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**The Future and Sustainability of Family Resource Centers:
Asking the Hard Questions about Family Support Programs
In California**

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**Children and Family Futures
Irvine, Ca.
April 2002**

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Introduction

Family resource centers (FRCs) as a generic program have come to a crossroads in California. Recent publications focusing on their potential have tended to overlook or understate the hard choices facing proponents, operators, and family members of FRCs. The crisis of FRCs has come for three reasons:

1. Because they are mature--some projects date back more than a decade to earlier initiatives; they are at a point where they must reconcile themselves to being marginal programs with year-to-year funding or becoming institutionalized with sustainable funds;
2. Because the state is entering into a budget squeeze in which new funding for new projects is unlikely;
3. Because the pressure for greater attention to sustainability means FRCs will have to define themselves to new funders.

Much of the literature on family support programs avoids discussing these policy choices and tradeoffs, preferring to emphasize a model of planning that often ignores several of the real choices facing FRCs. These choices include:

- choices about funding options and sustainability strategies
- choices about which kinds of families to target
- choices about services mix to offer: prevention, early intervention, 2-generation programs vs parent-focused programs vs child-focused programs
- choices about balancing between a community-driven menu of services and an agency-driven program mix
- choices about staffing mix between community members and professionals
- choices about how much to invest in data systems and outcomes accountability

This report will review recent developments in FRCs in California and attempt to suggest approaches to framing and making decisions about their future. This report will argue that three key policy shifts must be made to ensure the future of FRCs:

1. the mission of FRCs must be widened beyond creating projects to encompass community- and county-wide services integration and community development (some would call it community-building) efforts, if FRCs are to be kept from degenerating into another set of categorically funded projects
2. family *income* support is more important than the attention given to it by FRCs serving lower-income working families, and thus a technology of access to the full array of available supports is critical

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3. multiple levels or tiers of FRCs must be supported at different levels, with increasing funding matched by increasing levels of information and data collection as needs of clients¹ increase.

At the outset, we want to make our own commitment clear: we support FRCs and family support approaches, combined with public services and mobilization of community assets. We have seen good FRCs in operation, and they are greatly needed additions to the current mix of services and supports. They can also provide a tone of innovation in tired, rule-bound institutional services. But because we value what FRCs can do, we also believe that FRCs should be given a full chance to sustain themselves, and we do not believe that many of them are being given that chance.

Asking hard questions is one of the ways we pay homage to strong programs; we believe FRCs are and can be good programs, but that unless they answer the questions raised in this report, they will be making choices—or avoiding them—that relegate them to marginal status.

Definitions and Scope

One of the problems with the future of FRCs is that the term is used to describe disparate programs that do not view themselves as having common interests, which results in fragmented funding, advocacy, and research efforts. “Family resource center” is a term used widely to describe services provided to families at one or more locations in a community. It is sometimes used *specifically* to refer to a single agency’s family resource centers, as in the Probation Department or the child welfare agencies’ FRCs. It can also be used *generically* to refer to services provided by other agencies which are not part of a single agency such as Probation or social services but which operate on a collaborative basis and include several agencies, as in the Healthy Start programs in schools throughout the state, in programs funded by the Office of Child Abuse Prevention of the State Department of Social Services, and other models supported by federal and private foundation funding. The California Department of Developmental Services sponsors a network of its own FRCs throughout California, with a special emphasis upon support for families with children with disabilities. Some FRCs are hospital based; some are housed at military bases; several are university-based, with a California model at San Francisco State: frc@ccsf.cc.ca.us.

Some of these models include outreach, with different definitions of what outreach should involve. The Cal-SAHF model sponsored by the state Department of Social Services, for example, combines an FRC with home visiting, while other models have different forms of outreach that do not include home visiting protocols, but use community-based paraprofessional staff to provide supportive services to parents. The

¹ We recognize that there is a strong aversion to the use of the word “client” in some of the family support literature. While we share the conviction that a good FRC includes its intended family participants in the design, provision, and assessment of services and supports, ensuring that clients are more than passive recipients of services and supports, we use the traditional term because many FRCs still do and because of the awkwardness or lack of clarity of most of the alternatives.

