Community Partnerships for Protecting Children

JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA

Citizen Power for Stronger Families

by Andrew White

THE EDNA McCONNELL CLARK FOUNDATION

Community Partnerships for Protecting Children

The Community Partnerships for Protecting Children initiative of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation is intended to change the child protection field by demonstrating a new approach to safeguarding children and supporting families. Based on the premise that many people, agencies, and organizations in a community can contribute to children's safety, the initiative addresses child abuse and neglect by raising neighborhood awareness of child safety issues, empowering neighborhood residents to become more involved with families at risk of abusing or neglecting their children, strengthening locally based organizations and helping them form networks concerned with child safety, and fostering policy, practice, and organizational changes within public sector child protective services agencies. This approach is known as community child protection.

The Scope of Our Efforts

Since 1997, the Foundation's Program for Children has provided direct funding to community partnerships in four localities—Jacksonville, Florida; Louisville, Kentucky; St. Louis, Missouri; and Cedar Rapids, Iowa—to support implementation of community child protection in targeted neighborhoods. The four states also receive funding, enabling them to assist the local Partnerships and promote community child protection statewide. The Partnerships receive technical assistance in key substantive areas (such as frontline practice reform) to enhance their capacity to sustain this complex work. An external evaluation is

documenting the initiative's early progress, and will soon turn to measuring outcomes for children and families. More broadly, the Program helps foster a national dialogue on the need for new approaches to protecting children.

At the four Partnership sites,state and local governments have spent the last few years collaborating with local nonprofit service providers, faith-based institutions, schools, neighborhood associations, and community leaders to establish networks of protection and prevention.This work has focused on neighborhoods that have strong institutions and committed residents but also high rates of child maltreatment, drug use, and domestic violence. Each Partnership is pursuing reform of its local and state child welfare programs and policies, promoting decentralization of services, and instilling a new commitment to strength-based, family-oriented solutions to individual family problems. Each is striving to establish a culture of respect between agency workers and the people they serve and to establish a framework for full community investment in the safety of neighborhood children.

About This Publication

Each Partnership has unique strengths and excels in particular areas. Through publications like this, which share stories of the Partnerships' successes, the challenges they face, and the lessons being learned through their work, we hope to assist others interested in community child protection. In addition, a formal evaluation by Chapin Hall Center for Children will capture many of the details of the implementation efforts and the effects of the Partnerships' work on children and families.

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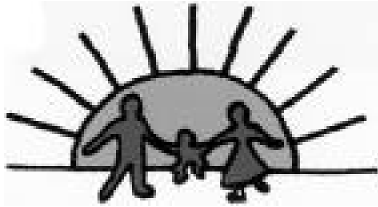

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WHEN ONE OF HER NEIGHBORS told police she believed Crystal J. had left her four small children home alone in the Washington Heights housing development on Jacksonville's north side, the young mother was promptly arrested on felony charges of child neglect. The officers were prepared to follow their standard procedures, which would have meant calling in the Department of Children and Families to remove the children straight away and taking them to an overnight shelter. The department would have found foster care placements for the youngsters, and months would have passed before Crystal could have regained their custody.

But when the police arrived that evening, two other mothers in the 200-unit federally subsidized housing development turned standard procedure on its head. One neighbor was already watching Crystal's four children in her own apartment. The others convinced the police officers they would care for the children overnight—and that someone from the complex could vouch for the children's safety to the state authorities the very next day. The commotion might easily have ended in the children's forced removal. Thanks to the Community Partnership for Protecting Children, it didn't work out that way.

The Partnership is a small but ambitious child safety organizing project targeting Washington Heights and four other housing developments near the Ribault High School in Jacksonville. Its leaders had long since cultivated relationships that paid off immediately when Crystal's neighbors called Sandra Durham, director of social services for the private owner of the housing development. Because she knew them personally, Durham was confident the mothers who had taken the children into their homes were capable caretakers with decent apartments. She telephoned a supervisor at the state's Department of Children and Families—a woman she had met through the Partnership, headquartered in the department's Jacksonville district

offices—who approved the temporary arrangement.

The community was able to ensure that the children would be well cared for while their mother was in jail—and Durham knew the neighbors would keep an eye on Crystal's family when she returned home a few weeks later.

"We used to be paranoid," says Fannie Green, a program administrator for the Department of Children and Families who helped the Partnership get off the ground. "We used to say we had to be there to pick up the kids when something like this happened. But Sandra knows what she's doing. We can trust her judgement."

may well have intervened this way even before the Partnership existed. But without their new relationships, they would probably have failed to keep the children out of the hands of the state authorities.

