
STRENGTHENING SERVICE DELIVERY

THE FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER - A MODEL FOR SOCIAL SERVICES DELIVERY

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“If I hadn’t gotten involved here, I probably wouldn’t have my four kids with me today. My husband and I attended the parenting classes and drug intervention classes and have turned our lives around. I owe a lot to this place.”

This was a moving testimonial to hear while visiting the Gilroy Family Resource Center on February 18, 1998. This same woman, who was holding her baby, talked about the difficulty she has had complying with the various requirements of the court and how hard it is to get all her kids ready to take a two hour bus ride from Gilroy to San Jose to attend court. One can only imagine how difficult it would be to take this same journey various times during the month to attend a class to learn parenting skills or to attempt to break the cycle of drug addiction. But she definitely feels these difficulties have been lessened with the assistance of the Gilroy Family Resource Center staff.

A second woman when asked if she wanted to speak had this to say:

“No one could tell me anything when I first came here two years ago. I thought I knew it all. I didn’t have any problems, other than dealing with ‘their’ demands. Then I took the parenting class. After that I got into the drug intervention program, and my life has changed. I’m now co-facilitating one of the drug intervention classes. I think I’m a better parent now, and I’m willing to

take responsibility for my actions. If I hadn’t come here, I don’t know what my life would be like.”

Very few eyes were dry after a third woman spoke up about her transformation from gang member to community activist. She described a life of drugs, crime and violence that took her to the brink of suicide. But she has turned her life around and wants to spread her message to others who will listen. She has found support, as well as the use of a desk and phone, at the Gilroy Family Resource Center where she works to stop the cycle of crime and destruction by gangs. She mentions proudly that she has been nominated Woman of the Year for the 28th Assembly District for her work as founder of *Mothers Against Gangs*.

What’s impressive from a visit to the Gilroy Family Resource Center is the interchange between the staff and their “clients”; in fact, it’s difficult to discern between the two. On the day of my visit, I didn’t realize the woman sitting next to me was a client until she told her story. The atmosphere at the Gilroy Family Resource Center is relaxed, warm and friendly. People are constantly coming in, pouring themselves a cup of coffee and wandering into this room or that to take advantage of the various activities and programs.

The breadth of activities to be found at the resource center include:

- An impressive *Youth Leadership* program in

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which young people meet for sixteen (16) weeks with a Youth Leader (a college student) to discuss issues pertinent to them such as drugs, self-esteem, gang involvement, life skills or sex education. There's a \$10 incentive paid to the participants for each class s/he attends, which could include a field trip to a cultural event, the zoo, the beach or a college.

- There are *Parenting Classes* for parents of children 0-5 years of age.
- *Parents as Teacher* is a hands-on education program which is taught by Gilroy Family Resource Center staff in the home.
- Their 32 week open-ended *Drug Intervention* class encourages participants to write in their journals and to consistently have clean drug tests.
- *Mothers Against Gangs* offers mediation between families and police, and encouragement for witnesses to appear in court.
- *De Mujer a Mujer* is a support group for Spanish speaking women focusing on self-growth and culture.
- *Employment Readiness* assists the unemployed in developing resumes, interviewing skills and job searches.
- Classes to prepare people to become a *Family Day Care Provider* are offered, as well as assistance in fingerprinting for licensure.
- *Foster PRIDE* classes to train foster parents and *foster parent support groups* are provided.
- *Family Conferencing* sessions, which provide a venue for extended families to problem solve, are held at the Center.
- Classes in *Migajon*, a traditional Mexican art form, are taught to help carry on cultural tradition, provide a creative outlet and offer a forum for interaction.
- *ESL and Spanish Literacy* classes are provided for Spanish speaking families.
- *The Family Unification Program/FUP* offers Section 8 housing certificates for families with an open child welfare case who are willing to develop a five year plan for self-sufficiency and agree to meet monthly with a para-professional over the five year period.
- *Family Wellness and Positive Parenting* classes, which are facilitated by trained social workers from the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, teach parents alternative responses to anger and healthy interaction through role playing.
- *Women's Domestic Violence* groups focus on building self-esteem, improving communication skills, processing issues and offering support.

In addition, such diverse groups as NA/Narcotics Anonymous and the Girl Scouts hold their meetings at the Center. To facilitate parent participation in these programs, no cost child supervision is provided on-site in a specially decorated "kids" room fully equipped with toys and games. While the above list is extensive, it is not all inclusive, and the Center keeps adding groups and programs as community needs dictate.

Gilroy Family Resource Center is a model for providing services to families in a non-threatening, user-friendly manner. And, it is just one of four centers sponsored by the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency. The other three centers listed in the order they opened are Nuestra Casa (1992), Ujirani (1994) and Asian Pacific (1995).

