

***Tower House:***  
**An Alternative to the Traditional Receiving Home  
for At-Risk Youth**

**ROXANNE STEPHENS**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In May 2001, San Mateo County Children's Receiving Home experienced an armed intruder looking for a resident who, fortunately, was no longer at the shelter. Later it was learned that the intruder and the girl he sought out were gang-affiliated. The incident called for greater attention to the growing complexity and challenge of providing adult-supervised residence for at-risk youth in San Mateo County. The situation highlighted the need for a second receiving home with a higher degree of adult oversight. The solution was an alternate receiving home, Tower House.

Tower House is a group home administered by a private contractor that is part of a larger Youth Services Center. It provides emergency placement services with smaller staff-to-child ratios, specialized services, added security, and a strong partnership with probation and other county and community organizations. Before the inception of Tower House, the central Receiving Home staff's primary concern was ensuring the safety of the residents, and activities were designed around the needs of the children with the most difficult and risky behaviors. As a result, children without these behaviors did not always receive adequate attention and support.

**Recommendations for Santa Clara County**

Santa Clara County faces similar challenges in its Children's Shelter. Staff at the shelter must contend with the growing number of residents with serious issues, such as substance abuse, gang affiliation, prostitution, violent tendencies, severe mental health issues, and probation and delinquency court involvement. Services within the shelter are not adequate to deal with such issues. Moreover, the shelter has experienced an increasing need for one to one staff-child ratios that are used to supervise children with especially high level problems. These policies are often put in place to protect other residents in a facility whose regular staff-to-child ratios are 1 to 8. In addition, shelter staff must ensure the safety of the children within a building not necessarily built to address such high security needs. This policy, however, comes with increased costs. To address this growing problem, the following are my recommendations for Santa Clara County:

- Put forth a Request for Proposals (RFP) for private contractors to bid to operate a separate receiving home, similar to Tower House.
- Develop an RFP that includes a stipulation for a "no reject/no eject" policy, lower staff-to-child ratios, and specialized services for high-risk youth.

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- Acquire a building that is in the vicinity of law enforcement and probation facilities to ensure better security and create a structure better suited to handle added security measures.
- Improve collaboration efforts between probation and children welfare.

Although Santa Clara County Children's Shelter has not encountered an armed intruder, the possi-

bility of such an incident exists. With Tower House, San Mateo County has been successful in addressing the increased dangers of housing at-risk youth. I recommend Santa Clara County consider duplicating San Mateo County's model and securing a separate facility for high-risk youth in need of emergency placement.

# *Tower House:* **An Alternative to the Traditional Receiving Home for At-Risk Youth**

ROXANNE STEPHENS

## **Introduction**

In May 2001, San Mateo County Children's Receiving Home experienced an armed intruder looking for a resident who, fortunately, was no longer at the shelter. Later it was learned that the intruder was a gang member, and the girl he sought out was in some way affiliated with the gang. While this was only a single incident, it reflected what staff at the Receiving Home had known for years: children with high risk-behaviors and gang affiliations should not be housed together with children not exhibiting these behaviors.

The incident with the armed intruder, and other concerns raised by staff, called for attention to the growing complexity and challenge of providing an adult-supervised residence for at-risk youth in San Mateo County. The situation highlighted the need for a second receiving home with a higher degree of adult oversight. The solution was an alternate receiving home, Tower House, an eight-bed receiving home created in cooperation with the county and Moss Beach Homes (MBH), a foster family agency.

Prior to Tower House, the Receiving Home program was designed around the child with the most difficult and risky behaviors. In other words, in planning activities staff first had to take into account the needs of children who might act out aggressively or be disruptive. Most of the staff's attention was focused on diffusing inappropriate or risky behaviors since they had to ensure not only that all residents were following the rules of the program but, more importantly, that their safety was ensured.

This case study will examine Tower House, San Mateo County's receiving home model, and how it is organized within the Human Services Agency. Implications for Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children Services are also presented.

## **San Mateo County Children and Family Services**

**Organizational Structure:** San Mateo County Human Services Agency's organizational structure is divided into three regional divisions for its benefits and prevention programs, and two divisions for Program Support and Children and Family Services (CFS). A director oversees the operations of each division with the help of several managers, who are assigned to administer the daily operations of various programs. In CFS, the areas of responsibility are further divided into regions and program areas. These areas include the Northern Region, Central Region, Southern Region, Central Operations, Program Integrity/Policy Procedures/Contracts, and Adolescent Services. (*See Attachment A for San Mateo County organizational chart.*)

**Children and Family Services (CFS):** San Mateo County's CFS Division is responsible for the safety and protection of the most vulnerable children in San Mateo County. CFS (also known as Child Protective Services) administers programs that investigate incidents of child abuse and neglect and offers family reunification and maintenance services for families needing intervention. After an investigation of allegations of child abuse and neglect is completed, CFS staff must determine whether the level of risk of

harm warrants removal of the child from the family. If the decision is made to remove the child, the child is brought into emergency care. This could include placement in the Children's Receiving Home, which is part of the Central Region of CFS.

