

SPIRIT wraps around families in need

New mental health program involves children and parents in the healing process

BY SARAH E. THIEN

If a child is in trouble, then a family is in trouble. And if a family is in trouble, then it makes sense to gather that family together with trained professionals and try to help them, for the sake of the child.

The approach is called Wraparound, and it's the main philosophy behind SPIRIT, a new collaboration between the Santa Barbara County Alcohol Drug Mental Health Services and nonprofit group Child Abuse Listening and Mediation (CALM). The SPIRIT program targets families with children who are at high risk for out-of-home placement and who have not been helped by previous treatment strategies.

"This is an approach that has really worked in other states and countries, but it's labor intensive and expensive, and that's why, until we had the funding, we couldn't implement it in Santa Barbara County," said Cecilia Rodriguez, associate director of CALM.

The funding for this new program comes from the Mental Health Services Act, which was passed by voters in 2004 through Proposition 63. The act raised the income taxes of wealthy Californians to fund new county-run community-based mental health services statewide.

The county Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a three-year plan in 2005 that outlined 10 new programs to be funded

with this money. SPIRIT was one of those programs, but it would take another two years to plan and fund the initiative.

"This is something that we've wanted to do for a long time," Rodriguez said.

Right now there are three wraparound teams in Santa Barbara County. One team works in the Santa Maria Valley, and the others are in South County and Lompoc. Each team consists of three people: a facilitator, a child-family specialist, and a parent partner. The input of a parent who has faced challenges with his or her own child is one of the most valuable, and original, components of the SPIRIT program.

"These are folks who have already had to deal with the bureaucracy of trying to receive services from the county," Rodriguez said.

The parent partner and the facilitator are both employees of Alcoholic Drug and Mental Health Services, while the child-family specialist is employed by CALM.

"The county has included us in every step of planning," Rodriguez said. "It's been a good partnership."

SPIRIT was officially launched on July 1. Because it took a few months to make connections with families, program facilitators are only now seeing the impact of the county-CALM collaboration.

"I think everything is awesome about the program. It's working very well," said Alma

Calzada, a SPIRIT program family specialist in Santa Maria.

Calzada worked for the county as a mental health caseworker before joining the SPIRIT team this year. She said that she's never had this much freedom to do exactly what a family needs and help in any way she can.

"We don't have limits with this program," she said. "We go out of our way to help them."

That includes being on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, a service that some families take advantage of and some don't. Every family is different.

Because of those differences, the SPIRIT

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Cecilia Rodriguez, associate director of CALM

process starts with a needs evaluation that deeply involves parents and children in their own treatment plan.

The SPIRIT method respects and honors a family's own desires and opinions, Calzada said. The team next makes a list of each family member's strengths, and not their weaknesses, she said. These strengths then become a road map toward well-being and success.

At this point the team also asks the fam-

ily to assemble a support system of people interested in the health of the family. This can include other family members, friends, or even neighbors. The entire group meets at least once a week. It sounds simple, but people don't realize how revolutionary an idea this can be until they've experienced it, Calzada said.

Right now 18 families are involved in the program countywide, but Rodriguez said that ultimately they want to help about 25 families a year. A family can be chosen for the program after coming to the attention of a therapist at one of the county's clinics, but the approach isn't a good fit for every family.

There is no timeline for the process, but there is a definite goal—to keep children safe, healthy, and in their own homes instead of a residential treatment center or foster care.

Treatment centers are especially inef-

ficient for the county because they cost taxpayers \$5,000 to 6,000 a month per child. Plus those children usually go home eventually, and often their family's problems haven't gone away in their absence.

"No matter what, I've never heard a kid say they'd rather be in a residential center than at home," Rodriguez said. ○

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