The Partnership's mission, simply stated, is to make children safer by strengthening the community. With three full-time staff and a growing network of partner organizations, the project has made large strides in this direction. They have built new relationships between local service providers and transformed a disconnected array of programs serving the area into a comprehensive web of support for

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residents. They have enlisted many of the district's child welfare case managers in efforts to more frequently include family members and community representatives in planning individualized, case-by-case support services for parents and children who need help.

Crystal's story is one small illustration of how people who live and work in a community can take action—sometimes spontaneously, at moments when help is most needed—in ways that benefit neighbors, lighten the load on government and help make children safer. The Community Partnership makes this kind of action effective in a very poor neighborhood by mobilizing residents and creating new networks of leadership, influence and change. The neighbors

And they have begun to fortify the community for the long haul, building up social networks among neighborhood residents, connecting them with one another and with residents from other housing

developments, as well as community leaders and staff from nonprofit and government agencies.

Organizing the residents themselves lies at the very core of the group's strategy. In order to make lasting change, the residents have to own it. And that, says Al Walker, director of the Community Partnership, means residents of very low-income communities have to become leaders—initiating, managing and evaluating the Partnership's programs.

"The community is the key to sustainability," says Walker. "The community is just beginning to understand it can make a difference. Over the next two years, these complexes will become completely different."

He is not alone in his confidence. "People in these neighborhoods used to go home and close the door, just saying 'That's not my family,'" Green explains. "But now they say, 'Can I get anything for you? Can Mrs. Durham help you? Do you need me to watch your children for a little while?' This has really changed the way people regard their neighbors."

The Partnership strategy incorporates a self-help agenda into the government's child welfare policy. In these five housing developments with fewer than 1,000 households, community residents now wield greater responsibility for the health and safety of their neighbors' children. Although the homegrown leadership and their widening social networks are fragile, their presence means government is no longer the first and final line of protection against child abuse and neglect. And stronger communities should also be healthier communities. If the innovation holds, incidents of abuse or neglect may be noted more quickly or prevented altogether. And fewer children would be injured physically or emotionally.

The Neighborhood and Child Welfare

WASHINGTON HEIGHTS and the four other housing developments targeted by the Community Partnership are in an almost entirely African-American district of Jacksonville. Economically, the surrounding area is very poor, and child poverty is as common here as it is in many far more obviously devastated neighborhoods in the urban United States. At the time of the 1990 census (the most recent data available at the zip code level), more than half of children in the area under age 5 lived in households with incomes below the poverty line, and more than half of the households with children in the

area were headed by single mothers. Local officials estimate that poverty may have eased marginally in the 1990s, but single-parent households are still more common than not.

Along with poverty, the district has a high crime rate. Drug addiction and drug-related violence are common, though declining. And in 1998, in the zip code where four of the five housing projects are located (32209), there were 37 incidents of serious injury to children resulting from abuse in a community with roughly 4,800 families. The number of such injuries has increased steadily since 1995. The zip code is also the source, in Duval County, of the largest number of reports to the state's child abuse hotline.

Most of the housing in this part of Jacksonville is in suburban tracts of small, one-story single family homes. But the five housing developments—Washington Heights, Hilltop Village, Cleveland Arms, Palm Terrace and Moncrief Village—are more densely packed two-story brick and concrete buildings abutting parking lots and lawns. The complexes are pockets of even greater poverty than the district as a whole: their owners estimate that at least three-quarters of the tenant families receive some form of public assistance, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), federal SSI disability, food stamps or federal rent assistance. Still, for the most part, the buildings are in fair to good condition. Only the oldest section of Palm Terrace has the feel of overwhelming, visible poverty and decline.

Recent shifts in public policy have had a direct impact on the Partnership's neighborhoods. Building managers report that many of the single mothers who live there have taken jobs because of new welfare-to-work laws. At Hilltop Village, for example, Resident Services Coordinator Glen Mills estimates that four years ago, nearly 100 families in the 200-unit development were on AFDC. Today, he says, only 10 are receiving TANF benefits. Most of the rest have gotten jobs, though they still receive food stamps and reduced rent subsidies. Those who refuse to work are usually cut from the welfare rolls, but they also continue to receive substantial rent supports.

The Partnership is an independently funded pilot initiative of the state's Department of Children and Families (DCF), housed in the DCF District 4 office building alongside case investigators and supervisors. Director Al Walker is a career child welfare professional who spent

The Partnership is well placed to help families gain access to services they might otherwise never receive.

10 years as a child protective investigator. Many of the initiative's biggest boosters work within the agency, some of them at high ranks.

Because of these close ties, the Partnership's work is unavoidably affected by turbulence in Florida's child welfare policy. In 1998, press coverage of a child's death in another part of Florida prompted a near doubling of abuse and neglect reports to the state hotline. Reform demands inspired strict new rules for child protection investigators and an overhaul of the department. In some Florida counties, Sheriff's offices now have responsibility for the investigations, and private companies are taking charge of case management. In Jacksonville, changes are less drastic, but the future is unclear—and a high percentage of longtime professional staff in the agency have departed.