**Receiving Home/Shelter Model:** San Mateo County's receiving home model utilizes three venues for receiving children placed in protective custody or children experiencing a placement disruption: (1) the central Children's Receiving Home, (2) emergency foster homes or relative placement, and (3) Tower House. A child coming into care is referred to the central site, and from that site a decision is made about the emergency placement of the child. Relative placements are preferred and considered before all other options. If a relative placement is not possible, then other options are considered. For younger children under 12 years of age, foster homes are typically most appropriate. For all other children, the central Receiving Home location is desirable, unless the child has a history of, or is presently demonstrating, high risk behaviors, such as substance abuse, aggressiveness, violence, gang affiliations, running away, prostitution, severe mental health issues, etc. These children, once identified as such, are temporarily placed at Tower House.

## Tower House

**Program Description/Purpose:** Tower House is a CFS program, whose successful operation is attributed to the collaborative partnerships and relationships built with the San Mateo County Probation Department. It offers an alternative for emergency placement for children with high-risk behaviors or gang affiliations as well as for those who are in protective custody or on probation and cannot safely, return home. Since its inception, Tower House has primarily housed children in the child welfare/dependency system but also has taken in children from the probation/delinquency system, or children whose status is pending in both child welfare and probation. An example of this situation would be a child who is a dependent of the juvenile dependency court, has been arrested and has charges pending in juvenile delinquency court.

In this case, the child's status as a dependent of the child welfare or the probation systems is pending and is not resolved until the outcome of the criminal case is determined. After the outcome is known, regardless of the child's status, (whether he remains a dependent in the child welfare system, or due to a criminal conviction, is under the jurisdiction of probation), this child can be placed at Tower House until a more permanent placement is provided.

Tower House's purpose is to provide a placement option for children who cannot safely be placed at the Receiving Home with children who are not exhibiting high-risk behaviors. This separation allows for services to be targeted for the specific population in both sites. More importantly, this is a safer model for staff and children housed at either receiving home site. Children at the Receiving Home are not exposed to risky behaviors, such as violence, prostitution, and substance abuse, and Tower House is able to put in place additional safety measures not necessarily needed at the Receiving Home. In addition, Tower House is well-located within the Youth Services Center (YSC) campus, near the probation and sheriff's department and near services for children teetering on delinquency.

Tower House has a "no reject/no eject" policy. In other words, the group home must accept any child referred by the manager of the Receiving Home, and the group home cannot force a child to leave. This policy is critical to the success of the program, as Tower House is an extension of the receiving home. Receiving homes and children shelters are obligated to take any child deemed to be in need of protection, until a more suitable placement is found. Unlike other group home placements, Tower House cannot give a seven-day notice when a child is disruptive or for any other reason. The child will only leave the facility when a long-term placement is secured or if law enforcement takes the child into custody and she/he is laced in juvenile hall or another probation facility. But in the meantime, the staff at Tower House must work with the child to improve the behavior, and if the behavior is too risky or dangerous, they must call law enforcement for added protection.

Except for the “no reject/no eject” policy, Tower House operates similarly to most group homes. It provides for all basic needs, including housing, food, education, dental, and medical. Up to eight children can be placed there, four girls and four boys. The boys’ and girls’ rooms are divided by hallways, and those from the opposite sex are not allowed in the other hallway. The goal of the program is to prepare children to be successful in other types of placements. Therefore, they are taught to follow a daily schedule, keep their room clean, do their own laundry, and help out with other household chores. This also includes helping in the kitchen. Although the program receives some prepared meals, the residents are responsible for preparing some meals. If residents complete their assigned chores daily, they are given an allowance, which is put into a bank account. Residents are allowed to spend a portion of their allowance but are encouraged to save money to meet some of the goals identified in their Independent Living Program (ILP) plan. At the end of day, they also have regular homework and group counseling hours.

