SCRA Community Psychology Practice Council

Community Practice Vignette

Name: Laura Clark
Name of workplace: Council for Children's Rights
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Please describe your primary work including the setting and primary focus of your work:

I lead the community planning, research, & program evaluation efforts for The Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures (an initiative of Council for Children's Rights). This work includes developing comprehensive community plans to address issues facing children in our community community; compiling and monitoring community indicators related to child well-being; researching and disseminating evidence-based practice research to community stakeholders; promoting research and data-driven decision making by community stakeholders; providing program evaluation training & technical assistance to service providers; and working with staff to develop public policies that support evidence-based practices in the community. I also oversee the internal program evaluation for three individual advocacy programs and represent Council for Children's Rights on relevant community committees. I staff Council for Children's Rights Research Advisory Committee; manage external relationships with local universities and research entities and manage graduate student interns for various research projects. I am also a member of the Council for Children's Rights Management Team and the Larry King Center's Leadership Team.

Please describe any other work or projects that you do as a community psychologist (paid or volunteer):

I serve on two non-profit boards and am often asked to provide program evaluation technical assistance to local agencies. For example, I was asked to conduct the United Way outcomes training series for their member agencies this year. As part of my work at Council for Children's Rights, I also serve as a sort of "triage" center for research and evaluation questions, directing non-profits to appropriate sources of information or assistance.

What training do you have in community psychology? What helped prepare you for this career?

I have a Master's degree in Clinical & Community Psychology from UNC-Charlotte. My graduate education, both in the classroom and in the field, helped to prepare me for my career. I was able to "see" community psychology in action by working directly with neighborhoods and community agencies as a student. I also had the privilege of having community psychologists as mentors while in graduate school. After graduate school, I continued to develop my skills while working at United Way in the Community Planning department. Through that experience, I gained additional skills in needs assessments, outcome measurement, and planning large-scale community initiatives.

Please describe how your training/education contributed to your work as a community psychologist. What do you view as the most important skills you learned in your training as a community psychologist. I think the program evaluation skills are probably the most tangible skills I gained including how to write surveys, conduct needs assessments and work with stakeholders to develop appropriate evaluation plans. However, the intangible skills may be the most valuable skills I acquired during my education. During my training, l learned how to work with diverse populations to achieve common goals, listen to the needs of neighborhood residents, and how to bridge the gap between science and practice. These are the skills that I use every day in my current job.

What other experiences or training have contributed to or enhanced your ability to work as a community psychologist? My early career experiences at United Way provided invaluable experience as a community psychologist. In the four years I worked there, I had the opportunity to connect community planning and program evaluation to the member agency allocation process. This ensured that community dollars were spent where most needed and where they could have the greatest impact. During this process, I had the opportunity to work with hundreds of volunteers and dozens of member agencies. This expanded my understanding of the community and gave me considerable exposure to the local health and human service arena.

Are there other ways you use your community psychology background and training, either unpaid or in paid roles other than your primary work? I teach undergraduate classes in community psychology and program evaluation and this gives me a great chance to expose students to the tenets of our field. I also look for opportunities to infuse the principles of my training into my civic endeavors, including board membership and volunteer experiences.

What advice might you give to students or people considering community psychology as a career? I would emphasize the diversity of the skill set you gain as a community psychologist. I'm able do community planning, conduct needs assessments, and evaluate programs as a result of my training. All of these are skills that are in particular demand right now as philanthropic dollars get tighter and tighter. Health and human service agencies have to be able to demonstrate their impact in the community to stay competitive. Students can use those tangible skills that they'll gain through their training to distinguish themselves from other candidates.

Is there anything else you would like to say about your role as a community psychology practitioner? I feel really lucky to have found a career that fits so well with my own personal values and beliefs. I go to work every day knowing that my training will be utilized in a variety of ways; it's not just some esoteric degree. I'm also really glad that as a community psychology practitioner, I'm able to connect the principles that guide our field to the real world issues facing health and human service providers.

Please list any professional affiliations:

American Psychological Association
Society for Community Research & Action
International Society for Child Indicators