

Rebecca Project for Human Rights Expands Advocacy

Training parents in recovery to advocate for improved policies for low-income families

SUMMARY

From 2005 to 2010, the Washington-based Rebecca Project for Human Rights expanded its efforts to advocate on behalf of low-income families suffering from the impact of a parent's substance abuse.

The Rebecca Project accomplished this chiefly through its Sacred Authority national leadership network, comprised of parents (mostly mothers) in recovery from substance abuse, violence and trauma, who speak from their own experience—at public conferences, educational briefings and congressional hearings—as advocates for innovative health and social welfare policies for families with addiction issues.

Key Results

- Project staff and Sacred Authority members trained 488 parent advocates in 18 two-day trainings across the country. They also expanded the number of Sacred Authority state chapters from 11 to 16 (including the District of Columbia).
- As requested in writing by members of Congress, Sacred Authority members provided written reports and congressional testimony. This contributed to the passage in 2006 of federal legislation mandating \$160 million in support of substance abuse treatment designed for families.
- Project staff and Sacred Authority members established a national Anti-Shackling
 Coalition to end the practice of shackling incarcerated mothers during labor and
 delivery. Shortly after its establishment, members helped end the practice of
 shackling in federal prisons through negotiations with the federal Bureau of Prisons.

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Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) supported this project with three grants totaling \$490,000.

CONTEXT

Some 80 percent of the families who come to the attention of child welfare agencies have members who abuse substances, according to statistics compiled by the Rebecca Project for Human Rights.

Low-income substance abusing mothers need family-based treatment centers, which add services such as family counseling, nursery and preschool education for their children, parenting skills training and pediatric care to the typical mix of services designed for single adults. But less than a third of the mothers who require family treatment are placed in such facilities, Child Welfare League data found. The remaining two-thirds face the traumatic choice of severing ties with their children in order to enter a treatment program designed for single adults or retaining custody while battling addiction without the help of an inpatient treatment program.

The Rebecca Project for Human Rights is a legal and advocacy organization working to reform intersecting health, child welfare and criminal justice policies that have an impact on vulnerable families. Since 2001, it has worked through its Sacred Authority leadership network—comprised mostly of mothers who are stabilized in their recovery from substance abuse—to advocate for the needs of families living with addictions, including the expansion of family-based treatment services.

THE PROJECT

Working primarily through its Sacred Authority leadership network, the Rebecca Project for Human Rights expanded its efforts to advocate for the needs of low-income families who have a parent who is struggling with substance abuse.

Through the Sacred Authority, parents in recovery from substance abuse speak from their own experience—at public conferences, educational briefings with congressional staffers and policy-makers, and as expert witnesses at congressional hearings—as advocates for innovative health and social-welfare policies for families with addiction issues.

When the project began, the Sacred Authority had 11 state chapters, each with an average of 14 parent advocates that staff and other Sacred Authority members had trained to be community leaders. The chapters meet monthly and participate in bi-weekly conference calls with Rebecca Project staff.

Major activities of the project included:

- Recruiting and training low-income parents in recovery and providers of family-based treatment to be advocates for family-based treatment services.
- Educating legislators and policy-makers on the need for family-based treatment services.
- Annual strategy meetings for parent advocates and providers of family-based services.
- Media outreach by parent-advocates—e.g., op-ed articles and radio pieces on the issue of family treatment.
- Redesigning the Web site of the Rebecca Project for Human Rights, chiefly to
 enhance its interactive features and give grassroots advocates, parents in recovery and
 policy-makers more opportunities to connect with each other and gather information.

Other Funding

The Ford Foundation, which was the initial supporter of the Rebecca Project for Human Rights, provided an additional \$150,000 per year.

RESULTS

Project staff reported the following accomplishments to RWJF:

- Project staff and Sacred Authority members trained 488 parent advocates and representatives from 18 treatment facilities¹ in 18 two-day trainings across the country. The trainings featured workshops aimed at developing:
 - Leadership, including skills in team building, recruitment of new members and personal development
 - Policy advocacy, including skills in researching, drafting and debating policy recommendations

Of the 488 parents trained, 135 met eligibility requirements to become new Sacred Authority members (staying clean for at least six months and attending regular project meetings for a year).

• The Rebecca Project formed five new Sacred Authority state chapters, increasing their number from 11 to 16².

¹ Facilities were Arkansas CARES, Ark.; Shields for Families, Calif.; Wheeler Clinic, Conn.; Operation PAR, Fla.; Heritage Foundation–Maya's House, Ga.; Haymarket Center, Ill.; The Women's Treatment Center, Ill.; Chrysalis House, Ky.; Guadenzia Treatment Center, Md.; Bridgeway Counseling Services, Mo.; Queen of Peace Center, Mo.; St. Louis University, Mo.; Amethyst, Ohio; Nexus Recovery Center, Texas; Meta House, Wis.; St. Monica's. Neb.; Wayside House, Minn.; Renewal House, Tenn.

