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# Community Engaged Research at the Regional Research Institute For Human Services

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## **Community Engaged Research**

**at the Regional Research Institute For Human Services**



**Portland State**  
UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

This paper was prepared by Diane Yatchmenoff, assistant professor of Social Work and assistant director of the Regional Research Institute for Human Services, at Portland State University and Laurie Powers, associate dean of research at the School of Social Work and director of the Regional Research Institute for Human Services. We are deeply appreciative to Kristine Nelson, dean of the School of Social Work, and Heidi Herinckx, assistant director of the Regional Research Institute for Human Services, for their helpful feedback and editing on this paper.

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## Introduction

Participatory models of research, in which communities are actively engaged in the research process through partnerships with academic institutions, are restructuring how scientific knowledge is being created. Community engaged research, also known as, community based participatory research (CBPR), and participatory action research (PAR) is increasingly recognized as a framework for high quality scientific inquiry. In community engaged research, researchers and evaluators work side-by-side with community members in all phases of the research process, from defining social problems and research questions, conceptualizing research design, carrying out research, and interpreting and disseminating findings. It requires partnership development, collaboration and cooperation, and commitment to improving community life by equitably working together to build knowledge, improve practices and achieve social change<sup>1</sup>.

Community engaged research has gained in popularity, in part because traditional research approaches have faced substantial challenges in translating basic science into real-world practice. Researchers and community leaders have increasingly recognized the need to work together to successfully address complex social issues such as homelessness and health disparities. The added benefits of community engaged research include increased community involvement, increased mutual trust and respect in the research process, increased reliability and validity of research results, and collaboration in implementing effective solutions. In the context of "re-engineering the clinical research enterprise," growing consensus regarding the value of community engaged research is reflected in the National Institutes of Health<sup>2</sup>, Roadmap for Medical Research. In the roadmap, the National Institute of Health (NIH) called for creating a new research culture that brings together communities and researchers from different disciplines and backgrounds. In line with this commitment, the NIH, National Science

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<sup>1</sup> Minkler, M., & Wallerstein, N. (2006). Improving health through community organization and community building. In M. Minkler (Ed.), *Community organizing and community building for health* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, pp. 26-50). Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>2</sup> National Institutes of Health (2004). *Roadmap for medical research*. Retrieved on November 8, 2009 at <http://nihroadmap.nih.gov/>

Foundation (NSF), W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and numerous other federal and nonfederal entities are investing in community-researcher grant partnerships, interdisciplinary transformative and translational research initiatives, and development of a new cadre of researchers from diverse communities.

### **Portland State University's Leadership for Community Engagement**

Portland State University (PSU) values its identity as an engaged university that promotes reciprocal relationships between the community and the University through which knowledge serves the region and the region contributes to the knowledge of the University. Engagement among faculty, students, and the community contributes to learning and scholarship that is globally relevant and regionally focused. For the seventh consecutive year, PSU was singled out in the *U.S. News and World Report's* 2010 edition of *America's Best Colleges* for its commitment to engagement through its service and learning programs. PSU was noted for its First-Year Experience Programs, Internships/Co-ops, Senior Capstones, Learning Communities, and Service Learning. Among various strategies used by PSU to promote engaged learning, research and service, the Center for Academic Excellences offers awards to promote faculty participation in reciprocal partnerships for expanding scholarship and improving student success. The Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter Partnership Award for Campus-Community Partnerships is granted to academic departments and interdisciplinary teams that leverage the resources of the University for the benefit of both the community and the University. Annually, the University awards a Civic Engagement Award for excellence in community-based research focusing on partnerships for social action and/or social change. The interplay of knowledge and community guides our research activities in the state, the nation, and around the globe.

### **The Regional Research Institute for Human Services**

The School of Social Work's Regional Research Institute for Human Services (RRI) was established in 1972 with a five-year grant from the Social and Rehabilitation Services Office of

the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The RRI was one ten regional centers around the country established with these grants, each focused on a different aspect of social services. At the RRI, this initial focus was on child welfare and juvenile delinquency prevention. With initial funding of \$100,000 each year for five years, RRI was able to develop a small infrastructure to support research and development. By 1975, RRI had 11 projects, \$600,000 in grants and contracts, and 16 staff.

