

PREVENTION SERVICES FOR CHILD WELFARE

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Traditionally, child welfare services have been delivered to families only after some act or omission by the parent that was severe enough to warrant state or government intervention. These services are designed to correct the problems that caused the abuse and to provide the family with resources that can help to improve the family functioning. Although over the years many new methods and approaches to child abuse have been tried, our profession has not really been able to reduce the incidents of child abuse. Sadly, the number of cases continue to rise. Is there a way for a public Child Welfare agency to step in before abuse occurs? This is the question that my internship raised for me.

My internship at San Mateo County Human Services, in the Youth and Family Services Division, gave me an opportunity to see a public welfare department that had designed a child abuse prevention and early intervention services program. The Futures Project is a school based program to identify and resolve family problems at the earliest point possible. The concept for Futures was developed by the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors and given to the newly created Human Services Agency to implement. The Board also provided the Agency with county funding to support the program for at least five years.

The Youth and Family Services Division developed four school based Future Projects serving children and families in targeted areas of the county where there were high incidents of child abuse reports.

Each center is staffed by San Mateo County employees from Public Health Nursing, Drug and Alcohol Services, Income Maintenance (both AFDC and Medi-Cal), Child Welfare, and Mental Health. As part of the county wide reorganization plan, county employees were reassigned to the Human Services Agency to be part of the Futures program staff. Each program has one staff person from all the participating agencies and is supervised by a Child Welfare supervisor. The multidisciplinary staff allows each site to be self-sufficient and able to provide all needed services to the clients.

The project is a collaboration with the public school system, which provide the office space for the projects. The Futures staff work as a multidisciplinary team to provide both individual client services and preventative programs. The individual client services can be long-term, short-term or one-time only. Each project has developed specialized prevention programs that address the particular age of the students and needs of the community. These include classroom presentations, parent education nights, special assemblies, recreation programs, parent education classes and after school programs. These programs are developed by the Futures staff in collaboration with teachers and parents. The Futures projects have also teamed with local agencies and community based organizations to provide some of the programs. One such program is an after school homework hour which is staffed with volunteers from the Boys and Girls Club. Another project uses community funding to pay instructors to teach dance, art, and judo to the students after school.

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Referrals to the Future Projects are from a number of sources. Teachers and school staff can refer individuals or families. Each project has an information sheet that is given to the older students and all parents which outlines the services available. Any student or parent can refer themselves to the project.

The multidisciplinary team of Futures allows the staff to respond to many different needs of a client. One example of this is a mother who was having difficulty completing her AFDC paperwork and requested assistance. The case was assigned to the staff person with the AFDC eligibility expertise. The client received help with the application and was granted AFDC. A few months later, the same client telephoned the Futures worker. She called because she had been feeling depressed and was afraid she might commit suicide. The worker was not trained to provide mental health services but had a positive relationship the client. By using the team approach, the worker consulted with her coworker who did have mental health expertise. With this advise the worker was able to persuade the client to go to the emergency psychiatric hospital for an evaluation. The worker transported the client to the hospital and was able to provide emotional support to the client during the admission process. After consulting with another co-worker, one with child welfare expertise, the worker was able to help the client arrange for substitute care for her children while she was hospitalized.

Through the Futures project this family received needed AFDC as well as mental health and child welfare services as the problems were developing. This family did not have to wait for a full blown crisis such as the mother being involuntarily hospitalized and the children being removed from the home to a children's shelter or foster home. Such an eventuality would have been more traumatic to the family and more costly to the agency. Through the Futures Project the client was able to return to a familiar person, ask for help, and participate in the decision making process for herself and her children. The county was able to provide needed services in the community and by intervening early, the cost of the services was minimized.

So far, the first years of the Futures Project seem very successful in San Mateo County. The schools report improved attendance by students, an increase in the parents involvement with the school, and support to the teachers.for the students who were previously seen as "problems". The Project delivers services at community schools when many of the problems are in the beginning stages and therefore require less costly interventions. The families and children are able to receive a large array of services at their neighborhood school, a familiar, non-threatening place.

