
Developing and Evaluating the Getting Ahead Program in Northeast Colorado

by Jacalyn Reynolds

Introduction

“In life, the smallest changes can make the biggest impact,” states Kimber, when talking about the success of the Getting Ahead in a Just Gettin’-By World (Getting Ahead™) program. Kimber ought to know; she has experienced the program in virtually all its aspects.

Kimber graduated from the very first Getting Ahead (DeVol, 2006) class that Rural Solutions sponsored in 2010. She then became a facilitator, and by the end of the grant, she served as the project coordinator for the Getting Ahead program in Northeast Colorado. She has seen Getting Ahead investigators (the term used for participants attending the Getting Ahead program) trade a pickup for a car, pay their bills on time to avoid overcharges, track

their expenses each week, and advocate effectively for their children at school. She has experienced the power of the Getting Ahead program firsthand.

Kimber is quick to downplay the importance of her role as facilitator for the program. Instead she states:

The Getting Ahead program gives individuals an opportunity to investigate their lives, the resources available to them in their communities, and the resources within themselves. Investigators can have the opportunity to explore what drives decision making and how their behavior impacts their own decisions and what it looks like to make decisions based on future outcomes rather than the tyranny of the moment. It is very

powerful to observe investigators getting to a place where they feel they have more control over their own lives and empowered to make decisions because they believe that they have options for their future.

Rural Solutions and Northeast Colorado

Rural Solutions has been the sponsoring organization for the Bridges Out of Poverty (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi-Smith, 2006) and Getting Ahead programs in Northeast Colorado since 2008. Northeast Colorado is a vast rural region made up of 10 counties covering 17,505 square miles. Seven of these counties are designated by the federal government as frontier counties, which have fewer than seven persons per square mile. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, this region is home to 114,205 people who live and work in many small communities across the region. Approximately 15% of the residents are Hispanic/Latino, and 2% are African American.

In 2009, the per-capita income for this 10-county region was \$22,685 (high of \$34,189 in Elbert County and low of \$19,936 in Morgan County), compared with the Colorado average of \$27,041. Region wide, more than 40% of the children qualify for free or reduced lunches in public schools each year, while 19% of the children under age 18 live below the federal poverty line.

There are other risk factors for families to consider in many of our frontier counties. Healthcare and human services are of-

ten a long distance from home or simply not available in our small and sometimes rather isolated communities. Not every county in the region has a full-time doctor or dentist; one county has no hospital. Some communities have very limited behavioral health services. Workforce Centers are able to provide only minimal staff, programs, or services in several counties. Public transportation services are extremely limited in the entire region. Compared with much of the rest of Colorado, job opportunities tend to be more limited, and salaries are generally lower than in other regions.

As is often the case when communities lack resources and face challenges that threaten children and families, leaders come together to look for solutions. In 1994 many regional agencies and organizations came together to create Rural Solutions, then named the Northeast Colorado Health and Human Services Consortium. Their purpose and vision was to establish a loosely knit organization that would allow collaboration to seek funding to build and strengthen programs that provide services to children and families.

Rural Solutions has nearly a 20-year history of collaboration and regional coordination to provide services to families in local communities. The mission of Rural Solutions is to “collaborate to address issues and create positive solutions for the health and well being of our diverse communities in Northeast Colorado.” The organization is a coalition of community service providers, community grassroots organizations, mental health providers, social services departments, domestic violence agencies,

handicapped services, public health, area agency on aging, and elected officials. Today, Rural Solutions is really “an organization of organizations” where agencies and organizations throughout the region come to the table to develop programs, provide services, and solve problems in the communities. It continues to serve the 10 rural Northeast Colorado counties of Cheyenne, Elbert, Kit Carson, Lincoln, Logan, Morgan, Phillips, Sedgwick, Washington, and Yuma.

Development of the Getting Ahead Program in Northeast Colorado

The Bridges Out of Poverty program in this region was developed through the shared vision of several Rural Solutions board members. In early 2008, county social services directors received initial Bridges® training at a state conference. They believed immediately in the vision of the program and were able to see the practical worth for their clients in their individual counties. The board charged Rural Solutions with bringing this program and information to rural Northeast Colorado. As executive director of Rural Solutions, I became a certified Bridges out of Poverty trainer in 2008.