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various guidelines for FRCs usually include some of the same language. Those for the State DSS FRCs, for example, could easily describe other centers not funded by CDSS: physical location, family focus, continuum of services, center based and outreach oriented, coordinate rather than duplicate services, strong resident/parent involvement, volunteerism, employee collaborative processes, blended funding. Most of these would characterize Healthy Start collaboratives and other forms of FRCs that may not use the term but operate functionally as FRCs. A comprehensive Head Start program with wide parent involvement and solid links to health services would look a great deal like an FRC, without ever using the label.

As a result of this diversity, FRCs may refer to programs whose typical client receives a small dosage of services or clients who are contacted repeatedly over several; years. They may also include programs with rich data collection and analysis capacity, or programs that merely count the number of “client contacts” they make with little or no data on the results of the contacts or the characteristics of the clients.

History

The rich history of family support programs has been described by several authors in a number of recent publications as well as by national organizations such as Family Support America.² Family support as a form of services integration is at least as old in this country as the settlement houses of the nineteenth century and the school-based health services established during the first major waves of immigration in the early twentieth century. Kagan and her colleagues traced the origins of family support back even further fifteen years ago in their seminal work *America's Family Support Programs*: “Family support has existed in America since the village green.”³

In more recent history, the multi-service centers funded by community action agencies in the 1960s, HUD's Neighborhood Services programs, federal services integration funding of the 1970's, and the school-based and school-linked services projects of the 1980's and 1990's all antedate the recent re-discovery and re-labeling of family resource centers. The accomplishments and failures of these earlier efforts make up an important part of the history of service integration, providing a useful foundation for design of current efforts, but are rarely tapped as formal lessons to be digested, debated, and applied. To the extent that these lessons are referenced, the major points include

- Both formal services and informal supports are vital ingredients of family support programs

² Some of the best-known of these include the Kagan sources cited below, and *Family Resource Centers: Vehicles for Change*, California Family Resource Center Learning Circle (2000). Others are available at the FSA website: http://www.familysupportamerica.org/content/pub_prodef.htm

³ S.L. Kagan et al. (1987) *America's Family Support Programs*. Yale University Press: New Haven.

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- Different “home bases” for family support programs exist, including family resource centers (FRCs), school-linked services and community schools, neighborhood centers, and community development initiatives
- There are important tradeoffs (but not polar opposites, as discussed below) between agency-dominant and community-dominant models of family support⁴
- There is a conceptual and practical tension between FRCs as universal programs and FRCs that target specific populations, defined by need (eg the 10-20% of births most likely to involve families with the greatest needs) or defined categorically (eg FRCs focused on children with disabilities)

In California in early 2002, the family support movement finds its clearest expression in the expansion of FRCs and FRC-like programs over the past decade. Fueled by five separate funding streams, FRCs have become a generic innovation that represents perhaps the most obvious embodiment of what was once called “services integration,” a term that now has connotations of services-only and “top-down” that were not part of its original concept as developed in the 1960’s and 1970’s. The funding streams that have supported these projects include

- Healthy Start and other school-linked services/community schools efforts, including the federal Schools of the 21st Century initiative
- Proposition 10 funds emphasizing FRCs that serve parents of children 0-5
- Funding from child abuse prevention programs
- Funding from juvenile justice prevention programs
- Funding for children with developmental disabilities

Family resource centers also incorporate many of the values and practices of the more recent self-help, parent education and family support movements that evolved from research and practice in the child development and child welfare fields.