Of the ten centers funded through this early initiative, RRI is the only one remaining with a current portfolio of more than 50 projects and annual extramural funding of almost 8 million dollars per year. During the last decade, the RRI collaborated with its numerous community partners to carry out more than 300 projects with funding of approximately 70 million dollars. At any given time, researchers from RRI work with at least 80 different local, county, state and federal governmental and non-profit agencies. The RRI is staffed by about 70 faculty researchers, academic professionals and administrative staff. The Institute also provides employment, training, and experience to more than 25 masters and doctoral students each year.

As the largest social and behavioral research unit on campus, the core mission of the RRI is to improve the design, evaluation and management of human services and service delivery systems, creating new approaches for addressing old problems. RRI researchers from a variety of disciplines, including Social Work, Community Health, Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Education and Computer Science, join with community leaders and organizations to plan and undertake community-based research and evaluation projects. RRI projects focus in the Metro Area, across Oregon and the Northwest, and throughout the nation and the world. Students are involved in numerous activities, such as conducting literature searches, developing research protocols, gathering data, field-testing promising interventions, analyzing data, and disseminating findings with faculty researchers and community members.

### ***Community Engaged Research at RRI***

The RRI has projects underway in mental health, child welfare, disability, homelessness, juvenile justice, addictions, interpersonal violence, youth educational success and transition to adulthood, mentoring, HIV, and health education. With recently awarded funding from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), the Institute is home to the *Pathways for Positive Futures Research and Training Center*, a multi-project initiative that is working with young people, families and professionals throughout the nation to discover and promote adoption of effective practices for supporting successful transitions to adulthood among youth with serious mental health conditions. The RRI also is the national program office for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's *Reclaiming Futures Project*, which is mobilizing communities to design effective supports for youth with delinquency and substance abuse problems. In Portland, as well as 25 other communities across the nation, *Reclaiming Futures* is helping juvenile courts, police, substance abuse programs and countless other youth serving organizations to create integrated systems of support for these youth. Another line of research features *Project Success* and the *Siblings in Foster Care* and *My Life Projects*, which are funded by the US Department of Education and National Institute of Mental Health, and conducted in partnership with the Oregon Child Welfare Division and school districts, to test new approaches for improving the education, mental health and transition outcomes of youth in foster care.

Many RRI projects are conceived by community partners who identify a need or develop a new practice they believe will improve people's lives. Projects are funded either through contracts from community agencies or through subcontracts initiated by RRI researchers with community partners. RRI researchers frequently assist community partners to prepare funding proposals, and it is not uncommon for an RRI researcher and a community partner to alternate leadership roles. Regardless of who is in the lead, decision-making is shared based on mutual respect and understanding that community leaders are the experts in identifying community needs and solutions, while RRI researchers contribute their technical expertise in analyzing

social problems and building evidence for what works. Researchers take seriously their roles in strengthening the capacities of community organizations to become increasingly autonomous in research and evaluation activities.

In addition to their formal research roles, RRI faculty frequently contribute their time to community partners by serving on boards of directors, raising funds to address community needs, and volunteering in program activities. In turn, at any given time, about 100 community leaders and advisors assist RRI researchers to design, field-test, and disseminate effective practices.

The RRI focuses on building enduring partnerships with community organizations and agencies across the region. For example, in 2006, the Native American Rehabilitation Association (NARA) approached the RRI to partner on the *Circles of Care Project*. Guided by tribal leaders and youth and family advisors, RRI researchers assisted NARA to document culturally-specific practices for promoting the mental health of Native American children and families in the Portland Area. Impressed by the outcomes of the *Circles Project*, SAMSHA awarded the Northwest Indian Health Board, NARA and RRI a six year, 9 million dollar grant to establish and evaluate *Nak-Nu-Wit*, an integrated system of culturally-specific community mental health prevention and treatment services for Native American youth and their families.

