

King County Children and Family Commission  
 Irreducible Needs of Families in King County  
**Report from Focus Group conducted in District 8  
 Families living in White Center Oct. 15, 2010**

**Leaders:** Pastor Timothy Rambo, Mrs. Angela Rambo with Rambo Ministries

**Host agency:** Rambo Ministries, 9448 18<sup>th</sup> Ave SW, Seattle 98106

**Location of focus group:** White Center Community Cultural Center, 9421 18th Ave SW, Seattle, 98106

**Date:** Friday Oct. 15, 2010

**Time:** 6:00 – 7:45 p.m.

**Number of People who attended:** 16, 7 women and 9 men

**Setting the context for the group:** The local residents came together at the White Center Community Cultural Center that is now a location where Rambo Ministries as well as several other community groups regularly meet. The building had previously been an educational center for the adjoining St. James Lutheran Church but currently since the congregation is smaller at the church and they do not need all of the building space it is rented to local organizations. The Community Cultural Center is located one block north of Roxbury on 18<sup>th</sup> Ave SW in White Center.

White Center is very diverse with residents speaking 54 different languages or dialects. The diversity is evident in the demographics of students in the White Center schools. Two elementary schools and a middle school in the Highline School District were selected along with one elementary school in the Seattle Public Schools where children in the neighborhood and children of the families in the focus group attend school.

**Demographics of students in four selected White Center schools**

Schools	White	Black African American	American Indian	Asian	Pacific Islander	Hispanic
<i>Mount View Elementary</i>	12%	11%	2%	25%	7%	45%
<i>White Center Heights</i>	14%	18%	2%	30%	7%	29%
<i>Cascade Middle School</i>	15%	14%	2%	24%	9%	36%
<i>Roxhill Elementary School (SPS)</i>	20%	25%	3%	18%	NA	38%

*Hispanic refers to ethnicity and individuals may be Hispanic and be of any race.*

**Notes about the group participants:** The group participants included two parent families, single adults with grown children, and single adults. The group participants had lived in District 8 in West Seattle and/or White Center for a range of 2 to 20 years. Some of the participants had children who were grown while other participants had younger children ranging in age from two



months-14 years old. The participants also represented different racial groups as there were African Americans, White, and individuals of mixed race in the focus group.

**This introduction was shared with the group as part of the project overview:**

The King County Children and Family Commission began work on the Irreducible Needs Project out of their concern about family well-being for all families in King County. They identified a common list of needs they believed are shared by all families. These are the needs they identified: a safe neighborhood, adequate nutritious food, affordable wellness care, livable wage, access to education and learning through life, affordable housing, stable and secure relationships, and a supportive resource network. The Children and Family Commission is sponsoring tonight's group to hear your input on what you believe families need to thrive and have well-being.

**Key points that emerged from the group:** (described in more detail in the following pages)

- These English speaking participants, who have lived in this neighborhood for years identified that they would like to see a community liaison to assist people to access existing services. They went on to describe the role of the community liaison who could work out of a White Center agency and provide information or referrals to individuals who ask where to turn for help with utilities, affordable child care, or health care for a sick child or other social, health, education or legal needs. There is another role for the community liaison to be in the office of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and direct clients who are overwhelmed when they enter to be sure people are in the right place and are waiting with a number if needed to ensure that each person will have a chance to request the service that he or she needs.
- The participants agreed that there is not one single area of unmet need that is common to all families but there are several areas where many families could use assistance to meet their needs. One of the most frequently identified unmet needs is affordable housing. The participants in the group identified that waiting lists for Section 8 housing vouchers can take years, indeed one participant had waited six year to finally get a Section 8 voucher. It is also very difficult for working families even families where both adults have an income to afford housing in White Center. Rents can be high and rent for a house that would be preferred to an apartment rental is more than families can afford.
- The other related needs that were frequently mentioned were for economic opportunities to provide a sufficient income so that families could afford health care. The participants felt that if adult workers could earn a sufficient income then they could afford health care or would have health care as an employee paid benefit. Health care was a major concern for all families including the single adults, single parents, and two parent households.

**1. For the families that you know, what is one thing that families need?**

The group participants readily listed many unmet needs that they believe are common to families. The needs they listed were similar to the irreducible needs that have been identified by



members of the Children and Family Commission. Some of the participants agreed that using public transportation is very costly when they listed what families need:

- Affordable housing
- Safe neighborhoods
- Affordable public transportation (riding the bus costs \$2 a trip)
- Accessible and affordable health care and dental care in the neighborhood (waits for any dental service are two months long)

Affordable housing was agreed upon by nearly all the participants as an unmet need and they would like to see increased affordable housing units available in White Center. The Greenbridge Hope VI development of the King County Housing Authority is not enough according to these group participants. There will be 468 units when the Greenbridge Hope VI development is completed. The last 111 units are soon to be occupied; 88 units were finished in October 2009. Greenbridge occupies the former site of Park Lake Homes and 60% of the Park Lake residents moved into Greenbridge.