"After all this, with caseloads skyrocketing and all the changes, each worker with any sense has gotten the heck out of here," says one of the remaining agency investigators. "Now we're a revolving door."

Some District 4 child protection investigators say they are currently struggling with as many as 90 open cases at once (in Florida, investigators are also responsible for connecting families with services). Some families are left without needed assistance for months at a time, or may never receive any help at all—even after workers have committed themselves to making referrals. Investigators say many of those who don't get services simply end up in trouble again. In this context, there is a huge service gap for the Partnership to fill. The initiative is well placed to help families gain access to support services they might otherwise never receive.

There are also many contextual factors that favor the project's mission and philosophy. Foremost is the hospitable local culture that appears amenable to community engagement, despite the economic poverty. Most of the women and children in the housing developments are church-going people, and are thus connected to larger social institutions. And relatives are often willing to care for members of their extended family, even for long periods of time. "This is a close-knit community," explains Pauline Grant, a supervisor and nine-year veteran of the department who has been involved with the Partnership program from the start. "People genuinely care for each other."

Another factor working to the Partnership's advantage is the United Way-sponsored Project

At the start, there was little in the way of indigenous leadership in the housing developments.

Reach, a comprehensive counseling and referral center that has been housed on the grounds of Ribault High School since 1991. One of five "full-service schools" in the county, Project Reach houses counselors and social workers from six agencies and can guide families and children directly to whatever help they might need, from domestic abuse counseling to drug treatment, from tutoring and youth programs to prenatal care.

Beginnings

IN 1996, when the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation first gave Jacksonville a planning grant to pursue the community partnership model for promoting child safety, the city's leaders had vast ambitions. The high-level nonprofit and government executives that made up the local Commission on Children decided to locate the project in all five of the city's high-school based "full-service" counseling and referral centers. This meant the project would aim to serve nearly 150,000 residents.

Officials at the Department of Children and Families supported the partnership strategy from the start. But it took barely a year of false starts for officials to recognize that their ambitions were out of tune with reality. With funding for no more than a small handful of staff, there was no way the project could generate a notable presence in such a large area, much less work alongside neighborhood residents to promote stronger communities.

Instead, they chose to focus on one high school. And finally, in 1997, the group targeted the five housing developments, among the poorest enclaves in the city, just a few miles up the interstate from District 4 headquarters. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation has since supported the project with grants of approximately $300,000 each year.

At the start, there was little in the way of indigenous leadership in the housing developments. The tenants were mostly single mothers on welfare, many of them teenagers shouldering heavy child rearing responsibilities. Among them, too, were a large number of elderly women whose children had grown up and moved on. If the effort was to take hold, the residents would have to be carefully nurtured. Fannie Green thought Al Walker was the right man for the job.

"I asked him to walk the neighborhood, get to know the people," she recalls. "He took that on with a zeal. He identified leaders and got

them involved. To have a man caring for them was something new for many of them," she adds. "They fell in love with him."

When residents first saw Walker strolling around their housing projects in his bright Partnership T-shirt, chatting respectfully with people, many kept their distance. "The Partnership had been having these meetings not far from my home," recalls Ernestine Shannon, a mother of three grown children who lives in Moncrief Village. "Al kept telling me to come on in, but I felt like I already did a lot for my church, so I wasn't going to talk about doing more." But then Walker sent a woman from another complex over with a car to drive Miss Shannon to a community meeting, and she felt she couldn't say no. Why did she go along? "A lot of times when you live in a complex like this, people look at you differently. People say, 'I wouldn't live there.' But Al looked at me with respect," she says. "The Partnership treated me like a person." And that's what it took to get her in the door.

"The people have seen government and organizations come and go," explains Fannie Green. "But we've been there two years now. And not just for monthly case meetings. We're there Saturdays, Sundays. They've bought in."

Community Engagement

SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZING is not a science as much as a concentration of commitment and effort, defined by worn-out shoes and worthwhile victories, small and large, designed to win people's loyalties. Early on, a woman from Washington Heights told Pauline Grant, "You're talking about creating a common goal for us, keeping children safe. But I have rats in my apartment." Grant knew the only route to engage the woman in the work of the Partnership—and, on the way, help her learn to be a better parent and citizen—was to first solve her rat problem. "So we got rid of the rats. Then we could talk."