In addition, specialized services are offered, including those from medical, mental health, and education professionals. A nurse administers prescribed medication and conducts basic examinations when the children are sick. A nurse also monitors and makes certain the children keep all medical and dental appointments. A psychiatrist visits the group home periodically to evaluate and re-assess any child with a mental health diagnosis and/or a prescription for psychotropic medication. The psychiatrist works closely with the nurse to ensure all medication doses are appropriate and to address other issues, such as unwanted side effects. In addition, a liaison from the San Mateo County Office of Education is assigned to work with the children and staff in order to make sure that they are properly placed in school and are receiving special education services, as needed.

Other important information about Tower House:

- Average Length of Stay: 26 days.
- Ages of resident: 12–18.
- Staff/child ratio: 8 children to 5 staff.
- Average daily occupancy rate: 5 residents.

## Planning Efforts

**Background:** In early 2000, San Mateo County completed two Juvenile Justice Needs Assessments and concluded that the juvenile hall did not meet the needs of today’s youth offenders. It found that it was not only structurally inadequate, but also that the service delivery system was ineffective in dealing with the changing face of young offenders. In addition, they found prevention services were sorely needed. As a result, the Board of Supervisors, the courts, the probation department, and the community created the concept of a Youth Services Center (YSC) in order to consolidate youth services in one location. The project included:

- **Juvenile Hall:** a new facility housing up to 180 youth.
- **Girls Camp:** a residential program to house 30 females, emphasizing gender specific programs.
- **Group Home Cluster:** a residential program for 30 juveniles with dual diagnoses and other issues.
- **Community School:** a collaboration between the probation department and Office of Education. This school serves up to 90 youth with delinquency issues.
- **Receiving Home (Tower House):** a shelter facility to temporarily house, supervise, and meet the needs of youth who have been abused or neglected.

In addition, the project included space for probation, mental health services, and the Juvenile Delinquency Court. Tower House was one project involving CFS and dependent children. It was integrated into this larger YSC Project, providing added benefits to CFS.

**Core Values:** When San Mateo County planned for the YSC, it prepared a list of thirteen core values that would guide the entire project. These values center on the themes of family and children. Every program within the YSC recognizes each family and individual as valuable and acknowledges families as the foundation of all personal growth. It views collaboration as the best way to develop and achieve its goals. Public and family safety are critical objectives, along with personal responsibility and account-



ability. Finally, respect and humane treatment are essential, especially as they relate to the diversity in cultures and backgrounds of the families in the community. (See a complete list of the core values in Attachment B.)

### **Community and Political Support/Opposition**

Tower House benefited from the political and community efforts to bring forth the entire YSC project. The entire project became a reality due to strong community support and bipartisan political sponsorship. Despite such strong support, some opposition came from the local community surrounding the proposed site for the center. The concerns were around safety and property values. Essentially, some community members did not want the project in their community—the Not-In-My-Back-Yard (“NIMBY”) syndrome, a common problem that surfaces when securing sites for programs for children and/or adults with behavioral or mental health issues. After securing funding through a Board of Corrections grant, the project became a county bond and was put on the local ballot and was passed by a majority of votes.

With the passing of the county bond, Tower House faced little community opposition thereafter. However, when CFS opted to use a private contractor to administer the program, they faced some opposition from internal staff and union leaders. They raised concerns about the quality of care children would receive from a private contractor and the possibility of county job losses. Ensuring quality of care is stipulated in the contract and is achieved by close monitoring. Receiving Home staff visit Tower House and participate in staff meetings at least weekly to ensure the children’s needs are being met. County positions were not at risk of elimination because, like most shelters, San Mateo County’s Receiving Home relies primarily on a core group of county staff and extra help workers. Because the Receiving Home requires minimum staffing levels to deal with an unknown number of shelter admits, a core group of county employees must always be employed, and extra help staff can be brought in as occupancy numbers rise. Now, Receiving Home staff is pleased

that Tower House exists, because they do not have to spend as much time dealing with disruptions and diffusing unwanted behaviors, and can spend more time providing support that children without high risk behaviors need.

### **Resource Strategies/Funding Sources**

**Resource Strategies:** At the beginning of the planning process, the county thought to simply develop another county-run receiving home to fulfill the need for a separate facility for high risk youth. However, this option proved to be too costly, so the county opted to contract with Moss Beach Homes Inc. (MBH), also known as Aspira. In doing so, MBH could receive payment for each occupant at the going foster care rate, which is significantly higher than the rate the county would receive in a county-run receiving home. For MBH, this strategy becomes problematic only when occupancy is low, and they are unable to collect sufficient placement revenues. MBH’s occupancy must average 5–6 children to adequately cover operational costs.

