

## Evaluation of the Getting Ahead Program (GAP) in Northeastern Colorado: Final Report

Prepared by: Daniel Brisson, Ph.D.

Submitted to *Rural Solutions* on: July 14, 2011

### Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank *Rural Solutions* and the Board of Directors of *Rural Solutions* for supporting this important work. I would also like to thank all of the Investigators and Facilitators for their participation in the evaluation – for their time, and for their forthright responses to often personal questions. I would like to especially thank Mickey Sjoberg and Kimber VanScoy for their administrative help setting up meetings, offering time and space during their GAP classes, and for their general assistance in data collection. Finally, I would like to thank Jackie Reynolds for her overall wisdom and enthusiasm for sustaining a program that assists people in her community to escape the tremendous grip of poverty.

**Table of Contents**

Executive Summary..... 3

Getting Ahead Program (GAP) Evaluation..... 4

Description of the Program..... 4

Evaluation Questions..... 4

Description of Methods..... 4

    Program Participants (Investigators)..... 5

Program Outcomes..... 9

    Lifestyle Survey..... 11

Qualitative Themes..... 12

Two Processes Leading to Success..... 16

Conclusions..... 19

Recommendations..... 21

## Executive Summary

The Getting Ahead Program (GAP) is a 16 week curriculum based educational program designed to transform the way individuals facing poverty and poverty type situations think about their economic opportunities. The current evaluation of the GAP involved the use of pre-test and post-test data collected for each program Investigator completing the program between January 2011 and June 2011 to assess changes that can be attributed to the program. Additionally, focus group and stakeholder interviews were conducted to examine more deeply the successes, stories, and challenges of the GAP.

*Rural Solutions*, the organization responsible for administering the GAP, relied on local knowledge and service provider referrals to identify Investigators that seemed likely to benefit from the program. Due to this opportunistic sampling strategy, there is a wide range of characteristics describing Investigators and limited exclusion categories for participation. From this sampling technique 74 unique Investigators participated in the GAP in the first half of 2011 and were included in this evaluation. Other than residing in northeastern Colorado, the characteristic most common for Investigators was that financial hardship was making day to day life a major struggle.

Results of the evaluation show consistent positive benefits of the program for Investigators. When Investigators started the program 60% of them reported that they were not working. When they completed the program the number reporting that they were not working went down to 42%. As part of the survey Investigators were also asked ‘in the last month, how many days did you feel down or discouraged?’ At pretest, 33% of Investigators said they felt down or discouraged five or more times per month; at post-test the percent responding that they felt down or discouraged five times or more decreased to 19%. Investigators also filled out pre-test and post-test surveys on lifestyle choices. At post-test Investigators improved significantly on the following lifestyle items:

- I pay my bills without doing anything illegal
- My family and I are living safe from violence
- I am able to get what I need by talking to someone
- I encourage my children to attend college
- I have a savings account
- I have support from people outside my family

Interviews with Investigators strongly supported that the GAP was a success. Interviews also revealed another interesting story about the process, or the *how* and *why*, of the program’s success. Investigators and facilitators told a story of two important pieces coming together to make the GAP work. The two pieces were first, the educational and behavioral curriculum that taught people about classed values and the class system in our country. Then, second was the group therapeutic process that provided social support for individuals to examine the choices they make in life, and support to make decisions about how best they want to move forward from this point. Quotes and Stories from Investigator interviews are provided in the full report. Conclusions and recommendations are also provided in the full report.

## Getting Ahead Program (GAP) Evaluation

GAP is a 16 week curriculum based educational program designed to transform the way individuals facing poverty and poverty type situations think about their economic opportunities. The goals of the program are for participants to gain economic self-sufficiency skills and to be able to access resources that will allow them to achieve economic stability. This evaluation of the GAP involved the use of pre-test and post-test data collected on each program investigator completing the program between January 2011 and June 2011 to assess changes that occurred to Investigators over the course of the curriculum. Additionally, focus group and stakeholder interviews were conducted to examine more deeply the successes, stories, and challenges of the GAP program.

### Description of the Program

The GAP offers educational/vocational support to individuals “stuck” in generational or situational poverty, and is based on *Getting Ahead in a Just-Getting’-By World*, a program created by Philip DeVol, co-author of *Bridges Out of Poverty*. It fosters exploration and adaptation skills that are based on the most effective methods toward a self-sustainable life and employment. This program is offered in Northeastern Colorado by Rural Solutions through a State Strategic Use Funds grant and Northeastern Colorado Association of Local Governments. This program was offered in Phillips/Sedgwick, Logan, Morgan, Kit Carson/Cheyenne, Lincoln/Elbert, Washington and Yuma counties. Participants were be eligible for TANF but not necessarily receiving TANF to participate and could have been a custodial or non-custodial parent.<sup>1</sup>

### Evaluation Questions

1. Are GAP Investigators improving from pre-test to post-test on indicators available from the Post-Workbook Assessment?
2. What is success for the GAP program as defined by key stakeholders, and what challenges remain for GAP Investigators?
3. What aspects of the GAP program are most critical for the program’s success?

### Description of Methods

---

<sup>1</sup> The description of the GAP program is taken directly from Rural Solution Getting Ahead Program Information Sheet.

