

Fall 2009

Pioneering Oakland Program Builds 'Safe Passages' for Urban Youth

By Josefina Alvarado Mena

Andrea was worried about her teenaged son, Jorge. The older cousins he admired were dropping out of school and sporting gang tattoos. One of his middle school classmates had shot another student on the street outside their east Oakland campus. And Jorge himself was beginning to rebel against his mother's custom of walking him to school each morning.

"He thought he knew it all," Andrea said.

Then one of Jorge's teachers invited him to enroll in a special Saturday class focused on gangs. The class took field trips to San Quentin, met with professional men of color, discussed educational disparities and talked openly about the difficulties young boys face growing up in rough urban neighborhoods. After several months, Andrea said, Jorge was a different kid. He lectured his younger sister about staying away from gangs and drugs. He seemed happy for his mother to walk him to school.

Jorge has benefited from an innovative partnership that seeks to mitigate the impact violence has on Oakland's children. The partnership, called Safe Passages, brings together more than 65 local agencies in Alameda County – among them two school districts, the county and the city of Oakland – to share responsibility for providing services to vulnerable populations of children and youth.



Safe Passages was founded in 1998, when the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation offered funding to five projects nationwide to improve health and safety outcomes for children in urban areas. Alameda County focused its proposal on the effects of violence on youth, as well as its underlying causes. Today, Safe Passages provides a broad range of social services to more than 9,000 children a year in Alameda County.

Creating a 'Joint Powers Authority'

Critical to the partnership's success was a decision three years ago to create a "joint powers authority" to help vulnerable youth. Joint powers authorities, or JPAs, are autonomous government entities created to oversee projects that involve multiple agencies. JPAs are commonly used to manage complex transportation and infrastructure projects. Until Safe Passages' creation of the Youth Ventures JPA, no California county had used this special structure to manage such a wide breadth of social services.

But to Josefina Alvarado Mena, a 39-year-old lawyer who directs Safe Passages and helped push for the JPA, it made perfect sense. After all, the array of issues facing low-income youth in a city like Oakland is just as complex and involves just as many government agencies as building a new bridge or sports facility.

"No one agency is adequately financed to meet the complex needs of kids and their families, especially those living in urban areas," says Alvarado Mena, who was recognized this year with a James Irvine Foundation Leadership Award. (The Irvine Foundation is currently inviting nominations for its 2010 Leadership Awards. The deadline is October 13.)

Moreover, at a time when cities and counties are experiencing significant budget cuts, the JPA has allowed Safe Passages to attract millions of additional dollars in federal grants, school bonds and foundation investments. This year, Alvarado Mena and her colleagues leveraged the agency's \$475,000

in annual member dues into a direct-services budget of \$16.8 million.

To local leaders in Alameda County, the need to work together on behalf of children feels especially urgent. In 2008, Oakland had 124 homicides, one of the highest per capita rates in the country. San Francisco, nearly twice Oakland's size, had 99. A 2005 report by the county's First 5 commission noted that Alameda also had more domestic violence calls than any other county in Northern California.

Programs Get Results

For children growing up in neighborhoods with high rates of violence, the effects can be devastating. To address these problems, Safe Passages is focusing its efforts on a few particularly vulnerable groups: preschoolers, middle school students and youth offenders. The agency helps connect these children with caring adults, educational supports, mental health services and alternatives to the criminal justice system.

The organization also has linked families with counseling services and offered parents classes on everything from taxes to talking to kids about sex and drugs. They've provided 800 police officers with training on how to interact sensitively with children who have been exposed to violence.

The results of these various programs are impressive:

- ▶ Oakland middle schools where Safe Passages provides on-site mental health services and a violence prevention/social skills curriculum have documented a 72 percent decrease in school suspensions for violence.
- ▶ Young people enrolled in the alternative youth offender program — which uses mentoring, counseling and other supports to keep young offenders from entering the juvenile justice system — were only 50 percent as likely to re-offend as young people sent to state correctional facilities.
- ▶ Preschool-aged children who have witnessed domestic violence showed reduced anger, aggression, anxiety and withdrawal after participating in Safe Passages' intervention program.

Amy Dominguez-Arms, who oversees the James Irvine Foundation Leadership Awards, said that Safe Passages' groundbreaking collaborative offers a model for other regions. "In a time of economic scarcity, Safe Passages demonstrates what's possible if we use creativity and collaboration to provide the types of services California's youth need," she said.

Dominguez-Arms explained that the Leadership Awards seeks to spotlight innovative, effective approaches to significant state issues, so that more Californians can benefit from successful programs. "The awards provide \$125,000 in organizational support to recipients, plus additional resources so they can share their program approaches and lessons learned with policymakers and other practitioners."

Turning a concept like the JPA into reality can be difficult, Alvarado Mena noted. Asking major government agencies to relinquish control over part of their funding takes some coaxing. In pushing for the arrangement, Alvarado Mena met with individual city council members and other local leaders to address their questions and concerns, and to show them evidence of Safe Passages' successes.

Just the fact of the JPA's continued existence is itself a triumph, board members say. "Without a doubt there's been success," said Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson. "The fact that we're still together, we're still developing, we're still growing as an organization is a major success. I think that has to be underscored with an exclamation point next to it."

Even as California's cities and counties experience significant funding cuts, Carson, who chairs the county's budget committee, said that Safe Passages' spirit of collaboration remains attractive to funders. Last year, The Atlantic Philanthropies made a \$15 million grant to Safe Passages to implement its four-year Elev8 Initiative in Oakland's middle schools.

(Editor's Note: The names of children and parents mentioned in this article have been changed because of the sensitive nature of the therapy they receive.)