

**Lotus House Women's Shelter
Lead Agency in Service Driven Research Project
A Model for Community Based Research**

Introduction

To advance equity and social justice, as well for ethical and pragmatic reasons, there is widespread recognition of the need to conduct research that aims to have significance within the context of community-based organizations providing services to those in need. Labeled in various ways as participatory action research, community-based research, and community-academic partnership, the models differ in the extent to which they emphasize the function of research to promote social change, however, common to all the models is the aim to ethically increase the scientific knowledge base in ways that are collaborative and has results that are meaningful to the persons studied. The service driven research model and project of the Lotus House Women's Shelter¹ ("Lotus House") in collaboration with Paulo Graziano, Ph.D., Center for Children and Families/ Psychology Department of Florida International University and third-party independent consultant Emily Arcia, Ph.D. ("Research Collaboration"), in addition to other research projects undertaken by Lotus House, conform to these models in multiple ways. Lotus House owned the project and acted as the lead initiator driving the research, identified the problems to be studied and the technical and methodological support it required, procured funding for the research project, oversaw staff's day-to-day functioning, kept and managed the data, and as of writing this report continues to be integrally involved in the public dissemination of results. Evaluator and university researchers function as consultants in their service driven, community-based research.

A Case Study

Following the framework posited by Drahota and associates,² we are suggesting that the Lotus House Research Collaboration has been highly successful because Lotus House has acted as the initiator and lead agency for the enterprise. Support for our suggestion comes from the results of the evaluation of the project.

With the humblest of beginnings, Lotus House opened its doors as an emergency shelter for high special needs women experiencing homelessness in 2006, expanding its buildings and services to include mothers with children in 2007. After a series of further expansions, its campus-like facilities were redeveloped into a state of the art, comprehensive homeless services facility called Lotus Village, which is today the largest women's shelter in the State of Florida and one of the largest in the country,

¹ The Lotus House Women's Shelter is the official tradename of the Sundari Foundation, Inc., a 501c3 non-profit charitable organization dedicated to serving women and children in need. For more information, see www.lotushouse.org.

² Drahota et al. (2016) Community-Academic Partnerships: A Systemic Review of the State of the Literature and Recommendations for Future Research. *The Millbank Quarterly*, 94,1 (163-214).

sheltering over 500 women and children nightly. In 2017 the agency took its first step as a lead agency³ into the world of research by applying for and winning an innovation grant from The Children's Trust of Miami Dade County to research and develop a trauma informed children's wellness center, with an expanded scope of services and deep protective factors for children, embedded in the newly re-developed facilities in Lotus Village. When the same local funding agency, The Children's Trust, published a request for early childhood research proposals just as the redevelopment of the Lotus House facilities was nearing completion, Lotus House was primed, ready to compete for and secure its largest community-based research project to date— a service driven research project to develop a portrayal of the social, emotional, behavioral and developmental status of sheltered children, and to compare two evidence based therapeutic parenting interventions in a randomized control study. Dr. Emily Arcia, Ph.D., a volunteer with research and evaluation experience, assisted Lotus House in launching the project and helped to enlist the services of Paulo Graziano, Ph.D., of the Center for Children and Families, Department of Psychology of the Florida International University. Together, they worked with the Lotus House team to develop and build the needed organizational capacity and infrastructure to implement what is now the largest service driven research study of the needs of sheltered children in the country. As of writing this report, the service driven research project, along with many extensions and additions, is in its fourth year of operation. An undertaking of this magnitude required the support of many, including general shelter funding from the Miami Dade County Homeless Trust, Miami Dade County, as well as public and private foundations and the community at large, Lotus Endowment Fund, Inc. and its founders the Micky and Madeleine Arison Family Foundation and countless more individuals and foundations committed to understanding and supporting the needs of children and families sheltered by Lotus House.

Programs and Services

In the five years since Lotus House launched the first research project, it has enlisted other research partners from Florida International University to collaborate on several programs that include: mental health, parenting, women's studies, and nutrition. The largest of these research projects, namely the early childhood research project mentioned above, has provided mental health services and parenting education to 1,118 children and 619 mothers in three years.⁴ Objectives were to increase current understanding of sheltered children's developmental and mental health status and trauma histories; improve child mental health status with therapeutic services for

³ The first research project undertaken by Lotus House was in collaboration with the DOCS program of the Miller School of Medicine of the University of Miami, studying access to HIV testing in the context of the shelter and its free clinic. See Doblecki-Lewis S, Lester L, Schwartz B, Collins C, Johnson R, Kobetz E. *HIV risk and awareness and interest in pre-exposure and post-exposure prophylaxis among sheltered women in Miami*. Int J STD AIDS. 2016 Sep;27(10):873-81.