RRI activities rest on a strong foundation of academic knowledge and research in the social sciences. This foundation of scholarship by interdisciplinary faculty and students lends credibility and breadth to the Institute and informs everything we do, distinguishing the RRI from many private, non-academic research entities. The work of RRI researchers and staff appears in numerous peer reviewed journals, edited books, monographs and reports, and presentations and proceedings at regional and national conferences. Key findings also find their way into mainstream media<sup>3</sup> and congressional hearings.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, the *Oregonian* April 17, 2008, in which findings from an RRI study of a substance abuse program are reported.

<sup>4</sup> Researchers from *Reclaiming Futures* have testified behalf of the needs for substance abuse and mental health treatment among youth in the juvenile justice system.

The bulk of the RRI's portfolio, however, is devoted to collaborating with community partners to use research methods and evaluation tools in efforts to directly improve services and influence the policies that govern service delivery systems. The central feature of this work is that its goals are defined by the needs of the community and by our commitment to RRI's mission.

### **Essential Aspects of Community Engagement**

The RRI has developed a reputation for community engaged research among our partners, across the state, regionally and nationally. This reputation hinges on several critical themes that are illustrated in the following stories contributed by research faculty and staff.

#### ***Creating a Portfolio Built on Relationships and Flexibility***

In the fall of 2006, Janet Byrd, executive director of the Neighborhood Partnership Fund (NPF, now Neighborhood Partnerships) called the RRI to ask for a meeting. No one at RRI had ever heard of NPF. The project Janet wanted to discuss involved a regional initiative to provide permanent housing combined with case management services for high-need homeless families. NPF was looking for an evaluator. At the initial meeting, Janet and a colleague from Clackamas County talked about what they hoped to show with the evaluation and the data they thought they would have available. They believed the evaluation would be simplified by the newly implemented Homeless Management Information System to which all of the project providers would be submitting data. They wanted to know what an evaluation would cost. The meeting was informative but ended without any plans to move forward.

***RRI's relationships with community partners flourish because of flexibility, mutual trust, and the quality and usefulness of the work. Partners use data from RRI studies for program improvement, program development, and to advocate for adequate resources and needed policy changes.***

Four months later, Janet called and said they would like to contract with RRI for the evaluation and that they could spend about \$35,000 on it for the first year. However, NPF only had funds available at the time for the first three months, and wondered if RRI be willing to

begin on a limited basis. The researcher from RRI began meeting with Janet, her Coordinating Team of officials from the region, and with a Provider Workgroup for B2H to learn more about what they hoped to accomplish and to begin to design an evaluation process with them. Three short 'planning' contracts occurred before NPF had funds fully committed for the remainder of the first year.

Since that time, the evaluation of Bridges to Housing (B2H) has grown every year, incorporating numerous components that were not initially envisioned but address questions or needs that have emerged over time. Some

of these components have been raised by the philanthropic partners, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Others have surfaced in conversations and site visits with providers. Others are designed to address questions that legislators may have as NPF



*Janet Byrd, Diane Yatchmenoff and Alison McIntosh*

advocates for additional resources for affordable housing. The annual budget for the Bridges to Housing evaluation has more than quadrupled.

In the meantime, RRI and NPF have worked jointly on several proposals for additional funding for B2H, and NPF has contracted with RRI for three additional projects as well as recommending the Institute to new community partners, further expanding our network and portfolio.

### ***Expanding Research through Longstanding Partnerships***

In the Spring of 1998, The RRI was contacted by Jeanne Cohen, the Director of Project Network, an African American women's residential substance abuse treatment program of Legacy Health Systems, to ask if we would like to partner on the writing of a proposal to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. We successfully wrote the proposal together, with RRI included as the subcontracted evaluator. Project Network's Kuumba program was funded as one of 16 sites of the Women Co-occurring Disorders and

Violence study in October 1998. That study was the beginning of the long-standing relationship between researchers at RRI and Project Network, a relationship which is much different than their previous experience with evaluators.

