

A young girl with curly hair is blowing bubbles outdoors. She is holding a blue bottle and a yellow bubble wand. The background is a soft-focus green landscape with trees and sunlight filtering through the leaves.

Strong families and safe children

How community resource centers are helping families in Gainesville

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SAFE STRONG SUPPORTIVE

safe children | strong families | supportive communities



Introduction

When Crystal lost her job as a server at a local restaurant, the rug was pulled out from under her. With no income, she couldn't afford food, utilities or even rent. The fear of losing the apartment that she shared with her 7-year-old daughter was very real. Crystal knew she needed help to regain stability, and she found it in a place she'd never thought to look: her local library.

Can a library be a one-stop shop for becoming self-sufficient, improving parenting skills and turning a bad situation into a stepping stone to success? Absolutely — especially if it houses one of the four community resource centers operated by the Partnership for Strong Families (PSF) in North Central Florida.

PSF is a child welfare services provider serving Alachua and 12 other counties in North Central Florida. PSF works to enhance the community's ability to protect and nurture children by building, maintaining and constantly improving a network of family support services. For many families, facing the stress of joblessness, homelessness, addiction or other challenges can lead to abuse, neglect and even the removal of children from their homes. Over the past seven years, PSF has found a powerful way to help families become resilient and stay together by leveraging a wealth of community assets through strong partnerships — starting with a local library.

In 2007, Florida had one of the nation's highest rates of children removed from their families due to abuse or neglect — and within Florida, Alachua County's removal rates were among the highest. This got the attention of Casey Family Programs, which was focusing on Florida as part of its efforts to safely reduce the need for foster care by 50 percent by 2020.

PSF and the state Department of Children and Families (DCF) partnered with Casey Family Programs to explore the possibility of targeting the most vulnerable communities to help turn around the county's removal rate. They invited community agencies, nonprofits and other county leaders to brainstorm why the county's numbers were so high and what the community might do, together, to improve them. As they explored community need, one particular ZIP code — 32609, in northeast Gainesville — stood out with disproportionately high levels of child abuse and shelter stays, especially among the African American population. This became the target community for a new form of child abuse prevention.

Birth of a partnership

In June 2008, PSF met with community partners, including the Alachua County Library District (ACLD), to identify a place to open a resource center. Since the library was also looking to open a branch in northeast Gainesville, it began collaborating with PSF with the idea that being co-located would reduce the stigma people feel about visiting a social services center.

"Timing definitely played an important role," says Pebbles Edelman, senior vice president of clinical and community services at PSF. "The ACLD's desire to open a new branch in our identified 'hotspot' ZIP code offered the perfect opportunity for partnership and collocation."



The Library Partnership had begun.

The list of partners grew from there. The group formed four committees and engaged experts to discuss the needs and kinds of services they could provide to support job readiness, mental health, physical health and early learning. Eager to launch, the partners pushed hard to hire a manager and start offering services as soon as possible. After less than a year of planning, the Library Partnership opened its doors in July 2009.

In retrospect, says Edelman, the partners realized they had missed one key element in their quick launch: community voice. "There is a difference between expert knowledge and community knowledge. Some of our initial services went well, and others did not. We had to learn to allow our partners to be flexible with the services they offered to meet consumers where they are. We completely transformed our services, recruited the right partners, and based services on what patrons were asking for. That's what started to build trust, and then participation grew."

Because of a stigma attached to seeking social services and a distrust of DCF (a holdover from an earlier era), the library setting offers a natural, nonthreatening place to provide critical resources. The Alachua County Library created a new location in a local shopping center, between a hair salon and a dollar store. It's close to the community center and within walking distance of several schools.

"It may not look like much on the outside, but inside it's amazing," says Edelman. "When you walk in, you enter a welcome reception area that leads to the library on the right and the resource center is on the left, with plenty of space for community meetings and one-on-one consultations."

The library and PSF partnered closely from the beginning. The library leases space to PSF, and PSF provides at least one full-time resource center staff member and an army of volunteers. Services include connections to community resources for rent and utilities assistance, immediate aid with food and clothing, and programs and activities that improve family relationships and health, such as early childhood learning, tutoring for all ages, parent/child activities, social programs, counseling, health events, computer training and assistance with job searches and financial management. As often as possible, the library and resource centers collaborate to deliver well-rounded programming and events.

Casey Family Programs helped to forge relationships and act as a thought partner for local leaders. It also helped PSF access data, community relationships, communications expertise and a number of other resources.

