

Chapter 9

The Adopt-A-Family Program: Building Networks of Support

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It is a common phenomenon that donations of time and money are higher during the holidays, even though the needs of low-income families are year-round. The San Mateo County Adopt-A-Family program, established in November 1997 by Al Teglia, legislative aide to San Mateo County Supervisor Mary Griffin, seeks to expand on the popular holiday programs run each year to ease the hardships of low-income families on a more continuous basis. The focus of the year-round Adopt-A-Family program is to provide for the physical needs of these families as well as build a supportive relationship between “godparents” and their adopted families. In the course of its development, it has also emerged as a valuable countywide network able to link available resources with those in need.

This case study explores the development of the program over the first eighteen months of operation. It is divided into the following sections: (1) a brief review of similar programs, (2) the development of the San Mateo County program, (3) a program description of the impact on its key players (referring agencies, godparents, and client families), and (4) a discussion of program outcomes and lessons learned.

REVIEW OF SIMILAR PROGRAMS

The underlying concept of the Adopt-A-Family program is not new or unique to San Mateo County. Holiday programs that link families in need with individual or group sponsors can be found in many communities across the country. Although they are often operated in conjunction with county social services, they mostly function as a component of private organiza-

tions. Organizations that currently operate local holiday programs include the United Way, Kiwanis clubs, universities, trade unions, and public service employees. The bulk of programs operate exclusively during the annual winter holiday season (primarily Thanksgiving and Christmas) and do not include an expectation of an ongoing relationship between the family and their sponsor. In several instances, the family and their sponsor will never meet and the program acts as a clearinghouse for the collection and distribution of donations. Typically, these programs serve anywhere from a handful of families to several hundred each season.

The primary assistance offered through the typical adopt-a-family programs is material. The most frequently donated items include food, gifts, children's toys and clothes, furniture and household items, money, and gift certificates. A small minority of the programs, including the subject of this case study, encourage the development of a relationship between the family and their sponsor. These relationships offer emotional support to families under stress. Activities may include coming together with the family for holiday and birthday parties or helping school-age children with their schoolwork. One program, the Dial-a-Granny program, is exclusively based on offering emotional support to families at risk for child abuse. In this program, surrogate grandparents adopt an at-risk family and share their parenting experience with them. It is designed to be a preventive measure to alleviate the stress of the often isolated and overburdened parents (Barbour, 1983).

Social isolation is becoming an increasing concern in communities across the nation. The stress of modern, everyday life in this complex society takes a heavy toll on families with few resources and support. It is often those in the poorest neighborhoods who have the least interaction with members of the larger community, although they may be located near more affluent areas (Wilson, 1996). As one of the Adopt-A-Family's participating godparents noted, "We all know that there are poor people out there, but we don't realize they live that close to us."

In the era of welfare reform, programs that facilitate greater community support for low-income and at-risk families are becoming increasingly more important. As part of rebuilding neighborhood support systems, these programs help to foster an increase in social interaction between members of the community. Through these interactions a sense of community is built and problem-solving skills are developed (Morrison et al., 1997).

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The popular programs that provide food and gifts to needy families during the holidays inspired the San Mateo County Adopt-A-Family program.

It was conceived as an expansion of these programs, in which low-income families would be supported throughout the year in their struggle for self-sufficiency. The driving force behind the creation of the program is Al Teglia, who started matching families with godparents in November 1997.

The idea for the program did not develop overnight and was based on a growing recognition of the social isolation of low-income families within the county. Teglia felt that untapped resources existed within the county and that they could easily be mobilized to help build a stronger sense of community. Many of the families served by this program are in need of the most basic household items, such as diapers and laundry detergent, as well as items that many people probably have stored in their basements or attics, such as children's clothing and furniture. In addition to the need for material support, Teglia recognized the importance of fostering personal relationships that could benefit both families.

To establish the program, Teglia drew on the knowledge, experience, and connections he had developed during his long career of public service in Daly City. He has been a champion of the needs of families in San Mateo County, most notably during his four terms as mayor of Daly City. His current position with the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors was also instrumental in the successful beginning of the Adopt-A-Family program. With the full support of Supervisor Mary Griffin, Teglia is able to spend approximately 25 percent of his time working on the Adopt-A-Family program. The reputation and resources offered by the supervisor's office have contributed to the success and rapid growth of the program.

The philosophy of the Adopt-A-Family program is to use grassroots networking to connect existing and available county resources with struggling families. The program is becoming a vital link in the county network of resources based on its commitment to minimizing bureaucratic red tape. Once the program has linked families with godparents it assumes a minimal role. The program does not define client needs or godparent resources. Material support provided by godparents goes directly to the family in need. The relationship that develops is determined solely by the family and their godparent.