The past few years I have provided the Bridges training for more than 200 professionals who work in the organizations that make up Rural Solutions: caseworkers in the county social services departments, workforce centers staff, nonprofits workers, area agency on aging staff, and mental health workers. Having staff from various human services organizations in the re-

gion understand the Bridges concepts has aided in the development of standardized vocabulary to identify the issues around poverty in our individual communities. It also has helped to change practices within these agencies and organizations. This training has shaped institutional discussions of how to define and then create services and programs that build resources for the most at-risk families. This knowledge has led to greater understanding of the day-to-day realities and challenges of people who don’t have enough resources.

In September 2009, Rural Solutions received a substantial grant from the Colorado Department of Human Services Colorado Works Statewide Strategic Use Fund (SSUF) to develop the Getting Ahead program and provide it to at least 90 TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families)-eligible residents in the 10 counties of Northeast Colorado. The grant was substantial enough to provide supportive services to develop Getting Ahead programs in at least seven sites in the region. To ensure that each program would meet the needs of the individual communities, the grant was designed that Rural Solutions work collaboratively with various agencies and organizations.

In addition, Rural Solutions also received ARRA (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) funds through Northeast Council of Local Governments, which serves six of the 10 northeast counties. These funds further allowed Rural Solutions to also serve residents whose income was below 200% of Federal Poverty Guidelines but may not be TANF-eligible, such as young adults, older adults, or adults who don’t

have children living in the home. These funds targeted adults who were underemployed or those who lost jobs during the downturn of the economy in the region.

Collaborative Efforts

From the beginning, the Getting Ahead program was a collaborative effort of several organizations in Northeast Colorado. Rural Solutions served as the lead organization and fiscal agent and provided the program in Elbert, Lincoln, Logan, Sedgwick, and Phillips counties. In addition, the following local family resource centers were instrumental in providing the Getting Ahead program in their various communities—with astounding success:

- The Rural Communities Resource Center (RCRC) developed and provided the Getting Ahead program in communities in Yuma County.
- Washington County Connections provided the program in Washington County.
- The Morgan County Family Center (MCFC) served the residents in Morgan County. MCFC continues to provide the Getting Ahead program, using county United Way funds.
- Prairie Family Center (PFC) served Kit Carson and Cheyenne counties. The Getting Ahead program was especially supported by local churches in the various communities.

Because most of the programs developed locally, many other partners, agencies, business partners, and interested community members “came aboard” to sup-

port the Getting Ahead program. In fact, several Getting Ahead classes were offered within domestic violence programs and preschool programs, serving those unique populations. Getting Ahead has become a very successful addition to the overall development of those programs. Many agencies and organizations also became collaborators in Getting Ahead, providing information, instruction, support, and services as needed. The model was strengthened in each county of the region because the collaborative partners knew the needs of their community members and the resources available to them. Learning how to access such skills and determining the specific needs of each Getting Ahead investigator became part of the program curriculum.

Importance of Competent Facilitators

When the grant began, several facilitators were assigned to the grant project by the collaborating agencies. Philip DeVol, author of the *Getting Ahead in a Just Gettin'-By World* curriculum, came to Northeast Colorado and trained the initial group. This laid the groundwork for the success of the Getting Ahead program.

Facilitators met regularly to discuss their experiences, sharing ideas and creative activities they had used in their programs. They also shared articles and resources and “new ways of exploring” a concept they had used during a class. Further, these meetings helped to standardize practices and recordkeeping, which was very helpful during the evaluative study that was conducted by Daniel Brisson in

2011. In almost all cases, each person who worked with the Getting Ahead program has been successful as a facilitator beyond the program's expectations.

It's interesting to note that the facilitators were as diverse as the investigators themselves. Their educational backgrounds ranged from high school diplomas to advanced college degrees. There is a wide range of age and life experiences. Several were experienced trainers, but for some, becoming a Getting Ahead facilitator was their first experience working with people in such settings. One facilitator's native language was other than English.

