

## The HR Manager's Secret Weapon: New Hampshire's Family Resource Centers

Let's face it. Family problems can be costly to employers. Several recent studies have linked stress in a worker's family with decreased productivity, increased absence, and negative attitudes at work. In the current social climate, family stress appears to be at an all time high. A record number of New Hampshire workers face caring for distressed or ill relatives, are dealing with complex and difficult problems related to raising their children or grandchildren, or are just having trouble keeping work and family life balanced.



Trying to help a coworker with a family-related problem can be extremely tricky business. Smart employers—those who understand the cost of family stress to productivity—have learned that partnering with community agencies for the benefit of their employees' family life can both improve the workplace environment and boost the bottom line.

Sometimes, however, the usual referral paths—health care providers, mental health services, or social service agencies—just aren't a good fit or carry heavy labels or stigmas that can frighten workers away. Enter the New Hampshire employer's new best friend: the local family resource center.

Family resource centers are community-based collaborations dedicated to strengthening families through education and support. In short, they are parents and professionals working together to help families get information, education and access to resources that reduce family stress.

Each of the 13 centers throughout the state (and that number is growing) developed independently out of the needs and impetus of local communities, and each is governed by local parents and professionals. Consequently, each center offers slightly different programs geared to the needs of local folks.

One great example is the Hub Family Resource Center in Dover. According to Executive Director Greg Burdwood, some community businesses are regular center collaborators. Liberty Mutual Insurance, the area's largest employer, not only refers employees to the Hub, but has hosted in-house parenting classes taught by Hub staff. "It's a great example of community cooperation," says Burdwood. "We have helped their employees and they, in turn, have rolled up their sleeves and volunteered to help us."

Among the Hub's many popular programs for Dover families is a dads' group that focuses on particular issues for fathers. The classes opened with one dad, but by the second week 22 fathers

were participating. In 2007, the Hub reached more than 800 families in the Dover area with education, resources and referral services.

New Hampshire has been a leader in the family resource center movement since it began. Consequently, we are lucky to have many centers that have been around long enough to have developed strong and effective programs. A recent (and ongoing) study of their effectiveness conducted by the New Hampshire Children's Trust Fund has shown that parents and family members who have participated in New Hampshire family resource center programs have significantly reduced the stress in their own and their families' lives, have improved their skills as parents, and have been well served by their involvement in the centers' programs.

Throughout the year, each center provides stress-reducing parent education on issues ranging from how to care for a newborn to how to handle a teen's arguments. Some offer in-home visiting to families who need extra help and support. Others offer programs for single parents, divorced parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, teen parents, military families, and recent-immigrant families on a wide variety of topics.

Family resource center professionals offer expertise in teaching family members how to help themselves by taking advantage of existing resources. Their approach differs from those of many traditional family service agencies because they don't see family stress as an illness or a disability, but as an opportunity to learn.

HR professionals will find a wealth of information at their local family resource center, as well as professional staff members responsive to their needs. Nearly all of the centers welcome the opportunity to partner with employers to create opportunities for employee participation, including offering job-site programs. The most wonderful aspect of all of this is the price tag. Most programs are offered for free or very reasonable cost to participating parents and businesses. And, since all are charitable organizations, family resource center directors are always looking for creative ways to make themselves useful to potential business donors.

To locate the nearest New Hampshire family resource center, visit the website operated by their statewide association, Family Support New Hampshire: [www.fsnh.org](http://www.fsnh.org). It could be well worth your time to stop by and visit the local center staff and establish a working relationship on behalf of your employees. Utilizing the assets of your local family resource center just might give your business a secret weapon in the battle to be the best: a family-healthy workforce.

*Dr. Malcolm Smith is Family Life and Family Policy Specialist with UNH Cooperative Extension and teaches in the UNH Family Studies Program. He can be reached at (603) 862-7008, or email: [malcolm.smith@unh.edu](mailto:malcolm.smith@unh.edu)*