*Rural Solutions*, a non-profit human services organization located in Sterling, CO was responsible for administering the GAP to residents in several northeastern Colorado counties. The GAP program was offered as a 16 session poverty reduction curriculum for adults facing hardship. From December 2010 through July 2011 Rural Solutions has contracted with an independent researcher to evaluate the effects of the GAP on program participants, more accurately called Investigators. At the start of the program, and then again at the conclusion, Investigators were asked to fill out basic descriptive information about themselves as well as a lifestyle survey. This pre-test and post-test data was analyzed to assess basic characteristics of Investigators and to detect any reported changes, particularly in lifestyle, that occurred over the course of the program. Focus groups were also conducted with three separate GAP classes. Focus groups were held at the beginning and then at the conclusion of the GAP program. Several individual interviews were also conducted with program Investigators after they had completed the program. Before discussing the results of the program, it is important to understand the characteristics of program participants.

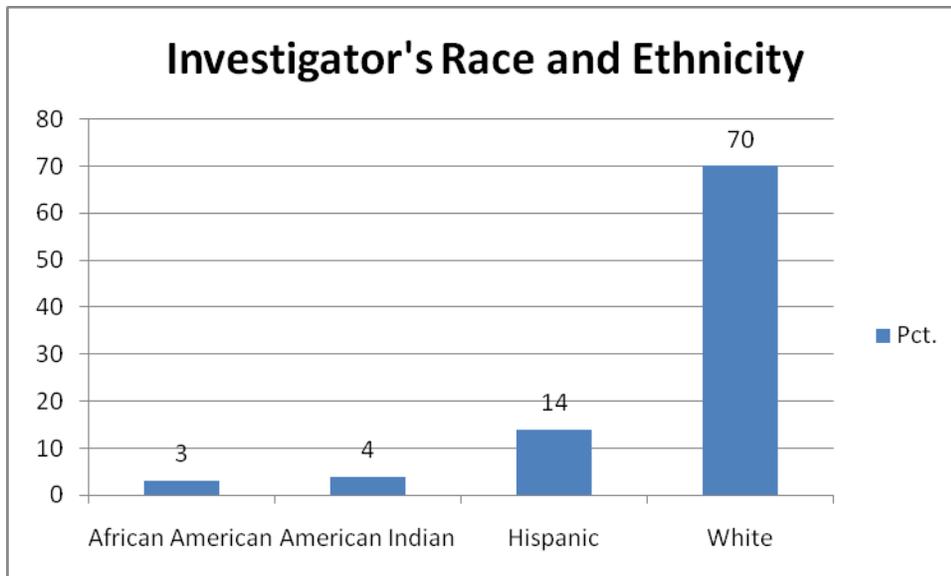
#### Program Participants (Investigators)

*Rural Solutions* relied on local knowledge and service provider referrals to identify Investigators that seemed likely to benefit from the program. Due to this opportunistic sampling strategy, there is a wide range of characteristics describing Investigators and limited exclusion categories for participation. From this sampling technique 74 unique Investigators participated in the GAP program in the first half of 2011 and were included in this evaluation. Other than residing in northeastern Colorado, the characteristic most common for Investigators was that financial hardship was making day to day life a major struggle. Of those reporting financial information, the average monthly income was \$1,197. On average Investigators reported the hourly wage of their most recent job was \$9.42. Over 50% of program participants reported they were not working at the start of the program and only 20% reported they were working full time. Thirty-one percent of participants reported that they had not held a job in the last 12 months.

Table of Financial Characteristics at the Start of the GAP Program

Avg. monthly income	Avg. hourly wage	Pct. Of Investigators unemployed	Pct. Of Investigators unemployed for the previous year	Pct. Of Investigators employed full-time
\$1,197	\$9.42	50%	31%	20%

The majority of participants reported their race as white (70%) and 14% reported their ethnicity as Hispanic. A table of the reported race and ethnicities of Investigators follows.



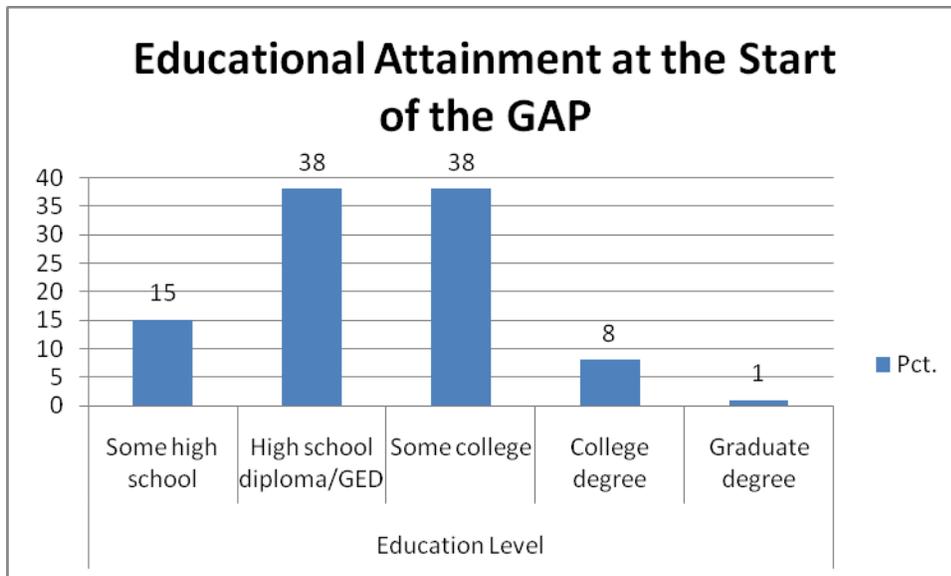
\*Note percentages do not sum to 100% due to missing data and rounding

On average Investigators were 37 years old when starting the program, and on average. Investigators reported the median number of persons in their household was three, and the median number of children in their household was two. Twenty-eight percent of Investigators reported being married and an additional 15% reported living with someone but not being married. Thirty-six percent of Investigators reported being separated, divorced, or widowed, and 21% reported having never been married. A table of these household characteristics follows.