Walker defines the four stages of the Partnership's strategy of community engagement:

1. **Identify individual leaders within the communities.**
2. **Identify institutional leaders who can collaborate.**
3. **Bring numerous institutions in to meet with and collaborate with residents and with other institutions.**
4. **Create self-sustaining structures of neighborhood governance.**

Of course, this is a cumulative process. No stage is ever truly completed. Even after substantial work is done to identify leaders, for example, and organizers begin to focus on convening institutions, new leaders still have to be brought into the fold. Otherwise, the networks and leadership will fray with time.

For Walker, engaging the community is an almost round-the-clock enterprise. Monday evening at 8 p.m. he's rallying 13 teenagers and five adults in a community room at Cleveland Arms with pizza and soda, prodding them to decide how to help their community, what kind of youth programs they'd like to have in their community center, where they would like to go on weekend field trips.

First thing next morning, Walker chairs a meeting of residents and social service executives at the Washington Heights community center. The small group listens to a presentation from a women's health clinic. Then they talk about ideas for preventing truancy at school. They learn about a local man intent on setting up a mentoring program for boys, and about the gentleman from St. Paul's Baptist Church who helps students with their homework. "Keep the ideas flowing," Walker says in closing. "We are the keepers of our neighborhoods, and we will ask for help when it's needed. Not help to have children removed. But help to keep our children safe."

Back at his office at midday, he's on the phone with directors of service agencies, department officials and resident leaders from the housing developments, coaxing them to show up for a recruitment and planning session he's hosting the following evening in a conference room he's wheedled out of some charitable executives at the Busch Brewery. (More than 117 turned out. No one touched the free beer.)

Over the course of the day Walker consults with Paula Johnson, who oversees 44 open cases of families for whom the Partnership coordinates services and support. Walker and Johnson must also craft a schedule to address nearly 17 new cases recently referred their way. Meanwhile, the District 4 administrator is circulating a proposal to apply the Community Partnership strategy statewide, and Walker has to review the documents. Of course, on this day, as on many others, there are visitors seeking his attention. They come week after week from other states and organizations, foundations and research centers, asking for a look inside this model program they've heard about.

Walker and his staff face new demands and details emerging in a relentless stream. And yet, to their credit, they and their colleagues at their partner organizations seem rarely to lose track of the basic tasks of leadership development and partnership building.

Walker has established several key partners, each of whom plays a central role in the project, often on a daily basis. These include Durham (who lived in Washington Heights as a child) and Mills, both of whom work for the property owners; Cassandra Austin and her colleagues at the Ribault full-service school; a small cadre of case investigators and supervisors at the District headquarters who have become devoted to the Partnership and its philosophy; and the leaders of a handful of organizations that provide services in the areas of domestic violence, substance abuse treatment, and after school programs.

Thus the institutional reach of the initiative is far larger than its own three staff members. Indeed, the group's Neighborhood Network includes dozens of service agencies, government offices, churches, grassroots associations and civic groups such as the Urban League and the Boy Scouts. Representatives of each have attended meetings, set up collaborations and in many cases devoted resources to the community. This is the art of networking: each new connection leads to many more.

The Partnership's reputation has been gained by sparking meaningful improvements in people's lives.

But the real measure of success is the community-level engagement of residents. The Partnership's strategy for building up the communities' social networks and internal resourcefulness has been multifaceted. It includes identifying and consolidating central leadership among the residents; reaching out broadly to neighborhood people through picnics, carnivals, celebrations, youth programs and informational events; and catalyzing important changes for individual families who need help. This last is essential: in such a small community, the Partnership's reputation has been gained by sparking meaningful improvements in people's lives. As a result, most people here now have some idea where to turn if they or their neighbors need help or if they want to pitch in.

At Washington Heights and Moncrief Village, Durham estimates about 10 percent of the residents have been directly engaged in the Partnership's work, either by attending meetings, community celebrations and field trips or by participating directly in helping needy families. Other leaders estimate roughly the same proportion at the other developments.

A smaller circle of residents has shown a much deeper commitment to the project. These are the women (and a few men) who serve on the Governance Committee, a 26-member group that is essentially the Partnership's board of directors, responsible for guidance and oversight of the entire project. Fourteen of those 26 members either live or work in the housing developments. The others come from nonprofit organizations and government. One is a former employee of the Department of Children and Families who lives nearby.

A small circle of residents serve on the Governance Committee, essentially the Partnership's board of directors.

The resident members of the Governance Committee are, for the most part, those who stepped up early and have devoted the greatest amount of time and effort to establishing programs and organizing events for their neighbors. For instance, Veronica Horne is a young woman who set out to reshape the way her neighbors deal with domestic violence. As part of the Governance Committee, she has established a safe space for women and helped devise a new protocol for the Department of Children and Families, which details the proper care of women and children who face domestic violence.

