



What Works

Policy Brief

Schools, Communities and Government Working Together to Improve Public Policy and Practice

Smart Cuts or Dumb Cuts:

Family Support Programs in Tight Budget Times

by Sid Gardner

Scene: In a County Budget Meeting in California

It had been a long day, and the county administrator and her team were wading through a painful discussion of budget cuts. For the third time in six months, the state had announced a reduction in funding for an array of county programs.

“What’s next, Frank?” the chief administrative officer asked wearily.

The budget director, Frank Sutter, had worked with the CAO for several years. He knew that she wanted the bad news unvarnished and with the most accurate numbers he could assemble. “There are these family support programs that we fund and loan staff to. They cost us six to seven million dollars a year, collectively.”

“What’s the state position on funding them?” the CAO asked.

The deputy CAO for intergovernmental relations spoke up. “There are 11 different state funding streams, as near as we can tell. We’ve asked the state what their total funding for family support programs but we never got an answer. Of the 11, six of them have been cut so far. The only programs that seem safe are those with mostly federal funding.”

The CAO picked it up. “So we’re exposed to the tune of about three to four million? Well, why not cut them all? We’ll make it clear that the state’s decisions made it necessary.”

The assistant budget director for human services spoke up, “As tempting as that seems, I think we need to take a longer look at what these programs have done. They’re the best outreach programs we have, and they have a good-sized political constituency in the neighborhoods and rural areas they serve. There are 12 of them now, funded with different sources, and we might be able to decide which of them to save if we take a harder look at them as a set.”

The CAO looked at the budget director, who nodded. “Okay,” she said, “let’s bring in the director of human services tomorrow morning. That’s it for today.”

Next Day...

The human services director was new to the county, having come from a software company where he developed information systems for child welfare programs. When the team reconvened, he began his presentation.

“The cost of county services and direct funding to the family support programs is \$3.6 million. But in fact, that’s only about one-fourth of the total funding for these twelve programs. They’re also supported by school budgets, United Way and out-stationed staff from regional nonprofits like Catholic Charities and the Mental Health Association.”

“If family support programs can meet these goals then they will soon be considered a vital, essential service, like public schools, hospitals, libraries and playgrounds.”





The budget director spoke. “So you’re saying there’s a fairly high leverage factor? Can they keep going without our funds and staff?”

“A few could. Others depend mostly on the state funds that we pass on to them.”

The CAO looked impatient. “But what do we get for our funding and staff? What’s the bottom line here?”

The human services director frowned. “The honest answer is that we’re not sure. Each of these programs has a different information system. We’ve been working with them to adopt common definitions of services and indicators of client outcomes, but it’s been slow work. They each have their own traditions, and the different state information systems don’t help much, either. These three,” he pointed to a set of programs labeled ‘Strongest Programs,’ “have done the best job of laying out what they do and who they do it for.”

The assistant budget director for human services, who had been a social worker before she joined the budget staff, asked, “These are family support programs, right? And we’re in a recession, with unemployment in this county up to 12 percent. So what have they

done to increase families’ incomes? Are they getting them earned income tax credit, child care supports, child support or health benefits for their kids?”

The director responded, “They do some of that, but no one program does it all. And none can document how many families get assistance. What they do is count their referrals, rather than how often families get connected with income supports. That’s one of the changes we want them to make in their information systems.”

The budget director decided to test the waters, and ventured, “Okay, what if we make funding contingent on solid results? We eliminate the least effective of the programs, and make sure the rest are distributed throughout the area, so all communities are served. We let them know that next year we’ll be asking who they helped and how, and how much income support these families have received as a result.”

The director of human services was the first to reply. “But you’d be cutting programs that provide services to hundreds of families. And we’d lose some of the federal matching funds they bring in.”

The budget director laughed. “Come on, Bill. If we have to match it, it ain’t free. What I want to know is, who are these families and what do we know about them?”

“They’re about one-third welfare or recently off welfare,” the director replied. “The rest earn below the median income for the county and are ethnically representative of the county’s population. We don’t know much about how their income has been affected by family support programs. But for five of the 12 programs, we do know whether or not they got services from any county agencies.”