The False Polarization between Community and Agency-Dominance

An unfortunate tendency in some recent discussions about FRCs is an over-polarization of the “community vs service providers” issue, as framed by some FRC operators and those who provide technical assistance on FRCs. Some FRC proponents have argued that “the community”—a term used widely and defined vaguely—must be dominant over service providers. Some of these discussions revolve around 51% majorities on governing bodies for community members, reminiscent of the one-third set-aside for “maximum feasible participation” in the community action debates of the 1960’s.

But framing these choices as polarized ignores the extent to which the community is, or can become service providers, as well as the extent to which service providers have moved toward community engagement. To be specific with an example, out-stationing an assistant district attorney to handle child support in welfare offices is a genuine form of

⁴ S.L. Kagan and P. Neville (1993) *Integrating Services for Children and Families*. Yale University Press. New Haven

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services integration that may have more impact on community income enhancement than dozens of community forums. Clearly, both extremes are inadequate: agency-only, top-down models are as unproductive of lasting results for children and families as community-only efforts that operate separately from the major funders already in the community and cannot be sustained except with external, token-level grants. But the choices aren't as simple as agencies versus community—they involve what to do about the range of needs of families already “in the system” and those who are “upstream” and not using public or nonprofit services. Saying we want to serve multi-risk families and then saying we don't want the stigma of working with families already in the system has been the inconsistent stance of more than one FRC sponsor or funder. There is a wide and deep middle ground between agency domination and community control, where most of the literature suggests the real payoffs lie, through the unique contributions each party can make to community and institutional change that improves outcomes for kids. Few of these choices are framed in the discussions about the future of FRCs.

One of the most thoughtful observers of community-based service reforms has described the connection between “the system” and FRCs well:

Family resource centers and family support programs are bridges between professional service systems and voluntary support networks...These centers and programs bridge for families the public and private, the therapeutic and the normative, the specialized and the general, the professional and the voluntary...⁵

And the Family Resource Coalition of America (renamed Family Support America), in a 1998 summary report entitled *How Are We Doing?* said

One of the primary roles is to build strong relationships with other community resources and services...An FRC works collaboratively with all community partners to bring together resources and activities into an integrated service system that is accessible and responsive.⁶

Bruner and FSA are right: FRCs ought to serve as such bridges. But often they operate largely separately from state and local government and its agencies, or accept token out-stationed staff who have little or no effect on the home agency's basic policies, rules, and operations. Those FRCs and FRC planners who speak disparagingly of “service providers” tend to have a hard time forging such partnerships, seeing the agency world as less important and more tainted than the community.

⁵ Bruener, C. and C. Dunst; (1995) *Key Characteristics and Features of Family Support Practice*; Chicago, IL: Family Resource Coalition of America

⁶ Family Resource Coalition of America (1998) *How Are We Doing?*. Chicago.

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Is State Leadership Likely?

Another strategic calculation needs to be made by FRCs at the local level: is any serious state leadership likely?

- State leadership is possible—but the state is locked into categorical pilot projects and shows no sign of even considering going to scale with any of them
- Examples of state FRC support along fragmented lines—juvenile justice models, special needs children, CalSAHF, ABC, etc, with no known effort to even convene the units which sponsor these separate FRC funding stream
- California’s unique status among states as lacking any oversight body such as the children’s cabinets in other states
- The budget crisis makes it even less likely that interagency efforts will be undertaken at scale.

The federal funding picture is equally dim. While there are some new funding programs that can be used to support FRCs, there is no interagency effort under way that seeks to tap multiple agency sources for family support; each agency is working on its own version of family support, using different definitions, evaluation tools, and intended outcomes.

Foundations have been hit by the market downturn, and some have turned to new priorities. And foundations, by definition, are better suited to starting programs than sustaining them.

So what is sustainability if it is not state, federal, or foundation funding?

Asking the strategic questions about sustainability

In a recent statewide meeting on children and family policy, a group of providers and advocates raised the possibility that a new set of “sustainability grants” could be supported by the legislature. Unfortunately, that kind of open-ended grant dependency (and oxymoron) is the opposite of sustainability. Sustainability demands a hard look at the outcomes achieved by an innovation and asking whether those outcomes warrant sustained funding from institutionalized sources—typically sources already in the community, such as school budgets, law enforcement budgets, and welfare or child welfare budgets.