Table of Demographic and Household Characteristics

Avg. age in years	median # in household	median # of children in household	Pct. Married or living with someone	Pct. Separated, divorced, widowed, or never married
37	3	2	43%	57%

In terms of education, ten percent of Investigators reported having earned at least a college degree. Thirty-eight percent reported having taken some college courses, another 38% reported having earned a high school diploma or GED, and 15% reported having completed some high school. The graph that follows provides a visual representation of program Investigators' educational attainment at the start of their program participation.



\*note percentages do not sum to 100% due to missing data and rounding

The GAP program, administered by Rural Solutions, is for low-income adults facing a number of challenges. Referrals often come from human service organizations, but Investigators reported having found out about the program from a number of different sources. Regardless of how Investigators found the program many of them faced major financial strains when they initially enrolled. Investigators describe needing to ‘start over’, or find ‘new ideas and options’. They also describe feeling that their poverty is inevitable and that there is nothing they can do about it—it leaves them feeling hopeless. Some of the ways Investigators described their financial situation when they started the program are as follows:

I lost my job and a pretty substantial amount of money, pretty much lost everything and need to kind of start over

[daughter] is the only thing that keeps me strong but it kills me whenever I don't have the money to buy what she needs.

*Different investigator:* or when she's crying for something

*Different investigator:* That hurts when you can't buy something. I do it for my two nieces all the time. I've had two kids, I don't have custody but I used to buy stuff for my nieces all the time, but I can't buy nothing for nobody [now] because I don't have a paycheck to do anything with.

When you have money you are confident, not so stressed out.

*Different investigator:* I agree with him. [You feel good when everything gets paid. You don't have a monkey on your back.

*Different investigator:* You're attitude changes a lot more whenever you have money your attitude is totally different.

I'm not trying to cheat. I'm just trying like other people to live and live decently (pounds the tables several times, is emotional). You know not eating macaroni and cheese all week because that is all you can afford.

It's like [name withheld]. I know she works at [fast food restaurant] and there's no way she can ever get out of [this town] working [there], or taco johns or Wal Mart. They don't pay enough money to get out of town.

We're in the same spot. We've had a long line of bad luck. We've had vehicles break down, we got rear ended a couple days ago. We've got to find something to get out of this rut.

Evaluator: So, it's about money?

Investigator: Isn't it always?

To be able to not have to rely on assistance. My previous case manager said, we're dropping your TANF by \$150 – no reason! Can you lower my bills by \$150?! We still have our bills. Now we don't have that little bit of cushion. We had our bills worked out so that we had \$20 left over from TANF – for an extra bit of gas or stuff like that or save for next month in case one bill ran a little high?

Evaluator: So, what's hard about relying on Mom or TANF?

Investigator: We never really pay rent, but we get groceries. When you don't know if you can pay your bills – it's like crap. Will they shut off my heat or will I have enough gas in my car to get my daughter to and from school, or what if there's an emergency. It gets really stressful. My kid needs new clothes, what do I do now?

but for me anyway a lot of that comes from the stability. I know when I have money in the bank, it doesn't even have to be a lot of money in the bank, it's not in the red--I walk with my head higher, and the way I treat people is better, and the way I go to work, you know, I'm not like ohh I don't want to go to work to the same old crap every day. I don't want to get out of bed you know whenever you are doing OK. You are on the high part. You've got money in the bank and you've got the bills paid, you hold your head up and you feel more confident. Or to me, I do. It bleeds through to the way I interact with my daughter and everything else.

I got here because I am broke and pretty much, there is nothing right now I can do about it.

**In addition to the financial strains Investigators shouldered at the start of the program, they also described a number of additional major life difficulties. Some of the additional burdens Investigators describe included trouble with the law and the justice system, domestic issues, alcohol and drug abuse, and health issues. Investigators reported the following at the beginning of the program.**

I still live with my mom. I'm [states her age]. My mom supports 7 of us off of her [retail store she works at] paycheck. It's hard on her... Dad died when I was 12. She's been doing this for awhile. Hard on my mom because I have another baby. Another kid my mom has to support that's not hers. My sister lives at home – has a son. All of us live together except my older sister who lives in Missouri and is actually doing something. I want to go back to school but having two kids at my age is hard. I graduated last year. It's hard! My life is not what I expected. The dad is leaving without wanting to be with kids – it's getting to me. I don't even realize that I'm pregnant half the time – just doing what I've done. My hardest struggle – watching everyone go through their teenage years and me just sitting at home doing the same thing.

Been a hell of a last four years. It's just been an up and down of emotional, law and what not.

I dealt with a little abuse there. Got divorced. I was in a relationship that ended badly. A lot of abuse-alcohol abuse violence.

I entered the dept. of corrections 2 years ago, and I am currently on parole and got two and half years of sobriety and trying to get my kids back.

My real dad was uhm, real abusive, sexually, physically, mentally.

Right now I'm disabled

and I was married and my ex flipped out and lost her mind and ran off with my best friend.

there's just one felony conviction holding me back from what I want to do.

My biggest challenge is being on parole. Trying to break the cycle. Knowing that in 4 months I could put in for early release.

I was addicted for 21 years and I haven't been for 2 years.

