

## **Chapter 7: Lessons Learned from the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park**

The well elaborated practice model that has been developed at the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park brings family and community practice together in ways that build on the strengths and contributions of each. In this chapter we identify the core components of the Center's model; practice principles that inform the Center's service design and delivery; and organizational principles that inform the Center's leadership and management. (See Figure 7-1.) Many of the principles that underlie the Center's model do not reflect new concepts. Rather, they embody ideas that have been promulgated in the social work and the management literature for years. To illustrate, based on a study of programs that have been successful in promoting positive outcomes for children living in adverse circumstances, Schorr with Schorr (1988) concluded that the common elements are "comprehensiveness, intensiveness, family and community orientation, and staff with time and skills to develop relationships of respect and collaboration" (p. 294). These are all components of practice at the Center for Family Life, which was one of the programs included in Schorr's research. It is important to emphasize, however, that what is important is that the Center is *actually implementing* all of the core components and principles identified in Figure 7-1, creating a dynamic synergy among them and illustrating that doing so *is feasible* and can make a difference in practice.

Moreover, our research suggests that it is the *combination* and the ongoing complex interplay of practice and organizational principles in the Center's day-to-day operation that is critical to its effectiveness. Thus, no single practice or management principle alone is likely to have a significant or sufficient impact; rather it is the consistent and balanced adherence to multiple principles over time that has built the Center's mission, philosophy, programs, and organizational culture.

### **Serving Families in Communities: Core Components of The Center's Community-Centered Family-Focused Practice Model**

The four central components that framed the Center's model when it was established over twenty-two years ago continue to powerfully shape its services and activities. These include an approach to services that reflects an ecosystems perspective; is children, youth, and family focused; is community-centered; and in which relationships are central.

#### **An Ecosystems Perspective**

The ecosystems perspective on practice has been proposed by many leading scholars over the past generation. (See, for example, Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hartman, 1970; Germain, 1973, 1978; Gitterman & Germain, 1980; Lindblad-Goldberg, Dore, & Stern, 1998; Meyer, 1976, 1983; Schorr with Schorr, 1988). Sister Mary Paul was among the first social work scholars to argue the value of this perspective (Janchill, 1969), and this orientation clearly guides all services and activities at the Center. Nothing is done on a case or program level that does not reflect careful assessment of the interaction among multiple individual, familial, community, and broader environmental factors and the ways that these may affect or be affected by the proposed action. This orientation pervades the thinking of all staff members.

Perhaps the clearest indicator of the Center's commitment to the ecosystems perspective is the way in which it extends multiple points of entry to service to community residents. This flexibility is based on the systems concept of equifinality that suggests that many different starting points can lead to the same end. Sister Geraldine once commented, "*I can't emphasize enough how much all of Mary Paul's deep embeddedness in systems theory has been the life of the Center . . . We couldn't help any one individual child without being part of the process of stimulating the school's interest in the social life of children, the family life of the children, the community life of the children.*"

The ecosystemic perspective is also apparent in more subtle ways. To illustrate, the storefront center provides a very simple and low-cost mechanism for insuring that adequate attention is given to the very basic economic and advocacy needs of the families in Sunset Park. And Madga Santiago, who directs this program, reflected her keen understanding of the Center's ecosystemic perspective in her description

of the principles that have guided the development of the thrift shop: *"People must be given a sense of dignity, not shame, in using the service; a person who needs help one day is likely to be donating something -- or giving help -- another day."*

### **Family-Focused**

Since establishing the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park, its co-founders have unequivocally emphasized that the primary investment of the Center's leadership and staff is in Sunset Park's families. The core Center services were designed with a blueprint that included a range of family services: emergency services, counseling, and community school services, with family life education, socialization, and learning to be provided at the schools. As stated in the Center's first progress report (1979:1), its mission emphasizes its focus on promoting the integrity and well-being of families with children:

The Center for Family Life has as its purposes the provision of an integrated and full range of personal and social services to sustain children and families in their own homes, to counter the forces of marginalization and disequilibrium which impact on families, to prevent delinquency, and to prevent inappropriate uses of foster care and institutionalization.

Our observations of program activities and our interactions with Center directors, program directors, supervisors, and staff have been rich with comments about the Center's family focus, such as *"The key is that we work with the family, with everybody"; "What's good for the families of Sunset Park is good for the community of Sunset Park, since families anchor the community"; ". . . every family that you meet . . . has something to get from the Center and something to give."*

### **Community-Centered: A Long Term Commitment**

It was also striking for us to note the frequency with which different staff members at the Center referred to Sunset Park and discussed the many ways that the Center's location in this community has influenced their practice. Some have chosen to live in this community. Others live at a distance, but still convey a sense of belonging. And all worry about the ways in which their activities may help or hinder community-building efforts.

To outsiders, there is nothing especially different or intriguing about Sunset Park. It is similar in many ways to a number of other low-income, immigrant communities in other big cities. But the staff and clients of the Center view Sunset Park as a very special place, and this sentiment undergirds the staff members' professional activities. There are numerous ways in which the Center's commitment to the community is demonstrated. Most simply, its official name, the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park, conveys an important message, as does its primary service criteria, which require only that the family have at least one member aged eighteen or younger *and* live in Sunset Park. The Center has consistently approached the Sunset Park community and its families as interdependent. Other ways in which the Center's commitment to the community are demonstrated include the provision of services based upon community needs; the inclusion of community development and advocacy as core services since the Center's establishment; the incorporation of a broad range of community-building activities; the commitment to "be there" for community residents for the long term; and the establishment of partnerships with other community institutions, agencies, and community groups. These aspects of community commitment are each fully elaborated and placed in the context of emerging literature about community based practice in Chapter 7 in *Nurturing the One, Supporting the Many*.