For those who support FRCs and want to see them institutionalized, there are three strategic questions that cannot be avoided:

- The strategic question for FRCs that see their future as primarily *community-based* is how the community can support it, and whether external funding will ever be able to sustain it above token levels of funding.

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- The strategic question for FRCs that see their future as *linked with local government*—cities and/or counties—is why those governments should support organizations that may duplicate their own functions while requiring additional funding to do it.
- And the strategic question for FRCs that see their future *linked to schools* is whether the education system, under enormous pressure to produce results in the currency of improved test scores, will ever provide non-trivial resources to family support programs. FRCs, seen through this narrow lens of test scores, may appear to be marginal in their effects, even though one-third of all students have barriers to learning that cannot be solved in the classroom.

Each of these scenarios demands more clarity about mission and targeting—which families should be supported and why—beyond that achieved by most FRCs thus far.

Sustainability is not getting another grant. It is a program designed so that it has a clear concept early on in the life of the program about where its resources for the future are coming from—a “theory of resources” which can be a critical ingredient for long-term success. So sustainability means at least three things:

- A clear answer to the question of “who will pick these programs up?”
- A clear answer to the question “what outcomes do we need to achieve to get someone else to pay for this *after* the grant?”
- And a clear answer to the question “why *should* someone else pick this up”—is it working and is it a priority for this community?

Sustainability is about *both* funding and program effectiveness—sustainable means client outcomes can be achieved over time and sustainable also means that this program is fundable.

In making these choices, FRCs around the state need to consider a set of different scenarios for their future.

Sustainability scenarios

The six scenarios described in this section are not presented as mutually exclusive; an FRC could tap more than one of these sources in its sustainability strategy. But without a clear focus on one or more of these, the issue of which outcomes should be emphasized may be fuzzy, and potential funders may not get the proof they need that their goals are being met.

1. The child welfare services “front end” scenario: Some FRCs have moved toward formal status as strong partners with the child welfare system, accepting and seeking as clients the families which the child protective services system believes need early help to prevent them from becoming serious abuse or neglect cases. In some models this involves referrals from CPS; in others the bet is that targeting

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families with problems early enough will have a preventive effect without handling cases already known to the system. The Clark and Casey Foundations, among others, have funded such models, and the Department of Social Services has also through its Cal-SAHF model.

2. The education learning supports/school-linked services scenario: perhaps UCLA's School Mental Health Program in its "learning supports" approach has developed the clearest description of this model. This model is also inherent in the Healthy Start projects in California that have been able to secure institutionalized funding from school districts.
3. The school readiness/early childhood development scenario In California, Proposition 10 has given new emphasis to strategies developed in other states which emphasize a community-driven approach to school readiness. At the same time, some communities and counties have used their inventories of local funding for early care and education programs to document that funding for these programs already flowing to their communities is 10-15 times larger than Proposition 10 allocations to school readiness. In California, with over \$3 billion spent annually on child care and child development programs through 20 different funding streams, this is an obvious source of institutionalized support.
4. The health/medical home/home visiting option: These strategies are not always combined, but they all seek a closer connection between families and health and medical providers. Home visiting has been supported from both grant and institutionalized funding, the latter primarily through public health budgets. Using FRCs as an access point for health services and health coverage for underserved families has been a common emphasis, but often without a long-term strategy for securing funding to do so.
5. The CalWORKs/welfare leavers/working poor families option: In this approach, family income and work supports has been viewed as more important than "soft services" family supports. Using welfare incentive funding in some cases and institutionalized Cal WORKS one-stop center funding in others, some FRCs welcome welfare clients and former welfare clients, in contrast with others who seek to avoid the stigma of serving only welfare clients.
6. Community development/building strategies: Using Empowerment Zone funds, Community Development Block Grants, or other institutionalized sources of funding for neighborhood- or community-targeted programs has been another approach to funding some FRCs.