The challenge for the Sonoma County Human Services Department is to find a way to develop child abuse preventative programs within the Family, Youth, and Children's Division. For programs to be truly preventative they need to be offered voluntarily and directed at the root causes of child abuse. These root causes could be different for different areas of the county. Even when the causes are the same, the individual communities might need different approaches to resolving the problems. Local schools are a natural site for preventative programs because almost every child attends school. Schools are a familiar, non-threatening environment to offer families preventative services. By using local schools for preventative programs the community and the agency can work in partnership to develop programs that meet the particular needs of that community. There are certain areas in Sonoma County in which English as a second language is a major issue. In other areas drug abuse is a more critical problem. If the community has a say in

deciding which needs have priority then the people will be more willing to support and participate in the programs. Prevention programs can only be effective if people participate in them. Currently there is a negative stigma attached to services offered by the "Welfare Department" and many families do not ask for assistance when the problems are small and just beginning to surface. Instead, most families wait until there is a crisis and interventions are mandated. This can make the family resentful of the intrusion of government into their life and not very open to the services offered.

The first part of this challenge is to find a funding source to provide preventative programs. The current state and federal funding for Child Welfare services is dependent upon the parent committing some act of abuse prior to intervention. Without the luxury of additional county dollars, Sonoma County will have to be creative in order to develop preventative services. We do have a number of advantages that would help to develop school based preventative services. One advantage is that we have already developed an extensive voluntary Family Maintenance program. This program offers families supportive services so that the children can remain in the home. Since this program has been active for the last ten years, it is well known in the community and seen by the community as a positive support to families. The voluntary FM program is a combination of pre-placement preventative and early intervention services. The approach we have taken thus far is to provide these services to individual families in a central location at our office. The families are either self referred or referred by Emergency Response Workers. The client and the worker establish a service plan and mutually decide which services are needed. Most of the services are geared to the individual but some are group interventions.

Our second advantage is that we have out-stationed two Child Welfare Workers at elementary schools. With the out-stationed workers we have taken the first step to move into the community. These two pilot programs at Roseland and Guerneville Elementary Schools have required our agency to work in partnership with the schools and the community.

By combining the philosophies and goals of our voluntary FM program and the school based workers, we have a foundation on which to build an early intervention/ prevention program that is community based. Any new social service program needs to be in the community it serves. We would need to expand the staff at our school sites to include a multidisciplinary team of social service, mental health and public health staff so as to integrate the services offered. In this way we could have a central, shared intake system for a large range of services. We need to develop a pilot project at one school and see if the various county agencies would be willing to work together to better serve the community. A pilot project could identify one area in the county that has a high concentration of cases from AFDC/Medical, child welfare, mental health and public health for a multidisciplinary school based program. Each county agency could be asked to donate the staff they are currently using to serve this population and develop a multidisciplinary team of workers located at a school in the area. The team, school staff, local community based organizations and the community could evaluate the needs of the community and develop a few specific preventative services to be offered by the pilot project. In addition, the team could provide the traditional health and human services to the clients in the school area that are now served by the centralized agencies. Current technological advances allow out-stationed workers to be linked to the central office and avoid any duplication of services.

For a pilot project like this to have a chance to succeed, it would need funding in addition to donated staff from county agencies. The project staff would need training in team building to be able to effectively work together. They would also need cross discipline training to be able to understand the services of the various agencies. Seeking grant funding for a time limited pilot would be a way to show that the project could be a success. There are grants available from either private foundations or the federal government for programs that emphasize a multidisciplinary approach, reducing duplication of services, and a more cost effective way to do business. With the help of a grant the agency could try a pilot project that would be a partnership with the community. If the pilot project proved successful, the community would be in a position to advocate for continued county funding. If the project also proved, as has happened in other communities, that this is a more cost effective way to deliver services, the county agencies would be providing better services and spending less money to do so.

There will be many changes to the way health and human services are delivered in the next decade, the challenge for us to begin now to plan for those changes. We need to learn from our colleagues in other counties who are trying new programs and continually look at our own successes to see how they can be improved upon. If we do not participate in creating new systems, we will have to live with some else's changes.