

Innovation and Community Involvement

Innovation

Our society is changing rapidly. Extended families and many traditional community support systems are becoming increasingly rare. Drugs and crime have invaded our neighborhoods on a scale unimaginable a generation ago. More families and children are at risk.

PRS is working with community organizations throughout the state to find creative solutions to the problems of abuse and neglect. These collaborations have resulted in innovative programs that are providing new hope for the future.

Community Child Abuse Prevention Efforts

New programs in several regions of the state are helping to prevent child abuse. Positive Beginnings, a Dallas-area program, matches young parents whose children are at risk for abuse and neglect with volunteer

mentors from the community. Mentors help parents with children from birth to age 4 learn about their baby's development, parenting skills, and how to find community resources. They visit families in their homes at least once each week, and may accompany them to doctor's visits and other appointments. Services are free and available to families in

27 targeted ZIP codes in the South Dallas/Mesquite area.

Mentor Programs

The Family Advocate Model for Empowerment (or FAME) project in the Panhandle matches foster parent mentors with birth families who volunteer for the program. Children in the program are able to return home from foster care sooner and are less likely to be reported again to the department.

Family Outreach

Family Outreach is a community-based program that helps families in times of stress. The program enlists volunteers to provide support, encouragement, and parenting information. The goal of the program is to prevent child abuse and neglect by strengthening troubled families. There are 32 Family Outreach centers throughout the state.

Positive Parenting

Positive Parenting is a training course which teaches parents how to modify children's behavior effectively by using clear instructions and positive feedback. Parents who practice this

method report that behavior problems and conflict with children are dramatically reduced. The department provided the training to foster and adoptive parents and residential child-care facility staff in 14 workshops throughout the state in 1996.

Preventing Juvenile Delinquency

The Services to At-Risk Youth (or STAR) program serves young people at risk of delinquent or criminal behavior. Through contracts with community agencies, STAR offers crisis intervention and counseling to youths who are having difficulty at home, have had a brush with the law, or have run away. Although these children don't fit the categories traditionally served by social service and juvenile probation agencies, early intervention is critical to help them resolve their problems before they turn to violent or delinquent behavior.

Although the program was originally designed to serve run-aways and truants, STAR was enlarged in 1995 to include chil-

dren ages 7-17 who have committed certain types of juvenile offenses. STAR services were made available to larger areas of the state as well. Once limited to 55 counties, the program now offers services in 138 counties. Services are expected to be available in all counties by 1999. In fiscal year 1996, STAR served 12,665 youths.

Alternatives to Gangs

A special project funded through PRS has helped to reduce gang activity in Baytown, near Houston. Now in its sixth year, the Gang Activity Prevention program is managed by the Goose Creek Independent School District and monitored by the Attorney General's office and PRS. It offers alternative programs featuring educational and recreational activities to youths who have been identified as gang members. Parents and brothers and sisters also participate. Local youth services agencies and law enforcement are involved as well. The program has been so successful that two of the major gangs operating in the area have been virtually eliminated.



Support for Adoptive Families

Bringing a new child into the family always involves adjustments for the parents and

other children in the home. But for adoptive families, there are additional challenges. Children who have been abused and neglected often need extra attention and sometimes professional help to overcome the effects of their experiences.

It is important for adoptive parents to understand the needs of these children and to have realistic expectations. The Connect Project in Houston trains parents and adoption workers on the issues involved in adopting older children and children with physical or emotional problems. Parents who have adopted special needs children can also get help from the Houston Area Adoption Respite Team. The HAART project provides relief care so that parents caring for children who require constant attention can have a break.

PRS on the Internet

Information about the department's services are available on the Internet's World Wide Web. Parents, educators, legislators, students and other interested individuals can download statistical data and Child Abuse Prevention Month materials. Readers can also view children available for adoption, read about PRS programs and services, learn about child care options, and get information about the runaway hotline. PRS' home page address is <http://www.tdprs.state.tx.us>

Community Involvement

The safety of our children and the well-being of vulnerable adults are everyone's concern. A major goal of PRS in 1996 was to increase the participation of communities and volunteers in all aspects of our mission. People from all parts of the state continue to respond enthusiastically. Individuals, businesses, churches, and civic organizations are working together to help their neighbors. Their help is invaluable to PRS, but the greatest beneficiaries have been the children and elderly or disabled adults we serve. Community projects are making a difference in the lives of thousands of Texans.

Volunteers

Volunteers are among the department's greatest assets. They serve on county child welfare boards, donate time and money to special projects, teach parenting skills, act as mentors to families and youth, provide holiday gifts for children in foster care, work in PRS offices, answer calls to the runaway hot-

line, and help to develop policy as members of the department's advisory committees. In fiscal year 1996, more than 10,000 volunteers throughout the state contributed over 150,000 hours to help PRS clients.