An exciting development is the investigators who successfully completed the Getting Ahead program and then have become facilitators in their various home communities. Original facilitators systematically and carefully identified Getting Ahead graduates who might have facilitator potential. Over time facilitators who were initially "recruited" from the investigator ranks have become strong and very effective facilitators; many of them continue with the program today. At least half of the current facilitators are graduates of the program.

The program coordinators believe that there are some basic criteria for the development of facilitators' skills:

- Successful facilitators must have a basic belief in the constructs of the Getting Ahead program.
- Facilitators must truly believe that they are in fact "facilitators" during the program and not in charge of "teaching" the curriculum.

- They must believe that people really do have the capacity to change their own lives. One facilitator identifies this belief as "unconditional positive regard" for others.
- All facilitators must be committed to the communities in which they live and work—and know well the residents and resources there.
- Facilitators with various skill sets can still facilitate the Getting Ahead program because the curriculum is strong enough on its own. One facilitator always tells us to "trust the curriculum."
- Mentoring is an essential part of developing effective facilitators, especially those who come from the ranks of Getting Ahead graduates.

Evaluating the Getting Ahead Program

All goals that were set for the SSUF grant were far exceeded. The program was developed and delivered in all seven selected sites and served all 10 designated counties. The goal of the grant was that at least 90 TANF-eligible individuals would complete the Getting Ahead program by June 2011. By the end of the grant, 165 individuals had completed the program. Even though the numbers were impressive, the coordinators in each collaborating organization were well aware that just counting the numbers of individuals who graduated did not begin to capture the "real story" of the program's success.

In early 2011, the Rural Solutions Board of Directors had the foresight and vision to hire Daniel Brisson, Ph.D., associate pro-

fessor in the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver, to conduct an evaluation of the Northeast Colorado Getting Ahead program, which was being funded through the SSUF grant.

The evaluation involved the use of pre-test and post-test data collected on each investigator completing the program between January and June 2011 to assess changes that occurred to investigators over the course of the curriculum. Investigators were asked to fill out basic descriptive information about themselves, as well as a lifestyle survey. These pre-test and post-test data were analyzed to assess basic characteristics of investigators and to detect any reported changes, particularly in lifestyle, that occurred over the course of the program.

Focus groups also met at the beginning and conclusion with three separate Getting Ahead classes to examine more deeply the successes, stories, and challenges of the program. In addition, several individual interviews were conducted with investigators after they had completed the program.

From this sampling technique, 74 investigators participated in the Getting Ahead program in the first half of 2011 and were included in the evaluation. Brisson reported that

Rural Solutions relied on local knowledge and service provider referrals to identify investigators that seemed likely to benefit from the program. Due to this opportunistic sampling strategy, there was a wide range of characteristics describing

investigators and limited exclusion categories for participation. (2011)

Other than residing in Northeast Colorado, the characteristic most common for investigators was that financial hardship was making day-to-day life a major struggle.

Of those reporting financial information, the average monthly income was \$1,197. On average, investigators reported the hourly wage of their most recent job was \$9.42. More than 50% of program participants reported they weren't working at the start of the program, and only 20% reported they were working full time. Thirty-one percent of participants reported that they had not held a job the last 12 months.

On average, investigators were 37 years old when starting the program. Investigators reported the median number of persons in their household was three, and the median number of children in their household was two. Twenty-eight percent of investigators reported being married, and an additional 15% reported living with someone but not being married. Thirty-six percent of investigators reported being separated, divorced, or widowed, and 21% reported having never been married.

Brisson reported comments, such as the following, during interviews and focus groups at the beginning of the Getting Ahead programs:

- *I don't know who I am or what I want. I know I want to do something and be somebody, but I don't know what that is. I am almost like needing guidance. Not like them to tell me what I need to be. I want to discover who I want to be.*

