

Fund for Social Change

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The Partnership for Family Supports and Justice (Bridge Builders)

"I think [Bridge Builders] is a perfect example of how a commitment to neighborhood-based services can lead to better services and outcomes,"

--John Mattingly

Commissioner

Administration for Children's Services

in The New York Nonprofit Press.

-- **John Mattingly's Quote**

January, 2005

A primary focus of the **Fund for Social Change** is preventing violence against young people and improving the well-being of families, through a combination of direct services, parent and youth empowerment programs, and social action campaigns to change existing policies or programs. One such comprehensive approach is Bridge Builders, a community-based preventive services project in the Highbridge section of the Bronx, designed to reduce violence against children and their placement into foster care. Bridge Builders is funded by the Partnership for Family Supports and Justice (PFSJ), a collaboration of 15 foundations and the Administration for Children's Services. The collaborative is administered by the Fund for Social Change.

In recent years the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) has implemented far-reaching reforms that have improved the child welfare system and dramatically reduced the numbers of youth in care. Yet some neighborhoods still have a disproportionately high percentage of children being taken from their families and placed into the system. Highbridge is one such neighborhood. Before the project began providing services, Highbridge replaced Central Harlem as the City's Community District with the greatest number of foster care removals.

Bridge Builders is based on the belief that parents, neighbors, and young people in a community, acting in partnership with existing providers, are the first line of support for families experiencing difficulties. Parents are trained to be outreach workers, leaders, and advocates, and are mobilized to identify at-risk families and to get them help. Families are diverted from abuse

and neglect investigations, and are instead provided with an array of social services and legal representation.

“I think it is a perfect example of how a commitment to neighborhood-based services can lead to better services and outcomes,” John Mattingly, ACS Commissioner, told *The New York Nonprofit Press*. In addition to providing funding, ACS closely collaborates on the initiative’s implementation.

Because Bridge Builders focuses on a small geographic area—three census tracts make up the heart of Highbridge—the project is able to use detailed data to closely identify abuse and neglect trends, and to target outreach and preventive services to those families most at risk. Families are referred to a community network of service providers created by the project, including the Highbridge Community Life Center and the Citizens Advice Bureau, long-time providers of foster care prevention services under contract with ACS.

In addition, Bridge Builders uses two key approaches which are generally lacking in community-based child welfare programs:

- An active role for parents, particularly those who have had contact with the child welfare system.
- Quality legal representation to families before and after ACS has begun an investigation.

To promote parental involvement, Bridge Builders includes the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), launched with the help of the Child Welfare Fund (CWF). CWOP recruits and trains parents who have had involvement with the foster care system to serve as parent organizers, offering support and guidance to at-risk parents. Bridge Builders’ extensive outreach effort encourages parents to come forward and seek help before ACS knocks at the door.

At-risk families often lack quality legal representation. Parents in Family Court hearings are routinely represented by court-assigned 18-B attorneys, who are too overwhelmed and underfunded to work closely with their clients.

To address this problem, Bridge Builders has provided funding to The Bronx Defenders, a legal service provider in the South Bronx, to expand Family Court legal services to parents in Highbridge before children are placed into foster care, and to Legal Services of New York/Bronx, for legal services after children are in foster care.

ACS, with its emphasis on neighborhood-based services, shares the goal of eliminating unnecessary foster care placements by providing preventive services, says Anne Williams-Isom, Deputy Commissioner and special counsel to the commissioner at ACS. Speaking of ACS’s collaboration with PFSJ, she told *The New York Nonprofit Press*, “It was an absolute match made in heaven. These were things we were already supporting... We are serving more kids in preventive services than we are in out of home care.”

Bridge Builders is being evaluated by a team headed by Dr. Fred Wulczyn of the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. The evaluation assesses whether fewer children come into care, return home more quickly, and whether rates of abuse and neglect decline. The evaluation of Service Year III, presented by Chapin Hall of the University of Chicago to the donors in January 2007, is hopeful. It states "...what we are hearing and seeing is a type of synergy, a breakthrough in thinking and action that has changed the way collaborative members work and the way that they think about their work."

The PFSJ donors' collaborative includes the Child Welfare Fund, the Open Society Institute, the Ira W. DeCamp Foundation, the FAR Fund, Hedge Funds Care, the New York Community Trust, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Sills Family Foundation, the Oak Foundation, the Clark Foundation, Heckscher Foundation, United Way of NYC, Hagedorn Fund/JP Morgan, Viola W. Bernard Foundation and the Administration for Children's Services. The Fund for Social Change invites additional donors and individuals to help sponsor this important initiative to assist at-risk families.

Other Links...

[Summary of Bridge Builders](#)

[Chronology of Bridge Builders](#)

[Read the Evaluations of The Bridge Builders](#)

[Read more about Bridge Builders in the New York Nonprofit Press -- January, 2005](#)

[Read the Evaluation of Bridge Builders by the University of Chicago/Chapin Hall](#)

[Read "Small Victories" about families who have been helped by Bridge Builders](#)

Visit the Bridge Builders Website: www.bridgebuilderscpi.org