertise. However, in these areas, congregations have created many successful partnerships, some of which are mentioned in this report. Partnerships with outside organizations and institutions can provide opportunities for congregations to maximize their strengths, build relationships, and contribute to a wide range of programs and services in their communities.





## Common Characteristics of Exemplary Programs

Though the interviews were conducted with experts from all types of social service programs, there were common key characteristics of exemplary community-based programs that cut across different service or content areas. These common qualities centered around human resources, program resources, and partnerships.

### Human Resources

**People** play a critical role in every aspect of an exemplary program. **Leaders** of exemplary programs were consistently described as having “vision,” “a clear focus,” and “the ability to create and maintain partnerships with other community resources.” Experts also stressed the importance of leadership that is committed to improving the overall well being of the community. One of the individuals interviewed captured the importance of good leadership: “If you don’t have someone driving that train and really being the person taking responsibility for what happens, if you don’t have that ownership – someone who really gets it – you’re going to have problems.” Exemplary programs have leaders who are able to combine their passion for serving the community with business savvy and administrative skills.

Along with strong leadership, **program staff** are also central to exemplary social service programs in all areas. Community-based programs need well-trained and experienced staff, especially if the program addresses complex social or health issues. Although different program areas require different kinds of expertise, all successful programs have staff that are caring, flexible, creative and committed to the people and communities they serve.

Without **volunteers**, many community-based programs would not be able to operate at all and for programs at every level, volunteers create opportunities to increase and expand services. Many of the interview respondents stressed the importance of having a **volunteer coordinator** to ensure that volunteer time is used efficiently and strategically. Having a coordinator to serve as the volunteers’ point of contact also demonstrates that the organization values their time and opinions. It is important for programs to recognize that volunteers generally do not make a long-term commitment, so a sustainable volunteer component requires continuing appreciation of current volunteers and recruitment of new volunteers.

### Program Resources

Exemplary programs in every social service area share a commitment to providing **high quality services based on current best practices** for their particular field. Many program areas have recognized standards of practice that guide program operations, staffing, and training. In addition to these program-specific standards, exemplary





programs share a philosophy that emphasizes treating participants with respect and providing opportunities for consumer involvement in the program. Respect for participants includes having hours that accommodate participant schedules, providing access to services or referrals for services that promote self-sufficiency, and using language that is respectful of participants' life experiences.

**Space** is also an important factor in exemplary social service programs. While different programs have different space requirements, all experts agreed on the importance of clean, safe, accessible, well-organized, attractive, well-lit, and welcoming spaces for all community-based programs.

For many vulnerable populations, it is important to incorporate **community service** into the program. Many people feel isolated from their communities for several reasons, including stigma against a particular behavioral health condition or a physical limitation that restricts their interaction with the public. By giving participants a chance to give back the community, programs can improve participants' self-esteem, decrease their social isolation, and contribute to their overall well-being.

## **Partnerships**

To truly embrace a **holistic approach** to serving community needs, all successful community-based programs build **partnerships** with other resources in the community. As one person noted, "A great feeding program does more than feed." Programs should not try to be all things to all people when many complementary resources exist within a community. Partnerships with other community resources also allow programs to provide access to a wider range of services and experiences for their participants.

Exemplary programs regularly solicit feedback and build support for the program within the community that they serve and the community that they are located in, as sometimes these are two different communities. Community partnerships are a two-way street, so community feedback is necessary **to ensure that the program is responding to community needs** and staying relevant.

Finally, all of the experts who were interviewed for this project stressed the need for all programs to have a **plan for sustainability**. In many ways, program sustainability depends on all of the qualities discussed above including having a leader with a vision for the future, implementing a successful program with high quality services that can be "showcased" to potential funders, and building strong community partnerships that give the program flexibility and options in planning for the future.