

Contra Costa County's Bay Point SparkPoint Center **Implications for Child Welfare Clients in Santa Clara County**

AUGUSTINE MARK LAPIZ

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research findings suggest that children are more susceptible to maltreatment when raised in poverty. It is not to state that poverty causes maltreatment; rather, poverty can induce stress and influence choices made by individuals. Santa Clara County's Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) provides services to families when a report of maltreatment has been made. Though poverty is not a reason for DFCS intervention, poverty is considered a possible "risk factor" for the safety and wellbeing of children where maltreatment has been determined. DFCS provides a myriad of services aimed at improving psycho-social behaviors and family conditions to ensure children's safety and wellbeing; however, DFCS has been unable to effectively provide services to address issues of poverty and self-sufficiency amongst the families they serve.

Contra Costa County's Department of Social Services has partnered with the United Way of the

Bay Area to provide a bundled services strategy model designed to assist individuals in moving towards self-sufficiency and in meeting their financial goals. Called SparkPoint Centers (SPC), these centers are based on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Center for Working Families. There currently are four SPC's open in the Greater Bay Area, and two more ready are to open their doors in Contra Costa County. The Contra Costa County SPC's are located in Richmond and Bay Point, California. The Bay Point SparkPoint Center is the only SPC where the lead agency is a county government agency.

The purpose of this case study was to gain a better understanding of the Center model, to learn how Contra Costa County developed the Bay Point SPC, and to ascertain if its strategies could address the self-sufficiency service gap in Santa Clara County's Department of Family and Children's Services.

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Introduction

Studies show that children raised in poverty are at greater risk of becoming victims of maltreatment, particularly of neglect and physical abuse (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), 2008). Furthermore, the NSPCC suggests: "Children who experience poverty and maltreatment are doubly disadvantaged because the experience of maltreatment may in turn further undermine life chances in the long term" (NSPCC, 2008). Poverty does not cause maltreatment; although, research demonstrates there is an association between poverty and maltreatment. Just as an individual's choices and well-being can be influenced by issues of mental health or substance abuse, poverty is a condition which induces stress. This stress potentially impacts the functioning of, and choices made by, parents. Families receiving services through the Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) have been referred because of a report of child maltreatment. The majority of these families also struggle with economic issues. As a result, poverty is identified as a "risk factor" for families when maltreatment has been reported.

DFCS services focus on addressing psycho-social functioning and behavior. The services include: parenting classes, domestic violence services, individual and family therapy, and substance abuse rehabilitation services. DFCS can also provide families with referrals for patchwork resources that can assist with an immediate crisis or need, such as food, transportation and short-term housing. Through a myriad of programs, families participate in services that address the psycho-social factors that contributed to the behaviors that resulted in DFCS' involve-

ment. For most of the families in the Child Welfare System, poverty negatively impacts their well-being and overall functioning. Current services are aimed at promoting long-term behavioral changes, but fall short of promoting long-term self-sufficiency. Though DFCS does not disregard the significant role that poverty may play in the life of a family, its services are not designed to assist families with the issue of poverty. This shortfall may in-turn contribute to recidivism of families into the Child Welfare System.

During this time when budgets are decreasing and services are being eliminated, Contra Costa County Social Services Agency is partnering in implementation of a strategy that aims to increase individuals' self-sufficiency. Contra Costa County's Social Services Agency is the lead agency working with The United Way of the Bay Area* (UWBA) to develop a SparkPoint Center (SPC) in Bay Point, California. The SparkPoint Model is UWBA's strategy to end poverty in the seven counties that comprise its region: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo and Solano. Through my participation in BASSC, I was afforded the opportunity to examine the SPC Model in Contra Costa County to ascertain if its strategies could address Santa Clara County's self-sufficiency service gap for its DFCS population. It is hoped that by bringing stability to parents, stability is brought to their child as well.

