



*Asha for Education*TM

UFlorida Chapter

Gators for Asha, 300-9 J W Reitz Union, P.O Box 118505, Gainesville, FL 32601

www.ashanet.org/uflorida

FORWORD Conference Call Minutes

September 25th 2016

Attendees:

From Asha UFlorida:

1. Shiva Halan
2. Ravi Venkatraman
3. Devesh Chugh
4. Ramya Sivakumar
5. Poojitha Reddy
6. Seema
7. Janani Prakash

From FORWARD:

Ms. Mathuram Shiamala Baby

Goal: To get updates about the project and to discuss questions from the budget document submitted for academic year 2016-17.

Budget:

https://ashadocserver.s3.amazonaws.com/263_ProjectProposalandBudget2016-2017.pdf

Minutes:

The conference call started with the typical introductions to the volunteers and the contact from the project, Ms .Shiamala Baby. She started off the call by giving an introduction to project FORWARD. Ms. Shiamala Baby briefly touched upon how she founded FORWARD after being a victim of domestic violence and what the goals of the organization are. Then she talked about the education centers in specific and the impact they have had on the overall holistic improvement in the community and the amount of goodwill it has generated among the villagers for her and project FORWARD. During this introduction, Ms. Shiamala Baby repeatedly mentioned that the education component is personally her favorite aspect of FORWARD and very close to her heart.

General introduction to educational centers: FORWARD runs 13 evening learning centers in thirteen different areas in and around Tambaram in Kanchipuram district of Tamilnadu. The goal of the educational centers is to help the students with their academics, reduce school dropouts, motivate achievement in academics and continued



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learning, and abolish child labor and child marriage and to create awareness among the parents and the community about the importance of education. A detailed list of each learning center, the location, and student strength and teacher information is presented in the budget proposal document linked above.

This conference call has a special significance for the Asha UFlorida volunteers because we had only recently concluded a “deep-dive” discussion seminar where the volunteers had discussed ways to measure and report the impact and outcomes with the projects we are partnering with. Dr. Muthuswami Kumaran, professor of Non-Profit Management at the University of Florida lead the meeting and gave some good insights about working with non-profits and also how output, impact and outcomes can be measured for these educational intervention non-profit programs that we fund. Since Dr. Kumaran had personally visited FORWARD project in 2015, there was a lot of discussion about FORWARD and measuring outcomes from the project. With this background and brainstorming about the project that had happened just two days before the conference call, the volunteers were eager to hear about it from the project partner and also to discuss opportunities to measure impact and outcome with FORWARD.

Qn: What are the other non-educational activities being run by FORWARD?

The goal of most of the activities conducted by FORWARD (other than the educational centers) is to raise awareness about rights for men and women. Some of the highlights of the programs conducted are:

- Help for men and women who are forced to look for alternate forms of employment due to urbanization and conversion of farmlands into housing or industrial complexes
- Alternate livelihood schemes, mainly for women through the women self-help groups funded by the Tamilnadu state government
- Counseling for men and women about the challenges they are facing
- Awareness about and help fighting domestic violence
- Support and counseling for patients affected by AIDS (Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome)
- Relief and rehabilitation work that followed the 2003 boxing day tsunami that affected the livelihood of several villagers, especially from the coastal areas

Qn: How does the community organizer help with the education centers?

The main goal of the community organizer is to help sensitize the womenfolk about the need for education for their children. The community centers in many of these villages is used for congregation and for creating a community that can help and support each other. The community organizer helps with teaching the women alternate livelihood skills like making ornamental handmade jewelry and handicrafts that are being sold in the city and at exhibitions and fairs.



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Qn: We understand that the teachers are not necessarily college educated. How is FORWORD improving their teaching skills, especially through the teacher training program?

There are 13 teachers for the 13 evening learning centers. The teacher's education level covers a wide range with some teachers with only 8th standard schooling while few others have a post-graduate degree. The main training that is provided to these teachers is for improving their confidence and sharing ideas on how to teach certain concepts to the students at their center. During the Saturday meetups that happen every month, the teachers spend time talking about various teaching techniques that they use at their centers. Each teacher provides an update of the students and progress at their center and the other teachers provide suggestions for improvement. At times, resource personnel from outside are brought in to educate these teachers with newer skills for teaching the students.

Qn: What spaces are used for conducting the evening learning centers?