Our partnership involved supporting the agency with developing new approaches for treatment for women in residential treatment that created a stronger linkage

***RRI is known locally, regionally and nationally for involving consumers in all phases of research. Consumers assist in defining research questions, help develop research protocols, serve as interviewers to collect data, and participate in interpreting results and disseminating findings.***

between substance abuse and mental health treatment, formalized the involvement of consumers at all levels of the program, and bridged the gap between the treatment for the women and services for their children who lived with them in the residence. That partnership also emphasized our participation in planning meetings, establishing a feedback loop that allowed the program to continuously adjust/improve based on evaluation findings, and highlighting for the community our collaborative relationship. As a result of this partnership, the RRI PI and Project Manager established a practice of hiring consumers as researchers on their substance abuse projects.

The relationship continued with the successful funding of a second SAMHSA grant in 2001 called Ugaza Jamii, which was part of the Strengthening Minorities Community program. It involved establishing a collaborative among Project Network and ten community agencies. RRI took the lead on establishing a Management Information System (MIS) for the collaborative to enable sharing information about the programs and clients. RRI purchased and installed computers in all of the agencies that didn't currently have sufficient technology to support the MIS and trained staff in all agencies to use the collaborative MIS. In addition, the PI and Project Manager worked with PSU Affirmative Action to establish consumer interviewers as salaried research faculty at PSU, even though they did not possess the academic credentials required for those positions. Two of those three consumers have continued their work on RRI projects continuously since 2002, one of whom is a graduate of Project Network. While still working on Ugaza Jamii, in 2003 Project Network and RRI successfully obtained funding for a third SAMSHA

grant called Weku, which is part of the Pregnant and Post-partum Women program. This project was funded a second time in 2006 through a new application process.

Two key related outcomes have resulted from this long-standing partnership. First, RRI has established a strong relationship with LifeWorks Northwest (LWNW), the current parent agency within which Project Network is housed. This relationship led to another evaluation contract in 2006 to evaluate their Leo ni Leo (later renamed REAL) project for African American teenage boys with substance abuse issues. Second, RRI staff have served in a pro bono supportive capacity to The Miracles Club, a club for people in recovery in North/Northeast Portland. RRI researchers, along with Project Network staff, have written proposals with Miracles, with the goal of establishing it as a Recovery Community Services Program, building on its well-established approach to providing peer mentoring services.

### ***Strategies for Community Engagement in Evaluation***

Evaluation work for federally funded System of Care sites around the country is largely prescribed by the requirements of a national cross-site study conducted by research firms located in the Washington DC area. At the local level, however, evaluators are encouraged to function not as external to the project but as one of the key community partners that collaborate to achieve system of care goals. RRI researchers are particularly skilled in this arena.

Multnomah County's Wraparound Oregon Early Childhood project serves children 0-8 years old who have serious emotional disorders and their families. Beyond providing wraparound services to these children and families, the project seeks to strengthen the entire system of care for this population to make it more family driven, culturally competent, individualized, coordinated, comprehensive, accountable and sustainable.

The role of local evaluation from the start has been to engage family members and other community partners in thinking critically about the child-serving system, learning how research methods and data can help them improve services and service delivery, and increasing their knowledge and capacity so that evaluation will be sustained beyond the grant period. One early strategy was to involve all constituents in developing a logic model for the project. Family

members participated in this process but also helped to develop a simplified graphically pleasing version that, as one family member on the planning team said, "all our families should have, so they know what they're supposed to get out of the program." The logic model serves as a catalyst for

***Facilitating partner development and use of logic models is an important means of fostering sustainability of community initiatives. The most successful and sustained partnerships achieve a delicate balance, drawing on the strengths and credibility of the University but also attaining the benefits of embedding critical thinking and evaluation objectives inside programs and collaborations.***

evaluation activities. All partners have the opportunity to point to an output or an outcome and suggest we examine whether we are achieving the goals we set.

Another strategy has been to engage family members on the evaluation workgroup in designing survey questions to capture feedback from caregivers on the services they and their children receive. Their help is invaluable in posing questions in ways that are understandable and meaningful to respondents. It has also been important to include the voice of direct service providers, their managers, and system partners – along with families – in the work we do. This way, findings reflect the multiple layers of experience in the system and are more credible with the many audiences we address.