The Gilroy Family Resource Center opened shortly after Ujirani in 1994 and originally served as both a community center and a child welfare office. Almost immediately after opening, funding was sought from the Office of Child Abuse Prevention/OCAP for a Juvenile Crime Prevention demonstration grant. This funding allowed the Family Resource Center to be autonomous from the child welfare program which is called the Gilroy Family Center. In 1996, the Child Welfare side relocated to its own site in Gilroy. The OCAP grant provided funds for a five year program entitled "Roads to Success" which has various components that are directed by the Gilroy Family Resource Center's Program Manager, Maria Elena Delgado. In addition to programs such as Youth Leadership which meets at the Center, there are various off-site programs that assist at-risk children, such as:

- *Before & After School Programs* provide tutoring for latch key students.
- *Mothers and Sons* offers recreation and therapy with a male therapist for boys in single parent Latino families.
- *FAST, or Families and Schools Together*, provides early intervention by a team of professionals for the parent(s) and child. Teachers refer students with attendance, achievement and performance problems. Communication and interaction skills are taught to both the students and parents.

SOME HISTORY

Community interest had been expressed for several years to establish a community-based child welfare district office in Gilroy to serve families and children at risk of abuse and neglect. Parents responding to court demands were expected to meet with their case worker and attend court mandated classes in San Jose, a formidable distance for families in crises and a major barrier to effective service delivery.

Discussions began in 1994 between Gilroy community leaders and the then Director of Family and Children's Services in Santa Clara County, John Oppenheim. By November of that year, the Center became a reality. Over ninety (90) human services agencies participated in the Gilroy Community Collaborative, the body that pushed for the establishment of a regional center to serve the families of that community. From this larger collaborative, a smaller partnership was established to form "Roads to Success", the Crime Prevention project which provided funding for various projects related to youth and allowed the Family Resource Center to have autonomy from the child welfare division.

This is but one story out of four - each rich in their struggles for identity, autonomy and community relevance. **Nuestra Casa**, the oldest family resource center in Santa Clara County, began as a pilot project in 1991. State Family Preservation funds were used to establish a "family crisis center", and a steering committee of over 100 people, representing 14 work groups, met for a year after Nuestra Casa was open to provide oversight and direction. The size of the group proved to be unwieldy, but their initial involvement provided much needed input and development assistance. While initially there was no ethnic emphasis intended, the location of

the Center in a Latino-rich east San Jose neighborhood coupled with the influence and involvement of El Comité, a group of activist Latino social workers, Nuestra Casa developed specific programs and services to meet the needs of Latino families.

Ujirani Family Resource Center was a product of the African American Strategic Plan which was developed by a group of individuals representing the community, including employees of the Social Services Agency, who were concerned about the disproportionate number of African American children in out-of-home placement in Santa Clara County. While the users of Ujirani Center are culturally and ethnically diverse (25% African American, 50% Caucasian, 20 % Latino, 2% Asian and 3% other), the decor and atmosphere of Ujirani celebrates African American identity with beautiful African art work and artifacts. Parenting classes and Girl Scout groups specifically for African Americans have been started at Ujirani.

The Asian American Employees Committee from the Social Services Agency provided justification for a family resource center to meet the needs of the Asian population in Santa Clara County. Housed in an industrial park building located in a predominately southeast Asian neighborhood, the **Asian Pacific Family Resource Center**, which opened in February 1995, serves mostly Vietnamese, Thai and Cambodian residents. Korean, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese and South Asian Indians living outside the neighborhood generally make use of the Center's services only when they are court ordered to take classes. There are parenting classes in Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, Mandarin, Tagalong, Cambodian and English, as well as parent support groups facilitated in Korean, Tagalong and Cambodian. A support and education group for parents of children with special needs is facilitated in

Mandarin.

Because the overall child welfare caseload in Santa Clara County is only 6% of Asian ethnicity, many of the services at Asian Pacific Family Resource Center are preventative. Classes which focus on retaining ethnic identity, such as traditional flower arranging, also serve as a medium to teach family interaction in a fun environment. Specific concerns of the Asian population are addressed as the community dictates, such as a Gamblers Anonymous meeting. There are well-attended citizenship classes to meet the recent concern of potential loss of social services due to resident status.

In May 1998, the Asian Pacific Family Resource Center is sponsoring an Asian Youth Conference with three town hall meetings at separate high schools. At these town hall meetings the "experts" will be asked to listen to the concerns of parents, youth and community members. Information from these meetings, along with a youth survey which was previously distributed, will be synthesized into recommendations that will serve as the foundation of a strategic plan.

