

Problem Based Learning Exercise “Our Town”

Scenario Part 1

Our Town is a rural crossroads community comprised of residents from five smaller villages. Its demographics are unique; 98% of its 3,000 residents are African American, and 85% are over the age of 60. There are many single-family homes headed by women, both mothers and grandmothers. The unemployment rate is extremely high and there are large numbers of medically uninsured and under served residents. Our Town is located in the fourth poorest county in a state where 40% of African Americans and 60% of Black children live in poverty and 56 out of 100 girls get pregnant in their teens.

With the mechanization of farming and the subsequent loss of family farms, most of the farm jobs have disappeared and have been replaced with low paying factory jobs 15 to 45 miles from the community. These factories, which employ a significant number of Our Town residents, are known for their unfair labor tactics and union busting. Partly as a result of this lack of desirable jobs, there has been a sizeable out-migration of working-age adults from the community, leaving behind a large senior population.

The area has also seen tremendous growth in the number and size of livestock farming corporations, which have raised serious environmental concerns. Our Town is a real town in the southern United States. Its citizens have formed grassroots coalitions to address these and other issues.

Tasks

1. What are the major issues facing the community?
2. How can these be prioritized?
3. How can citizens organize grassroots efforts to affect change?
4. What additional information is necessary?

Scenario Part 2

Our Town History

Our Town is a small, unincorporated, rural poultry farming community. The predominant labor system was land tenure from the Reconstruction Era to the 1950's. Seventy percent of farmers were tenants; 90% of those were African American. From 1910 to 1925 a lumber company provided jobs to tenants, but during the Great Depression available jobs decreased as workers returned home from the North. The situation worsened when the lumber company left town in 1932, but in 1934, Roosevelt's New Deal legislation led to the creation of "Our Town," one of the largest resettlement farms in the region. Known familiarly as "Forty Acres and a Mule," the goal of the project was to give to people own and cultivate land. Three hundred families from three states settled on 17,000 acres. The Our Farms Project (OFP) had a community center, a

gristmill, a blacksmith shop, a potato curing house and community farm equipment. The Our Town Mutual Association (OTMA) was established in 1936 to administer the OFP, which operated until 1943 when the project failed for lack of full government support. The Our Town Exchange Association (OTEA) was organized by the residents in 1943 to maintain the cooperative under African-American management.

Local citizens formed the “Concerned Citizens of Our Town” (CCOT) in 1978, which opened a community center and organized groups for children and the elderly. With help from two Catholic nuns, they organized an “envisioning workshop” and identified health care as the community’s most pressing need. Of major concern were access issues – the nearest clinic was 50 miles away, and the affordability of health care – most of the citizens had no insurance. The specific health concerns that were identified included high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

The second priority identified was the depressed socioeconomic status of the community, specifically the high unemployment rate and corporate exploitation.

Tasks

1. How can the health issues be addressed?
2. How do cultural issues affect community health issues?
3. What additional information is needed?

Scenario Part 3

In 1984 the CCOT addressed their health issues by inviting students from a nearby medical school to hold a two-week Summer Health Fair. As an outgrowth of this, in 1987 the CCOT began monthly People’s Health Screening Clinics in conjunction with medical student chapters from two nearby universities. Located in the OT Community Center, the clinics began to address some of the community’s health care needs while providing valuable educational experiences for medical students. In 1988 the CCOT established the Area Wide Health Committee and sought funding to renovate the community potato curing house. In 1990 they formed the Community Health Advocacy Program (CHAP) in which medical students taught grass-roots “health advocates” about heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, disease prevention and health promotion. By 1991 they had raised \$50,000 to refurbish the old “Curin’ House” into a health clinic consisting of three exam rooms, a reception room, and a laboratory.

The CCOT was especially concerned with the poor economic and social standing of the community, and took a number of steps to ameliorate the situation. First, Our Town had a large but dwindling concentration of African-American land owners. Members of the CCOT strongly believed land ownership to be a key source of political, social, and economic power. They established the Land Loss Fund in 1983 to provide education and organize assistance to economically disadvantaged land owners at risk of losing their land.

A second concern related to the decreasing availability of local jobs. Citizens had begun to migrate out of the area as smaller farms were replaced with large-scale livestock farms. Local laborers were forced to move out of the area in order to secure factory jobs elsewhere. In response, the CCOT established an Economic Development Committee (EDC) in 1993 to help generate jobs and businesses in the area.

Another problem in the area at the time was the targeting of poor black communities by national and multi-national corporations in search of an easily exploitable work force. The EDC worked to create community-based economic development so that money earned in the community stayed in the community and so that employers were answerable to their employees. The short-term goals of the EDC included creating a community-based investment group and identifying affordable housing.

The third issue facing Our Town residents was the environmental impact of the growing livestock farming industry. Huge, vertically integrated corporations were rapidly moving into the area and exploiting African-American and Native American communities. Worse, these large-scale intensive livestock operations were creating problems with disposal of offal, blood, and other debris. They had a history of polluting soil, groundwater and air with the uncontrolled, untreated waste of thousands of animals. In 1992 the CCOT formed Home Environmental Loss Prevention (HELP) to address these issues. It networked with local, state and national citizen groups to call for regulation of livestock operations and started a citizen lobby, which convinced the County Board of Health to adopt a regulatory ordinance governing livestock operations. HELP also convinced the County Commissioners to execute a 30-day moratorium corporate hog farm construction and lobbied at the state level for a program to study the effects of intensive livestock operations on the surrounding environment. In 1994, HELP co-hosted with the Environmental Defense League (EDL) to conduct three statewide roundtable discussions on the impact of this industry on local communities. HELP also formed the Hog Roundtable to address the injustices of corporate hog farming in the area.

Tasks

1. How can Our Town residents address the environmental issues?
2. What specific environmental issues are associated with large-scale livestock farms?

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