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Is Our Business Family-Centered?

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I retired in January 2011 after more than 40 years working with families. While touring Texas and New Mexico on my new motorcycle, the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services in Washington, DC, contacted me about a possible position in our nation's capital. Although retirement was relaxing, the new challenge excited a lingering passion.

When talking to the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, I saw an opportunity that was too good to refuse. Although the job description was not explicit, it became clear that I would be in charge of the agency responsible for prevention of child neglect, juvenile delinquency, truancy, poverty and related issues. My budget would be hundreds of millions of dollars with major influence over billions of dollars of additional resources. Additionally, the City Council and Mayor had already agreed to a major redesign of the programs and I would be given great support to focus our efforts on improving the lives and outcomes for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in our city. How could I say no?

Many of you may be surprised or even shocked to hear about the abundance of resources available for prevention services. Common wisdom is that the money goes primarily to deep-end services and that prevention is grossly underfunded. You may be even more shocked to learn that similar levels of support are available nationwide and that positions like mine exist in every state and every city or county in the nation. The job is commonly called the Director of the Department of Human Services or Social Services and the funding sources for prevention include well-known titles such as TANF, SNAP (Food Stamps), Medicaid, Social Services Block Grant, Community Services Block Grant and many others. Redefining our jobs and our missions to include prevention may be a new concept. What business are we in? Unless we all are in the prevention business, we will not be successful.

Let me give you an example of redefining business from the private sector. I read about this so many years ago. I have forgotten the source but I have never forgotten the message. Reportedly, Avis was struggling to make a profit as the number two rental car company in the world. But then some creative person in the company discovered that, not only was Avis in the rental car business, but that they were the second largest retailer of used cars in the world. Unfortunately, they were losing money on their used car business because no one wanted to buy the stripped down models that they rented to their customers. Avis started equipping their rental cars with the options people wanted and increased not only their re-sales but their rentals because they were offering what people wanted. Avis became more relevant because they better defined what business they were in.

The same principles hold true in Human Services. We often define our work as the day-to-day activities. We forget to look deeper to see what caused people to come to us for services and we don't consider that serving them well will act as a prevention program for deeper-end services such as child welfare and juvenile justice.

With this shift in mindset, we can see that every social agency has a prevention aspect. Healthy communities and good schools help prevent the need for TANF. Economic supports help prevent the need for intervention by child welfare and juvenile justice. Good child welfare programs prevent criminal justice problems and homelessness. But if we do not creatively define what business we are in, our approaches become siloed and agency-centered. The following three figures give us a practical view of how we can transform from an agency-centered model into a family- centered approach.

Changing how we work together to provide more support

Traditionally, Human Services organizations have taken an "agency-centered" view of the services we provide. We concentrate on what families are eligible for and forget to ask what they need. We reach out to other agencies to assist us in our mission and fail to understand how all of this should fit together or how the family relates to all these agencies. Families may be eligible for a variety of substance abuse programs but cannot access any of them because no one will pay for transportation to get there. Figure 1 is a typical diagram of how Human Services has tried to integrate with others in an agency-centered approach.

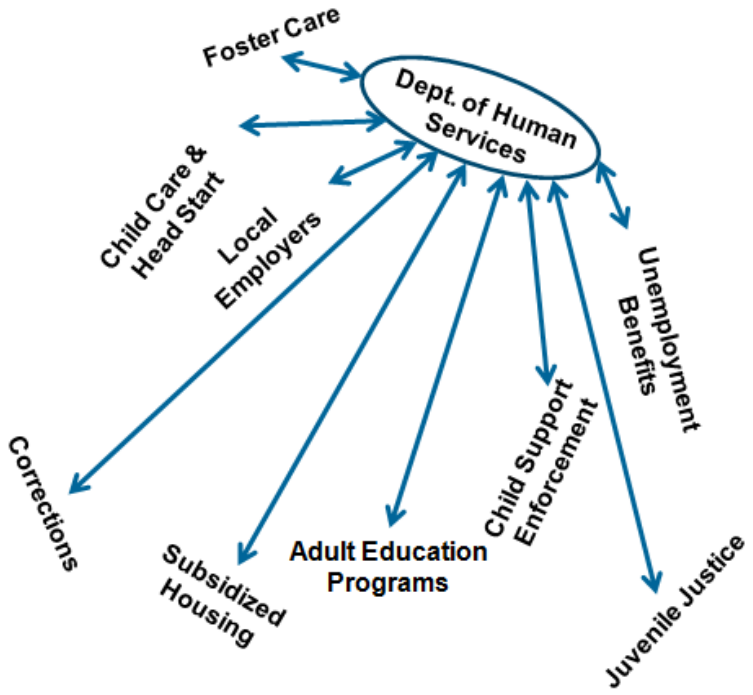

Figure 1: Agency Centered Model

We say we're focused on the family, but where is the family in our thinking? If we are family-centered, our focus is not what we (and other agencies) can do. We focus on what families need – even if it is provided by the community itself. When we put the family at the center, we see how agencies are not the first line of defense. Rather, agencies are called upon when the natural supports break down.

