
HEALING THE WHOLE FAMILY

A LOOK AT FAMILY CARE PROGRAMS

by MaryLee Allen and Jamila Larson

This Document contains:

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Executive Summary

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◆ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ◆

Healing the Whole Family: A Look at Family Care Programs describes 50 family care programs around the country surveyed by the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), with generous support from the Hite Foundation. CDF examined programs that treat or serve families struggling with substance abuse, homelessness, domestic violence, and teen parenting—problems that, if not addressed, all too often bring families to the door of the child welfare system. In this study, we defined family care programs as those that allow parents (usually mothers) and children to live together in supervised living arrangements for extended periods. These programs also provide comprehensive, individualized services to both the parent and child, as well as services to strengthen the family unit and promote family and economic stability.

CDF sees family care as an important component of the service continuum for some families for which in-home services will not work because the family is homeless, the children's or the mother's safety is at risk in the home, or for other reasons. Family care is appropriate when children's safety can be assured and when parents are committed both to complying with appropriate treatment regimens and to working hard to strengthen their families. The emphasis in family care

on healing the whole family can offer family members a powerful opportunity to change their lives. This report describes how family care programs work on a daily basis and the core elements that make them different from other more traditional treatment programs and other social services. It also discusses their funding sources and the results of early efforts to assess family care's effectiveness. Finally, this report reviews the lessons learned from family care that can be used to help strengthen other services for children and families.

Healing the Whole Family is intended as a resource for child and family advocates, staff of public and private child and family service agencies, homeless shelters, domestic violence, teen parent, and substance abuse treatment programs, as well as legislators and other policy makers who are committed to finding better ways to keep children safe and in permanent families. The report is also relevant to the work of welfare agencies and employment and training agencies, since the problems addressed by family care programs are often the same ones that create serious barriers to employment for a portion of the people they serve. Treating families' problems and helping parents stay on the employment track can keep families moving toward economic and social stability and prevent them from needing to seek help from the child welfare system.

What Family Care Looks Like

Our survey of family care programs was designed to help us learn more about how family care programs are being used for families with different needs, in different settings, in different parts of the country. We were not necessarily looking for model programs, nor did we have the capacity to evaluate the programs we surveyed. In *Healing the Whole Family*, we explore the origins of family care, those whom it serves, types of living arrangements, lengths of stay, the services offered, and aftercare approaches, illustrating each discussion with rich examples and quotes from program staff.

We show how family care uniquely addresses a woman's needs as a woman (providing substance abuse treatment, health services, and therapy for sexual abuse, for example), as a mother (offering opportunities for parenting education, counseling, and role modeling), and as a community member (offering help with education, job training and employment, and opportunities to participate in community activities). We also describe the equally important services for the children, such as therapeutic child care, health services, and supervised "children of survivors" groups. Finally, we discuss what makes family care particularly unique—the attention paid to the family unit itself. Forty-three of the 50 programs we surveyed assess the parent–child relationship at intake, and many programs provide opportunities for supervised parent–child interaction, parenting education, family therapy, and organized family recreation. The report features brief profiles of five programs serving families with different primary needs. An appendix includes one-page summaries of all 50 programs surveyed and a grid showing the key characteristics of each program arranged by the target group of families served.

What Makes Family Care Effective

As part of our survey, we asked family care staff what makes their programs effective. We used their responses, along with our own analysis and that of other experts, to identify those elements that make the best family care programs work for the children and families they serve.

The elements that make them effective include:

- Comprehensive services that address the complex needs of parents, children, and the family unit.
- Longer treatment timelines and aftercare that allow genuine change and healing to take place, as families uncover and address problems for the first time, practice new behaviors in a supportive setting, and ease back into the community.
- Priority attention to children's safety.
- An accepting yet demanding treatment environment characterized by clear expectations and standards, as well as an understanding that relapses and setbacks are part of recovery.
- Committed, skillful, and flexible staff members who are able to address diverse and emerging needs.
- Active peer support among residents while in the program and as they make the transition back into the community.