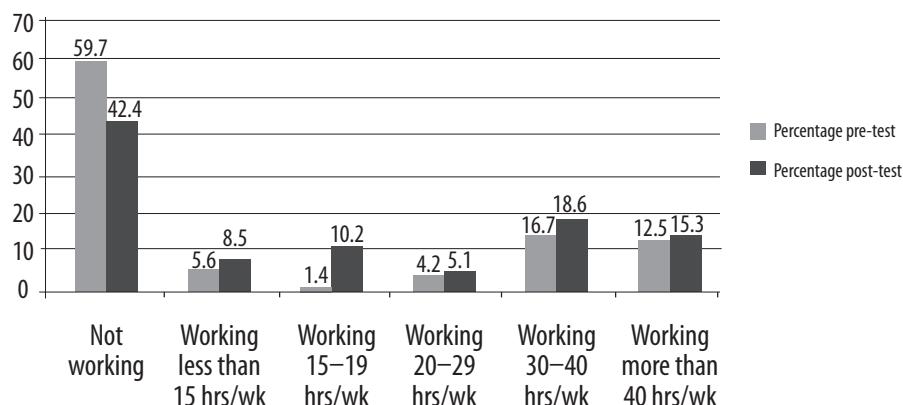
- I'm just bouncing around with the waves, and I'm not getting anywhere, and I have no clue how to get to land. And that's kind of where I'm at. I have no clue how to get to where I need to go or where I need to be.*
- I got here because I am broke and pretty much, there is nothing right now I can do about it.*
- Been a hell of a last four years. It's just been an up and down of emotional issues, law, and what not. (2011)*

Post-interviews with investigators who completed the program strongly supported that the Getting Ahead program was a success for them. They told a story of two important pieces coming together to make the Getting Ahead program work. The two pieces were, first, the educational and behavioral curriculum that taught people about class-driven values and the class system in our country. Second, the group process provided social support and a safe space for individuals to authentically examine themselves, their life,

and the choices they make in life—and to make decisions about how best they want to move forward from this point. Getting Ahead is not intended to be group therapy, but sometimes aspects of that dynamic emerge as part of the process.

The evaluation report presented by Brisson (2011) to the Rural Solutions Board of Directors showed consistent positive benefits for participants in a number of areas. When investigators started the program, 60% of them reported that they were not working. When they completed the program, the number reporting that they were not working dropped to 42%. Additionally, investigators were asked to check a box indicating how many hours they worked per week during the previous month. At post-test there was a higher percentage of investigators working in each of the “hours worked” categories. The graph below provides an illustration of differences in the employment situation for investigators when they began the program compared with when they finished the program.

Compare Hours Worked Per Week at Pre-Test and Post-Test



The Power of the Program

Comments from investigators indicate the power of the curriculum and its ability to empower people (they were talking about the importance of the program):

- *Being able to organize my thoughts and process things—and prioritize what I want and no longer want and be able to walk away from that. And in doing that I was able to decide my career path. I am back in school now. I have completed two semesters and made honor roll. I am going to school to get my bachelor's in psych and specializing in domestic violence groups.*
- *I mean, I have saved myself a lot of money. And over the next year it is all going to come back to me.*
- *I see the difference in the economic situation. I'm not the brightest guy in the world, but I made it. Teaches me where to put money [speaking about the Getting Ahead program], instead of just paying bills. Put some in the bank, some to my kids. I've learned to evaluate where my money is.*
- *I had this truck, I was getting like 12 miles to the gallon and then when I sit down and look at it I'm like, holy cow, I'm spending like \$650 a month driving back and forth to Sterling. That's more money than I spend [inaudible]. And I just got to the point that I was like I have to get rid of this vehicle. So I got this little car and I'm getting 39 miles to the gallon, and I'm stoked, and I've got all this money now to buy things and buy [names daughter] clothes and I got a promotion at work. So I'm making a*

little more money that way, and a lot of it was just my mindset. I mean, the way I take things for granted in my everyday life. I was just stuck in survival mode.

A year later, a program coordinator reported about the Getting Ahead graduate quoted last above:

The newly divorced dad was trying to figure out which way to turn as the whole world seemed to be falling in on him. At one point we believed he was suicidal when he first began seeking assistance with rent/utilities. He focused on his young daughter and began taking not only the Getting Ahead program but the Nurturing Fatherhood class. He made some changes in his life, specifically giving up his truck and getting a smaller more gas-efficient model so he could cut costs and better provide for his daughter. This father is now co-facilitating a Nurturing Fatherhood class.