Figure 2 shows where agencies and other supports are when the family is in the center. In this model, self- sufficient individuals and families get most of what they need from those closest to them. When natural supports are not there or are not adequate, government assistance or intervention often becomes necessary. Our goal is to prevent families from requiring the dramatic action of the outside circles by heavily supporting the inner levels. Many of the most crucial supports are not government programs or services.

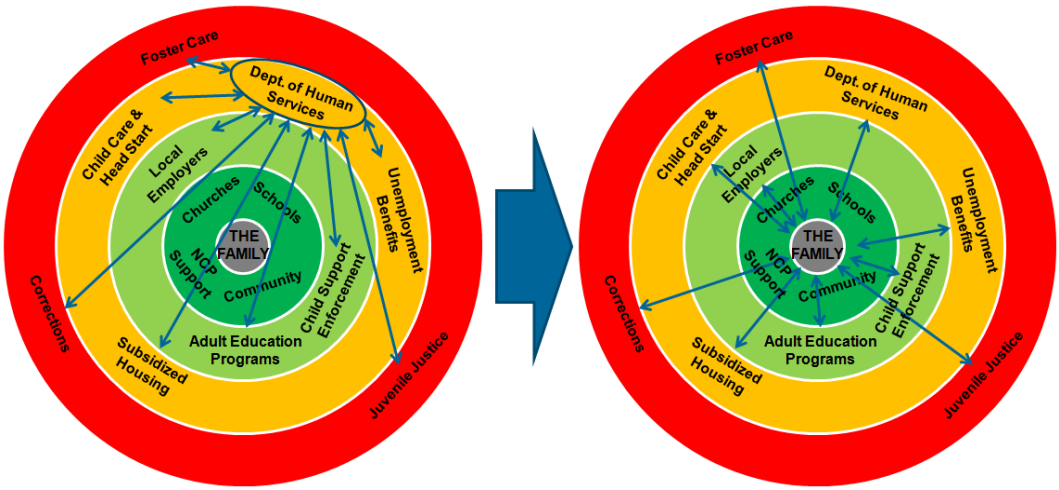

Figure 2: Switching to the Family Centered Model

Finally, Figure 3 shows how negative events can cause an individual or family to "break through" the wall and require services at the next level – but with the proper support, they can rapidly return to economic security with less need for our involvement.

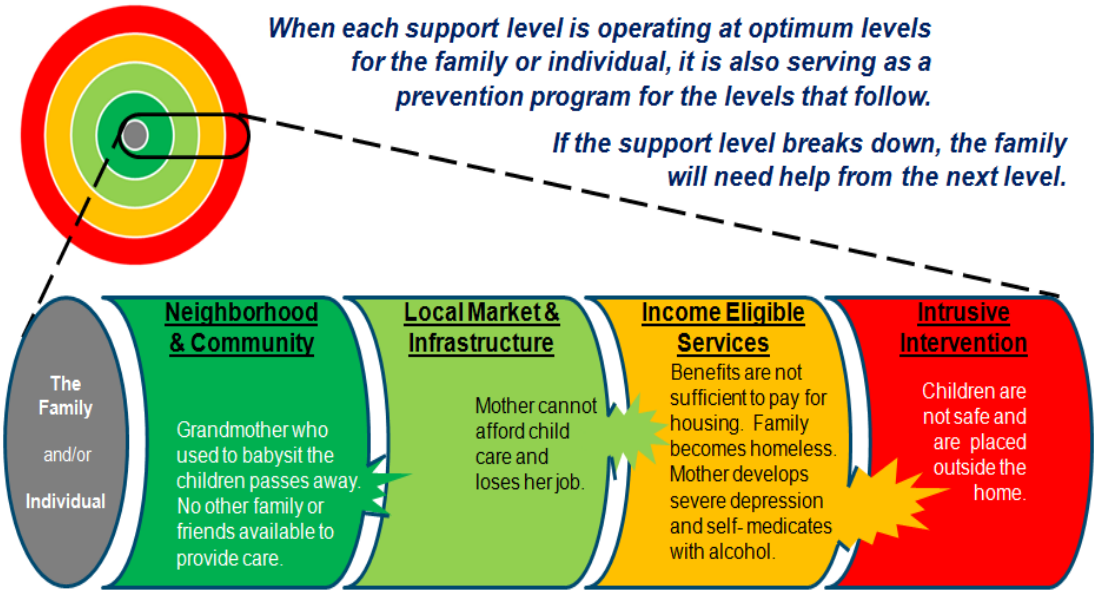

Figure 3: Integrated Approaches can Strengthen the Most Effective Prevention Programs

We are just beginning our transformation approaches in Washington, DC. They are based on many well-developed and successful efforts throughout the country. I was involved in some of these efforts in Michigan, Colorado and Arizona. The following are some of the lessons I learned in the last decades.