The program was launched with a presentation to potential client families at a human service workshop conducted at a local SUCCESS Center of the San Mateo County Human Service Agency. In keeping with the informal nature of the program, the site was chosen because a group of clients was available to hear Teglia's announcement of the new program. Once the first family was identified, Teglia approached local businesses to become the first "godparent." The Daly City branch of the Bank of America was the first to agree, and the first "adoption" took place soon after. In the first two years of operation, approximately 100 families have been matched with middle-class families and businesses throughout San Mateo County. The

program is constantly evolving as either new needs are recognized or new opportunities or resources become available.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Adopt-A-Family program is essentially a network of resources which depends on information, both access to information about godparent resources and sharing information about the program with low-income families. The program's success is based on two initiatives: (1) identifying the families who are in need of help and (2) reaching out to community members to get them involved.

Client families are identified by caseworkers in various social service agencies throughout the county. In order to be referred to the Adopt-A-Family program, the client families need to be prescreened by the referring agency and have a recognized need. To increase the chance of a successful match, the agency caseworker must be willing to help facilitate the match and provide some follow-up throughout the relationship.

Introducing the program to potential godparents is accomplished by spreading the word about the opportunity to give back to the community through the use of the following methods:

- *Community presentations:* Teglia takes advantage of any opportunity to introduce the program at the meetings of various community groups such as Rotary clubs, Kiwanis, and chambers of commerce.
- *Publicity:* A partnership has been formed with local newspaper journalists. Articles describing the program successes and ways to become involved appear on a semiregular basis. A flyer is currently being developed for the program, and information on the program is listed on the Web site for the local Children's Fund.
- *Word of mouth:* Contact with many of the referring agencies has developed informally, and each match that is made opens up new networking possibilities for new godparents.

The process of matching a family with a godparent begins with a phone call. The call can come from a caseworker making a client referral or from an individual or business interested in adopting. Once Teglia receives the information, he reaches into the resource network to make the match. Matches are made at monthly Adopt-A-Family program committee meetings that include Teglia, representatives from the human service agency of San Mateo County, representatives of referring agencies, and a newly integrated public relations person who schedules community presentations. In addition to for-

malizing the matches, these meetings provide an opportunity for program updates, for feedback on how to improve the structure and operation of the program, and discussion of possibilities for program expansion.

When a family is referred, they are asked to develop a wish list of items needed to help them become self-sufficient. Once this is done, it is forwarded to Teglia and eventually to the individual or business sponsoring that family. The first meeting between the family and their godparent is set up and facilitated by Teglia and the referring caseworker. After the initial meeting, the relationship that develops is entirely up to the family and their godparent. Follow-up is provided by the referring caseworker and is based on his or her continued service contact with the client family. The amount of follow-up done varies greatly based on the involvement of the referring agency and the individual caseworker.

There are no formalized entry criteria within the Adopt-A-Family program for screening the participants or making the matches. Client families are prescreened by the referring agency. The program expectations are explained to potential godparents when they inquire. If they are willing to make the one-year commitment to support the family in whatever way they can, they are deemed appropriate for the program. From interviews with the key players in the program, the following informal guidelines for matching the families seem to be in operation:

- *Geography:* Families are matched with godparents who are usually in the same city.
- *Family characteristics:* The size of the family, ethnicity, language, and the ages of the children may determine the type of match that will be most appropriate for that family.
- *Level of need:* Different families have different levels of need. Those with greater need are primarily matched with godparents who feel they have the necessary resources.

There is no funding for the Adopt-A-Family program since there are no employee salaries or administrative costs. The program is operated through donations of staff time, resources, and goods. Each participant in the network donates a portion of his or her time and energy to making and maintaining the matches. The costs of the program other than staff time (primarily phone calls, mailings, and meeting space) are incurred jointly by the human service agency and the office of Supervisor Mary Griffin. No cash donations are accepted by the program, and at this point only a small number of material donations are accepted due to the lack of storage space for such items. Cash donations would increase the overhead costs and create more bureaucracy than is desired. Even the godparents are not encouraged

to spend money on their families. If they choose to do so, the items are given directly to the family without the program becoming the middleman.

Referring Agencies

Numerous agencies throughout the county refer clients to the Adopt-A-Family program, and any human service agency in the county is eligible to make referrals. Caseworkers find it quite easy to include the Adopt-A-Family program in the resources that they offer to their clients. As one caseworker noted, "I can easily fit the program into my regular duties. The only hard part is finding time in everyone's schedule for the initial meeting to match the family with the godparent."