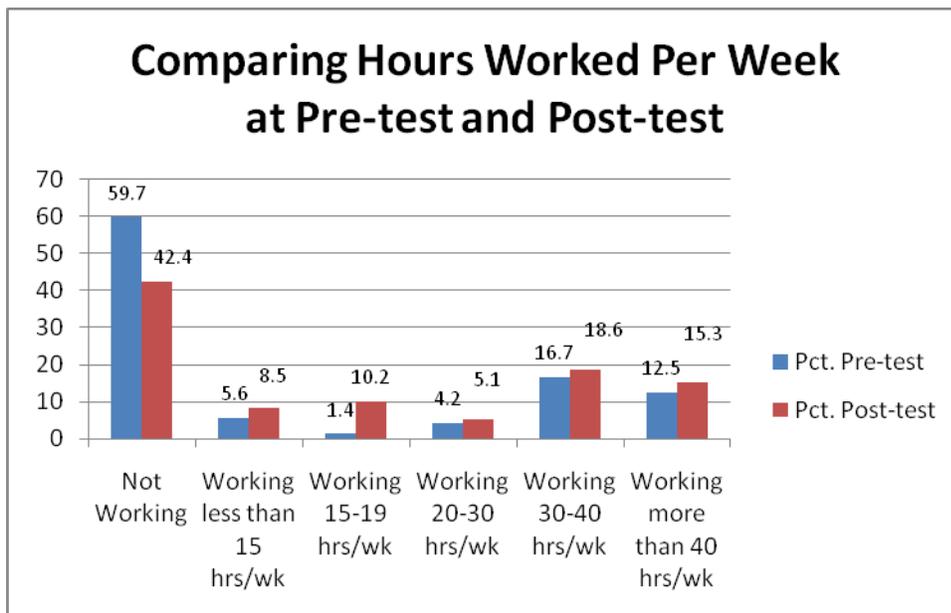
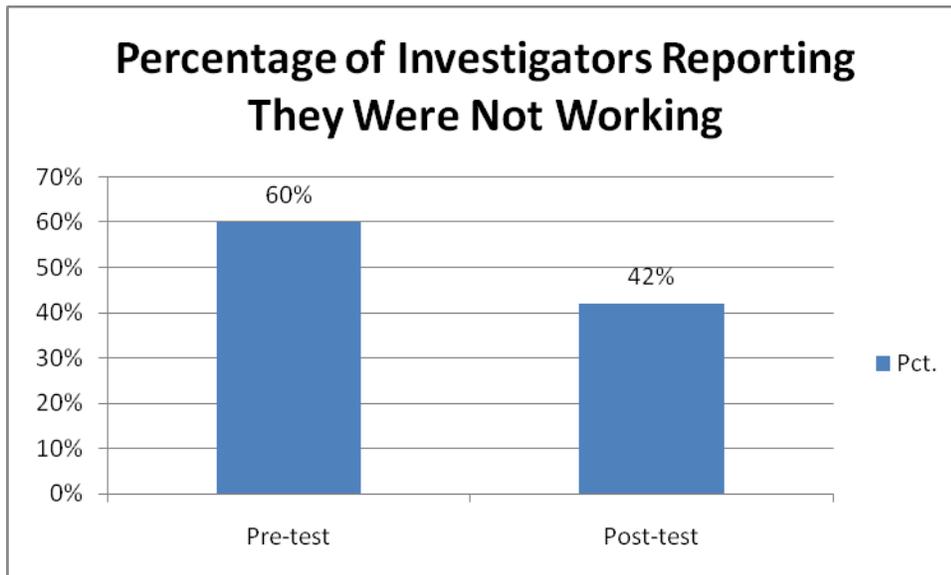
Domestic violence. It's going to keep me from anything I'm going to do.

### **Program Outcomes**

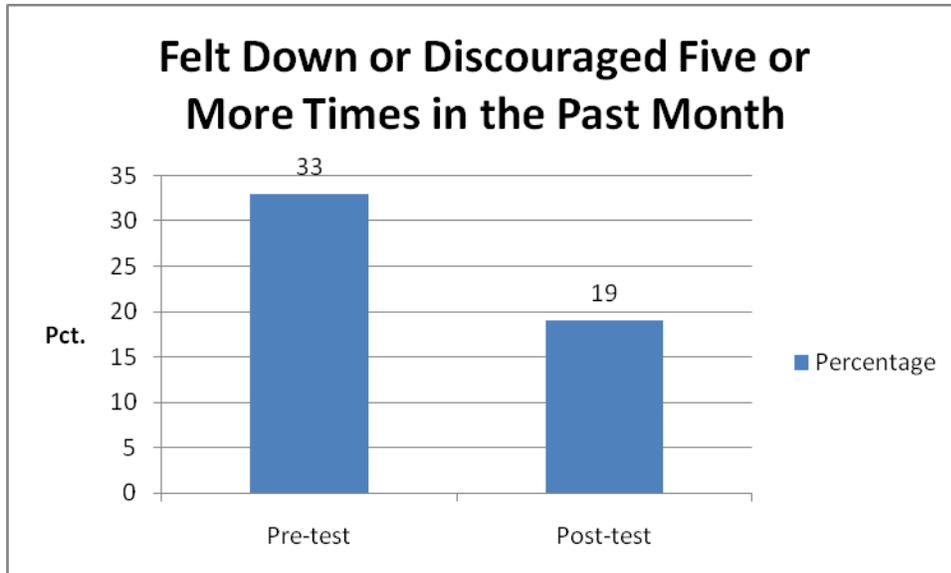
Investigators filled out pre-test and post-test surveys that captured information on a wide range of important outcomes. Investigators reported that they felt the program would 'benefit everyone' regardless of their current financial situation or perceived 'social class'. Investigators also believed the program would have different outcomes depending on a person's particular life situation. One investigator reported: 'GAP is so diverse in the effects it has on Investigators. It has potential for everyone.'