Finally, we use data to answer questions that community partners have and to encourage more questions – especially with an eye to informing continuous quality improvement and continued program development. Whenever possible, we encourage family members to help interpret and present data so that we continue to build confidence and capacity for the future.

### ***Community-Engagement for Rigorous Study of Effective Practices***

One of the concerns traditionally expressed about community engaged research is that rigorous studies, such as randomized clinical trials, are difficult to carryout with high levels of community engagement. Our experience has been the opposite. For example, RRI researchers have partnered with Portland Public Schools and other school districts in the Metro area, as well as the Oregon Child Welfare Division and local employers, to plan and carryout two

randomized clinical studies of the impact of self-determination enhancement and mentoring on the academic and transition outcomes of youth. Catalyzed by their research partnerships on the My Life Project and Project Success, Portland Public Schools and Child Welfare worked together to systematically identify youth in special education and child welfare, and to conduct youth-led inter-agency planning meetings resulting in coordinated education and transition plans. Preliminary findings from the My Life Study show the intervention is effective in increasing youth's self-determination, quality of life, transition planning, preparation for postsecondary education and employment. Furthermore, the partnerships enabling this research have supported adoption of new approaches for Child Welfare and school districts to coordinate services for students and state-level policies have been adopted to encourage their success. For example, language was included in state legislation on modified diplomas (HB 2848) that prohibits offering an alternative diploma simply because a student is delayed in acquiring general education credits.

Similar partnerships among RRI researchers, Portland Public Schools and the Oregon Business Leaders Network have been indispensable for carrying out the National Science Foundation funded STEM Mentor Project. The first randomized study of its kind, the partners worked together to recruit mentors with and without disabilities in STEM careers and to match them with high school students in special education who are interested in STEM. Study partners recognize that only through rigorous studies can compelling evidence be gathered to justify the benefits of these programs. They are invested in shaping the research prior to proposal submission and after funding, they are involved as they desire in recruiting participants, collecting data, interpreting findings, and translating the findings to improve services for youth.

***Over the past decade, RRI researchers have increasingly found community partners to be eager to participate in studies that are scientifically rigorous. Partners want information they can trust and that will have credibility with policy makers. The interests of researchers and community partners in community-engaged research are overlapping and synchronous.***

## ***Culturally Grounded Research and Evaluation***

With the passage of Oregon's Senate Bill 267 in 2003, human service agencies are now required to use evidence based practices in order to obtain state funding. The type of evidence that was required in the bill was based primarily on research designs using narrow criteria that the Native American community found culturally inappropriate. The community was faced with the challenge of developing culturally-grounded methods for measuring outcomes and demonstrating effectiveness of their culturally specific services.

Beginning in 2004, a team of faculty, students, and researchers from Portland State University's Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health (RTC) worked in partnership with the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA), and the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA). Responding to the increasing demand for evidence of service effectiveness, the partners have conducted the Practice Based Evidence Project (PBE), which has addressed the challenge of evidence-based practice in cultural - and community-based programs.

***Participatory research methods put the research 'expert' in the back seat, functioning as a facilitator and consultant as needed to assist partners to achieve their own goals for evaluation, program design and/or program improvement.***

NAYA is a culturally-specific youth development organization which serves over 1,200 Portland youth from 300 tribal backgrounds every year. NICWA, a national Native non-profit based in Portland, Oregon, provides technical assistance to American Indian tribes and organizations and is a leader in conducting culturally-specific research. The RTC is a nationally-recognized center that has developed partnerships with community based agencies to strengthen services to families affected by mental health disorders, and has a long-standing relationship with NICWA.



*Terry Cross, Cori Mathew, Roy Koch, Barbara Friesen*

Based on culturally-appropriate principles including practical and local relevance, community involvement, and cultural sensitivity, the Practice-based Evidence Project is a participatory action research project involving a wide range of community participants in the Portland Native American community. NAYA elders, families, youth and professionals as well as NAYA staff and management, Native community members and the research partners collaborated to determine research questions, design, methodology, data collection, protocols, and ownership of data. By means of a series of carefully-structured group meetings, the community defined successful outcomes for Native youth using an indigenous worldview and rigorous research approaches. The resulting framework was also used to develop a culturally-appropriate case planning and assessment tool for NAYA.