- A typical rent for a 2 bedroom apartment is \$850 in non-subsidized housing
- In White Center, 45% of renters and 26% of owners spend more than 30% of their income for rent or mortgage.<sup>1</sup>

**Need affordable health care-** The problem with health care is that participants, regardless of their work status or circumstances of using public assistance all found it to be expensive. The parents who were working had to pay a high premium to keep their family members covered. An older participant referred to “having a full disability and I still can’t make it.” One participant referred to “not having any health care coverage at all, and saying that you just go as long as you can without any (preventive care or insurance) and then it’s too late and you really need it if you’re in the hospital.”

## **2. What are other needs that families have?**

**Improve information access with a human touch-** The participants described several unmet needs that families living in White Center experience. They all agreed that there should be a better means of information access to local resources such as a dental clinic, WIC, SeaMar Health Clinic. They identified that one way that information access could be improved is to have a Community Liaison, a person who assists other people, by responding with information to individuals’ inquiries about services or resources. The emphasis is on this being a person and not computer access as some of these local residents do not all have a computer, can not afford internet access, or may not know how to use a computer. One older male participant who indicated that he had a disability said that he has gone to the library identified himself as not being computer literate to the librarian and asked for someone to access online information for him.

<sup>1</sup> Data on housing is from the White Center Community Development Association. Accessed online at <http://www.wccda.org/content/about/WC-history.php>

There was a combined feeling of discontent that computers have not succeeded in putting information into everyone's hands when access is limited and costs for internet service can prohibit low income families from home access. These participants were much more enthused with the idea that a person who could offer information would really help local residents who get by without knowing that some services do exist such as the White Center Food Bank and Baby Corner, Westside Baby, Head Start, or utility assistance.

### **3. What would you most like to have for your family?**

**Affordable legal assistance-** Participants in this group also identified that parents, including non-custodial parents, would benefit from access to affordable or free legal aide. Parents may need advice about custody or other issues and these residents in White Center would have no resource except to travel downtown and seek the services through legal aid. The participants wished that a local community advocate could be available to help parents and other local residents to understand documents or to identify if an individual should seek legal assistance.

**Improve safety in neighborhood-** Parents also identified that they wish they had affordable housing for their families and all participants wished their neighborhood was safe. The participants learned that there had been a very recent break-in on the block where the group was being held. The group leader also referred to the shooting that left four family members dead that had occurred just blocks away from where these local residents live. The participants reported seeing prowlers on 20<sup>th</sup> Avenue SW. On 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue SW two cars were stolen recently and someone reported that an air conditioner was stolen from a window. Apparently thieves might be stealing so they can sell the metal parts. In a separate incident that occurred in August, thieves broke the lights on the newly refurbished 98<sup>th</sup> Street corridor that linked Greenbridge to the business district and removed the stainless steel handrails to sell them for scrap. Another concern is that the general condition of the street on 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue is very poor with large potholes that could be hazardous to drivers.

**Make child care affordable and accessible-** Parents also need affordable child care. The participants felt it is just not reasonable for a mother to try and take the bus with small children to reach a child care setting early in the morning. This group agreed that the neighborhood needs quality and affordable child care. One family explained that there have to be steps to assist working parents to incrementally reduce use of public assistance by providing them with affordable and accessible child care. This family was referring to acquiring an income that meets some of the family's essential needs but still needing assistance to cover child care. The system is not perceived as functioning to restore the working families' self-reliance but that could be done through pro-rating a benefit such as child care to match the families increasing but sometimes fluctuating monthly income.

All of the participants also wished to have higher income so they could afford their necessary expenses. Participants who had younger children had school related expenses and child care costs while the more mature participants were challenged to afford their rent and health care expenses. The participants were similar to some of their neighbors and other local residents who work hard



to have a sufficient income and struggle to meet all expenses. In four schools in White Center, including three schools from the Highline School District and one elementary school in the Seattle Public Schools, the proportion of children in families at an income level that qualifies for the free or reduced lunch program is high:

- White Center Heights 62%
- Mount View Elementary 64%
- Cascade Middle School 57%
- Roxhill Elementary School 80%

#### **4. What resource or support would help the families to get what they need?**

These participants have discussed that the lack of awareness that a resource or service exists can keep families from seeking and using a service or resource. Families with older children in high school should know about Running Start and yet parents did not necessarily know this or have a school counselor or teacher tell their children. Families need a community liaison who will help students in the important transitions from middle school to high school and from high school to college.