While each of the four centers have core services and programs similar to the ones at Gilroy Family Resource Center described earlier, they all tailor their services to meet the needs of their neighborhood and the particular ethnic populations they target.

CHALLENGES FACED

The development of the four family resource centers in Santa Clara County has been challenging and rewarding. Some of the challenges that had to be overcome initially and in some cases still present obstacles follows:

- Visibility within the community and even within their own Social Services Agency necessitating on-going outreach.
- Competition with other community resources (such as other African American service agencies).
- Funding, that ever present challenge, particularly for preventative services.
- Finding and maintaining adequate space.
- Building an identity which is inclusive of the various sectors of the community.
- Determining what is “relevant” data and incorporating the collection of this data into an already busy social services workload.
- Building trusting relationships with other departments and agencies who have staff housed at the various family resource centers.
- Designating a “leader” - initially, there were no Social Services Agency supervisors at the various sites making it difficult to discern who was in charge, especially since there were staff from different county departments working together in one location.
- Because the family resource centers are under the jurisdiction of county government, there is no grassroots board or community oversight body.
- Maintaining an on-going awareness of the cultural and political issues of various special interest groups.
- Engaging the client customers’ awareness of the

services offered.

- Implementing an on-going system to survey satisfaction with these services.

WHAT WORKS

To what do the Family Resource Centers of Santa Clara County attribute their successes? Some of the very factors that have presented them with challenges, such as the diversity of staff, have also contributed to the accomplishments and richness of the centers. Other ingredients include:

- Dedicated staff sensitive to the background and struggles of clients.
- Neighborhood identity.
- Relaxed non-bureaucratic environment.
- Community input through surveys and one-on-one interaction.
- A home-like setting where staff can teach by example (i.e., keeping the kitchen clean).
- Convenience for clients by housing many services in one location.
- Culturally competent services and staffing.
- Designated staff to coordinate materials for outreach, resources and education.
- Program design and hours of operation (evening and weekend hours) which fit the needs of clients.
- Agency commitment to the concept of “customer

service”.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

There is much that Santa Cruz County can glean from the experience of our neighbors in Santa Clara County. While our communities are diverse in many ways (i.e., geography, economics, population size and specific client make-up), we are both responsible for the protection of children from abuse and neglect. Furthermore, we are both committed to providing families with the tools they need to find jobs, secure housing and maintain a minimum standard of health and safety. Our collective charge is to give children every opportunity to grow into productive and mentally healthy adults.

After visiting the family resource centers of Santa Clara County, it is clear that this medium is an important means to achieve these ends by offering relevant services to families in a humane and dignified manner. I would recommend the following to the collective agencies in Santa Cruz County that are meeting regularly to design a network of family resource centers.

- Learn from the successes and challenges of the existing centers in Santa Clara County and other state models through site visitations, review of materials and interviews with their client customers.
- Delineate clear leadership when combining service providers in one site and develop workable memorandums of understanding when out-stationing staff.
- Always keep the needs of the client customers foremost in mind when considering service design, hours of operation and site decor.
- Develop an advisory board with representation from the community, the families served and staff from the various agencies involved.
- Determine what data is necessary to collect for measuring both usage and *outcome* of services provided; develop a reasonable method for data collection.
- Find an effective way to communicate to the community, the staff at the various agencies and the clients what you’re doing and why; regularly survey these same folks regarding service satisfaction.
- Design services that focus on and recognize the strengths of families, such as Family Conferencing.
- Learn about the various resources provided at the four Santa Clara County family resource centers and utilize them for Santa Cruz County clients when appropriate, such as the parenting classes conducted in Asian languages.
- Be ever mindful of opposing political and cultural concerns, keeping the needs of the client customers in the forefront.
- Define the focus of the centers, and remember that although *prevention* isn’t easily fundable, it should be a guiding focus.
- Maintain a sense of humor; treat each other with kindness; and be flexible.

IN CONCLUSION

I want to thank the staff at the Asian Pacific Family Resource Center, the Gilroy Family Resource Center, Nuestra Casa and Ujirani for taking the time to educate me about the valuable work they are doing in their community. Also, the support that they receive from the staff located at the main Social Services Agency office on Technology Drive in San Jose, plus the assistance they gave me answering my numerous questions, can not be minimized. Mary Grimm, Lynette Harrisson, Deirdre Mellon-Reyes and Jim Ramoni all complement the vision and the day-to-day operations of the centers. A very heartfelt thanks goes to Zonia Sandoval Waldon for her very able role as “mentor” and for providing a model of how a strong belief in people reaps valuable rewards.