



# Neighborhood Family Councils Give Children—and Their Parents—a Head Start in Colorado Springs

## Neighborhood Family Council

### SUMMARY

From 1994 to 1999, the Community Partnership for Child Development in Colorado Springs, Colo., planned and implemented a Free to Grow project under the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) national program, *Free to Grow: Head Start Partnerships to Promote Substance-Free Communities*.

*Free to Grow* operated in three Colorado Springs neighborhoods—Stratton Meadows, Adams and Monterey—which are predominantly white and working class, with a large military presence that contributes to high mobility among residents.

### Key Results

- Despite outreach efforts which included registration drives in *Free to Grow* neighborhoods and contact with the Early Head Start program, the project failed to identify sufficient numbers of pre- and post-Head Start families for intensive case management services.
- Before being discontinued, *Free to Grow* case management services were provided to 43 families.
- *Free to Grow* staff provided support for transitions into and out of Head Start to 256 parents.
- *Free to Grow* staff established three Neighborhood Family Councils in the target communities with 111 participants. Two groups in Stratton Meadows and Adams focused on neighborhood issues. The third group, in Monterey, known as Parents in Action, focused on school, rather than neighborhood, issues.
- The grantee initiated a contract in which it paid the El Paso County Health Department to provide free and immediate substance abuse counseling to *Free to Grow* families.

## Evaluation Findings

Evaluators from Mathematica Policy Research reported that:

- *Free to Grow* was perceived as having made a large change in helping connect families with programs and services to meet their basic needs, as well as gaining access to substance abuse treatment services.
- At the community level, the program was viewed as having made a positive change in getting residents more involved in the community. (See [Lessons Learned](#).)

## Funding

RWJF provided three grants totaling \$986,188 to support the project.

## THE PROBLEM

Community Partnership for Child Development, founded in 1988, is the largest early childhood education program in El Paso County, which it serves through a relatively large center-based Head Start program (among the top 15% in enrollment nationally), with 34 classrooms located in 17 elementary schools throughout the county.

In the 1998–1999 class, it served 831 children ages three and four and their families; 91 percent of the families had incomes at or below poverty levels. Based on family histories and needs assessment, Community Partnership estimates that half of the Head Start families it serves have drug- or alcohol-related problems.

The Colorado Springs neighborhoods in which *Free to Grow* operates—Stratton Meadows, Adams and Monterey—are similar in many respects. Each one is predominantly white and working class, with a large military presence that contributes to high mobility among residents. All three areas have a large and growing number of monolingual Hispanic and Asian families.

One of the biggest problems facing these communities of low-paid military families, service workers and blue-collar workers is the lack of affordable child care, which results in many children being left unsupervised. Drug and alcohol problems are prevalent in all three communities, as is domestic violence, but they are hidden, in part because community norms discourage disclosure.

Gangs and violent crimes are also a major problem, linked to drug trafficking in the area. Colorado Springs is a growing secondary drug market, with the major interstate serving as a pipeline from Mexico to Los Angeles, Denver and Chicago.

## THE PROJECT

Community Partnership envisioned *Free to Grow* as a comprehensive, innovative program that would extend the continuum of care to families with children in the pre-Head Start (birth to three) and post-Head Start (five to eight) age groups through outreach, case management, information and referral services and support for transitions into and out of Head Start.

Community Partnership *Free to Grow* also included increased outreach and access to substance abuse counseling and treatment services, in collaboration with the El Paso County Health Department. Family strengthening services included enhanced access to classes in:

- Parenting skills
- English as a second language
- First aid.

As part of the community-strengthening component, Community Partnership established Neighborhood Family Councils to help parents and other community residents develop the skills they needed to advocate more effectively for themselves and their children, particularly around issues related to substance abuse prevention.

Senior leadership at Community Partnership provided oversight and management of the program, with the Head Start director serving as the *Free to Grow* project director; later in the pilot period, Community Partnership added a full-time *Free to Grow* coordinator.