Santa Clara County's Department of Family and Children's Services

Santa Clara County's Department of Family and Children's Services provides intervention services on four different levels to families who have been referred because of allegations of child abuse and

neglect. These different levels of intervention are specific to the level of need of the child and family. Known as Differential Response (DR), Santa Clara County's DR model provides these services under four umbrella programs known as "Paths". These paths range from referrals for community services without DFCS Supervision, to Juvenile Dependency Court involvement, and to aftercare services for those children and families who are exiting the child welfare system. DFCS DR paths are "... designed to meet the needs of the family based on risk and safety factors present at the time of contact with [DFCS], with overall goals of identifying the safest, most appropriate, least restrictive and least intrusive service intervention for each individual family." A second, but equally important, goal is to prevent future abuse and/or neglect issues from developing in families that are currently in crisis, by addressing these crises before they escalate into more serious abuse and/or neglect issues that would require court intervention." Each of the different paths provides services to families that are agreed upon through a contract called a "Case Plan".

- **Path 1** Voluntary services are offered when a report of child maltreatment does not meet the statutory definitions for abuse or neglect. Path 1 families are often experiencing crises or ongoing issues for which they could benefit from some support, referrals or participation in programs. One of the eligibility requirements is that at least one child in the referred family must be under the age of 6 years old.
- **Path 2** Services are offered after the DFCS assessment determines the report of maltreatment meets the WIC statutory definitions of abuse and neglect but that immediate risk to the child is low. The family, through participation in services, is willing and likely to change their behavior or situation to improve the child's safety. There are three tracks for Path 2 Services: a community-based organization (CBO) provides services with DFCS case closure; DFCS Voluntary Family Maintenance; and DFCS Informal Supervision Services.
- **Path 3** Juvenile Dependency Court-ordered services include family reunification, family maintenance and permanency planning. Services are court-ordered after a report of maltreatment meets the statutory definitions of abuse and neglect and there is an immediate risk to the child. Family consent is not needed and court intervention is determined necessary. Programs focus on addressing the psycho-social behaviors that placed the child at immediate risk. Program outcomes are focused on changing parents' behaviors to reduce risk and improve children's safety.
- **Path 4** Voluntary aftercare services are for families who have successfully completed Path 3 services and who have exited the Juvenile Dependency System. Services are very similar to those in Path 1, but are aimed at assisting the family with maintaining stability and preventing re-entry into the foster care system. Santa Clara County is currently the only county in the state that provides Path 4-type services to families exiting the Child Welfare System.
 - Services provided by community-based organizations under Paths 1, 2 and 4 include, but are not limited to:
 - Assessing child safety on an ongoing basis.
 - Developing, implementing and monitoring family service plans that include regular home visits, parent education, domestic violence support, safety planning, school advocacy, and practical skills.
 - Performing home visits with all clients on a regular basis to assess the home environment and promote increased accessibility of services.
 - Providing referrals and access to services within the community (e.g. referrals to therapeutic services, parenting classes, community support groups, housing resources & referrals, food and clothing assistance, legal services) that are not provided by the primary CBO agency.
 - Assessing eligibility and enrollment in Medical, Healthy Kids or Healthy Families, and the Department of Employment and Benefits services.

- Providing school advocacy and access to legal assistance.

Differential Response programs and services are often connected with resolving the psycho-behavioral issues that contributed to the reported maltreatment. Case plan services are outcome-driven and focused on addressing the behavioral reasons why a family has come to the attention of DFCS. Path 3 Services (Juvenile Dependency Court) are also dictated by legal mandates and time restrictions. Though DR services also attempt to reduce or minimize risk factors, DFCS is very limited in their ability to provide services that address the issue of poverty or self-sufficiency. Poverty is a common factor in nearly all of the families that DFCS comes in contact with, and it contributes to the wellbeing of the parents and the children.

United Way of the Bay Area and SparkPoint Center

In an effort to make progress toward ending poverty, United Way of the Bay Area created the SparkPoint Center Model. “SparkPoint Centers are family-friendly places where hard-working, low-income people can access a full range of services to help them get out of poverty and achieve long-term financial stability” (Spark Point Brochure, United Way of the Bay Area). SPCs are a collaborative effort in which the UWBA provides starter money, as well as advertising and technological support, for agencies that are interested in the creation of a Spark Point Center in their community. The UWBA includes the counties of Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Solano.