Each of these approaches has its advantages and disadvantages, and those will vary from community to community. In some regions, the best "handle" on family needs and strengths will be readily apparent, while in others it may require a "mix and match" strategy. The risk of the combined approach is obvious: it may result in none of the approaches receiving a critical mass of resources and attention to have a real chance of

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success, with funding spread across so many geographic and programmatic areas that each ends up with a light dusting of resources and none gets enough to make and impact. The failure to concentrate adequate resources on any one strategy to achieve results is a real risk for many FRCs that are unwilling to make the hard choices among these strategies, and seek to carry out all or most of them.

Some of those choices are clearly posed in a solid planning effort that addresses targeting issues and sets priorities based on a matrix of community needs, strengths, and resources. Examples include:

- Choosing families at the “front door” of the CPS system; there are approximately 250 Family Maintenance/Non-Court families (families who need only accept services on a voluntary basis) in a typical county of 600,000, which is the average in California
- Choosing families whose children are identified by risk factors at birth, as the Hawaii Healthy Start program does based on an index of risk factors
- Choosing families who are working at the bottom of the entry level job market
- or just opening up and serving whoever comes in, although the families that need the most support are the least likely to come in without extraordinary outreach and support.

The critical nature of information systems

Sustainability demands stronger-than-usual information systems. To collect data on the outcomes of FRC programs requires much more than head count and an intake form that captures some demographic information about families. How can FRCs achieve this?

- The Proposition 10 option: With Proposition 10 funding used for the information infrastructure,
- The Strategic Decision-making option, linked to CPS services and the child welfare information system
- School-based student information systems
- CalWORKs-based information systems such as SMART and WIN
- New accountability systems with internet data streams layered on top of earlier mandated systems

But the information systems decisions demand clarity about mission—answering the question “collect what information about what results for which clients?”

In one recent evaluation of FRCs, the most intensively served families received an average of six hours of service. Only a quarter of the intensively served FRC families also received at least one referral during this six months period. This is a dosage of service that seems inconsistent with sustained impact.⁷ And this was in a project cited as

⁷ *Family Resource Centers: Vehicles for Change*. (2000) The California Family Resource Center Learning Circle.

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well-evaluated; others may achieve even less intensity. Other evaluations that combined FRC services with home visitors and included community-wide efforts aimed at school reform reported greater effectiveness. The lesson of dosage seems clear; equally clear is the need for information systems that capture such results over time—which do not characterize the vast majority of FRCs.

How would tiering work?

What does the tiering option involve? Under this approach, funders would make clear to FRCs and potential FRCs that start-up or continuation funding would be conditioned on FRCs' choice of three levels of operations and accountability:

1. A basic level in which outcomes data would not be collected, but clients would be counted and some core demographic information would be compiled;
2. An intermediate level in which outcomes data would be collected for those clients in programs which involve more than a single encounter, such as parent education; and
3. An advanced level of operations in which a full client data base would be developed (possibly on a standardized basis, with modules for different services such as health linkages, family self-sufficiency, or school readiness). This third option would also include tracking changes in family income and work support benefits.

Funding would then be based on which of these levels is chosen, with higher and more lasting funding for the higher functioning FRCs. This approach recognizes that some FRCs prefer to remain informal—and that it costs more to provide real outcomes accountability for those FRCs willing to collect and use such information.

The question of mission and resources: “On top of or instead of?”

A major issue faced by all family resource centers is the extent to which they seek to build new structures and services in their communities in contrast with using new methods of delivering institutional services by the large public agencies which have most of the funding for children and family services. One way of phrasing this is to ask whether FRCs are intended to operate “on top of” the existing system or, over time, to replace it, to operate “instead of” the old system. The issue only arises, however, when considering whether to replicate FRCs at scale. It is irrelevant if the goal is merely funding a few of them as a small adjunct to the existing system.