The research process has provided an opportunity for NAYA to strengthen its capacity to evaluate its programs systematically and to successfully compete for funding without compromising its cultural relevance. The project has also allowed the RTC and its collaborators to develop a culturally-responsive evaluation model that is being disseminated through scholarly and community sources. The participatory research approach adopted by this partnership empowered stakeholders to tell their story with defensible rigor and in so doing, gave authority to their voices.

### ***Coordinated Research, Evaluation and Training***

The RRI has partnered with Options for Southern Oregon, the primary mental health agency in Josephine County, on a wide variety of initiatives. In 1998, the year Options was awarded a Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) Community Action Grant to implement the Individual Placement and Support Project (IPS), an evidence-based vocational rehabilitation model for adults with psychiatric disabilities in Josephine County. At the same time, the RRI was awarded a

***RRI researchers and community partners have the same goals for social justice and a sustainable service system that will address the needs of vulnerable citizens. Research results sometimes lead to new programs and new cross-disciplinary collaborations to achieve these ends.***

Community Action Grant to implement IPS in Multnomah, Clackamas, and Washington Counties. Since then, Options for Southern Oregon and Lifeworks Northwest in Washington County have developed expertise in supported employment, assuming a leadership role in providing technical assistance for this evidence based practice across the State. Through the IPS project, RRI provided valuable data demonstrating the effectiveness of this model to not only improve the employment outcomes and quality of lives of individuals with mental illness but also to reduce the number of psychiatric hospitalization days for the IPS participants. This early IPS work led to a collaboration between Options, Lifeworks Northwest and Portland State University to establish a Center for Excellence in Supported Employment funded by the State Office of Addictions and Mental Health and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. The Center for Excellence has provided technical assistance and implementation support to establish 16 high-fidelity, evidence based supported employment programs across Oregon. PSU also created an on-line work development course in supported employment in the Spring of 2008 through the Continuing Education Department and, in Fall 2009, will offer a 3-credit course in supported employment through the School of Social Work.

The RRI and Options for Southern Oregon have worked collaboratively to implement several other evidence based practices to improve mental health and addictions services for Oregonians. RRI is providing evaluation services for the Bridges to Success Program an intensive strengths based case management program to homeless adults with mental illness and/or substance abuse. The RRI recently completed an evaluation of Josephine County's Methamphetamine Early Response Intervention Treatment (MERIT) program providing strengths based case management and MATRIX substance abuse services for adults with methamphetamine dependence or abuse. The RRI also collaborated with Josephine County to implement a mental health court program: Phase I grant was completed in November 2008 and Phase II funding began in October 2009.

### ***Interdisciplinary Academic and Community Partnerships***

Catalyzed by establishment of the Duncan and Cindy Campbell Professorship for Children, Youth, and Families with an Emphasis on Mentoring at the School of Social Work, RRI launched an interdisciplinary initiative engaging community mentoring leaders and researchers from across the campus and other universities. The goal of the mentoring initiative is to advance knowledge and practice in mentoring across different areas of focus such as youth development, science education, and business leadership. The centerpiece of this initiative is an annual two-week Summer Institute on Mentoring that brings together internationally recognized mentoring scholars and mentor program research, practice and policy leaders to consider the translation of mentoring research to practice and to policy, as well as to inform future research. Following their participation in Summer Institutes, several hundred mentoring practice leaders have returned to their communities with increased knowledge of effective mentoring practices and evaluation methods they can apply for program improvement. Likewise, researchers have applied the practice knowledge they gained from program leaders to expand mentoring theory and develop new studies and methods. This work has been interrelated with numerous other mentoring research and training initiatives at RRI, across campus, and at other universities and research organizations to form an interdisciplinary community of mentoring researchers and community leaders. This group received Portland State University investment funding to establish the Center on Interdisciplinary Mentoring Research.

