

**Information Regarding Utilization of Services**  
**by the American-Born Black Community in Cambridge**  
**2012**

The information below represents the views of leaders, service providers and parents in the Cambridge American-born Black community, gathered in three focus groups led by American-born Black members of the American-Born Outreach Team (ABBOT) over the past two years.

**1) Needs**

- More attention must be paid to cultural differences within the “Black community” which, in Cambridge, consists of Blacks with roots in America, in the Caribbean and in Africa
- Cambridge does a great job celebrating other cultures, including many other Black cultures, but not the culture of Blacks who have lived, for generations, in this city
  - Today’s kids do not understand their own history
  - Need for more political representation
- The specific needs discussed were largely the same ones as the immigrant Black community or, for that matter, all low-income residents, with the exception of ESOL classes for immigrants
  - Underhousing (overcrowding) was singled out as a particular problem
- Disappearance of an informal network within the American-born Black community and a resulting sense of isolation
- American-born Blacks are “too proud to ask” for help
  - Their pride (or shame) prevents them from letting people know they are struggling
  - Fearful of the unspoken judgement that may accompany the offer of help
- Younger respondents believed that previous generations had more of a sense of entitlement in seeking out and using programs designed for Cambridge families

**2) Programs being used currently**

- Programs where they feel welcomed, where they could feel a connection to the program, where outreach was personalized and conducted by someone who “looks like them”
- The specific programs mentioned were identified as “institutions” with a track record of engagement with this community (in no particular order):
  - Central Sq. Senior Ctr.
  - Mayor’s Summer Youth Employment Program
  - CHA’s Work Force program
  - Center for Families
  - Early Intervention
  - The WIC program
  - Baby University
  - CEOC’s food pantry and tax filing assistance
  - Pop Warner
  - Churches
  - Other faith-based programs
  - Men’s Health League
  - Cambridge Community Ctr
  - Phillips Brooks House
- These programs build a sense of community which is particularly attractive to the American-born Black community

**3) Programs not being used & why**

- In a general sense, the backdrop of America’s history of racism makes it difficult to admit need and ask for services
  - If they do seek services and hit a dead end, they are much less likely to persevere and advocate for themselves and not stop until they get the help they are demanding, especially in comparison to the White community
- Health services, as there is a long history of mistrust between American-born Blacks and the medical community dating back at least to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment

- Mental health services, as there is a stigma about mental health issues within this community
- Home-based services, which are particularly impacted by the sense of pride/shame discussed above
- The Father's Program at the Center for Families is under-utilized because of the absence of fathers in many homes
- Lack of connection with the schools
  - many American-born Blacks have had bad experiences with schools which inhibit their engagement as parents
  - immigrant populations have generally believed that "education is the key" while many American-born Blacks have become disillusioned

#### 4) How programs can be improved

- Consensus that programs must do better at building relationships with this population
  - Make use of the institutions in the American-born Black community (e.g., churches, Pop Warner, Cambridge Community Center)
  - One cannot underestimate the power of perceived, often unconscious disrespect for this population through often unconscious "micro-insults" and non-verbal communication
  - Because changing the deep-seated, often unconscious attitudes of White (and, often, immigrant) agency staff is a difficult process, at best, the immediate solution is the hiring of American-born Blacks, particularly among outreach and front-lines staff
    - Participants spoke of a certain comfort in talking to another American-born Black which minimized the fear of being judged and allowed them to be more open
    - Even if there are still reservations about an organization or program because of the above-noted cultural issues, a relationship forged at the outset can trump fear and doubt
    - "Programs don't need to be improved; engagement strategies must be improved"
- Need for more understanding of what it takes to ask for help, of the vulnerable position in which that places people, especially American-born Blacks (per discussion above about the effects of racism on self-advocacy)
  - Building trust with this community is primary and must be the first task if the American-born Black community is to be engaged
  - If a program says they will follow up with them, it is important that they do so, particularly in light of the difficulties with self-advocacy noted above
  - Wait lists and deadlines of which this community is unaware lead to discouragement about seeking resources
  - Provision of an advocate to help people navigate the first steps of asking for and receiving services facilitates engagement
  - A personal touch builds trust and opens communication: one-on-one outreach trumps flyers or e-mail
    - Social events such as "Family Fun Day" provide an accessible low-pressure
    - Technology is leaving this population behind: referrals to a website or the use of e-mail is not helpful
- Need to re-build networks within the American-born Black community and between that community and service providers
  - While churches are a useful avenue for connection, their influence has waned
- System-level funding largely ignores this population, focusing instead on the "newest" needy population