"In the Library Partnership, we saw a very organic process, strong leadership, willing partners, strong public-private collaboration and a willingness to think differently than they had in the past," says Paul DiLorenzo, senior director at Casey Family Programs. "From day one, they saw the value of emphasizing family assets and strengths, rather than weaknesses and deficits, and



positioned themselves as resources to help strengthen families and support a community that would otherwise be ignored. We've been impressed by their ability to bring people in to address a crisis need, but then move them along a path to self-sufficiency to a place where they then want to give back. That's what strengthens communities."

Initial five-year data (2009 to 2014) for the Library Partnership showed an incredible 76 percent decrease in the number of verified child maltreatment reports in the communities surrounding the Library Partnership, based upon ZIP codes. And by 2015, the number of visits to this resource center alone topped 11,000 per year.

In 2010, the Library Partnership was recognized as a Bright Idea program by Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. In 2013, Casey Family Programs invited them into their Building Communities of Hope Learning Initiative.

"Becoming a Community of Hope took our relationship with Casey to a whole new level," says Edelman. "I hadn't realized just how many services they really had to offer, like marketing help and technical assistance with data collection. They did — and continue to — try to meet every need they can."

PSF has since expanded the resource center model to three other sites: the SWAG Family Partnership Resource Center (which serves several neighborhoods in southwest Gainesville) in 2012, the Cone Park Library Resource Center in east Gainesville in 2013, and the Tri-County Resource Center serving residents of Levy, Gilchrist and Dixie counties in 2015.

Expanding the model

"We've been able to grow organically over time, with lots of input from the community, and had the opportunity to learn from our mistakes," says Edelman.

With each new resource center, PSF has worked with local partners to conduct a community needs assessment, getting information from the local community about what they need or want. Casey Family Programs provided ongoing support for community planning processes and assistance in gathering data about needs, including a dynamic "heat map."

Finding the heat

PSF used "heat maps" created by the Alachua County Sheriff's Department and the University of Florida to determine areas of greatest need. In 2015, Casey Family Programs helped update the heat maps to show improvements in target communities.

The heat maps act as a powerful visual to help citizens and potential supporters recognize community vulnerabilities, while clearly demonstrating the positive impact of the resource centers to local children and families.

Each new center tailors its offerings to the community it serves. Some provide supports for transportation and children’s educational needs, others offer support and financial assistance for the GED, and some keep a store of basic food and clothing for immediate assistance. All centers focus on engaging parents to help them feel more connected to their communities.

Like the original Library Partnership, all services are linked to the five protective factors identified in the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s Strengthening Families™ Protective Factors Framework. Studies show that when these protective factors are present — family functioning and resiliency, social connections, concrete support in times of need, knowledge of parenting and child development, and nurturing and attachment — the likelihood of child abuse and neglect decreases.

“Concrete supports have always been the most sought resources, but we use those as an opportunity to have conversations with visitors and build trust so we can engage them with other, deeper services and programs,” says Edelman. “Over time, we’ve seen requests for parental nurturing and attachment services increase, an indication that our efforts are making the desired impact in the community.”

Partners continue to play a key role in each location, with each organization offering services that speak to their respective missions and enhance connectivity with other providers. Managers at each resource center coordinate regularly with partners, and PSF convenes quarterly partner meetings to share information, check in, share success stories and provide networking time. While all partners deliver services separately, they do so in close alignment and with very open lines of communication.

For example, the Alachua County Library offers literacy programs at the two library-based sites to help boost the numbers of neighborhood residents who attain a high school diploma. It created a summer reading program and launched a program called Prime Time that offers a free dinner and reading time for families.

Resource Center Partners

- Alachua County Community Support Services
- Alachua County Housing Authority
- Alachua County Office of Homelessness
- Alachua County Public Health Department
- Big Brothers, Big Sisters
- Casey Family Programs
- Catholic Charities
- Central Florida Community Action Agency
- CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services
- Children’s Home Society
- Children’s Medical Services
- Department of Children and Families
- Early Learning Coalition
- Florida Institute for Workforce Innovation
- Florida Works
- Gainesville Community Ministries
- Gainesville Housing Authority
- Girl Scouts
- Healthy Families
- Healthy Start
- HIPPY In-home Parenting Program
- Meridian Behavioral Healthcare
- Peaceful Paths
- Rebuilders Program – Gainesville Police Department
- Regional Transit Systems
- Salvation Army
- Santa Fe College
- Three Rivers Legal Services
- University of Florida (UF)
- UF Eastside Clinic
- United Way



Library staff also co-designed an oral history program with PSF staff and the University of Florida in conjunction with Juneteenth to commemorate the end of slavery and introduce kids to the event's history.