***RRI infrastructure for supporting interdisciplinary academic and community partnerships enables researchers and practitioners to foster unified approaches to tackling complex problems.***

### ***Community and University Partnerships for Public Health and Health Education***

The RRI has worked with a number of community organizations whose mission is to improve health outcomes for Oregonians, such as the Cascade AIDS Project, the African American Health Coalition and Oregon Health Sciences University's School of Nursing. The RRI has recently worked with the African American Health Coalition (AAHC) on two large initiatives.

The first was a Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH 2010) project funded through the Center for Disease Control to improve cardiovascular health among African Americans in Portland, Oregon. The AAHC developed and implemented culturally appropriate, community-driven programs to address the causes of health disparities in the Portland community and identified the best means of delivering preventive and clinical services. The RRI evaluated the effectiveness of AAHC's programs with regard to developing targeted public health education campaigns for cardiovascular disease and diabetes, decreasing risk behaviors and increasing protective behaviors among targeted sub-populations within the African American community. The second large initiative of the RRI and AAHC was a 5-year African American Targeted Capacity Enhancement grant from the Center on Substance Abuse Treatment. The project entitled "Not Afraid to Talk/Test or Transform" (NATTT) was designed to integrate and enhance substance abuse treatment services provided to African Americans by including HIV prevention education and services. NATTT participants received enhanced addiction treatment and counseling, and expanded linkages to HIV testing, case management, and other resources. The NATTT program provided HIV education to 1052 African Americans in the Portland metro area over 5 years and improved the frequency of HIV testing among program participants.

***RRI is a leader in developing methods to assess the fidelity and integrity with which social service programs and interventions are delivered. This fidelity work is essential to knowledge development and to program improvement.***

Currently, RRI is working with Oregon Health & Science University's School of Nursing to evaluate the effectiveness of a new model of clinical education for nurses called the Oregon Consortium of Nursing Education (OCNE). OCNE is a partnership among 8 community colleges and the 5 campuses of the Oregon Health & Science University. The RRI partnered with OHSU to apply for a Robert Wood Johnson grant to evaluate the effectiveness of OCNE. Already 5 states (California, Hawaii, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Ohio) are actively consulting with OCNE leaders about the possibility of replication. Nursing educators and professionals in Oregon and nationally are anxiously awaiting data on student outcomes which are currently

being collected and analyzed by the RRI and will likely be disseminated in Spring 2010. If OCNE demonstrates success in achieving its goals, it is highly likely that many other states will be replicating the OCNE model.

### ***Building Partner's Capacities for Mutual Benefit***

In 2005, RRI and young leaders from the National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) celebrated the organization's milestone achievement of becoming the first independent non-profit organization led by young people with disabilities. Supported and mentored by the RRI, NYLN leaders organized their board of directors, they conducted annual national youth



*National Youth Leadership Network participants*

leadership conferences in Washington, D.C., they delivered more than 100 presentations each year, and they designed and conducted two national research studies. As NYLN leaders gained leadership skill and maturity, RRI gradually relinquished operational authority. Young people moved into staff roles and the governing board assumed budget authority. Youth leaders shifted from mentored involvement in research activities to having primary responsibility for designing and carrying out the research, and for analyzing the

***RRI researchers take seriously their responsibilities to build evaluation capacities of organizations, consumers, providers and stakeholders. RRI's commitment is reflected in the many hours that researchers spend providing consultation and support, attending planning meetings, board meetings, coordinating councils, advisory boards, legislative hearings and more.***

results and authoring articles on the findings. As youth leaders' voices became stronger, they catalyzed new initiatives such as federal funding for 15 state Youth Resource Centers that remain in place today. The final step in the NYLN's independence came when RRI assisted the Network to secure its first federal grant. RRI researchers volunteered their time by assisting NYLN leaders to write the grant proposal and by offering technical support for the first cycle of the grant. When the NYLN took its final step to independence, the Portland State University Foundation transferred donated funds to the Network. NYLN leaders have subsequently obtained further grant funding on their own and they maintain close connections with the RRI, facilitating connections of young leaders with various RRI projects.

### **Key Elements that Make it Work**

These stories of RRI partnerships illustrate key aspects of our work that have helped to build and sustain community engagement in research and have resulted in a portfolio of projects that have had significant influence on programs and policies. Some of the most essential elements are as follows.

