

CHAPTER 3 COMMUNITY MENTORING STUDY—FINAL PROCESS STUDY RESULTS

This section describes process study findings for San Francisco’s Community Mentoring program for the period April 1, 2002 – June 30, 2002.

1. Methods and Procedures

A single focus group was conducted on-site in May, 2002. Focus group participants were the Special Projects Manager from the county social services department, the Program Coordinator, and one Mentor Supervisor. Additional participants were expected to attend the discussion, however, the Special Projects Manager noted that project staff were “angry” and “grieving” at the time of data collection and probably chose not to attend the meeting due to the project’s impending closure. Participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the focus group and read and signed consent forms at the beginning of the meeting. The focus group was audio-tape recorded and two UCB researchers took extensive notes during the discussion (one by hand and one using a laptop computer). The audio-tape was used as a back-up to researchers’ notes. All data was summarized and key themes were sought by the two researchers through the lens of “lessons learned” that might inform why the program was closing or how a future similar program might capitalize on the experiences of the Community Mentoring program.

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed by the CSSR evaluation team staff in accordance with federal Title IV-E Child Welfare Waiver Demonstration Project guidelines. The questions were designed to highlight problems that may have led to the program’s impending closure as well as to highlight successful aspects of the Community Mentoring project.

2. Key Features and Implementation Status

Program staff have been informed that the program is shutting down as of June 30, 2002.

a. Enrollment status: At the time of data collection, UCB records indicated that 61 children were receiving program services (experimental group, including siblings) and an additional 31 children (including siblings) constituted the control group.

b. Target populations: Focus group participants described program clients as needy, consistent with the fact that they have come into contact with the Department of Human Services, however, participants generally de-emphasized any characteristics of clients as being problematic for the administration or implementation of the program. Focus group participants highlighted the fact that the program was envisioned and began prior to the dot com boom and that since that time one of the target neighborhoods, Potrero Hill has gentrified. Gentrification of this neighborhood, combined with the availability of other social services in this area, was perceived as greatly reducing the numbers of children and families in need of Community Mentoring program services. In addition, focus group participants mentioned that the number of children in need of program services was lower than was envisioned due to a 50% decrease in general child welfare referrals over the last seven years.

Implementation difficulties: The program has encountered various implementation difficulties. The greatest difficulties appear to be budget related and have been problematic since the program began. For example, the program was designed as an innovative community collaborative. Unfortunately, many in-kind contributions from collaborators never were received. The failure to receive these projected contributions resulted in additional expenses being placed on the county and the program costs were much higher than initial projections. The program was not able to capture high start-up costs. In addition, focus group participants believe that the initial base rate set for children in the experimental group was much too low. Although the base rate was revised and the budget was revised during program implementation, the base rate was still too low and the program was not able to stay within set costs.

The referral process and informed consent procedures also contributed to implementation difficulties. Child welfare cases eligible for the program were not identified prior to hiring staff and greater numbers of staff people were hired than proved necessary. Furthermore, the program only receives funding for children in the experimental group and the program proposal did not anticipate so many children being enrolled in the control group. Thus, costs were higher than expected for experimental cases.

3. Organizational Aspects

a. Timelines: Families in the program received services as long as they had unmet needs. Consistent with the court calendar, a 6-12 month timeframe was initially envisioned for serving families. In hindsight, this timeframe was probably too short because many families in the program had problems that required at least a year of intervention. Participants noted that a key feature of the program, relationship building with whole families, takes time. Some families received services for up to 15 months and some families were served on a shorter timeline, depending on their needs.

b. Service delivery difficulties: Transportation was cited as a key problem for the program's service delivery. A central component of the program is the ability to facilitate easy modes of transportation for enrolled children and their families, however, transportation was not considered in the program proposal. Oftentimes staff used their own cars to transport their clients. Finding safe housing for client families also was problematic.

Another aspect of service delivery that could have benefited from refinement was that frequently the mentors felt like the families they were serving didn't understand the role of the mentor: "people didn't know why we were there." This could have been remedied if the process of introducing the family to the program (informed consent procedures) was more informative for the family. The program had envisioned hiring someone to serve this role, separate from mentors, however, the hire didn't materialize due to budget problems.

Participants indicated no problems with regard to assessment of child and family strengths. DHS workers joined the mentors and families in the assessment to help identify the needs of the families and the adult's level of commitment for fulfilling their case plans.

c. Staffing: Participants highlighted the need for a full or part-time staff person to entirely devote their time to the mentoring project, which was envisioned but didn't occur. At the time that the program was starting up another initiative was introduced that required 80% of the Special Projects Manager's time. An administrator working solely for the program could have expanded the program within the community so as to build additional working relationships. Participants agreed that the essence of the program was "a constant process of building relationship." A dedicated administrator could have given the program the time it deserved while working within the department to maintain steady enrollments of children into the program. Due to high staff turnover within the county, many social workers did not know about the program and others tended to forget to refer children to the program. An administrator with more time for the program could have created a mechanism to ensure that new staff and continuing staff were consistently informed about the program and that team building routinely occurred between social workers and mentors.

