

Regional SIG Implementation

State Incentive Grant and Project ALERT Provide Relief to Hurricane-Stricken County

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Several years ago, the State of North Carolina administered its substance abuse prevention services like most other states. The primary source of prevention funding was the federal Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant (SAPTBG), and most of that support went to information and education services that were not proven effective. In 1998, North Carolina was a recipient of a State Incentive Grant (SIG) from the U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP), after which the landscape of its prevention services changed dramatically.

CSAP has now funded 37 states through the SIG program, with the primary objective of preventing or reducing marijuana and other illicit drug use among our nation's youth. States typically receive a total of \$9 million for three years. Eighty-five percent of this sum must be directed to communities to implement prevention interventions targeted at youth; the remaining fifteen percent can be used to support state and community prevention efforts through administration, training, technical assistance, and evaluation.

CSAP's guidelines for the SIG stipulate that at least fifty percent of the funds received by each community must be spent on implementing "science-based" prevention interventions. Science-based interventions are those that have shown through past research to be effective in reducing risk factors, increasing protective factors, and/or reducing substance use. In order to assure a high level of effective services, North Carolina amended the CSAP requirements and stipulated that one hundred percent of the communities' funds must be used for science-based prevention interventions. Under the North Carolina SIG initiative (NC SIG), 23 community agencies are now implementing 11 different science-based prevention interventions. Among those interventions is Project ALERT, which is being implemented in several communities, including Pitt County.

Pitt County sits in the eastern region of North Carolina, about 40 miles west of the tranquil North Carolina coast. With a population of 133,000, the county is largely rural in nature but has experienced its share of industrial growth during the last 10 years. Greenville, population 60,000 and the county's one urban center, is home to Eastern Carolina University and its nationally recognized medical school.

Pitt County and the coast were far from tranquil in September, 1999 when Hurricane Floyd rammed through eastern North Carolina, causing nearly \$1 billion in damage and displacing thousands. Although massive relief efforts began immediately, the county is still experiencing the effects of the hurricane. Many businesses have not reopened and many people are still without homes.

In an effort to provide some assistance to the citizens of eastern North Carolina, the state made SIG funds available to mental health centers in counties that had been affected by the hurricane. Prior to this, the state had already funded 17 communities, all on a competitive basis. For this special round of funding, however, mental health centers simply wrote a letter of interest to the state and provided a plan for delivering prevention services. Six mental health centers (representing nine counties) applied for, and received, SIG funds.

Christi Williamson is the SIG Project Coordinator at Pitt County Mental Health Center, which houses Project ALERT. As a former Pitt County Deputy Sheriff and Crime Prevention Specialist, Ms. Williamson has extensive experience in prevention education. Ms. Williamson took over Pitt County's SIG program shortly after it was funded in January, 2001, and she began implementing Project ALERT later that spring.

Pitt County has nine public middle schools, all of which were potential targets for Project ALERT. According to Ms. Williamson, the recruitment process was fairly easy—she sent letters to the principals of the middle schools, asking them if they were interested in participating in a new, science-based prevention intervention at no cost to them. Five schools expressed an interest; two started that first year and the remaining three asked to start during the following academic year. Ms. Williamson, therefore, prepared to begin Project ALERT at once.

One major benefit of the SIG initiative is that funds are available for training. Training is becoming increasingly important in the field of prevention, particularly for the science-based interventions. To maintain a high degree of fidelity to the intervention design, it is preferable for staff to be trained directly by the program developers or their certified trainers. With the help of the State SIG Coordinators, several training opportunities were arranged for Ms. Williamson, plus counselors, teachers, and Student Resource Officers (SROs) from the five middle schools. Several staff had received Project ALERT training prior to Ms. Williamson's arrival as the Project Coordinator. Ms. Williamson attended a training in April of 2001 and still other staff were trained in October.