The assistant budget director for human services shook her head. “That’s progress, but it doesn’t say anything about the other family programs we operate. The county’s budget for children and families is at least one-third of the total budget. That includes foster care, adoption services, parent education, drug and alcohol treatment for parents of abused and neglected kids, child care, parent-child programs in the libraries ... If we did a full inventory of spending for family programs, it would total more than 10 or 20 times what we give these family support programs.”

The CAO was ready to move on. “I think we’ve heard enough. Let’s take Frank’s recommendation to the supervisors at the budget session. What’s next?”

Implications

This imagined dialogue is increasingly likely at California’s local government level, as several trends continue:

- The state’s budget crisis; it will affect cities, counties, school districts and community-based agencies from 2003 to 2006 and possibly beyond.
- The increased visibility of some family support programs after a decade of funding from multiple sources; these programs find themselves in jeopardy as budget cuts threaten most of their funding streams. Such programs include:
 - Early childhood family resource centers
 - School-linked service models (e.g., Healthy Start and after-school)
 - Home visiting models
 - Child-abuse prevention models
 - Delinquency prevention models
 - Developmental disabilities models
- Increased financial needs of lower-income working families, including families recently exiting from CalWORKS who often don’t receive the benefits or income supports to which they are entitled.



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In the Bay Area, the Jewish Family and Children’s Services program has four Parents Place resource centers. They offer parenting workshops, early childhood mental health consultations, a child development drop-in center, a father support project, individual guidance, opportunities for networking, youth development and more. This division of JFCS is funded through client fees, foundation and government contracts.

The Challenges

In the shadow of the fiscal crisis of 2003, California’s family support programs face painful challenges as they strive to:

- Focus on families with the greatest need.
- Ensure a balance between families that are easy and those that are hard to reach.
- Provide the highest-needs families with an adequate intensity of services and supports to make a difference in their lives.
- Provide an emphasis on income support programs while recognizing the full range of supports needed by families.
- Document the services provided and outcomes achieved in families’ lives, without overwhelming community-based agencies with complex information systems.
- Connect family support programs with other community-based programs that have similar goals, such as: youth development, early childhood and school readiness programs, parent education and empowerment, community development and community building, economic development.
- Sustain with institutional funding those programs that began with state, federal and foundation demonstration funding.

Meeting the Challenges

The good news is that, as of late 2002, more than 200 different family resource centers (FRCs) in California have started to address these challenges. Family support programs are increasingly prepared to strengthen links to other sources of support, using one of a variety of strategies:

- Developing closer ties to city, county and school funding sources and out-stationed staff.
- Strengthening their information systems and their ability to tell their story by quantitative and qualitative methods.
- Allying themselves with child development, community development, child welfare and other programs that operate in the same communities in which family support programs are based.
- Connecting with diverse community-based agencies that are well established in their own communities.

For FRCs, the lesson has become clear: “We can’t do it without a network.” When FRCs are not connected with other agencies, they risk failure in their goal to connect families with help. By definition, that goal requires partnerships.

Which Partners?

As they move in this new direction, FRCs need to answer a critical question, “Who are the optimal partners in this era of budget cutbacks?” The answer depends on the community, and there are many possibilities. FRCs may:

- Serve as the “front end” for child welfare services. Some FRCs have moved toward formal status as partners, welcoming referral clients — families who need early intervention to keep them out of the child protective services system.
- Become school outreach and parent involvement programs. Healthy Start is our best approach in providing school-based or school-linked services.
- Partner with schools, school readiness programs, early care providers and parents. Some FRCs have initiated a school readiness and early childhood development scenario. Funding from Proposition 10, along with the 20 other state and federal funding streams for child development programs, has given new promote to strategies that emphasize a community-driven approach to school readiness.
- Link to strategies that make a closer connection between families, health insurance and medical providers, including public health home visiting. These approaches acknowledge the importance of providing medical support for families who don’t have regular access to providers.
- Emphasize family income and work supports rather than “soft services,” especially for families who have recently left the CalWORKS system. Some FRCs rely on welfare incentive funding while others depend on institutionalized

CalWORKS funding. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, poverty rates are rising and family earnings declining among the working poor. Therefore, family income support will be an increasingly important way to connect families to cash and in-kind benefits, worth \$3,000–5,000 to some families.¹

- Fund FRCs with Empowerment Zone funds, Community Development Block Grants or other public sources of funding for neighborhood or community targeted programs. These community-building strategies involve FRCs in the physical and economic future of their communities. FRCs become part of a network of service providers who represent significant economic activity and a source of job creation in their areas.