During negotiations, MBH maintained that staffing costs would still be too high, even if MBH met its occupancy rate goals, given the high cost of living in the area. They also cited intensive services, and the staff to child ratios needed for this particular population, as problems in attracting and maintaining staff. MBH would have to pay its staff a slightly higher wage than other group homes. Because this would be the largest expense, the county agreed to a wage parity subsidy that, in essence, subsidizes the wages of Tower House employees. In addition, San Mateo County increases funding annually 3%, to cover any increase in expenses or “Costs of doing Business.” They also agreed to subsidize other costs by tapping into existing resources. Some of these costs include meals, mental and medical health treatment, education, and facilities. They utilized the Vocational Rehabilitation Food Services Training Program for their groceries and meals. Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) were established with the county mental health, county medical services, and Office of Education, so that mental health, medical, and

educational staff, employed to work with the Receiving Home, could also serve Tower House residents. In addition, the facility is a county-owned module unit, located on the same county owned property as the YSC. Therefore, facilities maintenance costs and functions were incorporated into the county central services.

For children coming from or pending entrance into the probation system, probation also provides services and assists MBH staff with the children. This includes participating in joint meetings and therapy sessions with MBH staff, social workers, and other providers. This also includes utilizing other services offered in the Youth Services Center. The partnership between CFS and probation is essential in working successfully with children with such high-risk behaviors, as these children often move between systems. Without this partnership, seamless and consistent service delivery would be impossible.

**Funding Sources:** Sources of revenue to fund Tower House have thus far come 100% from state and federal dollars. Although there are no dedicated funds specifically for Tower House, the county can tap into discretionary state and federal funds, which are based on child welfare caseload numbers. As caseloads grow and receiving home expenditures are incurred, revenues continue to come from the child welfare dedicated funds. The county has the discretion to use some county funds, if needed. So, for example, San Mateo County can decide to use "Net County Costs" funds (a discretionary county funding source) to cover the staff subsidy. As yet, this has not been necessary, and San Mateo County has been able to rely entirely on state and federal funding. In the future, however, this may not hold true if there are major budget cuts.

### Recommendations for Santa Clara County

Santa Clara County's model for receiving children into protective custody or during placement disruptions is similar to San Mateo County's, except that it uses a single receiving home. Relatives are preferable, other foster homes are used for younger children, and older children are typically admitted to the

Children's Shelter (CS) for temporary/emergency placement. In recent years, Santa Clara County has made incredible progress in reducing the numbers of children housed at the CS, going from populations as high as 120 children in 2001 down to average daily population of approximately 25 children. Most children, who previously would have initially been placed at the CS, are now going directly to relative homes, foster homes, or group homes for both emergency and/or longer-term placement. Nevertheless, the children who typically come to the CS now stay longer and often have high-risk behaviors or other significant issues. This presents several challenges for Santa Clara County, including:

- The need for more one to one staff-child ratios, used for children with especially high level problems, and often put in place to protect other residents in facilities that typically use 1 to 8 staff to child ratios.
- The high cost of housing children in a county-run shelter with children in need of such high staffing ratios and other high-end needs.
- They need to ensure safety in a facility not built, and a community not well suited to handle some of the more serious security issues.
- The lack of targeted services within the CS for children with problems, such as substance abuse, prostitution, running away, violence, gang affiliation, etc.
- The increasing number of children at the CS involved in both the child welfare and probation systems.

In an effort to successfully deal with these challenges, the following are my recommendations for Santa Clara County:

- Put forth a Request for Proposals (RFP) for private contractors to bid to operate a separate receiving home, similar to Tower House.
- Develop an RFP that includes a stipulation for a "no reject/no eject" policy, low staff- to-child ratios, and specialized services for high-risk youth.
- Acquire a location in the vicinity of law enforcement and probation facilities to ensure better

security and create a structure better suited to handle added security measures.

- Improve collaboration efforts between probation and child welfare.

Although Santa Clara County Children's Shelter has not experienced an armed intruder, the possibility exists, and other serious incidents have occurred. The incidents of greatest concern typically involve exposing children to the high risk behaviors of other residents. San Mateo County has been successful in addressing these issues by adding Tower House to its receiving home model. I recommend Santa Clara County consider duplicating this model and securing a separate facility for high risk youth, in need of emergency placement.

