

Understanding

others' attitudes, beliefs is a part of serving special populations

(Editor's note: Cultural Competency in Prevention Service Delivery is a training offered by Prevention First designed to prepare prevention professionals to work more effectively with people of all cultures. In the question-and-answer format that follows, trainer Kathy Jobin discusses how the training helps participants examine their own beliefs and those of others, and how it can help them in providing services to special populations.)

Why is it important to understand the cultural attitudes and beliefs of other populations that we serve in prevention?

If you don't understand those attitudes and beliefs, you're not going to be as effective as you could be. I'm not saying you will be totally ineffective, but I don't believe you're going to reach people to the capacity that you could if you had a recognition and appreciation from where people are culturally, how they view things. And, that goes beyond prevention ... that's everyday life.

I live in a town (Champaign) which is so much more diverse simply due to the university than many towns. There is a kind of reaching out and recognition of a lot of different cultural things, but if you go to another town this size you may not find that.

What are some of the barriers (to that understanding) that are sometimes present in participants who take the training for the first time?

Most of the barriers come from what you've learned from your childhood, what you may have experienced, and many times it becomes a mindset. That's the hardest thing, that they've never been shown other factors that enter into their full understanding of another group of people. That's what I frequently see at the beginning.

What skills are necessary to address your own cultural competence or that of your agency or programs?

You have to have an openness and a willingness to learn. The other part is you have to be able to understand that you don't have to give up your identity to understand and appreciate someone else's culture. You don't suddenly have to immerse yourself in that culture or give up your own.

What have you learned about people providing prevention services to special populations through this training?

I think people are trying, trying very hard. I don't think we've always given them the skills and the education that they need. Sometimes programs that we offer may be wonderful for certain populations. But that doesn't mean they're going to be as effective with another population.



We all learn something about this subject no matter what our personal backgrounds and experiences are. I don't think I've ever seen anybody walk away (from the training) and not learn something.

What is the purpose of the "de-brief" sessions trainers hold at the end of each day (a three-day training) and what have you learned from them?

We look at where we're at with our participants. The point is never to make anybody feel bad, it's to provide training, to provide skills. To give some depth to what you're doing, you always want to de-brief. You want to give the participants the freedom to say what's on their mind. We stress diplomacy. We help people let out some things that may be bothering them. There's not a training where I'm not watching the room. By the third day, people come together unbelievably. There's a giving and a receiving (from each other's cultures) that takes place. That's so important.

I'm constantly more aware of what I need to say and don't need to say. Even if it's uncomfortable, I have to work to bring out what's on their hearts and minds and hopefully do it in a way that they can get it out and not be offensive. I'm just a believer that silence is not golden.



What are some keys to making presentations to special populations?

Having an understanding about yourself and those other populations you are addressing. Do some reading and try to learn some things ahead of time. Be aware of how the information is being received and monitor people's feelings. The bottom line is you are looking at not just the differences, but the similarities (between people) ... and you appreciate both.

Jobin has been a part-time trainer for Prevention First for 10 years. She has worked with migrant farm workers as a Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) volunteer, taught school in the country of Micronesia, and worked and volunteered in the prevention field since 1987 in a variety of capacities.