Each of these approaches has advantages and disadvantages. Choosing one set of partners may make it more difficult to work with others, and some funding streams come with many more strings than others. Each community will need to “mix and match” strategies based on a solid planning effort. They must address the hard question of which families to target, and set priorities based on community needs, strengths and resources.

The riskiest approach of all, however, is to have no approach, or to spread resources so thin that little impact can be documented. With each of these strategies, an FRC links to a network of public policy and practices that rely on one or more forms of institutionalized funding. If an FRC lacks these contacts, it may be impossible to become self-sustaining.

The San Joaquin County Partnership for Families has launched a network of six family resource centers that emphasize neighborhood services and school readiness programs in neighborhoods of 10,000–20,000 families. Programs are funded from a variety of sources, including Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act funds.

¹ A more detailed discussion of this approach is included in a paper available at www.cffutures.org: “*The Future and Sustainability of Family Resource Centers: Asking the Hard Questions about Family Support Programs.*”

In Orange County, FRCs have been funded with a combination of Proposition 10 funds, welfare incentive funding and Family Preservation funds. Along with birthing hospitals and school readiness and outreach programs, FRCs are one of three “platforms” for early childhood programs.

FRC as “Front-End”

To illustrate the importance of partnerships, let’s look more closely at the first of these strategies — FRCs as the front end for child welfare services.

The trend toward community-based child protection has brought greater attention to the potential of FRCs to serve as a front end program for child welfare. At the same time, FRCs are also serving as community bases for home visiting programs.

Some FRCs receive lower-urgency cases as referrals. These “family maintenance” cases involve nearly one-third of all children in the formal child welfare system — almost 30,000. With family maintenance, the family voluntarily receives support services from county child welfare agencies, and the children are not removed from the home. The May 2002 California Department of Social Services stakeholders’ interim report *CWS Redesign: Conceptual Framework* describes the potential for community-based partnerships to “ensure the creation of broad-based opportunities for residents and CWS consumers to participate in prevention planning, implementation and evaluation.”

With community protection approaches in other cities and states, results suggest that the critical ingredients of successful community partnerships are:

- A credible community-based coalition that enables widespread community involvement.
- Opportunities for community residents to buy into programs with their own time and energy.
- A front-line team that can provide multiple services to families.

- A “barrier-busting” policy team of state and county policymakers whose responses are enlightened by what they’ve learned about barriers that affect families most frequently.
- An inventory of resources, to prevent new projects from launching without taking stock of current funding and community assets.
- Interagency funding based on a clear strategy to identify potential funding streams.

For the past five years, the Clark Foundation has supported community partnerships at four sites: Jacksonville, Florida; Des Moines, Iowa; St. Louis, Missouri; and Louisville, Kentucky. Each of the sites is working to:

- Change the way Child Protective Services (CPS) responds to families, moving from a one-size-fits-all solution to one that is appropriate for the specific situation.
- Develop and expand neighborhood-based resources to help families keep their children safe in their own homes and to make sure that support is available before a problem turns into a crisis.
- Involve more people in creating new ways for government, nonprofits and citizens to work together and help share with CPS the responsibility for children’s safety.

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago is compiling and evaluating lessons learned at these sites. Additional research on FRC effectiveness is underway at a number of other institutions.

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Founded in 1981 to build momentum in the family support field, Family Support America works to:

- Strengthen leadership for family support across states.
- Promote family-supportive infrastructure and partnerships.
- Secure state and community support and advocacy for family support.

The Chicago-based organization works with a combination of state government officials, community-based programs, and community members and parents to develop strategies for creating caring communities where all families have support to raise their children. Its core message: If you want to help families, ask parents what they want.

Family Support America conducts research on family support and educates family support, policymakers, researchers, funders and practitioners in multiple systems about its potential to strengthen families and communities. Family Support America helps this wide range of stakeholders to see family support as an effective way to ensure stronger families and communities, and to make family support services available to more families across the nation.