In addition, other facilitators have reflected on the successes of the programs in which they were involved during the duration of the SSUF grant. One states:

My family was personally impacted by the information presented in the Getting Ahead class, for which I will be forever grateful! From our first Getting Ahead group, two families have left our county to move on to better financial situations, with one more family preparing to move this summer. One [individual who] participated has received a \$3.45 an hour increase in pay. [Another] par-

ticipant, after being encouraged by the group, is now working and being paid $\frac{3}{4}$ time. One participant has been promoted to a position where he closes the store. He gained trust and responsibility. I like how many participants come to class thinking that it is a balance-your-checkbook-style class and are amazed [that] it is so-o-o-o much more than that.

A second facilitator from an agency partner made these observations from her organization:

The outcome [that] is most amazing to me—and shows me that this program really works—is the following: All of the families who have participated in the Getting Ahead program have decreased if not ceased the use of our services, when before they were accessing the services we provide as often as possible.

Lifestyle Survey Outcomes

Investigators also filled out pre-test and post-test surveys on lifestyle choices. While some of the expected outcomes of the Getting Ahead program may take months and even years to achieve (e.g., earning a college degree, building up a savings account, landing a better paying job), assessing changes in investigators' attitudes toward their lifestyle choices were easier to see in a shorter time frame. The study assessed investigators' attitudes from when they began the program to when they completed the program and found a number of important improvements.

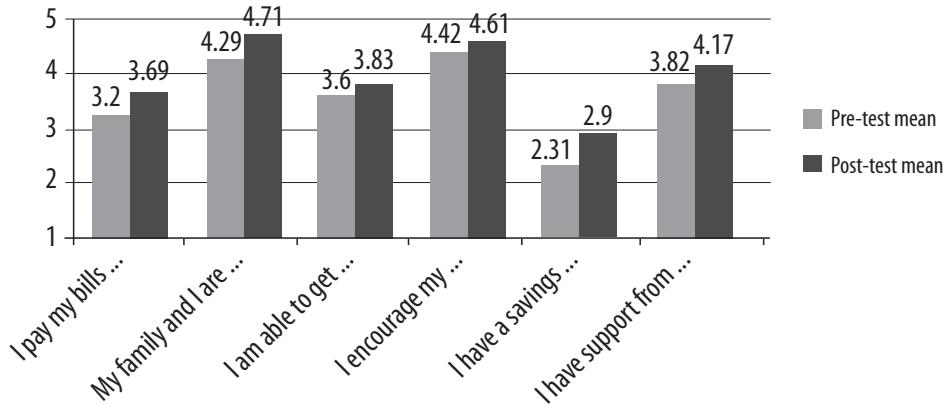
Investigators were asked to rate their agreement with a number of questions on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is equal to "Not at all," 2 is equal to "Not often," 3 is equal to "Not sure," 4 is equal to "Most of the time," and 5 is equal to "Always." Using a statistical analysis technique known as a t-test, the evaluators were able to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in perceptions of lifestyle from pre-test to post-test. In other words, evaluators were able to determine to what degree investigators experienced real changes in their lifestyle during their time in the Getting Ahead program.

The t-test results show that investigators did experience real change on the following items during their time in the program.

- I pay my bills without doing anything illegal (pre-test mean = 3.20; post-test mean = 3.69)
- My family and I are living safe from violence (pre-test mean = 4.29; post-test mean = 4.71)
- I am able to get what I need by talking to someone (pre-test mean = 3.60; post-test mean = 3.83)
- I encourage my children to attend college (pre-test mean = 4.42; post-test mean = 4.61)
- I have a savings account (pre-test mean = 2.31; post-test mean = 2.90)
- I have support from people outside my family (pre-test mean = 3.82; post-test mean = 4.17)

The graph below shows the pre-test and post-test scores for each of the items on which investigators improved significantly.