- ***Sharing common goals and providing service to the community***

NYLN's story provides one of many illustrations of free consultation provided by researchers to community partners, deepening relationships and positioning our partnerships for future research and evaluation opportunities. Many RRI researchers provide other sources of support, such as serving on boards of director and, advisory councils, providing data and testimony to local, state and national political leaders and legislative bodies, supervising students who are assisting community programs, and volunteering in service delivery and fund raising efforts. These activities are essential for forging stable alliances that extend beyond individual research projects.

- ***Maintaining a commitment to empower consumers, providers and stakeholder to be interdependent with the academic community but not dependent on it.***

Several of the stories illustrate the role that RRI researchers play in building capacity among providers, managers, stakeholders, and consumers to think critically about interventions, service delivery systems, and policies that affect at risk populations. Whether by assisting groups to clarify their programs through logic models or theories of change or simply by encouraging partners to carefully articulate and refine the questions they want to answer, RRI researchers and staff demonstrate the value we place on supporting and strengthening partner organizations in the work we do. Beyond the development of evaluation objectives and designs, RRI strives to present data in language and formats that are understandable and useful to our partners and that they can present and disseminate with confidence.

- ***Giving voice to constituents, drawing on social work skill, values, and experience.***

Research designs at RRI virtually always make provision to include the voices of consumers and direct service providers in our work. Quantitative findings come to life when they are enriched by the direct felt experience of service users through qualitative data collected in interviews and/or focus groups. Moreover, we turn to direct service staff for their input in posing questions and interpreting findings; we know that line staff are 'on the ground,' doing the work with children, families, and adults and thus have invaluable information and perspective to share. We are able to gain the trust of consumers and providers and to receive their honest and direct experience because we are soundly anchored by social work knowledge and practice experience.

- ***Combining scientific rigor with flexibility and a focus on utilization.***

RRI brings established credentials and a track record of excellence that is important to our community partners. The credibility of the University, the School of Social Work and the Institute gives confidence to stakeholders and philanthropic partners as they use our work to advance their own. RRI's credibility is sustained and strengthened by the continued high quality of what we do. Combining this high quality with the flexibility required to work hand-in-hand with our partners and to manage projects in the face of

shifting priorities, emerging research questions, modifications in implementation of programs, and other 'moving targets' requires intention, experience, and skill. Ensuring that the findings from RRI studies will be useful to our partners is the final key ingredient to cementing sustained partnership.

- ***Placing a high priority on relationships and people skills.***

In part, we are successful in navigating the sometimes difficult terrain because of the relationships that have been established between research teams and our community partners. These relationships are fostered by the close ties that the School of Social Work has with service delivery systems in the region. Many of our partners are former students or field instructors for current students, and have a real sense of ownership of PSU as the 'University that serves the city.' Beyond that, however, RRI researchers and staff blend academic training and research experience with personal qualities that serve them well in the work we do. Hiring decisions often hinge on these personal qualities as we seek to add staff who will work well with all of our constituents.

- ***Sustaining leadership and an infrastructure at RRI to make our work possible.***

The success of RRI rests on a foundation of support that makes our work possible. A key component of this support is the Institute's core support for researchers. The RRI director, who is also associate dean for research, functions as a bridge for RRI to the administrative team of the School of Social Work and to many other partnering academic units on campus. The director and assistant director of RRI foster the development and community connections of fixed term and tenure stream faculty who have interest and capacity to conduct research and evaluation. Leadership and infrastructure at RRI additionally make it possible to expand our portfolio and increase our scope by supporting grant development efforts, by mentoring new researchers and by providing opportunities for staff development and training. Moreover, RRI has excellent support from the School of Social Work, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, and the University overall in the provision of technology, space, IT support, and

financial accounting and contracting – all of which are necessary for us to conduct high quality research efficiently and effectively.

The RRI is a regional and national leader in community engaged research, resulting in major advancements in scientific knowledge, community-based participatory research methodology, and improvements in services and policies. Our partnerships with community leaders and organizations, policy makers, other researchers, and funding agencies have been the cornerstone for our success in applying research and evaluation to make genuine differences in peoples' lives.

