Integrating Youth Services
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Governmental agencies in Oakland, Calif., are collaborating to serve children better

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Al and Marshae Rivera keep their home stocked with candy—all the better to stop their kids from venturing out to buy some themselves. No one knows better than they do that in East Oakland, Calif., even short trips can turn violent. Their seventh-grade son was playing football outside this spring when drive-by gunfire ripped through the game from two directions, injuring several people.

For the 12-year-old, it was the latest in a series of traumas he’s experienced growing up on some of the San Francisco Bay Area’s meanest streets. As a child, he learned from a passerby that his uncle had just been killed in a triple murder. He’s seen a dead body on the sidewalk. And two days before bullets went flying into his football game, a family friend was shot riding the bus.

His parents do what they can to keep him safe. They recently moved out of the public housing projects. They bar him from hanging out with kids showing signs of gang affiliation. And each summer, they send him to his grandmother’s in Arizona, far away—they hope—from the dangers of so much idle time. But they’re waging a war on multiple fronts. The Riveras not only are trying to keep their son safe from gang shootings, they’re also trying to keep him away from gang membership in an area where joining is often more the rule than the exception. So when the couple learned that their son’s school was offering a Saturday class that took the gang issue by the horns, they enrolled him. The History of Gangs engaged young Rivera in discussions about the socioeconomic realities of crime. And crucially for the Riveras, the class took their son on nearly a dozen field trips to San Quentin State Prison, to hear from inmates who learned their lessons too late. The couple can’t speak highly enough of Art Mola, the class’s leader. “Art is able to see things here that we can’t see at home,” Al Rivera says.

The gang class is not on standard school curricula. It’s the result of the Safe Passages/Youth Ventures Joint Powers Authority, an innovative collaboration founded in 2006 to focus youth agencies from Alameda County, the city of Oakland, and the Oakland Unified School District behind a common cause—changing the way public systems work for children in areas blighted by violence and poverty.

Historically, the joint powers authority model that Safe Passages/Youth Ventures follows has been used to manage complex transportation and infrastructure projects involving multiple government agencies. But Safe Passages’ CEO, Josefina Alvarado-Mena, an attorney and a veteran of the Oakland public schools, believed it could be just as effective to deliver social services, since the issues facing low-income youth in a city like Oakland are just as complex and involve just as many governmental agencies.

RESOURCES MEETING NEEDS

In the early 1990s, the prevailing approach to interagency cooperation in Alameda County was to convene a big meeting where participants took turns saying what they were doing to address youth concerns, recalls David Kears, Safe Passages’ chairman and the county’s former health care services director. Then they’d adjourn with a promise to have another big meeting. The shortcomings of the approach were obvious. Youth service professionals were fighting problems that extended beyond the boundaries of any one agency, but they paid only lip service to the idea of tackling them together. One agency might ask what they could do for another, Kears says. They rarely asked what they could do with them.

The impetus for change was boosted in 1996 by a 10-year, $10 million grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which chose Oakland, the seat of Alameda County, as one of five U.S. cities to take part in an initiative to improve health and safety for young people through smarter planning and cooperation. At first, the Oakland schools, Alameda County, and city government proposed...
Collaborate to Improve Services

- Enable professionals serving the same clients to share information
- Recognize the potential of unorthodox organizational models
- Share financial resources to broaden the impact of programs

A Bigger Budget

Safe Passages/Youth Ventures currently operates as a think tank, developing and measuring new strategies that are largely carried out through its four partners, which in turn contract with more than 60 public and private entities. In fiscal year 2008–09, Safe Passages/Youth Ventures received $475,000 in direct funding from partner dues and more than $3.7 million in philanthropic donations. But its program benefited from a much larger sum of money. Acting on ideas generated from Safe Passages/Youth Ventures, the Oakland school system targeted more than $6 million to build school clinics; the county directed $1.3 million to mental health care in schools; and the city of Oakland earmarked more than $500,000 toward programs like violence prevention curricula and funding case managers at schools. All told, Safe Passages/Youth Venture’s programs were funded to the tune of $16.8 million.

Youth agency leaders in San Francisco, Baltimore, and other cities have expressed interest in replicating parts of the Safe Passages/Youth Ventures approach. In 2009, Alvarado-Mena became one of six winners of the James Irvine Foundation’s Leadership Awards, receiving $125,000 for her cause.

The impact of Safe Passages/Youth Ventures is only starting to be felt in Oakland. In 2007, the Atlantic Philanthropies awarded the partnership a four-year, $15 million grant to implement Atlantic’s Elev8 Initiative, a national program to bring together schools, families, and community in underserved neighborhoods. The initiative received $25 million in matching local funds.

The schools have a long way to go. Coliseum College Prep Academy in Oakland, which Rivera attends, badly trailed the district average in English and math proficiency in 2008–09 state assessments. But the school—where 90 percent of students are on free or reduced price lunches and where four lockdowns occurred in January alone—has a lot on its plate. Safe Passages is helping. “It’s providing the resources to stabilize kids’ lives—to get them in a place physically and emotionally to do rigorous academic work,” says Principal Aaron Townsend.

The victories are apparent in ways that are hard to measure. After the Riveras’ son was nearly shot playing football, there was only one person he wanted to talk to—Mola, the History of Gangs teacher and the school’s Elev8 coordinator. For the Riveras, he’s the key to their boy’s success. “What he’s doing here at the school with the kids is real good,” Al Rivera says. “Real good.”