

Integrating Youth Services

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Governmental agencies in Oakland, Calif., are collaborating to serve children better **BY SAM SCOTT**

AL AND MARSHAE RIVERA keep their home stocked with candy—all the better to stop their kids from venturing out to buy some themselves. No one knows better than they do that in East Oakland, Calif., even short trips can turn violent. Their seventh-grade son was playing football outside this spring when drive-by gunfire ripped through the game from two directions, injuring several people.

For the 12-year-old, it was the latest in a series of traumas he's experienced growing up on some of the San Francisco Bay Area's meanest streets. As a child, he learned from a passerby that his uncle had just been killed in a triple murder. He's seen a dead body on the sidewalk. And two days before bullets went flying into his football game, a family friend was shot riding the bus.

His parents do what they can to keep him safe. They recently moved out of the public housing projects. They bar him from hanging out with kids showing signs of gang affiliation. And each summer, they send him to his grandmother's in Arizona, far away—they hope—from the dangers of so much idle time. But they're waging a war on multiple fronts. The Riveras not only are trying to keep their son safe from gang shootings, they're also trying to keep him away from gang membership in an area where joining is often more the rule than the exception. So when the couple learned that their son's school was offering a Saturday class that took the gang issue by the horns, they enrolled him. The History of Gangs engaged young Rivera in discussions about the socioeconomic realities of crime. And crucially for the Riveras, the class took their son on nearly a dozen field trips to San Quentin State Prison, to hear from inmates who learned their lessons too late. The couple can't speak highly enough of Art Mola, the class's leader. "Art is able to see things here that we can't see at home," Al Rivera says.

The gang class is not on standard school curricula. It's the result of the Safe Passages/Youth Ventures Joint Powers Authority, an innovative collaboration founded in 2006 to focus youth agencies from Alameda County, the city of Oakland, and the Oakland Unified School District behind a common cause—changing the way public systems work for children in areas blighted by violence and poverty.

Historically, the joint powers authority model that Safe Passages/Youth Ventures follows has been used to manage complex transportation and infrastructure projects involving multiple government agencies. But Safe Passages' CEO, Josefina Alvarado-Mena, an attorney



Oakland, Calif., middle school students start summer class with a "Harambee!" a 30-minute celebratory activity.

and a veteran of the Oakland public schools, believed it could be just as effective to deliver social services, since the issues facing low-income youth in a city like Oakland are just as complex and involve just as many governmental agencies.

RESOURCES MEETING NEEDS

In the early 1990s, the prevailing approach to interagency cooperation in Alameda County was to convene a big meeting where participants took turns saying what they were doing to address youth concerns, recalls David Kears, Safe Passages' chairman and the county's former health care services director. Then they'd adjourn with a promise to have another big meeting. The shortcomings of the approach were obvious. Youth service professionals were fighting problems that extended beyond the boundaries of any one agency, but they paid only lip service to the idea of tackling them together. One agency might ask what they could do for another, Kears says. They rarely asked what they could do *with* them.

The impetus for change was boosted in 1996 by a 10-year, \$10 million grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which chose Oakland, the seat of Alameda County, as one of five U.S. cities to take part in an initiative to improve health and safety for young people through smarter planning and cooperation. At first, the Oakland schools, Alameda County, and city government proposed

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to create family resource centers, Kears said. But the grant providers said the plan lacked scalability and sustainability.

With new urgency, the collaborators intensified their search for meaningful ways to work together—an effort that ultimately produced Safe Passages as a research and development hub focused on using existing infrastructure like schools to facilitate change. Safe Passages developed a multilayered strategy to focus various agencies on helping kids in early childhood centers, middle school, and the juvenile justice system.

The overarching idea was to bring together representatives from youth agencies so each could see what the other was doing. In middle schools, for example, site coordinators hired by the schools led team discussions on individual students with teachers, social workers, and, if necessary, off-site professionals like probation officers. “By bringing those people together in a focused effort on a particular child, there’s a much better chance that you integrate services,” says Alvarado-Mena. “You don’t have the probation officer making the same call as the school person.”

