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*Practice Brief***Kinship Care Programs: Effective Marketing and Outreach
Build With Care and They Will Come!**

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Authors' Notes

Between the time of this workshop and the publication of this brief, kinship programmers have faced the extreme challenge of maintaining in-person support groups and other program events. Working remotely with caregivers, whether for an initial intake meeting or in operating a support group, has required us all to rethink former strategies (Szlauderbach, 2020) During the pandemic, the three programs represented by the authors of this brief have experimented with: holding monthly support group meetings via a secure telephone conference line; developing ongoing education and training events for relative caregivers to attend in the comfort of their own homes; and hosting creative virtual programs such as song and dance workshops offered on the Zoom platform. When possible, open air events such as drive-in movie nights and/or family picnics have been offered with some success. One thing we do know is that due to the pandemic the kinship population has expanded its upward trend, impacting families of all demographics. Those who are isolated, do not have access to computer networks, live with limited resources, or are new to this “work” are impacted disproportionately. These critically identified areas for program outreach and viability hold much promise given time and funding for future research and practice ideas (Hillis et al., 2021).

Abstract

A workshop entitled “Marketing Your RAPP to Effectively Reach Relative Caregivers” was developed and offered at the 2019 Brookdale Foundation Training Conference for professionals who work with kinship caregivers, or “Relatives as Parents Programs” (RAPP). The intention of this interactive brainstorming session was to give individual RAPP programs the opportunity to share and adopt proven effective methods to reach, attract, and enhance their own local or statewide caregiver programs. The

attending group was comprised of over 50 individuals who operated RAPP programs that spanned the US. The three workshop facilitators (authors of this brief with 70 collective years of experience) were chosen because their programs represented kinship professionals and caregivers from differing localities (urban, suburban, and rural), races, ethnicities, and financial demographics. Since the inception of these programs in the 1990s, and despite their demographic differences, the Grandparent Resource Center (GRC) of the New York City Department for the Aging, the Grandparent Connection of the Jewish Association Serving the Aged (JASA), and the Relatives as Parents Program (RAPP) of Cornell Cooperative Extension—Orange County (CCE-OC), utilized similar strategies that helped grow their programs from serving single digits to hundreds of families per year. The consensus of the authors, supported and added to by workshop participants, is that the shared strategies and methods proposed in this brief could be considered “best practices” and useful for any intergenerational program in the United States with a similarly defined audience.

Keywords: kinship, marketing, relative caregivers, support groups, outreach

Creating a Plan for a Defined Audience

Research has clearly proven the need for, and efficacy of, sustained support group and social programs for adult relative caregivers and the children in their care. Along with legal counsel, financial assistance, and educational support for the children in their care, relative caregivers have identified the support of other kinship caregivers as a primary need (Cohen & Pyle, 2000; Pollich et al., 2020). Support groups help mitigate the isolation and stress an older caregiver feels when now faced with diapers, school lunches, PTA meetings, and perhaps a return to work, unlike their peers who may be fulfilling their dreams of retirement, travel, and empty nests. Support groups are also a safe place to discuss the common challenges kinship caregivers face, as well as the satisfaction that accompanies providing a safe and loving home for related children. Further documentation suggests that the longer one participates in such a program, the more impactful it becomes for both adults and children, as well as increasing the likelihood of their continued attendance, sense of well-being, and ability to find local resources to help them in their family role (Cook et al., 2012).

A marketing plan for a new or existing caregiver program is critical in order to attract and maintain the participation and enthusiastic involvement of the audience as defined (Forbes Communication, 2020) For most kinship caregiver programs, this audience may include the grandparent and relative caregivers, the children in their care, and sometimes the biological parents. Once the audience is defined, the first two goals in a marketing plan are to create awareness and to define the benefits of the program. Even the best program will not succeed if no one knows it exists! Whether your program is brand new or has been around for many years, appropriate marketing and outreach strategies are critical to its growth and success. Few programs are fortunate enough to have a marketing department or funding to hire communication specialists. Piggybacking off the practical advice of others can help you create a buzz about your program creatively, sensitively, and simply, with a minimum of expense. The following ideas,

shared by professional staff and program volunteers, are a good place to start (Forbes Communication, 2020).