In particular, Family Support America promotes a shift in perspective:

- To find better ways to engage parents more productively and respectfully at the program and state policy levels.
- To involve parents in determining services for their children and families.
- To hire parents as advocates for program and policy design and development.

Through its publications, tools, conferences, meetings, technical assistance and training programs, Family Support America helps individual family support programs build and maintain quality practice. In California, it has trained family resource and support programs to conduct peer-to-peer and self-assessments. This training has helped participants to review and evaluate their program components according to the principles of family support practice, and to create plans for improvement (see sidebar, page 8).

To find out more about Family Support America's resources, research and advocacy projects, visit www.familysupportamerica.org or call 312.338.0900.

Principles of Family Support Practice

1. Staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect.
2. Staff enhance families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members — adults, youth and children.
3. Families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs and to communities.
4. Programs affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society.
5. Programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community building process.
6. Programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive and accountable to the families served.
7. Practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.
8. Programs are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.
9. Principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance, and administration.

(from Family Support America)

Which Families?

FRCs are faced with another choice — which families to help.

In some states and counties, this choice is narrowed — a child welfare agency tells the FRCs, in effect, “We will fund you to provide services to the families we can’t get to — those with no substantiated abuse or neglect, or the ones who aren’t in the system yet.” In other states and counties, FRCs make the choice themselves about how far upstream they should go with at-risk families in need of prevention services.

Programs that include formal services and informal supports for all families have undeniable logic and appeal. But limited resources and the need to demonstrate specific impact on specific groups of families demand that we define more clearly which families should be served. Some FRCs have spent time and energy debating these choices and improving how they target their services. Other FRCs have paid increasing attention to the role of fathers — a critical and sometimes under-emphasized element of family support. Still other FRCs have been reaching out to parents of preschool-aged children as part of school readiness efforts.

What Resources?

The Finance Project has developed two publications for financing FRCs and other community-based programs.²

The first of these emphasizes five approaches to financing strategies:

- Make better use of existing resources.
- Maximize federal and state revenue.
- Create more flexibility in existing categories.
- Build public-private partnerships.
- Create new, dedicated revenue streams.

A sixth strategy could also be added:

Implementing a fee-for-service approach taps community members' willingness to pay for a portion of the services they receive, while creating ownership that is not possible when services are free.

Taken together, these strategies add up to a theory of resources that are crucial in sustaining a program — as important as the underlying ideas about how its resources and interventions will create better outcomes.

The assumption that grants will follow grants is flawed, especially in an era of shrinking sources of funding. In most communities, 20 to 30 times more government funding flows to public agencies than grants to freestanding organizations. So the choice of partners also encompasses long-term funding strategies.

² Cheryl Hayes (2002) *Thinking Broadly: Financing Strategies for Comprehensive Child and Family Initiatives*. Washington, D.C.: The Finance Project. Sara Watson and Miriam Westheimer, (2000). *Financing Family Resource Centers: A Guide to Sources and Strategies*. Washington, D.C.: The Finance Project.



What if FRCs disappeared?

- Other agencies would end up with increased caseloads.
- Savings resulting from funds withdrawn from FRCs would be wiped out by the cost of added intensive services for families who couldn't otherwise get help.
- Families would wait longer for assistance, and family breakdowns could increase.
- Isolated families would have fewer links to their communities and sources of support.
- After a few years, communities would likely begin to reinvent FRCs under a new name. In fact, the idea has been around for well over a century and responds to a basic truth: some families need help from their communities.

In Hard Times, Family Support Means Family Income Support

Family support programs can make a significant difference for hard-pressed families. But few of these programs are familiar with the full array of benefits for which families are eligible. Such benefits include earned income tax credit, nutrition programs (WIC, food stamps, free and reduced lunch), health coverage under Medi-Cal or Healthy Families, housing and child care subsidies, child support payments and education aid.

Many families are linked to one of these but are unaware of how to access others programs could yield up to \$3,000–5,000 in benefits for some families. Studies show that as few as 10 percent of eligible families are taking advantage of these benefits. In times of economic difficulty, FRCs must verify that families are getting enrolled. Some organizations have developed a checklist and benefits calculator called self-sufficiency software. It enables workers to determine likely eligibility and helps them review the support they are currently receiving. See www.wceca.org for more information.