The collaboration directed resources to where they were most needed. Before Safe Passages, students who consistently misbehaved were often sent to special education classes, when what they often needed was mental health counseling. It was a classic example of institutional silos. The schools had troubled kids, but not adequate mental health resources. The county had access to mental health care money—in the form of state Medi-Cal funds—but lacked consistent access to many of the kids. Resources were essentially missing needs.

Through Safe Passages, the schools and county began to collaborate. In 2000, using Medi-Cal’s Early and Periodic Screening Diagnostic and Treatment program, full-time health workers were placed in the poorest schools. These counselors now see students with minimal disruption to students’ school days, and they are available to students seeking help themselves.

“It’s probably the best thing we ever did as a county,” Kears says. “I don’t think that previous to this initiative we ever went to a school and asked how we can be helpful.”

At the same time, Safe Passages helped extend mental health care into the foster system, early childhood centers, and juvenile detention facilities. Results were immediate. Between 1998 and 2005, there was a 72 percent drop in suspensions in participating Oakland middle schools, and in 2004 there was a 45 percent drop in criminal recidivism rates among youth who participated in the organization’s program for a year.

In 2004, as Safe Passages’ ideas were starting to show success, its leaders began to look for a way to secure the partnership once the decade-long Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant ran out. Alvarado-Mena championed the joint powers agreement model, which had been used locally by the Chabot Space & Science Center, an educational partnership formed in 1989 between the city of Oakland, the East Bay Regional Park District, and Oakland schools.

In 2006, the Safe Passages partnership was reborn as two organi-

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Enable professionals serving the same clients to share information

Recognize the potential of unorthodox organizational models

Share financial resources to broaden the impact of programs

zations working in tandem—Youth Ventures Joint Powers Authority, an intergovernmental agency, and Safe Passages, its nonprofit arm—with Alvarado-Mena as CEO/executive director of both. Creating twin bodies gave the organization the desired institutional stability, while retaining the flexibility to pursue different funding opportunities. The model was also adaptable enough to allow change. In 2007, the San Lorenzo Unified School District, which serves unincorporated areas of Alameda County, joined Youth Ventures as its fourth member.

A BIGGER BUDGET

Safe Passages/Youth Ventures currently operates as a think tank, developing and measuring new strategies that are largely carried out through its four partners, which in turn contract with more than 60 public and private entities. In fiscal year 2008–09, Safe Passages/Youth Ventures received \$475,000 in direct funding from partner dues and more than \$3.7 million in philanthropic donations. But its program benefited from a much larger sum of money. Acting on ideas generated from Safe Passages/Youth Ventures, the Oakland school system targeted more than \$6 million to build school clinics; the county directed \$1.3 million to mental health care in schools; and the city of Oakland earmarked more than \$500,000 toward programs like violence prevention curricula and funding case managers at schools. All told, Safe Passages/Youth Ventures’ programs were funded to the tune of \$16.8 million.

Youth agency leaders in San Francisco, Baltimore, and other cities have expressed interest in replicating parts of the Safe Passages/Youth Ventures approach. In 2009, Alvarado-Mena became one of six winners of the James Irvine Foundation’s Leadership Awards, receiving \$125,000 for her cause.

The impact of Safe Passages/Youth Ventures is only starting to be felt in Oakland. In 2007, the Atlantic Philanthropies awarded the partnership a four-year, \$15 million grant to implement Atlantic’s Elev8 Initiative, a national program to bring together schools, families, and community in underserved neighborhoods. The initiative received \$25 million in matching local funds.

The schools have a long way to go. Coliseum College Prep Academy in Oakland, which Rivera attends, badly trailed the district average in English and math proficiency in 2008–09 state assessments. But the school—where 90 percent of students are on free or reduced price lunches and where four lockdowns occurred in January alone—has a lot on its plate. Safe Passages is helping. “It’s providing the resources to stabilize kids’ lives—to get them in a place physically and emotionally to do rigorous academic work,” says Principal Aaron Townsend.

The victories are apparent in ways that are hard to measure. After the Riveras’ son was nearly shot playing football, there was only one person he wanted to talk to—Mola, the History of Gangs teacher and the school’s Elev8 coordinator. For the Riveras, he’s the key to their boy’s success. “What he’s doing here at the school with the kids is real good,” Al Rivera says. “Real good.” ■