Another staffing issue was the need to support further staff professional development, like licensure. If additional professional development opportunities were made available to the mentors it would be a way of giving back to the community because the community needs licensed professional helpers of color.

Participants felt that the Project Coordinator could have benefited from an assistant and it was noted that the Project Coordinator had five bosses who did not speak in a unified voice. In addition, the Executive Directors of the collaborating agencies were frequently in conflict with the Special Projects Manager which led to heightened feelings of tension among program staff.

With regard to relationships between social workers and mentors it was noted that not all social workers were open to the high level of collaboration needed to share a case with a mentor. However, the social workers and mentors who worked on cases for this program had excellent relationships with each other and were pre-identified for this program based on their interest in the community and their willingness to share power. Participants believed that social workers and mentors were mutually able to improve each other's work. For example, if a mentor had difficulty with a family he or she could always call the social worker for assistance. Similarly, mentors could devote a lot of time to their client families and could visit the families when the social workers couldn't, thereby reducing social worker workloads. In general, social workers and mentors had a substantial amount of communication and sharing of information and ideas. Mentors sent monthly reports to social workers noting all dates of contact with client families.

d. Program oversight and monitoring: Participants said that supervision of the mentors by the mentor supervisors was not problematic and that the use of pagers and cell phones facilitated communication and kept everyone accessible.

With regard to state oversight, participants felt that communication from the CDSS liaison was lacking and that more was needed. Early in the program the Special Projects Manager did not even realize that a CDSS liaison to the program existed. Participants believed that CDSS was not vested in the success of the program and that given how "revolutionary" the program was, CDSS guidance would have been welcome.

4. Contextual Factors

a. Community characteristics: Participants believed that the community was rich with resources to assist client families. Some staff members had previously worked in other agencies and therefore had established lines of communication with other supportive services. Oftentimes, if waiting lists existed for services, staff were able to move their clients to the front of the list. In addition, other professional service providers such as mental health workers or substance abuse counselors were brought in as consultants and played an important role in providing services to families. These professionals were available for consultation to discuss issues families were having and assist in the development of a treatment plan.

b. Agency factors: Focus group participants agreed that working in an out-stationed office for this program was desirable. The office culture was positive because staff volunteered to work in this extremely underprivileged community and all of their cases came from the community. Staff valued and treasured the opportunity to work within this community and these values were reinforced by the agency. All staff for this program were required to do volunteer work in the community in order to better understand the community. The culture at DHS headquarters was described as very different from the out-stationed office: this was perceived as neither good nor bad.

c. State factors: Focus group participants cited lack of assistance from CDSS as contributing to their inability to overcome program implementation difficulties. They felt more oversight and communication was needed from the state to make the program successful. Fiscal meetings with the state were helpful but should have occurred prior to the program implementation (not after the program was having major difficulties) and a clear description of what CDSS expected from the program was needed (but never communicated by CDSS).

Budget cuts and a decrease in the California general fund after September 11th, were the major economic factors at the state level that affected the program. In addition, the general decrease in the overall economy of the state of California, the dot com downturn, and the state cut of 20% to foster care administration all affected program implementation.

d. Federal factors: September 11th was the only social or economic factor at the federal level that was mentioned as having an impact on the community mentoring program.

e. Evaluation factors: Participants seemed to regret that they weren't able to create a stronger relationship with the evaluation team during the early development of the program. They would have liked to have worked more closely with a senior researcher in the beginning of the project so that things that were supposed to have been completed would have been. For example, participants discussed an assessment instrument that they were supposed to have received from UCB but never did. This assessment tool would have given the program staff a way to measure a family's progress before and after the mentoring intervention.

Participants said that they felt extremely disconnected from the UCB research team, especially prior to June, 2001. They described "locking heads" with their research liaison in ways that were very difficult for the program. With regard to that relationship they said "this is not how people work together, there was no connection or relationship." In

contrast, participants said they had an easy and collaborative working relationship with the senior researcher who was in place from June, 2001-2002.

5. Looking Toward the Future

Program staff are slowly pulling mentoring services away from client families and turning the cases back to DHS. The mentors plan to continue personal relationships with their client families. Unfortunately, due to budget cutbacks within the agency, client families will receive fewer services than the previous norm for child welfare cases.

Participants felt that everyone knows that the program is important in the community and it has been successful on many different levels. Many of the mentors have lost hope for the community because they see a good program being taken away due to a lack of funding. They said that even if a new program were to be introduced to the community it would be difficult to gain community support for it since this program was removed (and community members are feeling insulted).

Consultants have been brought in to help move program staff into new positions and help the mentors with resume and interview building skills so that they can obtain new positions.