The Governance Committee has five subcommittees. Four are co-chaired by a community resident and an outside agency executive or official. These include the Community Family Awareness subcommittee, which sets up monthly resident meetings with local service providers; the Domestic Violence subcommittee, which enlightens local residents about services available at Hubbard House, an emergency shelter, advocacy and intervention program; the Neighborhood Network subcommittee, which interconnects the area's many social service agencies, civic and faith-based institutions, and grassroots organizations; and the Self-Evaluation subcommittee, which meets twice

each month to review the Partnership's work.

A fifth subcommittee, the Integrated Service Team, is responsible for convening case managers from social service agencies to discuss specific families. Such case information must be confidential, so only professionals are involved. The subcommittee also helps coordinate "Individualized Courses of Action," team planning sessions for families referred to the Partnership by the Ribault full-service center, DCF case investigators and neighborhood residents.

About 38 residents, including the 14 on the Governance Committee, have gone through leadership training during the last two years. A small group attended a training developed and organized by Family Support America. Others have attended the Mayor of Jacksonville's three-stage Initiative for Neighborhood Leadership.

One tool the Partnership uses to win residents' attention is the "Call for Great Ideas," a small grants program that invites suggestions from anyone for distributing a total of $25,000 over the course of a year. The only guideline is that the money has to contribute to the well-being of neighborhood children. Proposals must be approved by the Governance Committee. Some of the funds have paid for necessities for individual children, such as mattresses. At Washington Heights, one grant purchased a lounge chair used to turn a back room at the community center into a hideaway where mothers in need of a break can find some peace. Last fall, grants bought school supplies for every child in the housing developments.

Individual Examples of Extraordinary Care

MAINTAINING ANY DEGREE of intensity in the involvement of community residents requires diligence on the part of the organizers. The garden of social action needs to be watered regularly and deeply, down to its roots. When this is done well, the flowers blossom: 40 people show up for a morning recruitment meeting, or 300 turn out for a summer celebration and award ceremony held at the state fairgrounds. Someone always has to take on the responsibilities of the gardener. It's simply a matter of walking the grounds, being around, making the calls, cajoling and encouraging, says Walker.

There are a handful of tremendously reliable residents who have joined the Partnership effort and stick to it with gusto. They are exemplars of the kind of indigenous community support

that should, if the Partnership's theory holds, make the five housing developments safer places to rear children in the years to come.

Ernestine Shannon has become the "mother" of Moncrief Village, the 97-unit development just down the road from Washington Heights. She is a dynamo of volunteerism, and since Walker recruited her, she's focused that electricity on her own neighbors' children. She runs monthly rap sessions and baking classes that attract as many as 30 children, ages 8 to 17, and she pays for most of the food she serves out of her own purse. In the week before Christmas, Shannon made sure a total of 72 boys and girls were driven to events where they received gifts donated by members of St. Paul's Church and the Mayor of Jacksonville.

At the rap sessions, boys and girls talk about school, or about kindness and friendship. In her baking class she leads the girls in prayer. "We always encourage people to support one another," she says. "It doesn't matter if you burn the cookies. You learn from your mistakes."

What does she get in return? A way to connect with people who appreciate her attention, and the love of the children. "I can be real tired or have a bad day but when one of those kids runs up to me and hugs me I know I'm doing something right.

"Since I became a community leader, at first it was hard, but now everyone knows me," Shannon adds. "I knock on doors, I pass out flyers, I talk with parents. If a tenant gets sick and the manager isn't here, I'm there." Leadership training has boosted her confidence, she says. "I can say it has changed me a lot. I'm not intimidated by people anymore. At one stage, I would not have known what to say."

Mothers Supporting Mothers

IN TERMS OF COMMITMENT to the Partnership, Shannon has few equals, but there are other tenants who have devoted scores of hours helping families get by.

As Sandra Durham pulls shut the screen door from inside her first floor office, she shouts across the sun-filled parking lot. "Miss Berry, don't forget the food bank! Round up some helpers! We'll get that going soon!" A local church has helped organize and supply a food bank serving more than 50 families at Washington Heights, but distribution problems nearly killed it. Now Bernice Berry, who has lived at Moncrief Village for 25 years, and some other women were

preparing to take up the slack.

Such small acts of volunteerism are more typical of the transformation taking place here. When the landlord targeted one young mother for eviction because she failed to keep her apartment clean, a neighbor called the manager's office. The two were not friends, but the neighbor said she hated to see a family thrown out on the street. "She made an appointment with the manager," recalls Durham. "She sat down without fussing and cussing and told them, 'I will be responsible for making sure she cleans up her house.'" Later, the neighbor and her son helped the young mother clean. "The manager was amazed," says Durham. "To me, that's partnership. That's community. The presence of people helping one another is catching."

Small acts of volunteerism are typical of the transformation taking place here.

