

Community Solutions Program: A Final Report
from the Virginia Association for Community Conflict Resolution
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The Virginia Association for Community Conflict Resolution (VACCR) recently completed a successful 2-year collaboration with the University of Virginia's Institute for Environmental Negotiation (IEN) on a statewide Community Solutions Program. The Community Solutions Program targets complex community-wide issues, such as land use, water supply, transportation, and public housing and offers a collaborative problem-solving approach to find innovative answers to difficult situations.

With financial support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, a far-reaching informational effort was undertaken by the nine Community mediation centers that make up VACCR. Training and mentoring support was provided by IEN.

During the grant period, 197 contacts were made and 168 disputes were identified 137 interventions were attempted by community mediation center staff and volunteers. These disputes were categorized as workplace (8%), land use (16%), community (11%), neighborhood and housing (18%), inter-agency (9%), environmental (6%) education/schools/youth (10%), revitalization/renewal (7%) and multicultural/racial (12%).

A number of alternative dispute resolution processes were used to assist with these disputes including group facilitation (12%), dialogue (14%), consensus building (9%), strategic planning (13%), training (13%), public meetings (10%), public forums (3%), mediation (3%), issue scoping (12%), and other processes (11%). Of the 134 reported dispute situations, in 59% a partial agreement was reached, in 6% a temporary or interim agreement was reached, in 28% a full agreement was reached and in 7% of the cases no agreement was reached.

Through this program, community mediation centers across the state have taken on more complex community disputes. Examples include:

- Facilitated a discussion between school and community members of the Seatack neighborhood of Virginia Beach. This neighborhood is economically disadvantaged and participants developed an action plan for utilizing limited economic resources;
- Assisted the Shenandoah Valley community in constructively addressing HIV issues
- Worked with stakeholders in addressing watershed management issues in the Shenandoah Valley area;
- Facilitated dialogues in the Hampton Roads area with ACT – Abraham's Children Together – an interfaith group which works to increase the capacity of faith-based organizations and the community in dealing with diversity;
- Continued partnership with the Elizabeth River Project, which focuses on an environmental cleanup of the Elizabeth River watershed;
- Participated in a civic engagement project with faculty, students and the community at Virginia Wesleyan College in Norfolk entitled "Is Democracy A Dinosaur?".

- Intervened in an internal dispute with a Newport News private school, its school board and affiliated religious institution;
- Facilitated a town-community-youth-police relations meeting on the Eastern Shore;
- Worked with city council, the mayor, civic and business association to resolve a siting issue;
- Provided Community Solutions training/facilitation to assist Virginia Extension Service Peanut Industry dialogue and problem-solving session.

One of the key outputs of the Community Solutions program is the development of the Virginia Solutions Initiative, which will provide a mechanism for a collaborative approach to community issues and seeks input from state government to create an effective and easy to use framework for addressing community and public disputes.

The 2-year effort to launch the Community Solutions Program in Virginia has been successful with 137 interventions attempted on public policy and complex community disputes. The “word is out” that community mediation centers have the capacity to handle these disputes and welcome the opportunity to do so. Examples of successes throughout the state include the engagement of economically disadvantaged citizens in a community-wide effort to cleanup an important waterway, and a collaboration of three religious groups to find common ground and end hate and violence.

Much work has been done but there is still much more to do to make “community solutions” the rule, rather than the exception when dealing with public policy and/or community disputes. The generous funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has put Virginia well on the road to being a leader in applying collaborative problem-solving principles to difficult and highly volatile public situations.