Other resources that families in the community need are an adult day center for individuals who would benefit from supervision and socialization. A community center is also needed for teens where they can hang out late at night. Teens should have access to caring adults who could mentor them. The participants were aware of the Salvation Army having a gym where youth play but it does not stay open late at night. Another need in the community is to have a soup kitchen so some of the transients would have a source of food but it could be accessed by other community residents. In a separate effort the members of the White Center Chamber of Commerce considered what might be involved if there was a soup kitchen and Holy Family School was thought of as a site but there were many considerations so there is no current activity on this idea.

One participant explained that the time frame under which services will be provided is not helpful to individual clients. A family that is falling behind in meeting its essential expenses may not find any accessible resources according to this group. One participant described that she sought help in anticipation that she could not pay her rent but was told she would have to be evicted first and then she could receive some assistance. Other participants agreed that there isn't a way to get assistance until a person is completely down and out without any assets or dignity left. The group participants would prefer if the human services system was accessible to give individuals and families a hand up before they depleted all of their resources.

#### **5. What are the barriers or reasons that families do not get the support or help they need?**

The participants described that the DSHS office that is intended to provide a safety net to families can actually hinder families. One parent said that DSHS causes them so much grief that "you may as well cut it off and just struggle to get by." The participants mentioned getting a letter from



DSHS every three months requiring them to verify their address and it had to be done in person to maintain benefits. Adults who are trying to work and may be in short term, temporary, or part-time jobs are burdened by having to take hours off from work to appear at the DSHS office.

According to some participants, other reasons why individuals may not get the support or help they need is that some people are depressed and feel helpless. Participants in the group said that whether it is due to having limited income or to the conditions here with very grey rainy days there are some people who get very down and do not go out of their house or apartment. There are some local residents who lack motivation so they don't muster the energy and effort that it takes to try and navigate the system.

## **6. What could be done so resources or sources of support are culturally responsive?**

**Humanize the experience of help seeking-** These group participants expanded on their Community Liaison concept and would like to see a Liaison in the DSHS office to help locate people into the right line or refer them if they are in the wrong place. One of the mothers in the group who recalled an experience of going to a DSHS office with her three young children said, "They took a part of me every time I had to go there" referring to how she was made to feel ashamed and humiliated in every encounter she had.

**Improve customer service-** One father carefully explained that the process of visiting the Seattle Public Schools enrollment office in the John Sanford building was a time consuming and demeaning experience. He spent an hour in line only to reach the head of the line and was told he needed to move to another line for the service he requested. Another parent echoed the demeaning experience of long waits in line only to be turned away. Working parents also said that taking time from work to try to access a service cost them money in lost wages that they did not necessarily have.

**Provide interpreters as needed-** These group participants spoke and understood English but they had empathy and compassion for local residents who are not native English speakers and seek services or wish to access resources and they can not make their needs known.

**Train in cultural sensitivity-** The group participants felt that state and local agency workers that have to interact with the public should have cultural diversity training to develop compassion and understanding for their fellow human beings who are their clients. The workers need to be educated to understand the clients' situations and they need to have empathy if they have not been in a similar situation. This group considered that the workers who interact with the public should also be treated respectfully. The agency workers deserve to do self care, have retreats, time off, and benefits that help them to enjoy their work and feel good about their jobs. The idea was that if the agency workers stayed on the job they gained expertise and they were available to meet the needs of clients.

**Develop integrity in services-** Any of the community agencies or organizations that serve the public should advocate for the individuals they serve. Clients should have a way of being able to communicate their needs or their requests to those in charge and be heard. As one participant



said, “People need to have a way to express their needs, they need to be told that they have been heard, and they need to know the result of what they said or the request they made.”

**Identify the appropriateness of community agencies to serve diverse clients-** One of the group participants thoughtfully explained that in a diverse community like White Center it is very important that any funders that provide resources to small community based organizations or agencies should ascertain that the organization reaches the intended audience and does so in a culturally appropriate way. This participant described how significant it is to have an organization that markets itself well to local residents and engages the participants who are in need of services. This participant would like to see that resources are not routinely distributed to the same organizations or agencies without identifying that each organization is meeting the community needs as intended and involving local residents in the process.