All the training sessions were conducted by Isabel Burk, MS, CHES, a Project ALERT trainer and consultant. Ms. Williamson was quite impressed with the quality of the training and said that Ms. Burk was very enthusiastic and knowledgeable. Ms. Burk used several teaching modes, including lecture, video, and trainee participation. She also taught the actual Project ALERT curriculum, to really give the trainees a good sense of the material. At the training workshops, participants broke up into several groups and taught Project ALERT material to their colleagues. Ms. Williamson found the hands-on training to be extremely valuable and thoroughly enjoyed the teaching style of Ms. Burk.

After the Project ALERT training in April, Ms. Williamson delivered the program to three sixth grade classes in A. G. Cox Middle School and Sgt. Greene of the Winterville Police Department (SRO), taught one sixth grade class. Ms. Marcia Turman delivered the program to the entire sixth grade of Chicod School. According to Ms. Williamson, the students were very enthusiastic about the program. "Project ALERT allows the kids to be a part of the lesson being taught," she said. "They play games and act out skits in groups of four or five. It is fun for them, because it is not the normal classroom setting."

The next round of program implementation will occur in January and will include the three middle schools that asked to delay their participation (C.M. Eppes Middle School, Farmville Middle School, and G. R. Whitfield School). The teachers and SROs will deliver the program to the entire 6th grade at these schools. In addition, Chicod School will deliver it to its 8th graders. Ms. Williamson will teach five classes herself in A. G. Cox Middle School and will spend much of the rest of her day traveling to the other schools to oversee the instructors' delivery of the program.

One goal of the NC SIG is to sustain science-based prevention in the communities after the SIG funding runs dry. Ms. Williamson has helped ensure that Project ALERT will continue to be delivered in Pitt County by arranging for teachers from each of the five participating middle schools to receive training. Thus, working along side Ms. Williamson, there are now 19 certified Project ALERT instructors in Pitt County, 14 of whom are in the schools. The other five are staff at Pitt County Mental Health. Planning ahead, Ms. Williamson is trying to arrange another training for six more staff members this winter. Moreover, Ms. Williamson has taken steps to stretch funds for materials and supplies beyond the life of the SIG. By duplicating and laminating many copies of classroom materials, she has taken this financial burden off the school system. Ms. Williamson is hopeful that the Pitt County schools will agree to include the Project ALERT curriculum in their standard course of study.

All SIG states must conduct some process and outcome evaluation. North Carolina SIG communities are required to collect and track process data using CSAP's Minimum Data Set (MDS). For each intervention session that she facilitates, Ms. Williamson documents several process variables, such as type of service, number of participants, and demographic characteristics. As in all NC SIG communities, Ms. Williamson has a desktop version of the MDS that she uses to enter data and generate reports on command. The state is switching to CSAP's new Internet version (MDS 3.0) starting in January.

The outcome evaluation in North Carolina is being conducted by the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE). Researchers from PIRE's North Carolina office have worked extensively with the state and with SIG communities to collect pre- and post-test data on all program participants. PIRE staff compiled pre- and post-test instruments, using measures recommended by CSAP, and distributed them to all the communities.

As with all the NC SIG communities, Williamson is responsible for administering the outcome instruments in accordance with local policies regarding the collection of evaluation data. She administers the instruments immediately prior to the delivery of the intervention (pre-test) and as close as possible to 30 days after the intervention is complete (post-test).

To enhance the capacity of the communities to collect and use outcome data, PIRE developed an internet-based data entry and reporting system. This system allows communities to enter data online and generate outcome reports as needed. Ms. Williamson and/or her staff are responsible for entering all pre- and post-test data on the Internet. She can then generate outcome reports at any time. These reports provide the following information in table and graph form on all her participants: demographics (grade, sex, race/ethnicity), changes in risk and protective factors, and changes in substance use.

Although it is too early to tell if Project ALERT is having the desired influence on Pitt County students, Ms. Williamson is very enthusiastic. She has high praise for the program and really enjoys facilitating it in the classroom. She particularly likes the interactive nature of the intervention and how it draws kids in with its fun activities. She also likes how scripted, yet action-packed, it is. This makes it easy for her and others to implement the program with a high degree of fidelity. She feels the students enjoy participating and that they gain the knowledge and skills necessary to resist substance use. Ms. Williamson is hopeful that Project ALERT will have lasting benefits.