

Choices That Make Change: A Collaborative Effort Between A Utility Company and Extension

To address the financial hardships faced by Connecticut consumers, the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension system developed a financial management outreach program in collaboration with Northeast Utilities. Results of this five-year public service effort and curriculum were presented.

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Background Situation

In 1993, the University of Connecticut CES Family Economics Team developed "Choices That Make Change: Your Money" as a public service outreach program in collaboration with Northeast Utilities to assist utility customers experiencing financial hardships. The Choices Money Management program was pilot tested and delivered to over 3000 Connecticut residents in 1994-95. The Connecticut Labor Department adopted the curriculum in 1995 for use as a mandatory workshop for 36,000 targeted unemployed residents. Northeast Utilities Community Outreach staff continue to provide this program as a public service outreach program reaching over 2,000 consumers annually. Findings from program evaluations indicate that a majority of participants plan to make changes in one or more money management practices.

Program Description and Curriculum Overview

The Choices Money Management Workshop addresses the financial stresses faced by families and individuals living on limited incomes and others who experience changes in financial status. The two-hour workshop features a slide presentation and participant workbook designed to enable financially stressed individuals to make positive changes through improved money management practices. The collaborative effort between the utility company and the Cooperative Extension System involved the development of the educational material and training of Community Outreach staff. Northeast Utilities funded the program providing the visuals, workbooks and calculators for program participants. Cooperative Extension Educators were contracted to provide educational programs statewide in conjunction with the utility company as an outreach program to local social service agencies.

The curriculum focuses on resource management skills and debt management principles. The workshop emphasizes taking control of personal finances through discussion of goal setting, budgeting, debt management, and practical ways to reduce expenses. Extension Educators upon request provide follow-up budget counseling and referrals are made to the Consumer Credit Counseling Service for debt management.

Social & Economic Impact

The program has been presented to several thousand Connecticut residents who are ethnically, educationally, economically and geographically diverse. The collaborative effort between a utility company and educational institution in cooperation with social service agencies and organizations helped Connecticut residents to effectively plan how to manage their resources more effectively. Data collected from 2,975 workshop participants in 1994-97 revealed: 89% (n 2652) felt better about managing their money; 82% (n 2442) plan to establish money management goals; 85% (n 2522) plan to develop a budget; 80% (n 2365) plan to reduce spending; and 58% (n 1730) plan to make payment arrangements with creditors.

Collaborative efforts between business, social services, and educators can be a viable partnership in addressing the financial needs of consumers. Early intervention through implementation of money management education programs and counseling programs can help participants overcome financial obstacles.

Endnote

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