If the answer is that FRCs are to operate on top of or in addition to the current system, then their future funding is inevitably competitive with the hundreds of millions of dollars of funding for existing agencies that serve some of the same families. And taking FRCs to scale will require an awesome level of funding.

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No one appears to have yet done the arithmetic that would answer the question of what it takes to move FRCs from a project approach to going to scale. The arithmetic is painful for advocates of the “on top of” approach, because the funding required is enormous. For example, if the 8,000 schools in California are to be sites, with a center for every five schools, and the typical well-functioning FRC has a budget of \$200,000 (assessments of the most effective ones suggest this figure is very low), it would take \$320 million to take FRCs to scale. Alternatively, if FRCs were to be targeted universally on the ten million children in California (as advocates of universal vs targeted funding would suggest they should be) and each FRC were to have a caseload of 1000 children, it would take \$2 billion. If “universalists” were to reluctantly agree that only the 20% most at-risk children should be targeted, the price tag comes down to “only” \$400 million.

In his excellent work on education reform, Paul Hill has used the term “zone of wishful thinking” to refer to reforms in which proponents have not addressed the resistance of the systems being reformed.⁸ It seems possible that FRC policy may need to overcome similar wishful thinking around replication and sustainability before it can escape the drawbacks of hoping for reform without a clear financial and political strategy to achieve it.

The issue of “marginal vs mainstream” is one which FRC advocates need to address, since FRCs can at times become isolated pilot projects that serve a small percentage of the families who need help, without having any impact on the larger systems already at work in a community. Going to scale is a difficult task for an FRC, and requires a thorough assessment of all of the families in need, rather than those within a given geographic sub-area. It also requires a multi-year funding and sustainability strategy that does not rely solely upon external grants, but is successful in redirecting existing flows of funding toward the FRC model. Otherwise, FRCs can sit on top of an unchanged system that dwarfs its limited, marginal resources.

The literature on human services innovation, including Lisbeth Schorr’s seminal 1998 book *Common Purpose*, makes clear that pilot projects can at times serve to insulate larger systems from change, and some FRCs may be at risk of serving such a purpose.⁹ One form of evidence of this tendency comes in listening to senior officials of county agencies discuss “their “ FRC networks, when most recent expansion of FRCs has been funded out of federal family preservation funds, one-time welfare incentive funds and new Proposition 10 funds. When it appeared as though major increases in child welfare caseworkers were coming in state budgets a year or so ago, some county agencies were asked how many of these new workers would be assigned to work in FRCs; the answers were typically vague or subject-changing.

So if the “on top of” option costs too much, what is the “instead of” option? In its essence, it argues that FRCs must assume some of the functions of the current system,

⁸ P. Hill et.al *Fixing Urban Schools* (1998) Brookings Institution Press.

⁹ L. Schorr (1997) *Common Purpose*. Anchor Books

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evolving strategically over time into the front end of one or more of the systems of services with an explicitly preventive mission. In the sustainability scenarios set forth above, several of those options are set forth. A final option also needs to be considered, since lower-income families are the obvious target for FRCs taken to scale.

Family support or family income support?

A fundamental issue facing FRCs and the wider family support movement is the question of whether family support initiatives should address family *income* support more intensively. Some would go further to argue that FRCs should be assessed and ultimately funded in part based on how many lower-income working families they connect with income support benefits.