### **Acknowledgements**

This research project and the entire BASSC program were truly incredible learning experiences and very relevant to my work in Placement Services in Santa Clara County. It could not have happened without the support of many others. First, I must extend my sincere gratitude to those from Santa Clara County who recommended my participation in the BASSC

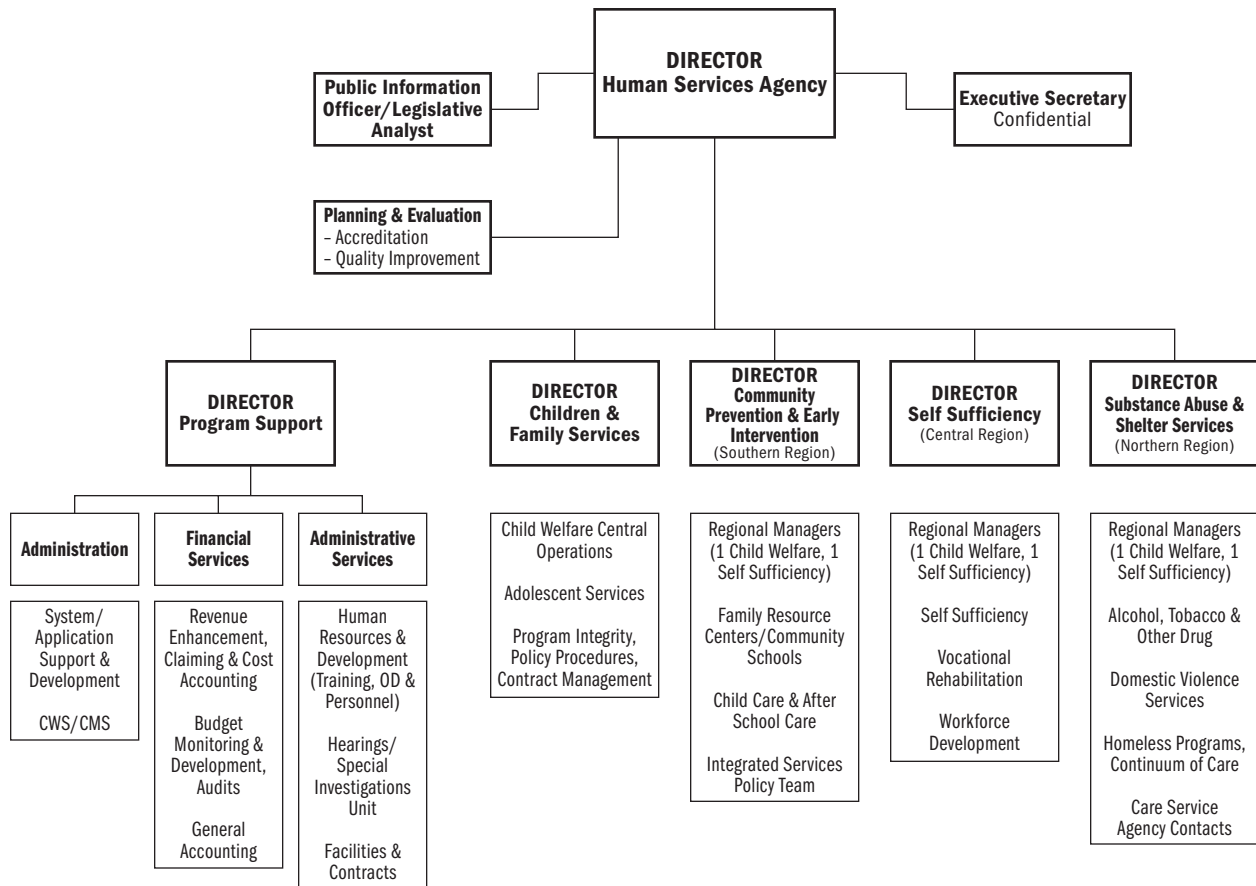
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# ATTACHMENT A

## Organizational Chart

### San Mateo County Human Services Agency



## ATTACHMENT B

# San Mateo County Youth Services Center: Core Values

The core values for the Youth Service Center are:

- 1** The Center recognizes families as the cornerstone of individual growth.
- 2** The center values every child and family.
- 3** The Center collaborates with agencies and families to provide the greatest opportunity for positive change in individuals and the community.
- 4** The Center develops goals in a collaborative process based on individual's personal strengths and centered around the family.
- 5** The Center provides the most appropriate and least restrictive interventions to assist youth and their families.
- 6** The Center promotes pro-social values and behavior.
- 7** The Center promotes public and family safety.
- 8** The Center reflects diversity and cultural awareness.
- 9** The Center promotes personal responsibility and accountability.
- 10** The Center is easily accessible and user friendly to staff and families.
- 11** The Center provides safe and humane treatment.
- 12** The Center is cost effective in both form and function.
- 13** The Center is expandable and flexible with multiple use capability as a community resource.

*San Mateo County  
County Managers Office/Clerk of the Board*