Investigators also reported after finishing the program that they would like to 'take the program again', with the rationale that the course would be different each time you took it and it would have different benefits each time you took it. While this may be true, surveys did show consistent positive benefits for participants in a number of areas. When Investigators started the program 60% of them reported that they were not working. When they completed the program the number reporting that they were not working went down to 42%. Additionally, Investigators were asked to check a box indicating how many hours they worked per week during the previous month. Investigators choices were 'not working', working less than 15 hours per week',

‘working 15-19 hours per week’, ‘working 20-30 hours per week’, ‘working 30-40 hours per week’, and ‘working more than 40 hours per week’. At post test there was a higher percentage of Investigators working in each of the ‘hours worked’ categories. The graphs below provide an illustration of differences in the employment situation for Investigators when they began the program compared to when they finished the program.



As part of the survey Investigators were also asked ‘in the last month, how many days did you feel down or discouraged?’ At pretest, 33% of Investigators said they felt down or discouraged ‘five or more times per month’, which was the highest category provided. At post-test the percent responding that they felt down or discouraged five times or more decreased to 19%. This decrease may symbolize the impact of the group social support process that occurs in the GAP program. The social support provided by participation in the program was reported to be a major reason Investigators felt the program was successful (more about the ‘clinical’ benefits of the program are described later in this report).



One very encouraging result of the evaluation revealed a trend indicating that Investigators were becoming more financially literate as a result of the GAP program. At pre-test, 23% of Investigators reported that they were ‘not sure’ if their housing was affordable and 21% reported that they were ‘not sure’ if their transportation was affordable. At post-test the percentage of Investigators reporting they were ‘not sure’ if their housing was affordable declined to 10% and the percentage reporting they were ‘not sure’ if their transportation was affordable declined to 9%.

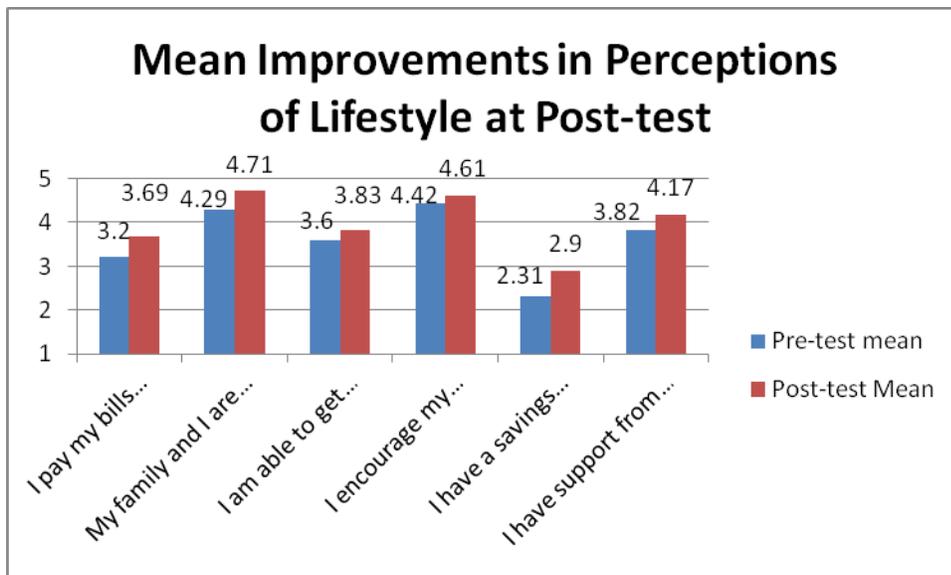
### Lifestyle Survey

Investigators also filled out pre-test and post-test surveys on lifestyle choices. While some of the expected outcomes of the GAP program may take months and even years to achieve (e.g. earning a college degree; building up a savings account; landing a better paying job), assessing changes in Investigators’ attitudes toward their lifestyle choices are easier to see in a shorter time frame. We assessed Investigators’ changes in attitudes from when they began the program to when they completed the program and found a number of important improvements. Investigators were asked to rate their agreement with a number of questions on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is equal

to 'not at all', 2 is equal to 'not often', 3 is equal to 'not sure', 4 is equal to 'most of the time', and 5 is equal to 'always'. Using a statistical analysis technique known as a t-test the evaluators were able to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in perceptions of lifestyle from pre-test to post-test. Said more plainly, evaluators were able to determine if Investigators experienced real changes in their lifestyle during their time in the GAP. The t-test results show that Investigators did experience real change on the following items during their time in the program.

- I pay my bills without doing anything illegal (pre-test mean = 3.20; post-test mean = 3.69)
- My family and I are living safe from violence (pre-test mean = 4.29; post-test mean = 4.71)
- I am able to get what I need by talking to someone (pre-test mean = 3.60; post-test mean = 3.83)
- I encourage my children to attend college (pre-test mean = 4.42; post-test mean = 4.61)
- I have a savings account (pre-test mean = 2.31; post-test mean = 2.90)
- I have support from people outside my family (pre-test mean = 3.82; post-test mean = 4.17)

The following graph shows the pre-test and post-test scores for each of the items on which Investigators improved significantly.



### Qualitative Themes

The quantitative results suggest the program is very successful for participants, but those close to the program know that hearing the stories of Investigators is an equally convincing method of

determining the program's success. Overwhelmingly, when talking to Investigators they talk about how successful they feel the program has been for them. In fact after completing the program, every interviewed investigator reported the program was deeply important to their life. This section provides some stories and quotes that highlight how successful Investigators' felt the program was in their lives.

[talking about how the program was important] Being able to organize my thoughts and process things, and prioritize what I want and no longer want and be able to walk away from that. And in doing that I was able to decide my career path. I am back in school now. I have completed two semesters and made honor role. I am going to school to get my bachelors in psych and specializing in domestic violence groups.