A Legislative Option?

“Family support-friendly” legislation is an option that was inspired by the Youth Pilot Project (AB 1741), which gave six counties flexibility in using state funding streams.

For cities and counties with funding committed to FRCs, such legislation would allow them the flexibility of combining different state funding streams. In this way, they could target their funding (for such programs as Healthy Start, juvenile crime prevention, youth development, after-school and early childhood services) to FRCs that have accepted accountability for specific outcomes in return for discretion in using state funds flexibly. Targeted programs could include funding. This approach — a “second-generation 1741” — could aid family support programs without requiring new funding.

Making the Case for Public Funding: Follow the Money

When FRCs approach public funders, especially city and county government and school districts, it is critical to gather two types of financial information:

- The large funding streams that come into local government.

In counties that don't have a children's budget, it is important to research funding streams, though not necessary to inventory every one (such as special education, child welfare services, major block grants and other programs whose clients overlap with those of FRCs). In counties that do have a children's budget — such as Contra Costa and Los Angeles — information gathering is easier.

- The extent to which support from FRCs creates savings for families.

Understand how local agencies benefit from what the FRC does for families. Some of these benefits have direct financial impact on local government:

- Increases in school attendance that result from after-school and other parent involvement programs, which offset the millions of dollars lost by some school districts due to attendance problems and truancy
- Decreases in re-referral of families who have been diverted from the child welfare system
- Improvement in school readiness as a result of FRC links with pre-school programs
- Reduction of special education costs when children with developmental delays are identified and enrolled in early intervention services

- Increases in Medi-Cal and Healthy Families enrollment that may reduce county-subsidized hospital costs for families who are able to use a regular medical home rather than visits to emergency rooms
- Decreases in juvenile justice costs by preventing further incidents by first-time youth offenders
- Enrollments of lower-income working families in the full range of income support programs for which many are eligible but not enrolled. These can total as much as \$3,000–5,000 per family, potentially resulting in millions of dollars of increases in family income in some counties and cities.

Each of these benefits show the direct effect of FRCs on local government costs. Documenting these benefits requires a powerful information system that's capable of intake data collection and follow-up. Such a system is more advanced than what most FRCs have now, but it's an important tool for monitoring the effectiveness of programs.

Presenting this actual or potential cost savings information to local government agencies may not ensure funding, but a first step. In some ways it's similar to a legislative effort — you introduce the bill the first year, widen support in the second and secure funding in the third. In this case, you begin discussions with potential funders, then demonstrate initial results in achieving outcomes, and finally secure longer-term funding once you can show evidence of solid results. It could be a three-year process.

Vague claims about how prevention saves money are insufficient. Proving your results will require specific data on cost offsets and genuine savings. In the future, local governments are likely to adopt a variation of the phrase attributed to President Reagan when he spoke of arms control, "Trust, but verify." Family support programs that devote new resources to collecting such hard evidence are likely to be those that have the best chances for survival in hard times.

Smart Cuts or Dumb Cuts

Family support programs deserve continued funding, even in fiscally strained times such as those we Californians face in the near future. Especially in such times, family support programs need to make a case that they can perform two critical functions, both measured in real terms:

- Ease pressures on local governments by operating programs that reduce costs of families to local budgets, creating verifiable savings.
- Ease pressures on families by connecting them with the benefits they have earned by working to provide for their children.

If family support programs can meet these goals then they will soon be considered a vital, essential service, like public schools, hospitals, libraries and playgrounds. Once that happens it will no longer be a question of smart cuts or dumb cuts because these programs will be considered part of the very fabric of California.

“Family support programs deserve continued funding, even in fiscally strained times such as those we Californians face in the near future.”



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The Foundation Consortium for California's Children & Youth is a philanthropic partnership formed to improve outcomes for children, youth and families. The Consortium is currently funded and governed by 16 of California's leading foundations. Foundation members are independent, yet they come together to fund this collaborative effort and share common goals. Established in 1991, the Consortium is a non-partisan resource bringing philanthropy together with community, schools and government to improve public policy and practice.

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