The caseworker will introduce the program to a family he or she thinks would be interested in participating and would benefit from it. The family then creates their wish list. Caseworkers emphasize that there is no guarantee the families will receive all the items on the wish list. Many caseworkers also help their clients to finalize their wish list by making sure that it is realistic and includes the basic necessities. The typical wish list might include the following:

- Clothing (especially for the children)
- Food
- Diapers
- Basic household items (detergent, soap)
- Children's books and toys
- Furniture and bedding (especially cribs)

Once the wish list is finalized, it is forwarded on to Teglia so that the program committee can match the family with an appropriate godparent. After a godparent is found, Teglia or his human service agency counterpart, Judy Bardales, arranges the initial meeting that includes the family, the godparents, and the caseworker. The length of time between referral and adoption varies from a few days to a few weeks.

Each caseworker utilizes different criteria, in addition to need, in determining which families to recruit into the program. Most, however, look for a certain level of openness to accepting and welcoming newcomers into their lives. They have found that the relationship works better when the family is looking to get more from the program than the material items on their wish list. Many find that the social support offered by the program can be even more important than the material support. One caseworker noted, "The most important part is building relationships between families and their communities. Some families are really surprised at how much people care."

After the initial meeting between godparent and family, the role of the program and the caseworker is minimal. Although no paperwork is involved in follow-up, it is important for caseworkers to stay in touch with their families in order to monitor their experience with the Adopt-A-Family program. The primary goal of doing follow-up work is to facilitate the development of an independent relationship between the godparents and the adopted family. Ideally, the clients will learn to call their godparent first when they are in need of assistance instead of contacting the agency. One of the indirect benefits of the program is the opportunity to teach clients how to access and utilize community resources directly and become more independent.

There are no set guidelines for the development of the relationship between the godparents and their families. Some godparents wish to maintain anonymity and fulfill the wish list without meeting with the family more than once. Others want more of a relationship with the family and invite them to holiday and birthday parties. One company even gave one of the family members a job. Although some families meet with their godparents only once, most will meet four or more times over the course of a year.

Godparent Experience

One godparent heard about the Adopt-A-Family program from a friend and got involved with the support of her co-workers, friends, and family. She was matched up with a Latino family with three children, one of whom had a learning disability and needed special schooling. The godparent met with the family and the caseworker, who acted as translator, because the parents spoke limited English. At the start of the relationship, the godparent noted,

I didn't really have a lot of expectations going in, just to help the family out with their basic necessities. After the first meeting, though, I took a real interest in them. The parents were so devoted to their kids; I could tell that right away. I was impressed with how resourceful they were with what they had. One of the children has a learning disability and was in a special school that involved a one and one-half hour commute each way every day. On her own, the mom found him a different program that was only fifteen minutes away. It was inspiring to see such loving and concerned parents.

This godparent worked closely with the family's caseworker and Teglia to tap into resources for the family. Most significantly, they applied for and received a grant from the Gift of Love program, another program founded by Teglia, which is run by the Italian Catholic Federation. The grant enabled the

family to buy a specialized computer to help their son overcome his learning disability. To fill the family's wish list, this godparent enlisted the help of her family, friends, and co-workers to donate time, money, and information on available resources. She describes her efforts in the following way:

Some of my co-workers helped out by giving me hand-me-downs from their kids, or small monthly donations that I used to buy things at garage sales. All my friends knew about my family and were always giving me suggestions about where to find things for them. There's an annual sale at St. Anne's in San Francisco and a great book sale every summer in Palo Alto. And if you're there at the end of the day, you can get some great bargains. They are practically giving things away. I even ended up pinning a copy of the wish list in my car so it would be handy if I happened to pass a garage sale. It was fun, kind of like a scavenger hunt.

In addition to providing the family with material items, this godparent was interested in overcoming the language and cultural barriers and developing a relationship with them. Throughout the year, she was in close contact with the family, meeting with them at least once a month, but usually more often than that.

It wasn't always easy to communicate, but the family was willing and the caseworker was great about translating for us. The kids were fluent and the dad spoke some English, so we were able to make do. After a few visits, I wouldn't just drop things off for them and leave. One time, we brought over a bed for one of the children. We put it together with the family and then stayed and had coffee with them. This family had a great attitude.

Her year commitment with the family was officially over in June, but she is planning one more meeting to say good-bye and give them a final box of goods that she has collected for them. She is planning to adopt another family in the near future and looks forward to repeating the positive experience. When asked to reflect on her experience with the Adopt-A-Family program, she replied:

Al and the caseworker were great, very attentive to my attempts to find resources for the family. But what I really liked was how hands-on the program was. You could set your own boundaries with the family, wherever you were comfortable. It's not as rewarding to just contribute money and not even know where it all goes. With this program, you get to see the impact you have on the family.