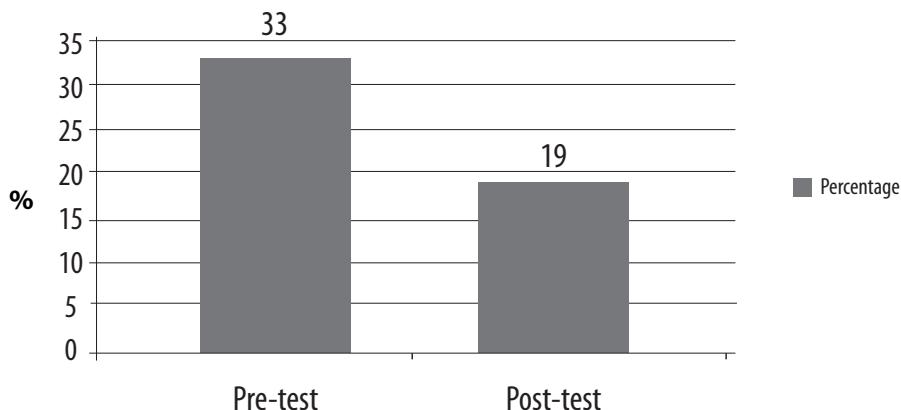
Mean Improvements in Perceptions of Lifestyle at Post-Test



As part of the survey, investigators also were asked, “In the last month, how many days did you feel down or discouraged?” At pre-test, 33 % of investigators said they felt down or discouraged “five or more times per month,” which was the highest category provided. At post-test the percentage responding that they felt down or

discouraged five times or more decreased to 19 %. This decrease may symbolize the impact of the group social support process that usually occurs in the Getting Ahead program. The social support provided by participation in the program was reported to be a major reason investigators felt the program was successful.

Felt Down or Discouraged Five or More Times in the Past Month



One very encouraging result of the evaluation revealed a trend indicating that investigators were becoming more financially literate as a result of the Getting Ahead program. At pre-test, 23% reported that there were “not sure” if their housing was affordable, and 21% reported that they were “not sure” if their transportation was affordable. At post-test the percentage of investigators reporting they were “not sure” if their house was affordable declined to 10%, and the percentage reporting there were “not sure” if their transportation was affordable declined to 9%.

Qualitative Themes

The quantitative results suggest the program is very successful for participants, but those close to the program know that hearing the stories (anecdotal evidence) of investigators is an equally convincing method of determining the program’s success. After completing the program, every interviewed investigator reported that the program was deeply important to his or her life.

Investigators gained insight into a value system that was largely unavailable to them before. The value system might broadly be considered a middle-class value system, but more specifically might be described as an understanding of financial systems, communication systems, educational systems, and problem-solving systems. Findings from this evaluation revealed that program investigators were glad to learn about the class-driven system, along with values that are implicitly part of the middle class—but mostly un-

available to participants enmeshed in a cycle of poverty. The following investigator statements about what stood out to them the most regarding Getting Ahead reveal how the program provided a doorway into a value system that investigators believe will allow them to finally “get ahead” in life.

- *Well, you know, one of the things was knowledge of the hidden rules. You have to forgive me [evident emotion]. The way things work and the way society thinks of things ... I have a lot of emotions around that. I struggled with those things, and understanding how those things work is kind of an eye-opening experience, I guess. I can get around a little better, I guess, and make a better life for me and [names daughter].*
- *She [the facilitator] wanted us to list the things we wanted to change. Once I started writing those things down, trying to work on those goals, making sure I didn’t get stuck, and saying that is never gonna work ... Now I see things differently.*
- *I’ve got a ways to go, but I have goals now, real goals. I want to go back to school. I want to make a better life for me and my daughter. If it’s just going to be me and her, then I’m already headed that way.*
- *The stages of change. Even though I knew I had to change parts of my thinking, but when it was broken down into those steps, I was able to work through it a little. There are hidden rules when it comes to writing an application for a job.*

- *Stages of change: The mental model gives you a visual.*
- *The way the course is laid out. Formal and casual registers. The different social classes and how they view things: speak, dress, act. And if you want to break into those classes, you have to play the game. And then ending with the goals. The way it was laid out was very powerful.*
- *How society perceives different classes of people. I've learned how to associate with those people.*

'Almost Like Group Therapy'

In addition to the educational component, there was also a strong clinical component to the work done by investigators in the Getting Ahead program. The clinical component might look almost like group therapy, with investigators sharing life stories and supporting others in a similar situation. This group process seemed to happen each week when investigators were given the chance to regularly focus on themselves and look more deeply to see where they are being successful and where they are falling short—in terms of their own aspirations.