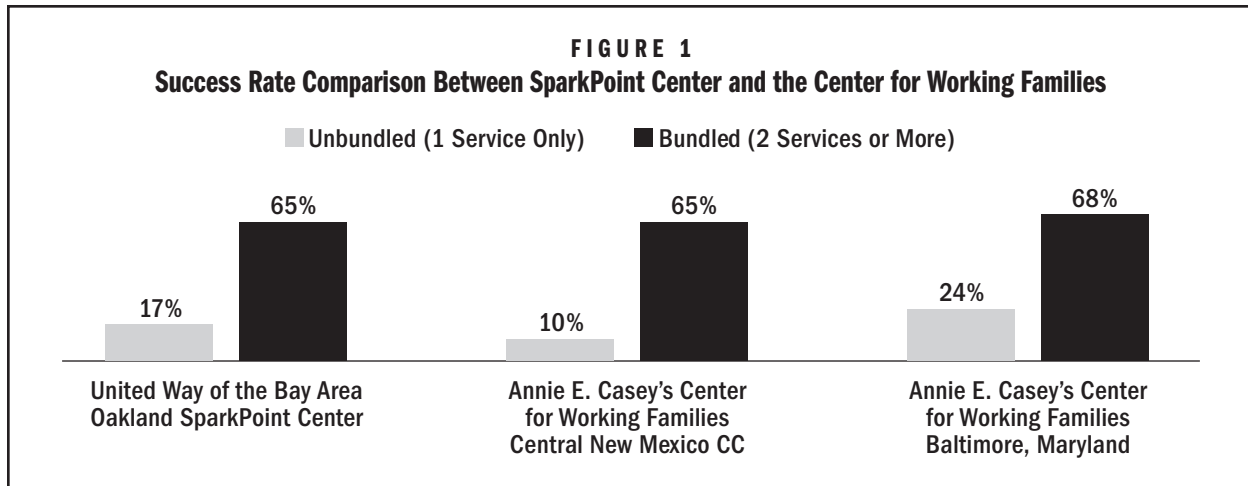
The UWBA utilized the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Center for Working Families as its starting point in developing the SPC model. The Center for Working Families (CWF) Model is a “framework for neighborhood service delivery designed to help low-income families increase their earnings and income, reduce their financial transaction costs and generate new wealth for themselves and their communities” (Ann Woodward, *The Center for Working Families—A How-To Guide*). Using a framework

based on the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s value that “families should be able to meet their basic needs and participate in some level of planning for the future”, the CWF devised a strategy to assist families by bundling services that addressed employment and career services, income and work support and financial services and asset-building. Through this model of bundling services, Annie E. Casey found that, in the first year of participation, clients had an 85% success rate of achieving their primary financial goal if they received three or more services, a 60% success rate of achieving their primary financial goal if they received two services, and only a 20% success rate if they received only one service. The UWBA utilized this model of bundling services as their strategy basis for designing the Spark Point Center Model.

Emily Harpster, SparkPoint Director with United Way of the Bay Area, explained that, as an organization, United Way felt it wasn’t “moving the needle towards ending poverty as they had been wanting.” The UWBA utilized the 2008 Self-Sufficiency Standard as a measure for defining poverty in the implementation of its SPC model. Due to the higher cost of living in the Bay Area compared to the rest of the nation, UWBA determined the figure to be about \$60,000 for a family of four, which was different than the federal poverty level standard of \$22,350 in 2011 (this excludes Alaska and Hawaii). The UWBA calculations factored in the cost of living, size of family, and housing and rental market value for a family of four living in San Francisco. Outcome goals for SPC participants are universal: to achieve a self-sufficient income; to improve a credit score to 650 or better; to accumulate savings equivalent to 3 months of living expenses; and to reduce their debt-to-income ratio to less than 40 percent.

Though the outcome goals are specific, Ms. Harpster explained that the SPC Model is “very flexible.” All SPC’s must agree to the core principles and outcome goals, but each has their own flexibility to administer and distribute services as they see fit for the community they serve.