Community Partnership also created new positions, known as neighborhood family advocates, to conduct both the family- and community-strengthening activities. Because of high turnover among the advocates, the position was reconfigured later in the pilot period, with family-strengthening assigned to two advocates and community work assigned to a third.

### The Partners

The most active *Free to Grow* partners were the McMaster Center treatment program at the El Paso County Health Department, the Meadows Park Community Center, elementary schools in *Free to Grow* neighborhoods, a local health and human services coalition and the Colorado Springs Police Department.

These partners remained supportive throughout the project and eventually took on major roles in sustaining project components. A decision in the later pilot period to limit partner involvement in the resident-driven Neighborhood Family Councils caused some tension and misunderstanding. According to evaluators at Mathematica Policy Research—which

had been commissioned by RWJF to evaluate the *Free to Grow* program and examine several of the projects in detail (see the [Program Results Report](#))—*Free to Grow* partners managed to overcome these challenges and demonstrated the value of partnerships in *Free to Grow* community work.

Further, the partnership with the Health Department became a vehicle for permanently changing the way in which substance abuse treatment services are provided to vulnerable families.

## RESULTS

- **Despite outreach efforts which included registration drives in *Free to Grow* neighborhoods and contact with the Early Head Start program, the project failed to identify sufficient numbers of pre- and post-Head Start families for intensive case management services.** Families who were identified tended to have a child who was already enrolled in Head Start and being served by existing Head Start family advocates.

To avoid overlap between *Free to Grow* and Head Start case management, the project discontinued efforts to provide intensive case management services to pre- and post-Head Start families and focused instead on information and referral services that complemented existing programs.

Information and referral services were provided to 2,002 persons. Before being discontinued, *Free to Grow* case management services were provided to 43 families.

- ***Free to Grow* staff provided support for transitions into and out of Head Start to 256 parents.** The Neighborhood Family Advocates supplemented the work of Head Start's transition coordinator through the distribution of back packs containing school supplies and information about programs and groups that parents could get involved in, presentations at parent meetings and other activities intended to encourage parents' active involvement in their child's education.
- ***Free to Grow* staff established three Neighborhood Family Councils in the target communities with 111 participants.** Two groups in Stratton Meadows and Adams focused on neighborhood issues. Their activities included working with the police to implement a graffiti watch and removal campaign, improving neighborhood safety and attractiveness and sponsoring a summer reading program for the local elementary school.

The third group, in Monterey, known as Parents in Action, focused on school, rather than neighborhood, issues. Its accomplishments included creating an after-school program for unsupervised "latchkey" children and sponsoring events to bring parents together and connect them with resources.

Neighborhood Family Advocates supported these groups by recruiting new members, facilitating activities and serving as a liaison to local agencies and community-based organizations. Community Partnership's ability to directly support the councils lessened as they became more resident driven, and, in some cases, openly critical of institutional partners, such as the school districts, on whom Community Partnership depended for support in fiscally and politically conservative Colorado Springs.

- **The grantee initiated a contract in which it paid the El Paso County Health Department to provide free and immediate substance abuse counseling to *Free to Grow* families.** The Health Department's substance abuse counselor—a position created specifically for this program—served 268 residents over the five-year period, of whom 67 were parents with young children; the rest were older or without children.

Innovative community- and home-based approaches succeeded in bringing families fearful of the stigma of substance abuse into counseling. A typical course of treatment involved three hours of individual and group therapy per week over a 12- to 16-week period. (After grant funding ended, the Health Department covered the cost of the service.)

Due to the confidentiality of treatment, it is unknown whether those in counseling were referred to Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous.

## Evaluation Findings

After discussing *Free to Grow's* impact with project staff, partners and a small group of participating families, evaluators from Mathematica Policy Research reported that the program was perceived as having made a large change in helping connect families with programs and services to meet their basic needs.

*Free to Grow* was also perceived as having helped some parents and other family members access substance abuse treatment services. The Health Department had begun to see the benefits of reaching out to families in certain higher-risk areas. At the community level, the program was viewed as having made a positive change in getting residents more involved in the community.

