

Back to the Well 2000

Reviving the Family Support Center Movement in Hawaii

August 10, 2000

We've got a story to tell.

Once upon a time, we, at home in Hawaii, caught sight of a wave in the United States headed toward renewing American values of strong, healthy families and vital communities while building the capacity of communities and families to thrive. The wave was called *Family Support Centers* (family centers) and presented a new, community-based, assets-focused, integrated way of incubating and mobilizing resources for all Hawaii's families (and communities) so that they could become strong, self-sufficient, interdependent, and socially responsible.

Because our shores were still well-washed with family/community values-more so, we thought, than the shores of the mainland – we figured we could be successful at surfing that wave and so we got aboard. Our surf boards were provided through the wisdom of the Legislature which funded and launched a Research and Development effort to develop family support center models. Hawaii Community Services Council became the facilitator of this project, channeling funds and capacity-building resources to community, agency, and school-based efforts and providing guidance and technical assistance for the development of each model.

It was not easy to change traditional ways of providing services in this time of rapid change when established rules of the road no longer work. Creating a new model was more complex than mastering a new set of moves in an old game; it was more like learning an entirely new game. The central ingredient of this transformational process was education: for leaders, service providers, and for consumers.

The core value-adding process in the new paradigm became the creation, nurturing, and preservation of civic enterprise, something uncommonly embedded in traditional service models.

As the effort progressed, each model, as unique as the community it served and working across all cultural, social, and economic boundaries, brought more resources to bear (in fact Centers leveraged an average of \$4 for every \$1 invested by Legislature) from remote, as well as local, sources. The stories of Center, family, and community successes were legion, including the report from the Research arm of Legislature that evaluated Center progress.

As this new, different, and innovative model of family and community strengthening caught on, more than thirty communities and agencies sought help from the project to launch their own Family Centers. And then, Hawaii's economy crashed. While Centers (school-based, housing-based, free-standing, agency-based, urban, rural, etc.) were still being modeled and tested, and in the midst of planning the deployment of Centers throughout the State in response to community pleas, the discontinuance of government support meant the demise of Family Centers for Hawaii.

Despite fears and tears of Centers and their advocates, though, the wave was so strong that most Centers stayed alive. They changed, however. Without monies for development, overhead, and preventive focus, Centers found the need to change the balance of their work. They moved from attending the full spectrum of preventive to corrective work across all consumer groups to aligning more with the precious funding available for programs for the disenfranchised. Centers derailed from their core competencies of incubating resources and empowering family/civic responsibility and from their path of facilitating community self-sufficiency.

Family Centers in Hawaii remain, today, at risk without public funding. Although work toward their mission continues, operational stability, development of core competencies, and progress toward community self-sufficiency, do not. Centers attract funds for worthwhile programs, but operational and developmental funds are almost impossible to retain from the private funders who seed activities and innovation only. And, the potential for adding new, needed, wanted, Centers for Hawaii's people is even more remote.

There's more to this story, ironic as it is! Hawaii's Family Center project progressed early in the national Family Support movement-and was a strong player. Other states, well behind in their efforts, visited and researched Hawaii as a model. Then, as we, at home in Hawaii, were losing the government support necessary to continue the work of the Family Support Centers, mainland states forged ahead, continuing to prove the value they add to society and the costs they cut from government expenditures. Today, there are few and far between mainland states without established, strong government-supported family center initiatives. Unfortunately, we are again, and still, one of them. We need to change that now and get back on the wave!

First, the concept of Family Centers for Hawaii needs to be brought back to life and understood-it is innovative and very different than traditional 'social service practice'; difficult for many to grasp. The thoughtstorming below is aimed at helping the reader of this paper to understand the concept and why Family Centers make so much sense for Hawaii.

You might think of a Family Center like an old village well – the place people gathered to draw resources (water), talk story, find out what was available from whom, and help each other pump the well or carry water home. Many a new idea for an event, a collaboration, a relationship, or a new service for the village was incubated during well-talk. The villagers dug, built, tapped, and owned the well together and, at village meetings determined how the resource(s) would be maintained, shared, and developed as the village grew. It was a utility in its simplest form.

A Family Center is also a utility. It is a gathering place where community members can develop trust and relationships, a structure that facilitates collaboration, networking, incubating and mobilizing resources, and an aggregation of resources from which Hawaii's families and communities can draw programs and information to become strong, self-determined, and socially/civically responsible. It is owned and driven by the community it serves; it can be free standing or live under and be served by the umbrella of a school, a community agency, or a housing project.

At a deeper level Family Centers help participants answer four questions:

1. Who am I?

Centers help participants develop a sense of identification, the first source of social confidence.

2. Of what am I a part?

Centers facilitate a sense of unity with others, values, and norms. Individual identity takes on a greater meaning within the context of group. In feeling unified with a group, participants gain a sense of belonging and a stronger sense of self.