Ms. Harpster explained that the UWBA understands that the barriers to financial stability are



great and that poverty is very complex. Therefore, each lead agency operating a SPC can develop their services to address the poverty needs that may be specific to their community. The services offered by each SPC are often a result of collaborative work with other community-based organizations that already offer services that fall in line with the SPC outcome goals.

Each SPC operates individually and has a distinct annual budget. Qualifications for SPC participants only require that their annual salary fall under the United Ways' Self-Sufficiency Standard of \$60,000 for a family of four. This is in stark contrast to many state- and federally- funded aid programs that have stringent qualifications and requirements (e.g. criminal history, past participation, time restrictions) that establish barriers for many individuals.

In an effort to measure their outcomes, the UWBA has utilized Efforts to Outcome (ETO), an internet-based case management database, to collect and analyze their data. Ms. Harpster reported that 2011 has been identified as 'the year of collecting data'. The first SPC is located in Oakland, California, and data already collected by United Way provides a strong comparison to the success rates of Center for Working Families. According to the UWBA Website,* clients receiving one service at the Oakland SPC have a 17% success rate compared to a 65% success rate for clients receiving 2 or more bundled services. Ms. Harpster emphasized that the SPC model

is very data-driven. The UWBA is looking forward to utilizing the collected data as a means of quality control, to designing and revamping programs, and to determining the effectiveness of their services. In addition, the United Way hopes that the reports generated by the ETO software will be used as everyday tools to create a culture of learning and improvement with the staff at each of the SPC sites. (See Figure 1.)

The UWBA is not involved in the daily operations of each SPC. In addition to funding, the United Way also provides support to each SPC through:

- Assignment of a UWBA staff person to each SPC
- Representation at all SPC planning meetings
- On-going trainings and meetings that include all SPC staff in the region
- Provision of Efforts To Outcomes Software and technical support to track data and measure outcomes
- Provision of marketing and public relations staff and support for media, flyers and broad outreach
- Influence of legislation at state and federal levels to champion SPC.

The UWBA has a targeted goal of having at least one SPC in each of the seven counties that it serves. There are currently four SPC's that have been in full operation, and four more centers that will be fully operational by June 2011. The four SPC's that are currently open are located in the counties of Alameda (Oakland), Napa (American Canyon), Marin (San Rafael), and San Mateo (Skyline Community Col-

lege). The four centers scheduled to open by June 2011 include two in Contra Costa County (Richmond and Bay Point) and two in Solano County (Fairfield and Vallejo).

Bay Point SparkPoint Center

Of the eight SPCs, the Bay Point SPC located in Contra Costa County is the only current SPC where the lead agency for the project, Contra Costa County's Social Services Agency, is a county government agency. The collaboration between a county social services agency and the SPC project sparked my interest to see how it could be implemented in Santa Clara County and how it could specifically target the child welfare population. I hoped to learn how a social services agency SPC lead was created, if the child welfare populations were factored into the process, and if an SPC could be part of the comprehensive service plan for child welfare clients.

The Bay Point SPC was spearheaded by Paul Buddenhagen, Program Manager of Contra Costa County's Service Integration Program, and was slated for a "soft" launch in March 2011. Mr. Buddenhagen provided great insight into his experiences with the planning, development and collaborative energies that went into constructing a SPC in the community of Bay Point, California, which is located in the eastern region of the county. Contra Costa County also has a SPC project being developed in the western region of the county in the city of Richmond. Though Mr. Buddenhagen was a major contributor in its development, the leading agency for the Richmond SPC is Brighter Beginnings, a non-profit agency that provides broad-spectrum case management services. I was also afforded the opportunity to tour the SPC of American Canyon and Skyline Community College and to meet their staff. The American Canyon SPC is led by a Family Resource Center community-based organization. The SPC of San Mateo is located at Skyline Community College and provides services under the college's larger organizational plan. Both of these programs are already providing direct client services.