Most learning centers are situated in an open space or veranda (portico/balcony/terrace) in the village. Care is taken to ensure that the space is easily accessible, has electricity and is well lighted, safe for the students and also does not have distractions. In certain villages, common village community centers are used for the conducting the learning centers. In the event that the learning center is being conducted in a space that is privately owned and is volunteered by the owners for the purpose of running the learning center, some money is paid to the owners to cover electrical and incidental expenses per month. Most cases these spaces are situated in front of or close to the teacher's home. The children sit on the floor and tarpaulin sheets are provided for their comfort. Usually the spaces are covered, to protect from rain etc.

Qn: What happens during a typical day at the evening learning center?

Most learning centers run from 5:30 – 7:30 pm every day during the week throughout the year, excluding summer and winter vacation time. At some centers the children have to travel far to get back from the school so the centers start slightly later at around 6. Also, during the non-winter days, when it gets dark later in the evening, the centers close at 8 pm. The students belong to standards from 4th – 12th. Some centers do have students who are younger than 4th standard who also come to the centers along with their siblings but these children are few in number and their support is mostly informal in the centers. Each center has two leaders selected – one boy and one girl who leads the center's activities each month. Every month a new boy and girl is selected to be the leader. Being a leader helps cultivate leadership capabilities and take up responsibility. During a typical day the following series of activities happen in the following order:

- Students come to the center and make arrangements for the center for the evening. This is led by the leaders for the month. This includes setting up the tarpaulins, blackboards, lighting etc. and make sure that all the children arrive on-time and are settled in appropriately.
- Every day the session starts with a simple prayer. The prayer is not based on any religion and is mostly a thank you prayer for all the opportunities and a



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request for peace and love. The prayer was authored by Ms. Shiamalababy herself and it does not enforce any particular religious belief.

- After the prayer, the students share any information or news that they have heard and want to share with the teacher and the other students. It could be anything interesting and educational that they have heard or seen at home or at school.
- Then the students first complete homework that was assigned to them at school. This structured environment to complete their homework helps generate interest to attend school and motivate students to achieve educational excellence.
- The students end the day with another simple evening prayer
- Students head off to their homes. If some students stay far away and/or it is too dark, the educator drops off the students at their homes.
- If there is any nutritional food provided to the students (select days) it is done so at the beginning of the session after all the students have arrived and the prayer is completed.

This structure is followed 5 days of the week during all school working days.

Qn: What are the activities being run by FORWARD on Saturdays?

The evening learning centers operate between 5:30 – 8:00 pm on weekdays when students come to the centers and use the time to work on their academics and school work. During Saturdays the children and teachers are involved in various activities depending on which Saturday of the month it is. The Saturday activities are geared towards incorporating other skills with the students and to educate them about their rights and increase awareness. The focus of the Saturday programs is personality development, positive attitude development and talent development.

- **First Saturday - Nature and Children:** Example of activities is anti-plastic demonstrations and marches to raise awareness about the ill-effects of plastics and genetically modified seeds. Also, students plant tree saplings and tend to small gardens and saplings.
- **Second Saturday – Teachers Upgrading Training:** Upgrading the teacher's knowledge. Teachers meet and mingle at the FORWARD head office at Tambaram.
- **Third Saturday – Children and Social Justice:** Social justice and children and women awareness. Children should know what justice is and how to stand up for their rights and how to perform their duties.
- **Fourth Saturday - Talent Development:** Students are trained to develop extra-curricular talents like painting, dancing, singing, creative talents like writing etc.
- **Fifth Saturday - Parents Teacher Community:** On this day, the parents get to come sit down and talk to the teachers about their ward's progress and also see how well their child is performing. This helps enforce with the parents the need for the child's education and also motivate them to keep the child in school.



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Other updates

- 60 new children have been added bringing the total number of children attending FORWARD learning centers to 125.
 - Nutritional food is provided to the kids around 6-12 times a month.
 - 75% of the children attending the evening learning centers are girls.
 - Sexual abuse and domestic violence is high in these areas. So particular are is taken to educate the children about the ill effects and how to safeguard themselves. Special programs are conducted to raise awareness and counter the effect of media and alcoholism
 - Training for adolescent girls to help their body and mind healthy so that they can be prepared and aware to counter sexual and domestic abuse
 - Project director visits 6 to 7 times per month and specifically focuses on the adolescent girls
 - 106 students have graduated from FORWARD education centers and moved on for higher studies
 - On the whole, more than 300 students have passed through the learning centers in the past.
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- ✓ The program is a community-based program. The reason the program is successful is because of the buy-in from the community
 - ✓ Children are motivated to attend the learning centers by the parents and elders in the community
 - ✓ Much effort is put into orienting the elders and parents about the importance of education
 - ✓ Efforts are undertaken to improve the overall economic background of the families in these villages so that a holistic improvement can be brought about