In investigators' words, this is what the group process felt like:

- *I called this the finding-me class. Now I know I have a voice. I will go to the school and speak up.*
- *I had been searching and searching for answers for a long time. It was that key that gave [me] permission—that I could*

care for myself ... I thought [the program] was going to be like school, but instead it was social.

- *Shows you life is hard, but I think we have to do it because you find out you're not the only one. You have something in common with others.*
- *I put up a real good front. I'm a real good BS'er.*
- *I think this group is communication. Because, you know, when you stay at home you don't do a lot. But here there is communication. And then the second part is "permission" to be able to do self-care.*
- *I think the biggest challenge for a lot of us in here is going to be change. Figuring ourselves out.*
- *Well, yeah, I didn't expect any of it. I wasn't expecting to get emotional about this class. I wasn't expecting to get angry about the way things are in my life.*
- *I would love for there to be a specific word ... I would say it's a journey.*

Lessons Learned

Rural Solutions and its collaborating organizations believe that there are several powerful lessons to be learned from the Getting Ahead program that may strengthen the program and make it more effective in Northeast Colorado.

- In his final report, Brisson (2011) clearly identified the aspects of the Getting Program that are most critical for the program's success in this rural region:

The evaluation revealed that two aspects of the program seem to be critical for its success. The first part is the basic curriculum, which provides educational and behavioral lessons on what we are broadly calling a middle-class value system in this evaluation. Some of the lessons that seemed to be particularly important for investigators were about: (1) hidden rules, (2) stages of change, (3) social capital and social networks, and (4) goal development. The second part of the curriculum that seems to be critical was the therapeutic process that occurred when investigators participated in a group process with their peers who were facing similar life difficulties. The therapeutic process seemed to give investigators a chance to focus on themselves and the choices they have made in life, while the group provided an accountability structure.

- For the Getting Ahead program to be successful in any community, large or very small and rural, the program must be locally grounded. Local human services agencies must understand the challenges that families who have financial challenges and few resources face each day. Local agencies also must understand their role in how to break the cycle of poverty for their clients and other residents. The program must be community-based in order to bring together these agencies, the business community, the faith

community, and other individuals and groups who can build resources in their individual communities.

- There is a strong need to continue to build a strong core group of effective Getting Ahead program facilitators. Rural Solutions and its collaborating organizations must continue the mentoring and education process to develop their skills and be very deliberate and strategic in supporting them. As with the investigators in this program, the facilitation process is also a “journey.”
- It has become apparent that there is a need for some sort of follow-up work, perhaps a continuing “support group,” after the curriculum is completed. Most investigators state they feel they would benefit greatly if the group could continue to meet for social support once the class ends. It might be useful for Rural Solutions to work with former investigators to create some mechanisms whereby investigators can meet voluntarily as they continue to work toward their goals.
- There also is a need for ongoing evaluation of program components with former investigators. One area that has been identified as particularly important for future evaluation is the need to assess the program at the six-month follow-up stage and the two-year follow-up stage in order to better understand long-term outcomes of the program. A few outcomes that would be worth assessing over a longer follow-up period include: (1) savings, (2) educational outcomes, and (3) wages.

And the stories keep coming! The facilitator for one of the classes currently being conducted in one of the small communities in the region, gives us this status update. She reports that there are “awesome success stories coming from this group.” The investigators in the class are having “so much fun with the hidden rules.” A worker from the Workforce Center came to the class and helped the investigators develop résumés. One person has been ill and is now feeling better and just found a part-time job. A woman with multiple sclerosis started working by cooking for the elderly in a nearby town, and she feels “so much better and happy.” One young woman just passed her GED test, and she’s looking forward to getting a full-time job.

The success of the Getting Ahead program in Northeast Colorado shows no signs of abating. I feel honored to be part of this exciting, life-changing endeavor.

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