### **Relationships Are Central**

The Center's organizational sanction and unequivocal support of the staff's development of close ongoing relationships with community residents is central to its community-centered family-focused practice model. Throughout this volume we have described the Center staff members' willingness and sophisticated ability to develop and maintain purposely close and meaningful relationships with Sunset Park's families. These relationships have become a safe, nurturing resource to children, youth, parents, and grandparents in their exploration of individual interests, talents, and goals, of family and social relationships, and of the world beyond the neighborhood, including the worlds of higher education and of employment.

Close relationships with Center counseling staff provide a secure base for children and youth to explore their own developing identities as well as their relationships with their families, friends, teachers, and employers. Social workers in the Center's preventive program serve what might best be described as an extended family member role for many parents who are overwhelmed with parenting responsibilities and environmental demands.

Youth participants in the Community School Program also often develop close attachments to individual social workers, to activity counselors, and to the Center as a whole. The involvement of youth over many years, first as young children, then as volunteer counselors in training, and in some instances, as paid young adult staff, provides them access to a range of adults who may for a brief or lengthy period of time serve as mentors or parent or older sibling surrogates. In many instances, former Community School Program participants return regularly to the Center from the worlds they have explored to share their successes and disappointments with Center staff, to problem-solve, to receive encouragement, and to contribute to the Center's programs and activities.

Staff members in all Center programs repeatedly articulate the importance of relationships to the ongoing development of individuals, families, and the community. Perhaps more importantly, it is evident that staff members understand and make the investment necessary to develop close relationships, particularly with parents and children who have difficulty in trusting others. As described earlier, program participants include many immigrants who worry about disclosing information to strangers as well as persons who have been abused or neglected, who experience severe and persistent mental illness, or who have experienced professionals as less than fully helpful. Thus, it is not unusual for community residents to voluntarily seek the Center's services or to follow through on a referral to the Center while at the same time conveying ambivalence about trusting and working with Center staff. Yet, according to family members and to staff, when close, often long-term, personal relationships are established, they greatly support program participants' efforts to make changes in the ways they express themselves and relate to others in a range of roles.

**A secure base.** As discussed in Chapter 1, the Center's strong commitment to being continuously accessible over time to community residents and to the development of relationships with program participants often contributes to the experience of the Center as "*like home*" or "*an anchor*." We believe that conceptualizing the Center as "a secure base" to which Sunset Park's family members may turn and return as needs arise is useful. It is most likely that community residents' relationships with the continuously accessible, responsive, sensitive, and trustworthy staff in all programs makes possible the perception of the Center as "*like home*," and that this perception greatly facilitates families' willingness and ability to seek services as soon as they identify their needs, and thus prevent crises, rather than seeking services only when a crisis arises.

### **The Core Practice Principles That Underlie the Center's Model and the Organizational Principles That Guide the Center's Leadership and Management**

As outlined in Figure 7-1, we have identified a number of principles that have powerfully shaped practice at the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park. As indicated above, it appears that it is the consistent adherence over time to *all* of these principles across Center programs that contributes to the effectiveness of its services. In Chapter 7, each of these is discussed in-depth and placed within the context of the current literature regarding services to families and children. They include:

- Services are comprehensive, holistic, integrated, and non-stigmatizing
- A developmental perspective guides activities in all program components
- Services are continuous and accessible
- Empowering by providing choices and creating a sense of possibility for families and practitioners
- Cultural sensitivity pervades the Center's activities

Several organizational principles that are consistently applied by the Center's leadership, management, and supervisory staff also emerged in our study. These principles, outlined in Figure 7-1, have been

central to the development of the Center's organizational climate, its high staff morale and remarkable staff retention, its fiscal stability, and its reputation within the community and nationally as a successful program. Adherence to many of these has been advocated by experts in the worlds of business and of human services. Center directors and supervisors are committed to these principles because they are consistent with their professional and personal values and because doing so "makes sense" to them. These are examined in-depth within the context of the business and human services leadership and management literature. These include:

- A clear, consistent sense of mission
- Creative and dedicated leadership
- A learning organization
- A long-range planning perspective and investment
- Funding strategies follow mission and philosophy
- Boundaries are stretched while costs are contained
- High priority is given to staff recruitment, support, and development
- Sense of community within the agency
- Institutional supports and alignments are cost- and time-efficient

#### The Implications of the Center's Model for Professional Practice and Education, Research, and Child and Family Policy

*In Chapter 7, the authors provide an extensive examination of the implications of the Center's model for professional practice and education, emphasizing the need for greater attention in professional social work education to the flexible use of time and relationship; recognizing strengths and needs from a culturally aware perspective; understanding the benefits of continuous service accessibility to families; developing skill in designing individualized services; and developing group work skills.*

*A number of implications for research emerge in any effort to study true community-based services. In Chapter 7 the authors examine the necessity for the field to recognize the benefits derived from systematically engaging practitioners in articulating and reflecting upon their practice; for funders and evaluators to give careful attention to the sequencing of management information systems capacity building efforts and initiation of evaluation studies; for researchers to take into account the phenomena of recursion in developing instruments to measure change; and to recognize that, although systems theory suggests that an intervention at any point in a family or a community system would affect both individual and collective functioning and practitioners and families can point to the results of community-centered family-focused practice, the methodology available to measure such interventive effects is currently limited.*

*Several key policy implications of this study are identified and examined, including the importance of a continuum of accessible service options to all families and children who may be at risk; the need to question rigidity in service time frames, separation of services, and location of services; the importance of recognizing the value of professional trained social workers and compensating for professional training and expertise; and the need for funding for flexible, open-ended, non-categorical service to youth.*