I mean there were times when I just had struggles with things. One of the things that I know that I had a real problem with was the use of my resources. We did an exercise where we were suppose to list our resources (speaking very slow and deliberately, clearly very emotional). And there were all these boxes and we were supposed to fill in, and I had none. It was just me. I wasn't utilizing anybody, and I was so tired. And so many other people in the class that I thought were worse off than me, I mean I thought they had it really bad, and then I participated in this thing and they had tons of resources, and I was like I am the one that has it bad. You know it was really profound to me. It was just me. It was very emotional to me. I need to be reaching out to people, or I have isolated myself to the point that I don't know. I think it is part of the rules. You get stuck in survival mode and you wind up doing it all yourself.... I had to start reaching out to other people. I had to start. I have had resources that have helped me, and now I am doing it.

Being true to myself again. I was playing the caretaker in life and I stopped and started to think about what does [names herself] need? It is the first time in life that I have looked at me, and it is good. I have always looked at how my decisions would affect others. So, I am in the process of getting into school. First time in life I ever looked at what I wanted to do in life. I want to become a minister and that is what I am going to do.

You know it is in a short period of time that I have started to make steps. But they would not have happened if I would not have been in this class.

I really enjoyed this class I am going to be sad when it ends because I think I have a lot of learning to do. But, I think I'm well on my way.

I used to be complacent with it and accept things for what they were.

This class was the best thing ever (agreed by everyone). Is there a follow-up class?

Evaluator: Why was this the best class ever?

Investigator: It was a safe place. Even if you said something that wasn't correct.

And I told him that if you don't have all the pieces, having all the support team, if you don't have that maybe you won't be able to make it. I joined organizations in the community-and I didn't think I had the knowledge to join-because I didn't have an education. Everybody can get something out of it. It would be better for everyone in the community if everyone knew these things.

And they had asked me to come and I was desperate. I needed something to change, but I didn't really expect it to have the impact that it did have.

It opened my eyes to what is going on around me. Yeah, definitely a success. It opened my eyes to the political and economical of what's going on in the town. I'm reading things and associating it with me.

I've come a long way. I mean I've really come a long way.

I am still in awe and still processing things. My mind has been so stretched that I am still processing things

The interviewed Investigators did more than describe the program as deeply successful. They provided specific examples of changes they had made, and were planning to make, that were a result of their participation in the GAP program. Unlike at the beginning of the program, at the end of the program Investigators reported real changes in their attitudes and behaviors around money. After completing the program Investigators report paying their bills on time, finding creative ways to save, and creating budgeting systems. Investigators said:

I see the difference in the economic situation. I'm not the right guy in the world, but I made it. Teaches me where to put money [speaking about the GAP program], instead of just paying bills. Put some in the bank, some to my kids. I've learned to evaluate where my money is.

Different investigator: I was broke.

Different investigator: I feel the same way. I don't spend money the same way.

I save my money better. I don't impulsively shop-I can't afford it.

I make sure my bills are paid

I was just fixated on things and I wasn't fixated on, wait, where am I wasting money.

I keep more of my receipts to track my spending. I've given up hot java. You wouldn't believe how much you spend at Wal-Mart.

Different investigator: Something I noticed. I saved my change and went to Wal Mart. After one month I got \$76. Now I'm thinking I just keep that for emergencies.

Different investigator: I'm going to save my change and go on a trip.

I mean it's a good thing, I hate filing for bankruptcy, but it's a good thing for me and [my daughter]. I have to get out from under this debt.

I had this truck, I was getting like 12 miles to the gallon and then when I sit down and look at it I'm like, holy cow, I'm spending like \$650 a month driving back and forth to Sterling. That's more money than I spend [inaudible]. And I just got to the point that I was like I have to get rid of this vehicle. So I got this little car and I'm getting 39 miles to the gallon and I'm stoked and I've got all this money now to buy things and buy [names daughter] clothes and I got a promotion at work. So I'm making a little more money that way and a lot of it was just my mindset. I mean the way I take things for granted in my everyday life. I was just stuck in survival mode.

I mean I have saved myself a lot of money. And over the next year it is all going to come back to me.

**In addition to the changes Investigators made about money, they also told stories about other areas of their lives where they were making real changes. Some additional stories of the real changes Investigators made are as follows:**

I have started reaching out more to people I can truly call my friends because I don't have much of a family. Except for my very dysfunctional family. But you know just friends at work, you have to communicate and talk to them. Just trying to hide all that and thinking I can manage it all by myself, and that hasn't worked. And this class, and so many of the exercises made me realize that, and I was in tears (starts crying) just thinking about it. It makes me very emotional. It hit me like a sledgehammer. I thought I was really strong, and to come to the realization that you're not doing anything except drowning. You're not reaching out to anyone to help you. That was a hard lesson for me to learn.

Yes, attitude [talking about changes she has made since beginning the program]. What your putting out is what comes back to you (all agreed).

Different Investigator: I'm a very negative person. Very pessimistic. I am always thinking, what bad thing is going to happen to me. I try to not put my negativity out on everyone. It's going to bring others down. You don't want to be the Debbie Downer of the room.

Different Investigator: The way you are aware of different things, different people.

And [facilitator] has told me if I need help I can call her. And I have other resources. She is part of my social capital now to get advice, because I don't always think about things. And this class taught me that. I don't always think. I can get hyperfocused on one thing and there are like 14 things you have to think about before that point.