Why should FRCs get into the family income business? There are at least six major answers that emerge from concrete evidence as well as arguments on ethical grounds:

- Because child development and long-term child outcomes are linked powerfully to family income
- Because families who have recently left welfare or been diverted from it are typically working at the lowest end of the income scale in ways that affect their children directly; “most parents leaving welfare for work earn too little to support their families.”¹⁰
- Because there is a growing number of families who do not receive the work supports they are entitled to, based on numerous national and state-level studies¹¹
- Because a community development approach that is place-based requires a concern for the total family income flowing into a given neighborhood or community, and if working families are not receiving the benefits they deserve based on that their work and their low income, the neighborhoods they live in are unfairly deprived of a critical asset.
- Because the basic compact made in welfare reform in 1996—that welfare should no longer be an entitlement—was linked to a commitment to “make work pay,” meaning that lower-income working families should be given temporary work supports as they work their way up the income ladder and that those benefits should be permanent if the family stayed eligible based on their income and their work.
- This argument also raises basic questions of equity with middle- and upper-income families, who are much better informed about their tax benefits than

¹⁰ *Windows of Opportunity: Strategies to Support Families Receiving Welfare and Other Low-Income Families in the Next Stage of Welfare Reform*; E. Sweeney et.al. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2000).p.1.

¹¹ [The Social Safety Net at the Beginning of Federal Welfare Reform: Organization of Access to Social Services for Low-Income Families](#) by Martha R. Burt, Nancy Pindus, Jeffrey Capizzano. January 2000

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lower-income families are about what one recent study called a “bewildering array” of income support programs, each with different eligibility processes.

One in six children — 11.5 million nationally — lived in poverty in 1999, which means children are more likely to be poor than any other age group. An additional 15 million children live in families with near-poverty incomes (between 100 percent and 200 percent of poverty). Yet the vast majority of poor and near-poor families have at least one adult who is employed most of the year.¹²

In a recent report on the impact of welfare reform on New York City families, the authors listed ten programs that provide direct income or income substitutes to lower-income working families.¹³ Collectively, the combination of income benefits available to some working families with children amounts to more than \$5000 a year (the EITC alone tops out at \$3,888 annually).

The typical lower-income (poverty-level or near-poverty, up to the eligibility levels of EITC) family receiving the following benefits realizes the following annual amounts:

1. Food stamps and subsidized lunches: \$1240
2. Earned Income Tax Credit: \$1095 [rising to \$3,888]
3. Child care subsidy: \$289
4. Child support: \$840¹⁴

In addition, the family is entitled to either Medi-Cal (or, at higher income levels, Healthy Families/CHIP benefits) that provide basic health benefits for children worth approximately \$1,716, which is not direct income, but which obviously defrays out-of-pocket health insurance or health costs worth at least these amounts.

To summarize: having full access to the array of income benefits to which a family below the poverty level is entitled could mean as much as \$3,464 annually (excluding health benefits). The average “poverty gap” for a female-headed household in an urban area in the Western U.S. is about \$5,300. Thus a full-benefit income support package would reduce the poverty gap by two-thirds.¹⁵

¹² E. Lazare. et.al. *States and Counties are Taking Steps to Help Low-Income Working Families Make Ends Meet and Move Up the Economic Ladder*. Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

¹³ H. O’Neill et.al. *Policies Affecting New York City’s Low-Income Families* (2001) National Center for Children in Poverty. The programs included continuing TANF payments, the Earned Income Tax Credit, food stamps, Medicaid or Healthy Families, child care subsidies, child support, unemployment insurance, and subsidies for attending vocational or college education aimed at increasing wages.

¹⁴ The first three items are from the US Census Bureau March 1999 Current Population Survey in 1998 dollars; the fourth item is from the Orange County District Attorney’s office and is an average of all receipts by clients, not those below the poverty level.

¹⁵ Since these are annual numbers computed for the entire U.S. population, cost of living, housing costs, and child care costs should be factored in, which would lower the actual value of these figures by at least 10% in Southern California. Larger family size among some Orange County lower-income families

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For a working poor family which is above the poverty level, off welfare, but still eligible for all these benefits which are set based on levels ranging from 125% to 185% of poverty, these amounts are equally important in providing the margin between inadequate and barely adequate housing or the amount between inadequate custodial child care and good child care with a developmental component. Again, for a family support program to ignore to potentially make-or-break impact of these amounts of income support would appear to place a reliance upon counseling or self-help to make a difference for a family—in ways that we do not expect of middle income taxpayers as they claim all their available tax deductions and credits.