How Family Care Is Supported

Two-thirds of the family care programs we surveyed had annual budgets of more than \$600,000. Three-quarters of the programs in our survey depended on public resources for at least 80 percent of their annual budgets in the year they were surveyed. We examined the patchwork of federal, state, and local funding sources and other resources that help support these programs, which total at least 66 sources. Most of the family care programs we surveyed also depend on donations of time, expertise, gifts, and supplies from individuals and institutions in their communities. One program estimates that it receives more than \$150,000 worth of volunteer services each year. Other programs identified specialized services they were able to provide only with donated help. The report lists the funding sources used by the family care programs, as well as their major sources of in-kind contributions.

How Family Care Differs from Traditional Child Welfare Services

Family care programs and local child welfare agencies tend to serve families with the same characteristics and histories. Unfortunately, the services typically offered by child welfare agencies too often do not get to the heart of a troubled family's complex needs. Sometimes a child is temporarily removed from the parent, but the parent may be left without help to solve the problems that had necessitated the child's removal. Even when services are provided to the parent, they may be incomplete and uncoordinated—short-term detox, for example, with no follow-up. As a result, children may return home but subsequently cycle in and out of foster homes or relatives' homes, as family crises erupt and subside. In fact, many parents participating in family care with one child have other children who had been placed in foster care earlier. The report explores the variety of relationships that exist between family care programs and child welfare agencies.

We at CDF believe there would be tremendous benefit to children, families, and the larger society if child welfare agencies and other agencies and programs serving vulnerable families were able to target services and treatment to both children and parents, strengthen parenting capacities and skills, and offer families follow-through services and aftercare. We believe that child welfare agencies, working together with programs offering substance abuse treatment and help to teen parents and parents struggling with homelessness and domestic violence, should find ways to offer family care when it is appropriate. At the very least, we encourage child welfare agencies to begin modifying their service approaches to incorporate some of the characteristics that have made family care effective in strengthening and stabilizing families and keeping children safely with their parents.

What We Know About the Success of Family Care

There is little doubt in the minds of those most closely involved with family care—program staff and families—that it improves many

participants' lives. Many of the features of family care were added specifically to make the programs more responsive to the needs of women and children than other service and treatment approaches. However, the challenges in evaluating these types of programs are significant. Formal systematic evaluations of family care are still evolving, so current data on outcomes are limited. Several major reviews of family care programs are expected before the end of 1999, and other evaluations are underway.

Nonetheless, what we do know about the effectiveness of family care is encouraging. The best family care programs seem to be documenting success in alleviating harmful behaviors among the women they serve, such as alcohol and other drug abuse, repeat pregnancies among young teens, engagement in violent relationships, and involvement with the criminal justice system. There is also scattered evidence of enhanced participation in education and employment and of decreased homelessness. Early studies also show that women participants exhibit increases in self-esteem and decreases in depression and stress levels.

Outcome data for children are even scarcer, but programs are getting better at tracking these outcomes, too. Programs have found that babies born in family care are healthier; developmental scores improve for preschool children during residence; and there seems to be a positive impact on school performance for school-age children. Programs with strong parenting components also have found that parenting attitudes improve, parent-child attachment increases, and reunification of parents with children in foster care typically occurs.

What Challenges and Opportunities Lie Ahead

Despite its promise, serious challenges lie ahead for family care. Ongoing sources of funding are threatened by the move to managed care, some of the changes in the 1996 welfare law, and the termination of federal support for residential treatment programs for women with substance abuse problems and their children over the next several years. Yet other recent

developments have the potential to increase states' interest in using the family care approach in dealing with vulnerable children and families. For example, to meet federally mandated performance rates for moving welfare recipients into the work force, states will be looking for ways to address such problems as substance abuse, domestic violence, and homelessness, which prevent parents from getting and keeping jobs to support their families. In addition, recent changes in child protection and adoption laws that expedite timelines for decision-making will make it essential that child welfare agencies get services and treatment to families as soon as they enter care. In both of these areas, the lessons of family care can be instructive. *Healing the Whole Family* offers recommendations for enlarging the impact of family care. Specific recommendations address the need for:

- Advocates for children to make a stronger case for investments in these troubled families.
- Expanded funding options for family care programs.
- Continued and expanded efforts to evaluate the impact of family care programs on children and parents and on the parent–child relationship.
- Enhanced capacity of child welfare agencies—through new partnerships with other agencies, programs, and community institutions—to address the needs of parents with substance abuse and domestic violence problems and those facing homelessness and teen parenting, in order to equip these parents with the skills and resources to build stable families for their children.