Other residents have been drawn to Walker, Durham and the project through its innovative community casework. The guiding concept is called the "Individualized Course of Action" (ICA), and it involves case meetings for families in need—not only with professional counselors and social workers, but also with relatives and community people who can commit themselves to offering support. The purpose of these meetings is to help a parent or young person focus on their strengths, their dreams, and goals—and then helping them find some of the support they need to achieve those goals. For some, the objective is winning their children back from foster care. For others, it is to get a job. For most, there are many small hurdles that have to be overcome along the way.

Maebell Cherry, disabled by severe asthma, is raising a boy and a girl, 10 and 11 years old, at Washington Heights. She has trouble walking and barely scratches by on her federal disability income and food stamps. For a time she couldn't clean house, and had no beds for the children, raising the possibility that she could be evicted and lose her rent support. When a social worker referred Cherry for an ICA meeting at Project Reach, Durham immediately hooked her up with a neighbor who was also struggling financially, paying her a small stipend to clean Cherry's apartment for a month. A new supportive relationship was built. The

neighbor now has outside work, but she and another friend stop by periodically to help Miss Cherry.

“I just tell them that agencies have finally learned how to work with people and show people the respect they deserve.”

A typical ICA session seeks to encourage the person at its center to express what she or he believes should be done—rather than laying out a traditional service plan devised by professionals, bureaucrats or the courts. The ICA process strives to strengthen the assets of individuals who might otherwise simply be seen as troubled clients in need of repair. The technique can be used for families who need help caring for their children, or for families whose children are already in foster care.

Several child protective investigators have referred many of their most difficult cases to the Partnership, largely because of the ICA model. “These are families trying to get their children back,” explains investigator Tammy Gajewski. “They can come up with their own solution to the problem. When they come up with it themselves, they are more likely to do it. And the hostility is diminished.” She says the technique has worked well. One mother had her children back in two weeks and avoided the court system altogether, another mother had her children back in one month, and a third in three months. In the traditional system, reunification typically takes half a year or more.

Walker describes the ICA process as the true focus of the entire Partnership project. If individuals can regain self-esteem and be attentive, supportive parents to their children—and if family members and community people can help—then the goals of the Partnership will have been accomplished. More children will be safe.

Several community residents have trained to be note-takers and assistants to the professional facilitators at ICA case planning meetings. A few dozen have committed themselves to work with specific individuals—sometimes in ways as simple as just watching the kids for a few hours. It is another way for them to contribute, be useful, and gain experience that may one day help them land a job in a service organization.

Respect

THE COMMUNITY does not recognize the ICA process as the heart of the situation, though I believe it is," Walker says. "They don't recognize it because I haven't played it that way. I just tell them that agencies have finally learned how to work with people and show people the respect they deserve. They no longer have to be afraid that the total issue is someone coming to take the children away. They see that they can be a helper, a support to their neighbor."

Respect is the core value that best describes the Partnership's organizing strategy. In mobilizing nonprofit agencies, the project seeks to reshape the way staff think about the people they work with.

"Organizations want the people in their programs, but they don't want to come out and walk the community," says Walker, who is by default the chief street-level organizer of the Community Partnership. As far as Walker is concerned, too many social service agencies are afflicted with either a lack of commitment or a raw laziness that keeps staff in their offices and not out in the field, meeting people where they live. It's not a great model for building trust. "To learn anything, you must leave that office and come to the community," says Walker.

"Families need to be heard and listened to rather than evaluated," Walker tells his colleagues. "Learn to respect the people you serve." Residents can now connect a growing number of social service organizations with familiar faces who show up in the community now and then, and are not simply bodies behind a desk awaiting a crisis.

Today, some state DCF investigators and supervisors can operate differently as well, relying on people they know to obtain information. "Two years ago I was leery of going to these places," says Eddie Gibson, a child protective investigator since 1990. "Now there's a wave, a friendly face. I used to be treated like The Man, like the police, and I could not get any information. The attitude has really changed."

"A year ago people would have called the hotline," Gibson adds. "Now they call the Partnership."

Barriers and Lessons

STRESS. Any initiative ambitious enough to try to change systems and strengthen communities is bound to feel itself overstretched. Within the Partnership, the pressure on a small number of individuals is immense. Sustaining and nurturing community

A small number of people can make a substantial difference.

leadership is only one of many jobs that require huge investments of time from people capable of making change happen. There's always the danger that overcommitted organizers will fail to follow through on a promise, let someone down, even inadvertently develop a reputation for having a lack of courtesy. Early on, Walker says, he found himself scheduling two or three meetings each evening. People could see that he was only giving them lip service while his mind was elsewhere. He dropped that act the first time he was criticized for it.