Understand your audience and how to attract them, including their motivations and limitations

Questions worth considering are: What's in it for them and how could it be of value? How will your program help them do their job within the family more efficiently? How will it help them solve problems, find resources, and generally assist the children in their care? What time of day is best for their attendance? What location is reachable through public transportation and feels safe? Do they have childcare, or will they need to bring their children with them? Are there mobility and/or language differences that need to be considered? Will they need to be fed?

Define the benefits of your program

Be extremely clear about what your program does (and does not) offer at the present time. Avoid general language whenever possible and highlight the specific features and assistance your participants may expect. For example, if you plan to offer a program for children, will it be an informal drop-in program or a structured support group? If you say that food will be provided, is it a meal or a light snack? Always remember to consider your obligations to your funder and partners in your program's description. Have you been funded to provide a weekly, in-person or remote support group or simply provide resources and referral? Being clear via your materials will help your marketing reach the intended participants in the right way and at the right time.

Keep it simple

Simple is often best, including the language used in promotional materials. Use a catchy logo and program title developed specifically for your groups so that audiences will begin to recognize it over time. Sometimes the term "support group" is stigmatized as it conveys a clinical approach to seeking help. Instead develop a name that conveys your central purpose and also sounds "fun." It may be helpful to look at other successful support program titles and adapt them to your use. The use of consistent colors for all marketing pieces is another simple strategy suggested by communication specialists. Other basic recommendations include:

- Use simple language that is nonclinical and jargon-free.
- Use the languages that are spoken by and reflect your audiences.
- Check for consistent location and time, especially if recently changed.
- Provide directions to support group or event location.
- Establish a contact number and email address where people can leave confidential messages, with a voice message indicating probable time of return call.
- Proofread every marketing piece or social media posting

One final recommendation from a workshop participant is to ask someone *who knows nothing about the program* to review the marketing before it is released. If they "get it," then others are more likely to do so, too.

Develop a multimedia strategy

Before developing the marketing materials, consider these points: What type of print materials do recipients regularly read or look at? What would make them take notice of your program outreach—both wording and design? What vehicles can be used to attract participants? For instance, an older person may be more apt to read a print newspaper or program flyer while a younger person is more likely to get their information through social media. Partially due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, social media is rapidly becoming the communication medium of our modern world and is increasingly used for marketing to all age groups. The different outlets—Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, etc.—are often geared for different age users, and it is wise to have someone familiar with these outlets handle that form of outreach. Radio, television, and the Internet are naturally considered to be a strategic part of your plan, as is your agency's website.

If the agency providing the program is large, be sure that your program is listed correctly with a clear description of program sites, times, and contact information. You may also want to develop a website just for your specific program for easier client access. In general, it is wise to develop a program strategy for social media use and designate a staff member or trained volunteer to regularly update information on all outlets including the timely removal of past events.

Use traditional, tried-and-true methods of publicity

Many of our recommendations are free! They include:

- word of mouth
- public service announcements
- monthly calendar of events
- reminder phone calls
- program newsletter
- community newspapers/ support group listings
- intra- and inter-agency conversations
- high quality hard copy posters, flyers, invitations to programs
- press releases
- table at schools, health fairs, and other community events
- agency website with links to/from other sites
- photos and quotes from program participants that are culturally diverse and representative of the audiences you hope to attract. Get releases!
- T-shirts and other swag to promote your program's "brand"

Shout it out!

Never assume that others already know of your program, even if you have been in existence for years. Rather, approach each piece of marketing as if your audiences are learning about you for the first time. Starting with your own agency, be sure that all staff/departments know about the services you offer and how to refer clients. Follow this step with a brainstorming session, including existing program participants if you have

them, to create a list of other local, state, and national resources that can help spread your message.

Volunteers and Partnerships Enhance Outreach and Program Success

A second but no less important audience is program partners and funders. With the increase in the number of kinship families and the competition for scarce funding, the use of trained participant volunteers and collaboration with partner agencies is strongly encouraged. These partnerships help to extend outreach and refer clients, assist staff from other groups to gain a broader understanding of your program, and engage community members as volunteers or funders. All three authors shared examples and stories of the importance of such collaborations, proving that “many hands make lighter work.”