3. What connects me to the rest of the world?

Centers supply avenues for involvement so as to clarify the degree of contact with others – away from isolation and toward belonging and connectedness.

4. What relationships matter to me?

Centers help participants identify with people like themselves. Being connected isn't enough. Self-esteem comes from feelings of reciprocity, i.e., a network of mutual understandings, obligations, and expected behaviors on the part of others. People report feeling a sense of wholeness as center participants. They recognize mutual commitments and obligations to each other. They trust that they can rely on others for support, guidance, and help. They feel good that, as a center participant, they have a corresponding set of obligations to support, guide, and help others.

All Family Centers have a number of dynamics in common, they: center on the family, focus on assets, leverage resources while helping families learn how to similarly leverage resources, facilitate collaboration, develop community leaders, and remove barriers for (or clear paths to) success.

A Family Center is a partnership of families, resources, community leaders, and funders working toward a vision of strong, healthy, family and communities. The partnership facilitates the growth of a community-based, integrated network of family-focused resources (social, psychological, educational, economic, medical, recreational, spiritual, and civic) from which a family can choose to build their self-determined capacity to succeed. A participant (not a client) is related to as ready-to-succeed rather than in-need.

Participants of Family Centers can expect such outcomes as: Increased employment; increased family life balance; healthy, immunized children; family health; decreased crisis; better living environments; improved parenting; increased sensitivity to child development; increased social support; increased positive recreation; increased contribution to community; increased esteem, increased collaboration.

A Family Center is a place, a family, a best friend, a gateway, a "high tech" incubation, a capacity builder.

A Family Center is a safe, welcoming, neighborhood place where people find resources to support and strengthen family life, opportunities to build social relationships, a sense of community, and activities in which they can give back to and take charge of their own community. Family Centers exist for everyone, across economic status, genders, ages, stages of development, culture, religion, and ethnicity. They impact the lifeblood of the family and the community.

A Family Center is a family of resource agencies, families, and staff who together are bonded by aloha, who model the attributes of strong family (role definition, shared values, support, nurturing, thoughtfulness, planning for success) and who share in the work of:

Bringing existing resources into the awareness of families and the community

Families sometimes freeze in unhealthy patterns. Unfreezing is often as simple as finding and tapping a comfortable, accessible resource to help! And, refreezing into healthier patterns can be as simple as having the support to do so!

Identifying and channeling remote resources into the community to share in the abundance that could otherwise remain hidden

Before a Family Center started in a Kaneohe housing project, some kids and seniors were going hungry. With a little direction in how to find resources, participants reeled in a Honolulu bakery to donate end-of-the-day products to the project. A resource that was unknown and remote

became available and tapped without government intervention or expense. And, the participants now, with a resourcing success under their belts, higher in self-esteem, are becoming even more resourceful.

promoting and incubating civic enterprise by helping neighborhood folks to develop new, “system-appropriate” community resources

Family Centers are incubators of leaders and enterprise. They help build the capacity of families and the community to serve themselves with the just-in-time resources they need.

A suburban townhouse project, when polled by its community family center, experiences a low level of physical activity and feelings of being connected/supported. With a little guidance and development of local leadership, the project now has a community garden, supplying fresh fruit and vegetables, a venue for physical activity, a sense of community, and social, supportive, interaction.

Linking the knowledge and resources of various organizations: facilitating partnership and networking between agencies serving the community to work efficiently and effectively as a system – to plan and measure performance and out comes, to eliminate duplication, to improve accessibility, and to leverage community assets.

Family Centers catalyze “collective ego” – the feelings of pride and confidence that allow families and communities to feel strong and asset-full, to grow in vitality, and to contribute to civic welfare and quality of life.

Before the community took the reigns to develop its own Family Center (including a hale), a Kauai community found that 20% of the folks were receiving 80% of the available services. Duplications abounded. Today, the balance has changed. Representatives of those services now meet, coordinate activities, and integrate service plans. They also collaborate with participants in creating new resources. As well, Center participants learned to leverage their assets into building a welcoming community center filled with self-sufficient supports and activities.

A Family Center is a gateway away from costly, often out-dated, expensive, corrective programs toward value-adding, outcome-focused efforts that prevent families from making life mistakes and promote, instead, healthy, wholesome living.

The challenge of family support centers is the need to blend the efforts, cultures, rules, knowledge, services, objectives, and outcomes of the community members and resource partners.

Meeting such a need requires a “high technology” consisting of:

1. A portal (for gathering, analyzing, and disseminating information),
2. An aggregator (for bringing resources together to network and integrate), and
3. An incubator (of civic enterprise that generates new resources in a timely, targeted, cost effective, way).

As well, Family Center “high technology” delivers resources that strengthen families and communities with such programs as: parent education, early childhood education, support groups, job training, literacy tutoring, parent school involvement, skill development, school readiness efforts, health and education screening, information and referral, life planning school partnerships, family activities, civic projects, economic enterprise, crisis intervention, counseling, coaching and childcare.