According to Mr. Buddenhagen, Spark Point Centers are "a good marry of services within county

agencies as we need to figure out how to support families in a different way due to less money." Though the Contra Costa Social Security Administration (SSA) is the lead agency for the Bay Point SPC, the goal of distributing services relies heavily on other agencies that focus on providing some component of services aimed at self-sufficiency (e.g. job connection/training, adult education). Mr. Buddenhagen identified and received commitment to the SPC project from two agencies, and released an invitation to all community-based organizations in East Contra Costa County for a large meeting. After a self-selection process, there were nine agencies fully committed to the SPC project. This team became the SPC Steering Committee. This steering committee not only provides the services but also makes decisions collectively. A private consultant was also hired for the project. Services provided by these participating agencies that fall in line with the UWBA goals for SPC include, but are not limited to:

- Credit report and counseling services
- Access to and maintenance of affordable housing
- Home-buying and retainment
- Vocational counseling and employment placement
- Financial education and services
- Enrolling in public benefits and health insurance programs
- Tax assistance
- Individual Developed Accounts

Due to its small size and staff, services offered through Bay Point SPC are only provided in English and Spanish; however, on-going cultural competency trainings will be provided to all staff.

Each partnering agency has agreed to provide their service at the Bay Point SPC, with the exception of the job development and training program, which will remain at the providing agency's site. Each agency will provide a staff member to be housed at the SPC who will provide the direct client services. Though each staff member will represent their own agency, they each will be provided with extensive training on all the services offered through SPC so they each can address the complex financial issues that a client may present.

Contra Costa County's Child Welfare system was not part of the planning of the Bay Point SPC, nor were any other county SSA departments. The Bay Point SPC development was consistent with the UWBA's model of providing bundled services to individuals with a focus on moving towards self-sufficiency. Mr. Buddenhagen explained that, at this point, the Bay Point SPC does not address entire family/individual systems as they do in the child welfare arena. He hopes that at some point the Bay Point SPC will have the ability to address individual and family systems issues for SPC clients. In hindsight, Mr. Buddenhagen suggests that those internal systems should have been at the table to get more county buy-in and support. Bay Point SPC's target is to serve 500 clients within the first year. None of these slots are allotted for clients who are referred through DFCS. Rather, the Steering Committee's agencies have each been allocated a number of slots to refer current clients whom the agency feels could benefit and utilize SPC services to the fullest.

In regards to funding, the Bay Point SPC received \$200,000 from United Way, which was a combination of various donations and partnerships with Bank of America, Wells Fargo Bank, Chevron, and other foundations. Additionally, \$250,000 worth of in-kind donations was provided by the nine participating agencies. Mr. Buddenhagen projected that SPC success will be determined by those SPC's that are able to obtain their own funding sources. He added that the United Way explained that each SPC budget projection should not be based on limitations but rather projections should be based on the vision of the SPC and the desired outcome. Though the United Way provides a large amount of funding, the seed money for each SPC is not equal. Again, SPC's that can develop their own sources of funding will be the most successful.

Because the Bay Point SPC has not been fully launched, there is no data supporting whether or not the services they provide are effective. However, just like the services offered through the Oakland SPC, the bundled services provided by Bay Point SPC mirror the services outlined in the CWF strategic model.

Recommendations

Data collected from the SparkPoint Center of Oakland by the United Way of the Bay Area is consistent with the findings of Annie E. Casey Foundation's Center for Working Families. This data demonstrates that the bundled services strategy model to address poverty and self-sufficiency is effective in working with clients. A SparkPoint model in Santa Clara County could fill a much-needed service gap in addressing the risk factor of poverty amongst Department of Family and Children's Services clients.

Currently, the SparkPoint model could be integrated into the Paths 1, 2 and 4 services model. Unlike Path 3 Services, supportive services are a primary focus for Paths 1, 2 and 4. Issues of child maltreatment have been determined to not require court intervention and supervision.

At this time, SPC services for Path 3 families would need further development as these services are focused on child safety and well-being. Path 3 services are based on Welfare and Institution Code Law, when maltreatment has been determined and it requires court intervention. Legal statutes dictate that Path 3 services are time-limited, outcome-focused, and connected to the reason for or the causal factor that resulted in the removal of a child from their parents.

A SPC in Santa Clara County could provide much-needed services to all individuals who meet the criteria, but should include a number of openings that are reserved for families involved with child welfare who, after a determination was made by the assigned CBO, would make good candidates for the SPC.

Acknowledgements

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