I was brought up middle class. My father is wealthy but I have experienced situational poverty a few times. It showed me that the most valuable resource was myself. I was brought up that I can do anything. Married, divorced, raising kids alone, I didn't any longer believe that I could do anything. Then taking the course helped me believe again that I can do anything. I am going back to school. I am [tells her age] but I am going back to school. I have worked with head start and setting goals with families. And this course gave me that back. The way the course is laid out; formal and casual registers; the different social classes and how they view things: speak, dress act. And if you want to break into those classes you have to play the game; and then ending with the goals. The way it was laid out was very powerful.

I would have never read the paper. Now my eyes are open.

Different Investigator: I watch more news

The GAP program taught me to organize and process through my thoughts. Previously I tried to handle everything at once, but that wasn't effective. In the past I always felt like I always had to handle everything at once.

I do have a voice I just have to use it.

I think I share better now than I did when we first started. I think that it taught me things. It taught me, you know I had preconceived notions about the way people were. You know, you look at them and you size them up and I guess that is human nature. And I found those things to be wrong. In every case.

It's just odd to me that you can change the way you talk to people and change the way you feel about yourself. Or the goals, look at the goals differently. Like wait a second, that is not a goal I should be looking at.

### **Two Processes Leading to Success**

These stories give an overall picture that the program was overwhelmingly a success for Investigators. However, reading through interviews with Investigators revealed another interesting story about the process, or the *how* and *why*, of the program's success. Next, we will provide a description of the story that unfolded when listening to Investigators reflections about their success in the program.

Interviews with Investigators and facilitators told a story of two important pieces coming together to make the GAP work. The two pieces were first, the educational and behavioral curriculum that taught people about classed values and the class system in our country. Then, second was the group therapeutic process that provided social support and a safe space for individuals to authentically examine themselves, their life, and the choices they make in life, and to make decisions about how best they want to move forward from this point.

To provide more details of what is meant by the GAP program working through this two pronged process, I will use the words of Investigators to describe both the educational component of the classed value system, and then the therapeutic, or clinical, process that happened by working in a group setting. First, are the educational and behavioral components. Investigators gained insight into value systems that were previously unavailable to them. The value system broadly might be considered a middle class value system, but more specifically might fall into an understanding of financial systems, communication systems, educational systems, and problem solving systems. This is an important finding as the GAP program has been critiqued for using an acculturation approach in promoting middle class values. However, findings from this evaluation revealed that program Investigators were quite thankful to learn about the classed system, and values that are implied to the middle class, but that were largely unavailable to participants enmeshed in a cycle of poverty. The following investigator quotes reveal how the GAP provided a door way into a value system that Investigators believe will allow them to finally 'get ahead' in life.

For me, yeah, I do. I have taken a lot of things that I have learned from this class and I have ...

Differen Investigator: Well you know one of the things was knowledge of the hidden rules. You have to forgive me (breakingup a little). The way things work and the way society thinks of things. I have a lot of emotions around that. I struggled with those things and understanding how those things work is kind of an eye opening experience I guess. I can get around a little better I guess and make a better life for me and [daughter].

I don't know, I just have to change my mind-set about just trying to survive and get into trying to get along with and make things work with the middle class.

Going in front of the school board you need to know how to talk to them people. I speak the way I speak. I try to make my words better. That's what we've learned.

She wanted us to list the things we wanted to change. And once I started writing those things down, trying to work on those goals, and making sure I didn't get stuck. And saying that is never gonna work. And I have just seen it differently.

I grew up in a home in poverty, I guess. My dad was an alcoholic, and it was modeled after a mostly patriarchic society. He was the hammer and the way he wanted things done. My thought process about everything. One thing, that I didn't realize was-did you get enough to eat? That's one of the hidden rules. Depending on what class you were in, the poor class they didn't worry so much about the preparation of the food or anything, just did everyone get enough to eat. And you know I never realized I thought that way. Like, did you get enough to eat, did you get enough to eat.

I've got a ways to go but I have goals now, real goals. I want to go back to school. I want to make a better life for me and my daughter. If it's just going to be me and her then I'm already headed that way.

Also the stages of change. Even though I knew I had to change parts of my thinking but when it was broken down into those steps I was able to work through it a little. Hidden rules: a job, when it comes to writing an application. Stages of change: the mental model gives you a visual.

The way the course is laid out. Formal and casual registers. The different social classes and how they view things: speak, dress act. And if you want to break into those classes you have to play the game. And then ending with the goals. The way it was laid out was very powerful.

How society perceives different classes of people. I've learned how to associate with those people.

In addition to the educational component, there was also a strong clinical component to the work done by Investigators in the GAP. The clinical component might look almost like group therapy with Investigators sharing life stories and supporting others in a similar situation. Then, also holding other members of the group accountable. This therapeutic process seemed to happen each week when Investigators were given the chance to regularly focus on themselves and look more deeply to see where they are being successful and where they are falling short. We first

provide two quotes that were given before Investigators started the program. These two quotes provide a glimpse into the mindset of Investigators before beginning the program.

[said at pre-test] I don't know who I am or what I want. I know I want to do something and be somebody but I don't know what that is. I am almost like needing guidance. Not like them to tell me what I need to be. I want to discover who I want to be

[said at pre-test] I'm just bouncing around with the waves and I'm not getting anywhere, and I have no clue how to get to land. And that's kind of where I'm at. I have no clue how to get to where I need to go or where I need to be.

Next are quotes provided after completing the GAP. In the Investigators' words, this is what the therapeutic process felt like:

I called this the finding me class. Now I know I have a voice. I will go to the school and speak up.

I had been searching and searching for answers for a long time. It was that key that gave [me] permission. That I could care for myself.

[talking about the program] I thought it was going to be like school but instead it was social.