"When PSF staff wanted to do programs that required library resources like access to our databases, literature or program design, I would provide them," says Linda Cue, a library staff member who formerly worked at the Library Partnership and at Cone Park. "When I did outreach events in the community, they would give me all of their resource lists to share and sometimes come with me to talk about the resource center. By the end of my time there, they were doing literacy stuff, and I was doing some of the social work!"

Meridian Behavioral Health, a resource center partner that offers a full spectrum of behavioral health services, refers people to the centers or to specific events or services. "They also give us referrals," says Alan Paulin, vice president at Meridian. "We've worked with the Library Partnership since inception, offering mental and physical health programs, tutoring, hosting scout troops, and leading education classes for parents."

Meridian offers regular outreach at all resource center locations and uses contact with patrons to help dispel the stigma of using mental health services. "Tutoring and being a presence is a way to help educate about our services and build trust," says Paulin. Meridian and PSF are also considering expanding the availability of mental health counseling at the resource centers for residents who might be hesitant or unable to travel to a Meridian clinic.

Crystal's library resource center location was at Cone Park on the east side of Gainesville. "I always took my daughter to the library to get books and to use the Internet," she says. "One day I needed to fax a form to get rental assistance. The resource center offered free faxing, and that was the trigger."

Crystal met Erica Reed, the Cone Park Library Resource Center manager. "She was always so helpful and let me know about the other services they could provide."

The resource center staff and volunteers helped Crystal secure her rental assistance and access a public emergency fund to assist with utility bills. They also helped with food, bridging the gap between when Crystal lost her job and when food assistance began.

But the resource center did much more than just help Crystal survive. It helped her return to self-sufficiency. "They knew I was serious about finding a job," says Crystal. "They had a job board and helped with resume review. They asked what kind of jobs I was into. They told me about job fairs. At one of those fairs, I got a call to interview, and I ended up getting that job."

A rural approach

At the Tri-County Community Resource Center (TCCRC), which serves a population of 45,000 people in 2,100 square miles, the approach is tailored to the needs of a more rural community. That includes not only building trust with families, but also with potential partners.

“Historically, local organizations have often worked in silos, and increasing collaboration and communication among potential partners has at times been a challenge. It’s been important to help the community members and partner agencies understand what is available and how to best access services and resources,” says Beverly Goodman, resource center manager and an area native.

To build trust, she’s spent more than a year visiting providers, explaining the resource center’s role as an information hub rather than a competitor. She also has taken a slightly different approach than the urban resource centers for reaching families. “There’s not really a neighborhood here, so kids don’t just wander in. To get kids here, you have to have the families engaged first.”

From its offices in an old town hall building, TCCRC offers computers and internet connections to help residents apply for assistance programs; works with a local career office to promote interview workshops, clothing closets and application help; and offers free CPR and basic life support classes to enhance the marketable skills of residents who have or are seeking jobs in hospitals, daycare centers or similar settings. There’s also an emergency food pantry, weekly on-site mental health counseling and other services, too.

To entice parents to bring their children, TCCRC has offered fun and creative events, such as a tea party and a parent/child cooking class. A new “Family Dinners to Go” night offers hot and healthy take-home meals for parents who bring their children. As part of the process, parents must watch a quick demonstration about how to use food assistance benefits to make healthy afterschool snacks and then complete a quick game with their kids. (Packed with the dinner are place settings, brochures about dinner table conversation starters, ideas for more mealtime games, and information about why eating together as a family is important.)

Tracking outcomes

PSF looks for hard evidence to prove the value of everyone’s investment. PSF tracks data in many ways and uses it to continually adjust and improve its offerings. In addition to client satisfaction surveys, staff also collect demographic data on all patrons to tailor programs to their needs. PSF staff constantly review that data to ensure programs are culturally relevant and meet basic needs.

“We also look at domestic violence rates, high school graduation rates, the percentage of children receiving free or reduced lunch in school, and other factors just to get a better idea of the population we are serving,” says Edelman. “Managers also have to report gaps in services, which allows us to brainstorm how to fill them.

For example, the Library Partnership saw an uptick in requests for children’s activities in the summer months, and was able to adapt a summer program from other resource center sites to respond to the local community.