- Project staff and Sacred Authority members conducted 53 one-hour "Crossing the River" workshops, with an average of 16 people per session, at family-based treatment programs in the Washington area and at the Washington Women's Correctional Facility. These workshops—facilitated by poets, writers, educators, drummers and acupuncturists—combine healing and leadership development activities to help women move forward with their recovery.
- As requested in writing by members of Congress, Sacred Authority members provided reports and congressional testimony and conducted educational activities with legislators. According to Sacred Authority staff, this contributed to the passage in 2006 of federal legislation mandating \$160 million in support of family-based treatment. (See the Bibliography for details.) Legislation included:
 - \$145 million over five years to support family-based, comprehensive, long-term substance abuse treatment services, as part of the Child and Family Improvement Services Act of 2006
 - \$4 million to expand methamphetamine treatment services to pregnant and parenting women who come into contact with the criminal justice system, through amendments to the 2006 reauthorization of the Patriot Act
 - An increase of \$11 million in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's 2007 budget for family treatment services
- In 2008, the Rebecca Project established a national Anti-Shackling Coalition to end the practice of shackling incarcerated mothers during labor and delivery, which the American Medical Association, in a resolution calling for an end to the practice, describes as "barbaric" and "medically hazardous." As of 2010, 42 people from 35 organizations were active in the coalition.

Working through the coalition, members helped end the practice of shackling in federal prisons through negotiations with the federal Bureau of Prisons. Sacred Authority mothers continue to work with the American Correctional Association, state lawmakers, and U.S. Senators to end the practice on the state level. Coalition members also document personal stories of the practice, posting them on their Mothers Shackled During Labor and Birth page on their Web site. One account, for example, reads:

Stephanie, who is legally blind, gave birth to her son Diamond in shackles during her incarceration in 1993....After going into labor, the police transported Stephanie to the local hospital.... Stephanie was placed in shackles from the time she left the jail to deliver Diamond until her return to the jail forty-eight hours later. Specifically, the

²The 16 states (including the District of Columbia) are: Arkansas, California, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, **Kentucky**, **Maryland**, Missouri, **Nebraska**, **North Carolina**, Ohio, **Texas** and Wisconsin. (States in bold were added during the grant period.)

³ From the *Huntington Post*. Online.

local sheriff placed both metal belly-waist and ankle shackles on Stephanie... During the delivery itself, the doctor and nurse asked the police to remove the ankle and belly-waist shackles. The sheriff removed only belly-waist shackles, "to prevent a possible escape." Stephanie, as a result, gave birth to Diamond, with her ankles shackled to the bed.

• Mothers who had been trained by Sacred Authority were issued an invitation to testify before the Arkansas State Legislature in its review of Garrett's law, which automatically placed a mother on the state's child maltreatment registry if she or her infant tested positive for illegal drugs at the time of delivery. The Sacred Authority members testified that placement on this registry stigmatized a mother, rendered her children vulnerable to out-of-home foster care placements and often prevented the mother from obtaining employment.

The legislature amended the law in October 2008 so that a mother can no longer automatically be placed on a child neglect registry for the above reasons. The amended law now requires a formal finding of neglect for a mother to be placed on a child maltreatment registry. See the ACLU Web site for a description of this change.

- In 2007, project staff formed the Family Treatment Directors' and Allies'
 Coalition to help directors of comprehensive family-based treatment programs
 connect with each other and advance a common national agenda. In November of
 that year, staff hosted a forum for coalition members at the annual conference of the
 Public Welfare Foundation, with 19 program directors from 12 states attending to
 discuss best practices and strategies to expand comprehensive family-treatment.
- Project staff subcontracted with Washington-based Siren Digital
 Communications to redesign the Rebecca Project Web site. New features include:
 - A resource section including fact sheets, policy papers, reports and Sacred Authority materials for advocates, policy-makers, academics and students.
 - Video storage capability and an expanded photo gallery.
 - Project staff also created a Facebook site to enable online discussions and information sharing at www.facebook.com/rebeccaproject.

See the Bibliography for details.

Communications

In July 2010, National Public Radio aired a 17-minute report on the Obama administration's approach to substance abuse services for families, which included an interview with Project Director Imani Walker (available online). In addition, two newspapers in Missouri—the St. Louis Review and the Columbia Tribune—ran stories that reported on the work of Sacred Authority members.

The Rebecca Project also held annual meetings in Washington that brought together between 35 and 40 parent advocates and providers of family-based services to craft policy recommendations, collectively explore education strategies and develop national and state events.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Never underestimate the power of personal stories to sway decision-makers. According to the project director, stories based on real life experiences are a compelling complement to the statistics and numbers typically provided by public health experts. (Project Director/Walker)

AFTERWARD

The Rebecca Project for Human Rights continues its work with funding from the Ford Foundation. Among its new accomplishments is a report card, produced in collaboration with the National Women's Law Center in Washington, which grades states and the federal government on the treatment of incarcerated mothers in the areas of prenatal care, shackling, prison nurseries and alternative sentencing. A report about the project, including report card results, is available online.

Project staff expects to create two to three more Sacred Authority state chapters in 2011.

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Program Management Team: Vulnerable Populations

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Facebook page for the Rebecca Project for Human Rights, www.facebook.com/rebeccaproject June 2010.