There is very little I would change about my experience. It was inspiring and gratifying to get to meet a family that I would not have otherwise met. In retrospect, there is one thing that I would do differently. I think with my next family, I'll try to show them where the resources are so they can keep using them when our year together is over. If I can, I'll take them with me to the annual garage sales that I find.

The Experiences of Adopted Families

Client families also report having a positive experience with the program. One family, adopted by a local business, admitted to having low expectations at the start of the program because they were not sure what type of support they would receive. Once the relationship began, however, this same family described being overwhelmed by the amount of material assistance and emotional support they received. In addition to providing the items on the family's wish list, the company invited the family to all of their picnics and holiday celebrations. Over the course of the year, this family met with their godparents more than ten times. When asked about the specific support her family received from their godparents, the mother replied,

We received clothes, pots and pans, and things for the children. Most of it was used, but that didn't matter because it was in really good shape. Everything they gave us was so helpful, but what I wanted most was for my children's wishes to be fulfilled, and they were.

As with many adoptions, there was a language barrier between the Spanish-speaking client family and the English-speaking godparents. The caseworker involved with this match was central to the development of this relationship because she was willing to take an active role as translator. The only regret this family had regarding their participation in the program was that the language barrier prevented them from being able to express their gratitude as well as they would have liked. However, they describe their overall experience in the following manner: "Everyone was so nice, friendly, and supportive. I am really grateful for everything the program did for me and my family, and I hope that it continues to help other families in the future."

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

In its first two years of operation, the Adopt-A-Family program in San Mateo County has already demonstrated its effectiveness in linking existing needs with available resources. There have been over 100 adoptions county-

wide. There are three major lessons learned to date and three challenges which will impact its future.

1. *Build a strong resource network.* The commitment and experience of the founder, Al Teglia, significantly aided the establishment of this program. With over forty-eight years of public service experience in San Mateo County, his knowledge about the needs of the county's families and the potential resources available was extremely valuable in the implementation of the program. Despite the unique experiences of Al Teglia, this program can be replicated elsewhere. Special attention needs to be given to establishing a network of agency and business representatives which focuses on two main areas: cultivating relationships with social service agencies who can refer clients and wide dissemination of program information throughout the community to reach potential godparents.
2. *Minimize bureaucratic procedures and costs.* Unlike most programs for low-income populations, this one is not interested in getting more funding. In fact, the success of its implementation and expansion is, in part, because it is based exclusively on donations of time and materials. Outside of the staff time needed to establish and develop a program like this, the overhead costs are minimal. The program continues to refuse to accept cash donations because it would create too much red tape. Any money that does change hands goes directly from the godparent to the family, without incurring administrative costs.
3. *Make it easy to participate.* The network-based approach and the minimal bureaucracy make it easy for the key players (referring agencies, godparents, and client families) to participate. This program places only a small burden on the staff time and resources of referring agencies. The only requirement placed on clients is that they be pre-screened by a social service agency in the county. Godparents need to commit to helping their family in whatever way they can for a period of one year. Beyond this, the program places no requirements on participants.

With these lessons in mind, this innovative program also faces several challenges, including the following:

1. *Need for increased public awareness of the program:* Continued public exposure of the program is critical for its future, especially keeping the program uppermost in the minds of referring caseworkers to encourage appropriate families to participate. It is also crucial to maintain a sufficient number of godparents who want to adopt these fami-

lies through the use of flyers, Web sites, and volunteers who give presentations to local community groups, which is the program's primary method of recruiting godparents.

2. *Need for additional services:* The flexibility of the Adopt-A-Family program makes it possible to expand the types of goods and services it can offer to client families. As new resources come to the attention of the program's manager, they should be incorporated into the program, given the changing needs of client families.
3. *Need for program self-sufficiency:* This represents the greatest challenge to the future development of the program. The program is currently dependent on the personality and reputation of its founder, Al Teglia. The human service agency of San Mateo County has recently created a community liaison position to provide support to the Adopt-A-Family program in addition to numerous other community outreach projects. The newly hired community liaison is helping to develop the program's operating protocol, advertising materials, and job description for when she becomes the main contact of the resource network. As the transition develops, the community liaison will be more and more responsible for keeping track of potential godparents and client families, making the matches, and arranging the meetings between godparents and families. While Teglia continues to coordinate the program, the partnership with the community liaison at the human service agency will ensure that the program continues to flourish.

CONCLUSION

The strength of this program can be found in its simplicity. It seeks to mobilize existing resources to fill existing needs, without bureaucracy. From inspiration to implementation, the program has stayed true to this founding principle and is emerging as a vital link in the countywide network of resources. The potential for future expansion of the Adopt-A-Family program is limited only by the amount of time, energy, and resources which can be mobilized without burdening it with too much red tape.

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