Success Story 1. In the early 1990s, as the role of kinship caregiver came to the forefront, the GRC was developed under the auspices of the New York Department for the Aging which is the local Office for the Aging. Through this initiative, they were able to develop a stronger relationship with several New York City (NYC) government agencies including the Administration for Children’s Services (Child Protective Services), the Departments of Health and Mental Health, and the Department of Education. The latter helped to publicize the GRC’s initiative with schools in the NYC area, and elected officials helped spread the word through libraries, senior programs, and local children’s offerings. As one of their first initiatives, they developed a training for other agencies entitled “How to Start a Grandparent Caregiver Support Group.” This experience clarified that the newly emerging support group leaders would need guidance and direction to work with the newly defined audiences. In response, the GRC developed a Support Group Facilitator’s network that met bimonthly, allowing professionals and lay leaders to share ideas and concerns and to collaborate with each other, extending their work throughout the five boroughs of New York. Three decades later, this network was still in operation, playing a critical role in the lives of hundreds of professionals, kinship caregivers, and the children for whom they provide care. It is a testament to the strength and durability of an outreach program built upon professional development, sensitivity to audience needs, and collaborative programming.

Success Story 2. At a large housing development in the borough of Bronx, NY, an increasing number of resident seniors were noted as both registering children for childcare and activities, as well as dropping and picking up children from their after-school center. After first speaking with the seniors, the relatives were discovered to be acting as primary caregivers and raising their grand- or other related children without the parent present in the home. Once this emerging community need was identified, and after consulting with the GRC, the agency developed a new RAPP program within the housing development in the late ’90s. In 2002, a new director was hired and challenged to increase membership and services. Attention was next given to local community programs such as school and after-school programs, childcare centers, houses of worship, social service and mental health agencies, and senior centers.

A parent coordinator from one of the local schools identified children being raised in caregiver families and invited the agency to speak at the next school Parents Association meeting. At closing, every staff person and parent participant were given

copies of the new program flier and current calendar of events. At the suggestion of a program participant, a meeting with a local Congressman was held where four caregivers spoke of the issues they faced and the benefits of the RAPP program. They presented him with a RAPP-branded tee shirt and invited him to attend their next meeting just prior to Thanksgiving; the Congressman attended and brought turkeys for all the caregivers. This simple yet strategic outreach led to many years of financial support while building a significant long-term relationship including a tour of the Capitol in Washington led by this same Congressman.

Success Story 3. In the 1990s, when funding for kinship staff was still very minimal, the RAPP program of CCE-OC in upstate NY was faced with a dilemma. Either develop a creative solution or curtail much of their defined programming plans. Limitations of the caregivers and the lack of a cohesive rural public transport system were already impacting consistent attendance at their one centralized support group location. At the recommendation of their advisory committee, the extension program “deputized” families to take leadership for program enhancement and rural and ex-urban outreach opportunities. Several teams of volunteers were developed including one for peer-led support group expansion, one for legislative outreach, one for community events, one for caregiver mentors, and one for youth programming. Each team of volunteers, with the guidance of a staff member, agreed to send a representative to the RAPP program’s Advisory Committee that met monthly. There, with an audience of local agency representatives from across the county, the volunteers reported on their plans, their need for support, and their outcomes.

This robust volunteer mentor program helped to establish three additional support group locations that reached caregivers closer to their homes and helped shepherd new participants by assisting them with transportation, resource and referral contacts, and court supports. One of the most effective and innovative outreach networks developed as a result of the youth programming team. The teens, all raised in kinship families, contacted the local 4-H club, Junior League, United Way, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and the Orange County Youth Bureau to discuss outreach opportunities and program needs. Not only did the RAPP children benefit directly by participation in programs but developed a broader understanding of community needs and partnerships. When awarded a grant to benefit the RAPP teen program, the youth team unanimously agreed to donate the cash award to another youth-serving agency that they deemed to be in even greater need. The Youth Bureau, so touched by this show of community generosity, increased their funding to the RAPP youth program for many years to follow.

Walk in their shoes

Whatever methods of outreach you choose, view/listen to all ideas and materials through the eyes and ears of the participants. Inviting input from your defined audiences *before* you arrange for a new support location, or a series of ads may help save both time and valuable funding. Having your participants involved in the design of your program logo, or develop a business card for outreach, are great ways to help them feel ownership of the program. With ownership comes the interest to recruit others, and there is no better marketing strategy than hearing directly from someone experiencing program benefits.