⁴ Arcia A, (2020, September). *Lotus House Therapeutic Mother-Child Program: Year III Report*. Retrieved from <https://lotushouse.org/childrenfirst/>

mother-child dyads; evaluate the effectiveness of modalities offered; and disseminate results to the larger academic and shelter/health provider community, as well as national and community leaders and stakeholders. Therapeutic modalities included: time-limited versions of child parent psychotherapy and parent-child interaction therapy as well as trauma focused cognitive behavior therapy. Pre-and post-intervention assessments include a developmental screener of children under 8 years of age, assessment of parenting stress, child behavior, child trauma experiences and symptoms, and mother-child interaction. Results are available for 481 completers and their mothers. In addition, a subset of children was randomly assigned to psychotherapy or parenting intervention and the results showed levels of improvement that were statistically significant and clinically meaningful.⁵ This parenting intervention program is carried out entirely by the trained clinicians of Lotus House.

A second service driven research project undertaken by Lotus House with Asia Eaton, Ph.D., and her team from the Women's Lab of Florida International University focuses on women without children experiencing homelessness and through focus groups has collected extensive qualitative data that describes the women's experiences, their survival strategies while homeless, factors that facilitated and hampered their wellbeing, and their subsequent experiences at homeless shelters, including Lotus House. Participants who had exited the Lotus House program described it as having a "culture of care," defined by: genuineness, dignity, respect for participants; high expectations for independence and accountability; being somewhere to rest and recuperate; a place where individual needs and experiences were understood and met; and a place of belonging and sisterhood.⁶ Lotus House used the feedback derived from this research for the continuous improvement of its shelter program. As of writing this report, other manuscripts with results on the gender-specific needs and coping strategies of women experiencing homelessness and the specific supports the women felt were the most helpful to their successful transition were in preparation.

A pilot study by Lotus House of women and children's indicators of nutritional status and experiences with food insecurity prior to entering Lotus House was supported by Cristina Palacios, Ph.D. and Catherine Coccia, Ph.D., Department of Dietetics and Nutrition, of Florida International University. This collaborative project deepened Lotus House's understanding of the prevalence of hunger and food insecurity of women and children entering the shelter and in the impoverished neighborhood which Lotus House calls home. It also helped Lotus House successfully compete for a second innovation

⁵ *Pending* - Graziano P, Spiegel J, Arcia E, and Sundari Foundation, Inc. *Early Assessment and Intervention for Families Experiencing Homelessness: A randomized trial comparing two parenting programs*. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, currently under peer review, 2020.

⁶ *Pending* – Eaton A, Stephens D, Ruvalcaba Y, Banks J, and Sundari Foundation, Inc. *A Culture of Care: How Lotus House Women's Shelter heals program participants through genuineness, space, high expectations, dignity, individualized attention, and community*. Journal of Community Psychology, currently under peer review, 2020.

project, The Farm at Lotus Village, from The Children's Trust. The Farm program was designed to offer hands-on science and nutritional programming for sheltered children in a science lab/hydroponic urban garden where children and families learned by growing their own vegetables. The Farm offered the added benefit of fielding a rich array of leafy green vegetables into the larger shelter's food service and programming reflects extensive research in ways to support children's learning.

Criteria for the Success Label

The criteria for considering the Lotus House Research Collaboration in this case study a success per Drahotá et al. (2016) are as follows.

CBO as Lead Initiator; Distal Outcomes. Lotus House was an active lead initiator of several projects, including the case study Research Collaboration, meeting the criteria for distal successful outcomes in the development and enhancement of programs and interventions. Among those was the establishment of a model therapeutic children's wellness center embedded within its shelter. The Research Collaboration built on this project to provide therapeutic services to address the trauma histories and the mental health and developmental needs of sheltered children and their mothers. In another example of its role as initiator, Lotus House took the lead in recruiting, organizing and hosting the focus groups of alumni sheltered women to develop a deeper understanding of the gender specific experiences and needs of single women experiencing homelessness in the second project, in collaboration with its research partners. The pilot nutritional study on hunger and food insecurity of women and children experiencing homelessness prior to entering the shelter established the need for the development of an innovative nutritional and educational program— The Farm at Lotus House; again, Lotus House was the initiator though its collaboration with third party and academic researchers was invaluable.

Lotus House and its Research Collaborators continue to improve community care for marginalized women and children who experience homelessness. Through the provision of therapeutic services, Lotus House demonstrated clinically meaningful outcomes like the reduction of trauma symptoms, the improvement of behavior and stronger mother-child relationships. As the lead initiator driving the research, Lotus House, with the continued collaboration of its Research Collaborators, continues to illustrate a sustainable model with the expansion and enrichment of its services. Although continued services will require continued sources of outside funding, the staffing and service structure that have been set up make the program both replicable and sustainable.

Aligning with Drahota's principles, successful proximal outcomes of the community-based research projects include the collective development of tangible products in the form of yearly reports, which document the levels of services and outcomes, as well as academic publications and presentations and field papers for other service providers. The collaborators continue to develop additional pathways for field publications, scientific papers, donor reports, social media and website content.