These numbers provide the basis for the argument that all family support programs serving lower-income, working poor families should be evaluated in part by their effectiveness in connecting families with all of these benefits. To suggest implicitly that a family support program need not concern itself with family *income* support can be justified only if one of two possibilities is true:

- Someone else is already working effectively to address the problem, or
- The problem is not important.

But neither is true. While there are FRCs and welfare one-stop centers that address some of these programs, the interagency nature of the mix of work supports programs means that no single center addresses all of these. At best, they make referrals, and none has yet been identified that consistently follows up to see if the other agencies have connected working families in the FRC with the benefits they deserve.

For some of these programs, the time costs and complexity of assisting families are quite low. It takes about half an hour to assist a single parent who is eligible for the EITC, using a software tax program. The IRS offers volunteer services to help with this, and some FRCs have taken advantage of this help. But to seek to help families or single parents) with the full array of these work supports is clearly more time-consuming, arguing for a software application or paper-and-pencil checklist for all of these programs that could perform intake-level preliminary screening of the potential, given family size and income, that a family would qualify for these income supports.¹⁶ In this case, it is not *services* integration that FRCs would be enabling, but integration among work support programs needed by lower-income working families.

More recently, there are new tools emerging, which can be used to assemble information about most or all of these work supports. Wider Opportunities for Women and the Annie E. Casey Foundation have recently compiled information about the WOW Family

would partially offset this in the opposite direction, however.

¹⁶ Terminology matters in discussing family income; we are using work supports and family income supports interchangeably, but the preferred term would seem to be work supports, since it is the working status of these families that entitles them to aid and that may enable other taxpayers to recognize the merits of support for those who work.

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Economic Self-sufficiency checklist, which is being used in a number of states as a means of assisting families in determining their eligibility for more than one program at a time.¹⁷

One way of framing the fundamental risk for the future of FRCs is the possibility of drifting toward a “yoga model” in which peripheral issues are addressed for a group of the parents and community members who least need the help offered by the FRCs.¹⁸ Priorities get set when you open the doors of an FRC, and they will be set by the parents who show up or get referred. But without a discussion about what we already know about community and kids’ needs, the yoga model takes over, and deeper strategies--such as making sure that family support includes family *income* support--fade out of view, both because they are more difficult, and because they are never presented as an option.

A community cannot “choose” a program or an approach that it has never heard about. Choosing yoga over work supports may be a rational choice, but if the potential members of an FRC—or its staff—are never presented the option of a comprehensive effort to link families with work supports, no choice has been made. The program has simply drifted toward doing what comes most easily, rather than what parents may need most.

FRCs and school readiness

Much of the positive literature on FRCs—and some of the experience—suggests that parent-child connections and school readiness can be enhanced by the operation of FRCs, and conceptually the connection makes sense. But getting from a small center (one recent source describes getting \$40,000 for opening a center) to a serious impact on school readiness is a big leap, and one not fully justified by current FRC operations. A few parent education classes for parents already motivated to seek such help will have little impact on school readiness for a community or neighborhood in which there may already be hundreds of children in a wide variety of early care programs, ranging from programs which are first-rate to those that are among the 10-15% found in one study to be harmful in their developmental impact.

Conclusion

FRCs are at a crossroads, as described in this paper. The choices they make will not only determine their sustainability, they will also affect the thousands of families that are—or could be—clients of and participants in FRC programs. The family support movement has helped focus hundreds of programs around the nation on the needs of families, but in California, it is now critical that those needs and the capacity of FRCs to meet them be reassessed in light of new challenges to both FRCs and to the families they serve.

¹⁷ <http://www.sixstrategies.org/>

¹⁸ This term has arisen based on recent publicity about an FRC that offered yoga classes to its parents.