Different Investigator: Shows you life is hard but I think we have to have to do it because you find out you're not the only one. You have something in common with others.

Different investigator: I learned more about myself in this class

Different Investigator: I put up a real good front. I'm a real good BS'er.

From reading the literature to the discussions to just the conversations we have over dinner. Just the unity, that's what I like about it.

And I think this group is communication. Because you know you stay at home you don't do a lot. But here there is communication.

It's been good to meet other people in the community.

My father was very tight lipped about everything and things went on in the family that we weren't supposed to talk about and this and that. And I think I just engrained that in myself and I had to start reaching out to other people.

I live life to make me happy (agreed by everyone).

Married, divorced, raising kids alone, I didn't any longer believe that I could do anything. Then taking the course helped me believe again that I can do anything.

And then the second part is 'permission' to be able to self-care.

I liked the interaction I had with [other Investigators]. It taught me something  
We taught each other and we learned from each other. No one person is going to have all the answers.

We've shared all of our stuff where we couldn't other times.

I think the biggest challenge for a lot of us in here is going to be change. Figuring ourselves out.

I would love for there to be a specific word... I would say it's a journey.

Well yeah, I didn't expect any of it. I wasn't expecting to get emotional about this class. I wasn't expecting to get angry about the way things are in my life, or just frustrated

I think they definitely feel the therapeutic process. I don't think anybody comes and is not changed.

## Conclusions

To conclude this report we will provide summary answers to each of the evaluation questions listed earlier. We will then provide a bulleted list of recommendations that can be used as next steps for *Rural Solutions* as the organization moves forward with their work with this successful program.

### **Evaluation Question 1:**

*Are GAP Investigators improving from pre-test to post-test on indicators available from the Post-Workbook Assessment?*

In summary, findings from the evaluation demonstrate that Investigators are changing in a positive way as a result of their participation in the GAP. Investigators showed improvements in several outcome measures available through the pre-test, post-test design. Areas where Investigators improved were employment, mental health, financial literacy, money management, escaping family violence, building resources and support networks, and developing savings.

### **Evaluation Question 2:**

*What is success for the GAP program as defined by key stakeholders, and what challenges remain for GAP Investigators?*

The following is a list of domain areas uncovered by the evaluation where Investigators report being successful. This list can be considered a starting point for defining success in the GAP program.

- Employment
- Mental health/Self esteem
- Financial literacy
- Money management
- Escaping family violence
- Building resources (social capital)
- Educational aspirations
- Savings
- Organizational skills
- Developing goals
- Developing a voice (speaking up for oneself)

GAP Investigators interviewed for the evaluation did not list very many challenges. The two challenges most often stated by Investigators were that it might be difficult to continue to practice the work they had learned in the program, and that it was going to be difficult to keep doing the good work they had started without the support of their fellow Investigators. The following are two quotes from Investigators about challenges they face now that they have finished the program.

One of the things my class did was said really, there is nothing after this? And the facilitator encouraged us to meet.

The program is awesome. The goal part needs to be more time on it. It is too quick and too intense and it is right at the end and then you are left.

### **Evaluation Question 3:**

*What aspects of the GAP program are most critical for the program's success?*

The evaluation revealed that two aspects of the program seem to be critical for its success. The first part is the basic curriculum which provides educational and behavioral lessons on what we are broadly calling a middle class value system in this evaluation. Some of the lessons that seemed to be particularly important for Investigators were about: 1) the hidden rules; 2) the stages of change; 3) social capital and social networks and; 4) goal development. The second part of the curriculum that seems to be critical was the therapeutic process that occurred when Investigators participated in a group process with their peers who were facing similar life difficulties. The therapeutic process seemed to give Investigators a chance to focus on themselves and the choices they have made in life, while the group provided an accountability structure.

## **Recommendations**

Findings from this evaluation clearly demonstrate the success of the GAP program for participating Investigators. Demonstrating the success of the program is important and provides a measure of validity for Rural Solutions for all of the hard work they have put into providing a service for individuals facing financial challenges in northeastern CO. With this success there are also a number of considerations Rural Solutions should consider as they move forward serving vulnerable adults. First, finding some way to continue the program will be important for individuals who have not yet been given the opportunity to experience the power of the GAP curriculum and process. Other recommendations include:

- Our initial recommendation is that the program should be continued as it has clearly created positive change for adults in northeastern Colorado facing financial difficulties.
- Although there were not many difficulties mentioned by Investigators, some of those interviewed mentioned that they thought they would benefit greatly if the group could continue to meet for social support once the class ended. It might be useful for *Rural Solutions* to work with former Investigators to create some mechanisms whereby Investigators can meet voluntarily as they continue to work toward their goals.
- We also recommend ongoing evaluation of program components. There are three areas that we have identified as particularly important for future evaluation. First, assessing the program at 6 month follow-up and two year follow-up to understand long term outcomes will be important. A few outcomes that would be worth assessing over a longer follow-up period include: 1) savings, 2) educational outcomes; 3) wages. Second, research into the socio-demographic characteristics correlated with program success will be important. Understanding if the program works best for people with particular presenting issues, be they domestic violence, problems with the law, or substance abuse, is an important next step in the evaluation of GAP. Last, assessing the cultural sensitivity of the curriculum would be worthwhile. The GAP curriculum has been critiqued for being culturally imperialistic. Understanding if this critique is scientifically valid will be important for shaping the program to be accessible to all people.
- Finally, although not critical, one possible next step would be to focus on an evaluation of the GAP process. This would allow stakeholders to understand what program components, such as the hidden rules, or the stages of change, are most beneficial for Investigators.