The need for real partners. Some partners have no time to spare and end up funneling work into the core staff of the initiative. For example, caseworkers in Florida's child welfare agency routinely operate in crisis mode—so they end up referring potential ICA cases to the Partnership and to Project Reach at the Ribault full-service school. The resulting case management takes up nearly all of Paula Johnson's time, and threatens to swamp the entire project.

Yet Walker and the Governance Committee have, for the time being, agreed that managing these cases is worth the risk, because ICAs are an important organizing tool. Families that go through the process receive high-quality care and respect. And team meetings that involve families and neighbors engage the growing indigenous community support infrastructure developed by the Partnership. What's more, the process creates small victories that build trust in the initiative. Someday, perhaps the state government will recognize the potential preventive value of the ICA method and factor it into the DCF budget.

Other prospective partners sometimes don't follow through on commitments they make to work with residents. "I take what they propose at face value. If it pans out, it pans out," says Durham. But don't expect anything, she adds. And don't rely on untested people. Too often, she has found that would-be partners fail to show when the time to actually do something arrives.

Volunteerism. The level of volunteerism is generally very low among people in publicly subsidized housing. Studies show that self-confidence and self-esteem are, on average, much lower for people receiving public assistance than among the general population. It takes charisma and obvious dedication to overcome this, say Mills and Walker. The talent is

there among the residents, but bringing it out is never easy. Yet a small number of people can make a substantial difference. While it can be frustrating to find only 10 percent of the tenants taking part in the Partnership's projects, that number can also be looked at as a great success. One in 10 people can change a community if they remain engaged.

Mobility. Those residents who get most involved tend to be the most able—and the most likely to move away from subsidized housing as soon as they can find enough money to rent or buy a better home. Tamika Youman, 21, has lived in Washington Heights for two years with her young daughter. With the support of the Partnership, she has focused on getting off public assistance and into a job. She now makes a decent wage at Wal-Mart on the overnight shift, and she's working toward her G.E.D. She is also a strong community advocate, helping out her neighbors. But her rent has increased substantially because she is working, and, like many others before her, she says she plans to move out of the development as soon as she can afford to.

This mobility steadily saps the leadership. Yet, at the same time, people's ability to move up and out reflects success. The organizers don't want to discourage people from taking control of their own lives. They work with people to make sure they are financially able—and in some cases emotionally ready—to move to unsubsidized housing. They also urge departing residents to stay in touch and engaged. But in the end, the only way to deal with the transience of the population in low-income communities is to constantly identify new leaders. Ultimately, newcomers have to fill slots that become empty.

Public assistance. Benefits tied to income, such as food stamps and federal rent subsidies, also pose barriers. If the Partnership paid the most involved residents small stipends for some of their work, some mothers would be willing to devote more time to important projects. But earned income must be reported, and it affects the level of rent tenants must pay. The Partnership focuses instead on helping to connect people to wage-paying jobs in the outside world whenever possible.

Sense of entitlement. Some residents in subsidized housing express a sense of entitlement

that can be difficult to deal with. When the Partnership bought new mattresses for two families who desperately needed them, other families demanded Durham do the same for them. "I have to explain that's not how it works," she says. "We have to be careful we aren't just used."

Child abuse. Finally, there is the simple reality of child abuse and neglect. There are times when organizers or members of the Partnership see a situation that demands serious intervention—when children are living in persistently terrible conditions, without adequate supervision, food, or clothing, when they are witness to drug abuse or severe domestic violence. If the family will not respond to overtures from Walker, Durham, Mills or their neighbors and relatives, it's time to call the authorities.

"I won't do it unless I talk with them and try to get them help first," says Durham. "But you get some who say 'I don't care. Call them.' When they do that, I say, 'I'm not going to do this behind your back. I'll use your telephone,'" she says. "I'm there when the state worker comes. This is about trust. Even these families should trust me."

The Key Ingredients for Change

OTHER GROUPS have come through here in the past," says Mary Green, who has lived at Moncrief Village for 17 years. "But they never followed through."

Over the two years that the Partnership has been working in the five housing developments, its staff has lived up to their promises most of the time. In an organizing project devoted to building up the social assets of a community with few resources, no single factor counts more than hanging in and following through. The group's successes are very fragile, particularly in the area of resident mobilization. As it now stands, the infrastructure in the neighborhoods would not persist without the organizers constantly on the ground. In late December and January, when Partnership staff members were involved in other business—an evaluation, a conference and training out of state, and visits from state officials—they were unable to devote adequate time to organizing in the community. Only four of the most dedicated residents showed up for the community family awareness meeting on January 11, along with a dozen other people from agencies and civic groups.

