



Building 'Safe Passages' for Alameda County Students and Families

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Editor's Note: Efforts of an Oakland, Calif.-based Safe Passages have led to a 72 percent drop in student suspensions in participating middle schools, and a 45 percent drop in repeat offenses among youths who participated in the program for a year. Behind the organization is activist Josefina Alvarado-Mena, whose visionary approach to social services was recently rewarded by a James Irvine Foundation Leadership award. NAM contributor Justine Drennan reports.

OAKLAND, Calif. – Josefina Alvarado-Mena thinks it takes fewer resources than most people think to provide services that can keep them out of trouble.

"Every public system has the sense that it doesn't have the resources to meet the needs of the community it serves," Alvarado-Mena, executive director of Safe Passages, a nonprofit organization that brings together social programs for Alameda County youth.

Safe Passages' efforts have led to a 72 percent drop in suspensions in participating Oakland middle schools between 2004 and 2005 and a 45 percent drop in recidivism rates among youth who participated in the organization's program.

"The old paradigm was that families had to go to multiple services, often at multiple locations," Alvarado-Mena says. "You got lost in transit or lost in translation."

Instead, Safe Passages uses schools as conduits to bring social services to youth and their families. Focusing on underperforming youth in middle school and early childhood, the organization offers academic support, physical health services, violence prevention classes, and family therapy. Full-time site coordinators at each participating school ensure Safe Passages reach the most vulnerable students, including undocumented immigrants and young people with diverse backgrounds and unstable families.

"We really think about schools as being the center of the community where everything comes together," Alvarado-Mena says.

Safe Passages began in 1998 as one of five Urban Health Initiative sites funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. In 2006, to further its significant success in improving the health and safety of urban youth, Safe Passages created Youth Ventures joint powers authority (JPA). JPAs are organizations provided for by California law that coordinate services among multiple public organizations. While JPAs generally manage operations like transportation and waste disposal, Youth Ventures creatively applied the model to coordinating social services among Alameda County, the city of Oakland, and the Oakland Unified School District.

"Safe Passages' wrap around services allow young people not only to learn but to succeed in all aspects of life," says Rose, a spokesperson for Oakland Mayor Ron V. Dellums. "Because schools are many times the center of the community, we can directly affect our students and also make services available for the community."

Youth Ventures' JPA model attracts a wide range of funding and is easy to join – as the San Lorenzo Unified School District did in 2007.

The JPA also brings together diverse perspectives. Youth Ventures' board includes a chief of police, a chief of fire, and a superintendent of schools. "Complex social problems really need to be addressed in a multi-disciplinary way,"

Alvarado-Mena said.

Safe Passages staff members suit this task. Among them are teachers, social workers, a public policy specialist and a cultural anthropologist.

“We’re really working to be culturally competent,” Alvarado-Mena said.

Safe Passages offers case management in various languages, including Spanish, Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Chinese. Language sensitivity helps gain the trust of undocumented immigrant families, whom Safe Passages helps to access legal and financial services.

“This is an area really close to my heart,” said Alvarado-Mena, who used to work with undocumented immigrants.

According to Safe Passages’ intergovernmental and public relations officer Alicia Perez, Alvarado-Mena is “often called to work at very high-level situations, with elected officials, and heads of philanthropies. The next day she’d be making photocopies.”

Alvarado-Mena frequently visits schools and observes the process whereby case managers help students.

A first meeting might begin with the case manager saying, “I’m here to support you. What’s going on?” After listening to the student, the case manager would choose the kind of support the student needed, coordinate services with a social worker and seek feedback from the student’s teachers.

“There’s a lot of input from the young person,” Alvarado-Mena said. As students begin to meet their own goals, they start to believe in themselves.”

Safe Passages encourages student resiliency through the Youth Development Framework and asks teachers to use a conflict-resolution model for violence prevention to promote empathy and impulse control in the classroom.

“The problem is not always conflict at that moment,” Alvarado-Mena said. “It could be that the student is experiencing family trouble at home. It’s really important to look into root causes.”

Because many Alameda County youths are involved in gangs, Safe Passages offers a class on the history of gangs that combines social and academic learning.

Safe Passages has faced cuts due to the financial downturn, but the staff has worked hard to continue bringing a high level of service to the community, which the slump has affected severely.

“Many families have lost their homes,” Alvarado-Mena said. “Many parents have lost their jobs. Five-person families are struggling to get by on \$20,000 incomes.”

To help them, Safe Passages organized a series of free tax preparation clinics at schools last spring. Some families received tax refunds with more than \$2,000.

Safe Passages gauges its success by measuring student participation in its programs and school attendance, as well as through surveys and focus groups. These assessments show a high level of engagement with the programs, but the most gratifying for Alvarado-Mena are events like the awards ceremony that Safe Passages held this year for students that had been using its services regularly. Over 200 people attended the dinner, where students received plaques for their progress and families received gift cards.

“For some families, it was the first time their kids had been honored,” Alvarado-Mena said.

This year, Alvarado-Mena received a James Irvine Foundation Leadership Award for her work with Safe Passages.

hopes the award will catch the attention of people involved in scholarship and policy.

“There are a lot of lessons to be learned,” she said, “and stories to share.”

Page 1 of 1

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