PSF also tracks the level of community support, in terms of the number of providers and partners, volunteers and volunteer hours, and cash and in-kind donations. This helps ensure that the resources given by partners are indeed aligned with the needs of patrons, and it calls attention when needs begin to exceed service delivery so that partners can adjust or new partners can be found.

Overall, more than 50 formal and informal partners provide services through the resource centers. Forming those partnerships and maintaining relationships are the key to success, says Edelman. “I continue to be so grateful for our partners’ willingness to set aside turf issues and to provide their services for free — and also for my staff’s ability to maintain those relationships.”

Because of these strong partnerships, the resource centers have delivered impressive results.

In 2015 alone, the resource centers provided services to patrons more than 45,000 times. Of those served, 93 percent reported that they were “very pleased” with the services received, and 99 percent said they would recommend the resource center to others.

In terms of the protective factors that undergird the resource center approach, in 2015 the majority of patrons (57 percent) sought concrete supports in times of need, but they also sought social connections (15 percent), parenting and child development knowledge (13 percent), family functioning and resiliency assistance (11 percent), and support for nurturing and attachment (4 percent).

The resource centers also have grown in community support, attracting nearly \$11,500 in community grants and donations and nearly \$130,000 in in-kind support in 2015. About 130 volunteers supplied 11,712 hours of time, the equivalent of six full-time employees during 2016.

Since the resource center model launched in 2009, data have shown a decrease of 44 to 58 percent in the verified child maltreatment counts for the communities each Gainesville center serves.

Although the TCCRC has been operating for just over a year, it has served more than 4,000 visitors, created a network of approximately 40 partners and provided 7,000 distinct services to patrons.

“We see success in Gainesville both in the short term and the long term,” says Casey Family Programs’ DiLorenzo. “In the short term, they’ve been able to move numbers in the right direction around child safety, well-being and school engagement. Even better, their long-term prospects for success are enhanced because they’ve changed the conversation about serving families from being stigmatizing to focusing on building support and strength.”

The success of service extends to all partners in meaningful ways. “When you see the kids and families interacting, and the positive energy they bring in on a day-to-day basis, that’s immeasurable,” says Meridian’s Paulin. “I know we need data, but it’s a really neat thing when a



parent says, 'Thank you! My son is actually talking to me now,' or, 'My kids are coming home and doing homework.' It's wonderful hearing parents talking to one another and knowing they are bringing their new knowledge home."

When Crystal started her new job as a receptionist at a research clinic, the resource center provided her with a transportation card until she received her first paycheck. After only a few weeks, she was promoted to the position of recruitment and outreach coordinator. Now she and her daughter have moved to a new home, closer to her work and in a better neighborhood with a school that offers gifted programs for her very bright daughter. But Crystal hasn't forgotten about the Cone Park Library Resource Center.

"Because the resource center helped me, I know they are a complete resource for the community. I will always help them by telling my story and encourage others to reach out. I tell them that it won't be a lost cause getting up every day. The resource center was my secret to success. They literally saved my life and helped me get on my feet."

Looking ahead

PSF has plans to enhance and expand the resource center concept. Locally, its staff are working to build stronger relationships with the faith community and develop opportunities for aligning in support of child welfare. PSF also hopes to increase its marketing and awareness capabilities, grow services and programs at each center, and provide more development and recognition opportunities for resource center staff. For itself, partners and other community members, PSF is looking at ways to enhance prevention-focused trainings to include a broader range of skills, such as resource development, civic engagement, data indicators and asset building.

Looking beyond its own service area, PSF plans to capture the tools and lessons it has learned in the *Operational Toolkit for Resource Centers*. This toolkit will help PSF tell the story of its success and provide other communities with the knowledge and tools necessary to replicate the resource center model.

"Being a Community of Hope and growing this approach of prevention and intervention has really given us the opportunity to have a greater impact on more families," says Edelman. "The idea of preventing abuse before it starts is extremely welcome and is core to our mission. But even beyond that, our resource centers are seeing so many other related gains — in terms of education, job attainment, better health, freedom from domestic violence and other factors that really change people's lives. There are layers upon layers of success here."

Now that Crystal has regained stability and self-sufficiency for herself and her daughter, she's committed to cultivating hope for others in her community. "I've been blessed to be in this position, and now I want to help others out," she says. "That is what will help our communities get better."

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families across America. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and two territories and with more than a dozen tribal nations to influence long-lasting improvements to the safety and success of children, families and the communities where they live.

P 800.228.3559

P 206.282.7300

F 206.282.3555

casey.org | contactus@casey.org



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