Child Welfare Boards

Child Welfare Boards in 185 counties in Texas form a vital link between PRS and the community. Boards supplement child protective services with financial support and promote public awareness of child abuse and neglect. In 1996, Texas counties provided \$1.8 million to fund child protective services staff. With federal matching funds these monies paid for approximately 100 workers critical to local child protection efforts.

Members are appointed by the county commissioner's courts, and an important responsibility of the boards is to keep the courts informed about the status of children in the county. County boards are represented in regional child welfare board councils and the statewide Texas Council of Child Welfare Boards.

Citizen Review Teams

Citizen Review Teams in every region evaluate completed child protective services cases, reviewing the actions taken and the decisions made. Established by the Legislature in 1995, the teams consist of at least five private citizens who are also parents. They meet at least once a quarter, and have an opportunity to speak with staff and ask questions about any aspect of an investigation, including the final conclusion. Team members make recommendations to improve the department's policies and procedures in future investigations.

Texas Community Partners

Texas Community Partners brings local organizations and businesses together to support special programs to benefit abused and neglected children. Working with Junior League volunteers throughout the state, the program provides support for child protective services caseworkers and the children they serve. Community Partners promotes development of projects like Adopt-A-Caseworker and the Rainbow Room, modeled on

highly successful programs in Dallas and Corpus Christi.

After months of planning, the initiative was launched in October 1996 at a conference attended by volunteers from 26 communities with Junior League chapters. A public service announcement was developed featuring First Lady Laura Bush, who was formerly a member of the board of the Dallas Community Partners.

Rainbow Rooms and Adopt-A-Caseworker

Children often enter the foster care system with very little but the clothes they have on. In an emergency, there may be no time to pack, and caseworkers often end up supplying diapers and other necessities out of their own pockets. The Rainbow Room provides donated clothes, toys, formula, and

supplies to caseworkers in a store-like setting.

The Adopt-A-Caseworker program pairs church and civic groups, businesses, and individuals with CPS caseworkers to help families and children. Participants donate birthday gifts, household goods, bus passes, new clothes, gift certificates for children's meals, and money to pay for utilities. It may also be used for a special purpose; for example, one group purchased a used car for an

18-year-old Amarillo girl who was leaving foster care to attend college on a full scholarship.

Youth Development Grants

PRS awarded grants totalling \$10.5 million to 11 targeted communities who design programs to reduce juvenile crime. The Community Youth Development program, part of the 74th Legislature's juvenile justice legislation, provides money for after-school

and mentor programs, computer labs, alternative activities, parenting programs, and other projects in ZIP codes with the highest rates of juvenile crime in the state. Programs must be proposed and organized by members of the communities themselves. Grants have been awarded to projects in Austin, Amarillo, Brownsville, Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Galveston, Houston, McAllen, and San Antonio.

Prevention Campaign

In April, during Child Abuse Prevention Month, PRS kicked off its annual Child Abuse Prevention Campaign. The department sent out 15,000 information kits containing public information materials and camera-ready artwork. The packets included scripts for public service announcements, instructions for blue ribbon campaigns, advertisements for local newspapers, and information for parents.

The kits were distributed to child welfare boards, school districts, religious and civic organizations, hospitals, and professional groups. These organizations copied many of the materials and passed them on to their members, or used the artwork to cre-

ate bookmarks, ribbons, and billboards that carried messages to help prevent child abuse.

The Child Abuse Prevention Packet is now available, in English and Spanish, on the Internet at <http://www.tdprs.state.tx.us/psfc/cpshome.html>.

Family Support

PRS provided funding for 16 collaborative projects to provide health and child abuse prevention services to high-risk families under the "Texas Families: Together and Safe" program. Projects were developed by coalitions of local providers and government agencies to meet the specific needs of their community. Each project is different, but all are designed to streamline access to services and focus on the whole family.

At the Youth and Family Impact Centers in Dallas, for example, the health department, county juvenile department, Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, Dallas Independent School District, Headstart, YWCA, PRS, and other agencies all offer services at a single location in Oak Cliff. The Bryan Independent School District coordi-



nates a program called Project Unity which offers an array of prevention and support services throughout Brazos county in a mobile family center. In San Antonio, a project coordinated by the United Way and Bexar County targets new parents, families in high-risk areas, and teen parents.

Young at Heart

The Young at Heart project brings older adult volunteers to child-care centers where the children benefit from the extra love and attention the seniors have to share. The adults benefit from getting out and sharing their experience and wisdom. The project offers flexible hours and transportation. PRS joins with community organizations in coordination with Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA).

Help for the Elderly

Businesses, churches, and community groups donated food, clothing, blankets, and medical supplies to elderly adult protective services clients. Individual organizations find their own ways to help: for example, an advertising sheet in Houston runs quar-

terly drives for donations, a national motel chain is seeking approval to offer emergency overnight stays at cost, and a local construction group repaired a donated mobile home. Because pets are so important in the lives of many elderly clients, the Houston Society for the Protection of Animals and other organizations donated hundreds of pounds of dog and cat food and local veterinarians provided vaccinations and other services free of charge. ■