Client's voice: This is most important so let's start here. We need to ask more questions such as "How did you make it this long without us? What is different now? What do you want to accomplish? What have you already tried? What has helped in the past and what got in your way? What can we do to help you to get more of what works and for us to stop doing the things that interfere with your progress?" The client's voice is not only essential in designing their own plans but also in guiding and assisting in new systemic approaches.

Hope and abundance: Little progress comes from dwelling on what we do not have. We need to look at the strengths not only of our customers but of our staff, our agencies, our communities and our systems. The problem is not just a lack of resources. Currently, we have huge expenditures, but our present way of doing business can too often lead to very bad outcomes. A sense of abundance gives hope and excites our passion. In the long run, good outcomes are cheaper than bad outcomes.

Doing the right thing as well as doing things right: I define doing things right as meeting the regulatory requirements and doing things effectively and efficiently. It includes timeliness, accuracy, respect, and effective use of technology. These are all essential but will not get us all the way to where we need to go.

Doing the right thing brings us back to the question of "What business are we in?" I can run a highly effective and efficient TANF program according to the rules but will still fail if many of our families end up in intrusive, costly and unpopular child welfare and juvenile justice services. How can we prevent their slide into those systems? Strict enforcement of time limits and work requirements easily reduces the number of people receiving TANF. But if those families end up homeless, hungry and unemployed, I have neglected the most vital part of my job. In DC, we have told our staff that it is half our fault if any clients leave TANF due to sanctions or time limits. All should leave because they have better ways to support their families.

Sense of urgency: In Washington, DC, we did not fully implement the TANF program when the law first passed. To protect poor families, we disregarded the five-year time limit and we did not impose strong work requirements. Although these choices were made for very humane reasons, we lost the sense of urgency. As a result, over half of our caseload has received TANF for over five years.

The Mayor and the City Council concluded that we have not done a favor for our clients by having such low expectations nor did we provide sufficient resources for them to succeed. Thousands of children are still living in poverty with little hope of moving up.

The expectations recently changed with legislation phasing in the five-year time limit and imposing a full family sanction for repeated failure to comply with work requirements. Implementation of these provisions could easily and almost without effort result in massive reductions in the caseload and in TANF expenditures. But if that were my job, I would not have ended my retirement. I see my job as implementing the new laws but never having to impose them on families. They should always leave welfare for something better.

Every person with a work requirement must work full-time on activities that will make them successful. We are not ordering people to perform federally-approved work activities. Instead, anything agreed upon by the client and their case manager meets our requirements if it is full-time, individualized and helps them to reach economic security.

Families are not limited to programs that are paid for or arranged by the Department. There are many natural supports in the community such as adult education and literacy classes, volunteer activities, work experience, treatment programs and community supports. The families design and direct their own plans with help, guidance and support from case managers.

If the family already has a case plan with another agency or professional, that plan is good enough for us. They do not need another case manager from DHS unless they want one. We will work with their chosen case manager to ensure that we get the information necessary to meet our legal requirements and to give them access to our resources. The client can “fire” their case manager at any time and choose a new one if their needs are not being met. This is not about complying with our requirements but rather about their being successful before time runs out.

There are many more aspects of this project but I could not begin to include them in this brief introduction. Many of these changes have not been fully designed and yet they are being implemented. Ambiguity

breeds creativity. I told all of my staff here (as well as all 10,000 staff I had in Arizona in a similar job), “If it is the right thing to do, if you have not been told not to do it and if it is not illegal, then go ahead and do it.” Manuals do not tell you the best way to reach our goals. Manuals tell us what we must do and what we cannot do. Our customers, our partners and our creativity tell us how to assist families to be safe, secure and economically independent.

Just as my journey has changed, so has the journey of the Family Preservation Journal. Begun in 1995 as part of the Family Preservation Institute, it has now become the Journal of Family Strengths. As a fully online journal, it continues as a critical refereed forum for a learned discussion of family-centered work. Through evidence based articles and theoretical articles with commentaries and editorials, the focus continues to be on the family-centered principles employed in policy, programs and practice.

Looking back, the first volume of the Journal in 1995 included articles on family preservation and support, treatment fidelity in intensive family preservation, family reunification, the impact on family functioning and a strategy for staffing standards. Clearly the archival value of previous volumes will help guide us as we continue our journey toward family-centered programs. I hope the ideas in this edition excite your passion and I encourage you to read the many great articles that follow on family-centered practice. Enjoy!