Creating New Partnerships and Collaborations

Most new kinship support programs begin small and gradually enhance their services. Once there is a firm foundation of a regularly attended support group, and a solid reputation has been built, it may be competitively advantageous to add other activities and events to broaden program dissemination and services. In order to do so and not overly burden staff, take advantage of the expertise of other local agencies and organizations. After the GRC developed their professional training initiative for other support group leaders, they expanded their outreach to help coordinate Grandparent Information Forums in many of New York City's boroughs. These were modeled after the Brooklyn Grandparents' Coalition that had successfully implemented topic-specific forums for a number of years previously. These borough Coalitions, hosted by community-based organizations, provided critical information to caregivers in each locality, while also creating new partnerships for future endeavors.

While almost all new programs begin with local outreach, your state and national organizations and foundations can provide critical assistance. The JASA Grandparent Program in the Bronx, NY, took advantage of the professional assistance provided by the NYC Department for the Aging and the New York State (NYS) Navigator Program. Both provided information and client focused resources, as well as direct referrals to their local program.

After CCE-OC's program in Orange County NY had been well established, their staff was invited to speak at both state and national conferences offered through the National Brookdale Foundation, the NYS Office for the Aging, the NYS Kinship Coalition, and Generations United. These organizations had played a role in launching Cooperative Extension's kinship work, either fiscally or through resource and referral. It is a privilege when your organization can give back to partners who have helped you.

Showcase Your Results

If you have a development or media unit in your organization, meet with them to discuss ways in which you can showcase the results from your program. If not, work with your team and volunteers to develop a strategy. Participants from the Brookdale workshop shared best practices from their programs.

Share Success Stories

Ways to share success may range from feature-length articles including quotes and photos from your participants to short newsworthy pieces that you prepare and send to the local news outlets. Keep a file or journal of them. These items are good for sharing with partners and are great to use when applying for grants or reporting to funders.

Document Activities and Events. After each special program event is offered include photos, participant quotes or a brief write-up on your website and social media outlets. If you have a newsletter, feature the event, with photos and quotes, as long as you have participant releases.

Hear from Program Participants. There is nothing that sells a program like hearing directly from someone with a shared experience. Highlighting what you have to offer is enhanced when the benefits are shared by program participants, both adults and

youth. Having intergenerational representatives or ambassadors is a sure way to highlight the program's strengths and successes both in print and in person.

Give Credit to All. Keep a clear listing of all who have contributed to your program success, including funders and close partners. Every organization wants to see their name related to successful programs, and for funders, this is an absolute. If you're not sure who to credit, it is best to err on the side of inclusiveness.

Celebrate the Volunteers. Whether your volunteers are professionals from other organizations or participants in your program, thank them publicly for their work. Working with the Retired Seniors Volunteer Program (RSVP) may be another way to showcase the work of your volunteers, as this organization, often connected with the local Office for the Aging, provides reimbursement for volunteer mileage and awards for service.

Final Remarks

One of the greatest rewards in the emerging field of kinship is the comradery and generosity witnessed among participants, as well as the willingness of others in the field to share their successes. Even in an established program much can be learned by listening to others' advice and trying activities that have been successful elsewhere. This is particularly important in recruiting kinship families, as you never know what type of program will attract them, or how many years they may be on your mailing list before they seek support and assistance. The authors hope that The National Brookdale Training Conference provided that bridge for all who attended the workshop "Marketing Your RAPP to Effectively Reach Relative Caregivers." The attempt of this brief is to extend the practical advice of the 50-plus participants, the three authors who represent significantly diverse populations, and the countless other practitioners who have shared their knowledge and expertise to those who are interested in developing or enhancing their own programs.

Almost universal feedback from participants across the nation encourages professional staff to create an environment that is culturally and age-sensitive, friendly and warm, trusting and confidential, and safe for all family members. Indeed, in many kinship programs their relationships speak of the family chosen, rather than the one born into. While it may be difficult to convey all these qualities in a print flyer, a tweet, or an email blast, it is paramount to keep the needs of the audience of caregivers and their related children in mind as each piece of marketing and outreach method is initiated. Most of us in the kinship field have neither a marketing nor communications background. Yet, if we build our programs with care and sensitivity, as well as the willingness to learn from others, following these basic guidelines should help provide a foundation for success.

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