Institutional Outcomes. In the implementation of these service driven, community-based research projects, all parties continued to evolve and exchange knowledge and Lotus House built the organizational infrastructure to continue and expand its service driven research to further its service, policy and public education goals. The clinical team received vital training to enhance their skills and develop professionally. Data collection, both quantitative and qualitative, and empirical data driven decision-making was possible. The knowledge gained from these projects allowed the Research Collaboration to more closely tailor services to the needs of those served and contributed to a deeper overall understanding of the needs of sheltered children and families. The exchange of knowledge increased the understanding of research methodology in the field, subsequently strengthening the delivery of services and validity of data interpretation.

Although the community-based organization, Lotus House, and its Research Collaborators shared different perspectives and approaches to the community-based research, the collaboration exuded passion and synergy. As per Drahota's framework for understanding research collaboratives, this successful proximal outcome resulted in a replicable model for other community-based led and partnered research projects.

Thus, we consider this a successful example of a research collaborative led by a community-based organization. Below are the factors that have hindered and facilitated implementation.

Hindering Factors

None of the parties had as much time or the financial resources needed to optimize the Research Collaboration. As is often the case for community-based projects, financial resources were the primary limiting factor. Serving and meeting the needs of the sheltered women and children in the study was paramount to Lotus House and integral to their mission. As such, the exigencies of the shelter environment and needs of those served were always prioritized. Because the collaborative included professionals from various fields including law, clinical and developmental psychology, nutrition, social

work, and education, the professional jargon and language typical of any given field sometimes became an obstacle that had to be overcome when preparing written material for dissemination. Empirical and experiential bases for decision-making necessitated balancing. That said, the research collaborators always recognized the importance of integrating both perspectives.

Facilitating Factors

Lotus House along with its research collaborators successfully effectuated a community-based organization led service driven research project providing value to the women and children served, in no small part due to many facilitating factors. Consistent with all the facilitating factors identified by Drahotá et al. (2016), the Research Collaboration demonstrated a shared belief in mission, trust and respect. The framework of the team included clearly differentiated roles among the research collaborators, and a skilled and dedicated staff who embodied leadership vision and commitment. The Research Collaboration engaged in well-structured meetings and frequent communications to ensure positive program impact. The success of the collaboration resulted in continued funding and encompassed benefits for all collaborators. The collaborators' willingness to share knowledge and experiences contributed to a replicable model for a successful community-based research that provided value and improved the lives of those served.

Summary

It is important to note that to achieve an equal partnership in service driven research, memoranda of understanding and agreements have been in place with all of Lotus House collaborators, which affirm Lotus House's lead or at least equal status and the commitment of the research collaborators to honor the values and principles of Lotus House in carrying out their work together. For example, the agreement with one research partner stated "[Researcher] and Lotus House agree to carry out the research in a trauma-informed, kind, compassionate, respectful and collaborative manner in accordance with a mutually agreeable timeline of activities." In terms of decision making and resource sharing, the agreement further provided that "[Researcher] agrees to share with Lotus House all information, data, abstracts, summaries, analyses, draft manuscripts, draft papers, and all other extracts...; in no event shall any of the foregoing be publicly disseminated or published, in any form or by any means of communication, by [Researcher], without the prior written consent and agreement of Lotus House (which may be a conditional consent or agreement), in its sole discretion."

Above all, it should be remembered that research of this nature must be valuable to the community-based organization and those they serve. From the perspective of Lotus House, successful research projects: satisfy their goals of both high quality direct

services to sheltered women and children and have the potential to serve as a catalyst for new social and public practices and policies to address the needs of sheltered women and children; document positive outcomes from service driven research and inform continuous improvement in their work; address impacts of gender, racial and social inequities on both a personal and social level; and extend current knowledge to inspire change in their field of work and beyond to end homelessness. While we recognized every community-based organization is different, the model presented today by Lotus House is both replicable and scalable, demonstrating that community based organizations can lead service driven research to achieve their goals for service and social change.

Acknowledgements

This project was made possible by the generous funding of: The Children's Trust of Miami Dade County, Florida; Miami Dade County Homeless Trust; Miami Dade County and Lotus Endowment Fund, Inc.; Micky and Madeleine Arison Family Foundation; Carnival Foundation; Martin Z. Margulies; Angela Whitman and Family Foundation; and our community. We would like to thank the children and families of Lotus House for their participation and the dedicated team of Lotus House for making this community based, service driven research possible, with special mention to Shana Cox, LCSW, Psy.D., Gabrielle Contreras, LCSW, Stephanie Padro, LMFT, Muriel Ayala, LCSW, Nicole Carnero, LMHC, Nadly Moline, LCSW, Michaelle Sylveus, LMHC, Geneva Comeau, LMHC, Arleny Mirambeau, MSW, Marsha Trujillo, MFT, Ireysis Ramos Garcia, MSW, Franchesca Ali, MSW, LeShea Jenkins, MEd, Noelle Amador, BS, Leanett Reinoso, BA, Melissa Claros-Erazo, BS, Donna MacDonald, MHSc, and Shameequa Buxton, JD.

Learn more at www.lotushouse.org and contact research@lotushouse.org