Meetings, of course, should never be the measure of an organizing project. Many community residents are more interested in being mentors, trainers, community support people and a hundred other things. And stumbles can be easily overcome—by February, following a much more intense month of outreach, more than three dozen people attended the community meeting.

No single factor counts more than hanging in and following through.

The lesson, however, is that sustained attention to the grassroots is the most essential component in building an effective association of citizens. Walking the ground, being visible, listening to people, training new leaders, delivering on promises.

And while fragile, the fabric of relationships the Partnership has woven across Jacksonville is increasingly lush. Having the support of the Department of Children and Families has been a valuable carrot to attract outside social service organizations to the Partnership. When public officials and bureaucrats buy into the project, it raises the possibility of real, long-term systems change. The landlords, too, have been supportive, and some of their staff have been irrepressible forces for the betterment of the community. This could change if residents point out major problems with housing quality which are not promptly addressed. So far, they have been.

Sustaining a high level of leadership development and community engagement—and building a governance infrastructure that truly empowers residents—is especially feasible in this kind of geographically tight target area. If the Partnership were trying to serve a larger population in a more diffuse community, its impact would be significantly diminished. If and when efforts are made to extend the Partnership model to other communities and cities, this factor must be considered.

The commitment and charisma of individual players is also a key component in mobilizing residents and developing indigenous leaders. While the Partnership model could probably cover many more neighborhoods, it will be only as effective as its organizers and leaders. There's no substitute for talent and commitment: skillful hiring and effective partnering are essential. "You have to hire people who know how to

engage people," says Walker.

The Partnership has learned to make an art of connecting with people in language they understand. Jargon is a conversation killer, and is often seen by low-income people as a weapon deployed by social service professionals to obscure the truth. When you don't understand what's being said, it is impossible to assert your rights or say "No." Walker, Durham, Mills and the others are skilled at speaking with people in ways that are clear and to the point.

Finally, the asset-based model focuses on people's strengths, offers them hope, a reason to be involved and a sense of power. Residents have learned that they are resources with skills to offer. They are given the opportunity to work with and support neighbors in need. And they acknowledge and return the respect offered by outsiders, including the organizers, social service professionals and others who come into the community. Even many of those families caught up in the child welfare system see a difference. Because the Partnership has emphasized a strength-based model, says protective investigator Eddie Gibson, "People get the sense that the state is not coming in and taking control of their lives."

Conclusion: The Long Horizon

GIBSON DESCRIBES one of his toughest cases: a family that includes a 14-year-old boy who is not in school and hangs out on the streets, a 13-year-old girl who is giving her body away to strangers, and a mother addicted to drugs. "The kids say they will run away if I place them in care," Gibson says. "I'm still trying to figure out what to do." Painful, difficult cases like this one often involve older children whose families have been in horrible shape for years. For them, there may not be a lot that the Partnership or government can do. But for Gibson, there is a message.

If this family's neighbors had been strong and engaged 10 years ago, maybe the family would have gotten help when they were younger and more open to support. If the Partnership project can be sustained for several years, and if it can build a lasting community support infrastructure, there will be fewer cases like these, Gibson hopes.

Throughout the community development field nationwide, theorists, funders and a growing number of practitioners are paying greater attention to long-term strategies designed to prompt change over decades, even generations. Asset building is at the

heart of this work. Fostering civic institutions and building an infrastructure for stronger social relationships within communities, the theory holds, creates a more healthy environment for families and children. And society as a whole will benefit when those children grow up.

higher quality services and effective supports for people who need help.

As a child in 1968, Sandra Durham moved into the Washington Heights development with her mother, her brothers and sisters. Though she moved out to live on her own in the early 1970s,

The Community Partnership for Protecting Children stands at the intersection of asset-building theory and child welfare policy.

her mother remained here for 18 years. In the years since, Sandra has become a social work assistant, a mother, a college graduate, a program manager at a local nonprofit and now the service director working on her old home turf. "My family went through the same things these families are going through," she says. But at that time, there were more people offering advice and support. And today, all but one of her brothers and sisters own their own homes.

"A lot of the families here now want the same results we had," she says. "They don't know how to get it." But that, she says, is beginning to change.

The Community Partnership for Protecting Children stands at the intersection of asset-building theory and child welfare policy. Clearly, government alone can never solve the persistent problems of child abuse and neglect. Society as a whole—families, institutions, government—must be responsible. Strong local communities with viable social networks and open eyes and ears are more likely to intervene with troubled families than communities that are weak and disenfranchised.

Thus, an organized and mobilized neighborhood may be an effective tool for the prevention of child abuse and neglect. It is most certainly a vehicle for providing

Information about community child protection is available from:

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250 Park Avenue, Suite 900
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www.emcf.org

or

The Clearinghouse on Community Based Approaches to Child Protection at The Center for the Study of Social Policy
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