## Communications

Although dissemination was not a priority, Community Partnership communicated information about the *Free to Grow* project to parents, residents and provider organizations in the Colorado Springs area through articles in the local newspapers, seminars at schools and community centers and a substance abuse training workshop. (No Bibliography is provided.)

## LESSONS LEARNED

- 1. *Free to Grow* must maintain supportive connections with local agencies, especially school districts, while supporting neighborhood councils.** By organizing and empowering residents to improve their communities, agencies that sponsor Head Start may be criticized for "rocking the boat" and may even jeopardize important relationships with partners on whom they depend for fiscal and political survival. In such cases, community partners may be better suited than Head Start agencies to sustain the community strengthening work by sponsoring neighborhood councils. (Evaluator/Mathematica Policy Research)
- 2. More training in substance abuse prevention, preferably from experts in the area, could help staff overcome community resistance to confronting the issue.** Community norms made it difficult for this project to increase awareness about substance abuse issues and to keep project efforts focused on prevention. Staff discovered that "no one will come to a meeting about substance abuse," so project activities were described in more neutral language and substance abuse was rarely a discussion topic. (Evaluator/Mathematica Policy Research)
- 3. Leadership is needed to ensure that Head Start staff members understand the purpose and value of *Free to Grow*.** Head Start leadership did not sufficiently communicate to its staff members the unique focus of *Free to Grow*, and especially how the role of the Neighborhood Family Advocate was distinct from the ongoing work of the Head Start family advocates. This problem intensified because *Free to Grow* staff members worked in the community, often in the evenings, and had limited interaction with Head Start staff. (Evaluator/Mathematica Policy Research)
- 4. The lack of the right mix of skills contributed to a high turnover rate among Neighborhood Family Advocates.** Most advocates lacked expertise in community organizing. While some learned quickly on the job, others struggled. For some advocates an additional problem was the transition from traditional case management work to the more limited role of information and referral provider. Support and training are needed to acclimate staff to their new roles in *Free to Grow*. (Evaluator/Mathematica Policy Research)
- 5. Because the substance abuse treatment component was located within the public health department, Community Partnership had no supervisory authority over the counseling position, which led to problems in communication and coordination.** While the intent was to focus on families with young children, the referral link between Community Partnership and the treatment component weakened over time and services tended to focus on the individuals rather than the family. Furthermore, because of confusion about whether the counselor could reveal client names, families did not receive after-treatment support from Neighborhood Family Advocates as originally planned. (Evaluator/Mathematica Policy Research)

## AFTERWARD

Community Partnership is using Head Start staff (the existing Head Start family advocates and the Community Partnership transition coordinator) to carry on to a limited extent the *Free to Grow* work of extending the continuum of care to pre- and post- Head Start families. Community Partnership also plans to intensify substance abuse-related training for the existing Head Start family advocates and other family services staff.

For the most part, however, Community Partnership is primarily using its partners to sustain *Free to Grow* rather than integrating the model components into the Head Start infrastructure. The substance abuse treatment component will be sustained as planned by the Health Department. Several *Free to Grow* partners will provide some support for the three neighborhood/parent councils, and family advocates will serve as liaisons to these groups.

---

**Prepared by: Jayme Hannay**

Reviewed by: Karyn Feiden, Robert Crum and McKaughan

Program Officers: Marjorie Gutman (Pilot Phase), Karen Gerlach (National Demonstration Phase), and C. Tracy Orleans (Evaluation)

Grant ID # 24234, 29044, 29694

Program area: Human Capital

---

## APPENDIX

### Community Voices

*"The treatment program gave me my life back. I had lost my mind on speed. I was in a psychiatric ward. Even when I was sober I was hearing voices, having anxiety attacks in stores, didn't want to ride the bus. I came here to live at my mom's house and got started in Head Start. They connected me with my counselor and she showed me how to live again. If I didn't have my counselor to show me these baby steps I would have been lost."*

*—Participant*

*"Disenfranchised communities need to develop indigenous healers that, on behalf of their communities, become resource people, compassionate leaders.... When you develop a group of people who care, when a neighborhood begins to move in that direction, you begin to see change."*

*—Partner*