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## Moms Groups and Movie Nights: Can a New Approach to Child Welfare Win Families' Trust?

By *Angela Butel*

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O.U.R. Place is a bright, open space dotted with fashionably rustic plywood furnishings. When I arrived on one of the first nice mornings of spring, two neighbors were there, chatting about their efforts to learn sign language. One had recently gotten a hearing aid; the other was teaching her grandson, who she suspects has developmental delays, to sign so that he can communicate. Another neighbor was talking to Emily Lopez, director of O.U.R. Place, about his struggles to connect with his son. "All he wants to do is play Fortnite," he groaned. "I almost want to put him on punishment just so I can take his PlayStation away and we can go outside." Lopez suggested someone she knows who might be a good mentor.

O.U.R. (Organizing to be United + Resilient) Place, located in Hunts Point in the Bronx, is a family enrichment center (FEC), a new type of family support being piloted by New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS).<sup>1</sup> It is one of three FECs that have been open for about a

<sup>1</sup> To gain a sense of how the FEC model is working so far, during the spring of 2019 the Center for New York City Affairs visited each of the three pilot FECs and spoke with participants and staff. We also talked to several additional staff at the nonprofits that manage the FECs, community advocates not involved with the FECs, and Lorelei Vargas, former Deputy Commissioner for Early Care and Education at ACS.

year. FECs are intended to fit into ACS's continuum of preventive services aimed at strengthening families and keeping kids out of foster care. As a "primary prevention" strategy, though, the FECs seek to engage families further upstream than mandated preventive services like mental health and substance abuse treatment or parenting classes. Activities at the centers are voluntary, and staff do not keep records on participants. The goal is to establish enough trust that families feel comfortable asking for more intensive support when they need it. The informal conversations I heard at O.U.R. Place are a core piece, not a byproduct, of the FECs' mission: to foster community networks that can strengthen families before they find themselves in crisis.

With their small size, community input, and variable format, the FECs are in many ways a departure from the existing centralized, structured preventive services system. The model is based in part on the Family Success Centers (FSCs) in New Jersey, where 57 sites are in operation. It also harkens to earlier community-based preventive efforts by ACS itself. ACS plans to expand the program at the end of the three-year pilot period if it is working. But given how differently FECs operate from ACS's other preventive programs, how to tell whether the model works is not entirely clear. It will be a challenge to measure the impact of a program that, by design, changes regularly and does not collect data on its participants.

Questions of measurement are tied up with questions of trust. In the context of the often-contentious relationship between ACS and communities who fear surveillance in any ACS activity, the FECs are designed to avoid a sense of obligation or monitoring. The pilot centers certainly have the sort of welcoming, home-like ambiance suggested by the model, but at this early stage some big questions remain. Will a promise not to track participants be enough to overcome wariness of anything ACS-affiliated? Can the centers keep that promise and still provide convincing evidence of success? Can a project on this scale meaningfully change relationships between ACS and the communities where it is most active?

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The staff at The C.R.I.B. (Community Resources in Brooklyn) were not quite finished setting up when I arrived for Chat and Chew, their weekly Friday afternoon open house. Later that night, they'd be hosting a family movie night—an idea, explained Lettice Layne, director of The C.R.I.B., that came from one of the center's youngest visitors. "A five-year-old girl was visiting with her mom. She overheard me asking her mom about what kinds of programs the center could host, and she was like, 'What about me?'" Now the movie night is a monthly tradition.

The C.R.I.B. is located in East New York, and the third pilot center, Circle of Dreams, is in the Highbridge section of the Bronx. The pilot centers are funded through ACS but, like other preventive services, managed through contracts with community-based organizations.<sup>2</sup> The centers each receive \$450,000 per year, which they can use for a variety of purposes as long as they develop their offerings in partnership with the community. To this end, each center has a group of "Parent Leaders," members of the community (often, but not necessarily, parents) who meet regularly with staff and shape the programming at their site.

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2 O.U.R. Place is managed by Graham Windham; The C.R.I.B. is managed by Good Shepherd Services; and Circle of Dreams is managed by Bridge Builders in partnership with Children's Village

During my visit, Layne showed me some of the results of those conversations about space and programming at The C.R.I.B.: an internet café; a conference room that community members can use for meetings; a playroom for kids; a community kitchen where neighbors can cook for events. These resources, and events like Chat and Chew and movie nights, are casual, no-commitment ways to get people in the door. For some people, that might be all they're looking for; others stay and start to build relationships.

Relationship-building is at the heart of one of The C.R.I.B.'s most popular events, a series of panels called "Our Voices." The first event focused on mental health and policing; the second on complex trauma, stress, and resilience. "We have real people talking about real-life situations they've gone through; then afterward people who represent treatment programs or other services can talk about what they offer," explains Valerie Segal, division director for Brooklyn Community-Based Programs at Good Shepherd Services. Staff at The C.R.I.B. see these events as more effective than referrals for introducing people to services in the community; rather than getting a clinical description of a service, they can hear from a real person about what they experienced and how they got through it, and what role, if any, services played in that.



Community space at The C.R.I.B.

This approach of basing Center offerings in neighborhood residents' experiences recurs across the FEC structure. In addition to regular meetings of the Parent Leaders, each center hosts "Parent Cafes," community discussions based around a set of "protective factors" such as resilience, relationships, communication, and community that can buffer families from crises that might lead to child welfare involvement. These Parent Cafes expand the FECs' circle of engagement and offer the broader community a chance to weigh in on what the FECs should offer. Parent Cafes and Parent Leaders are both part of the "co-design" process that is the foundation of the FEC model.

Many participants I met at the FECs had gradually developed from hesitant event attendees to community champions. One Parent Leader at O.U.R. Place told me that when he finally attended a Parent Cafe, after multiple invitations from his neighbor, he was pleasantly surprised that the discussion was not about professionals giving advice but simply neighbors supporting one another. After attending a few more times, he got involved in developing programming for fathers, who he had noticed were largely absent from the conversations. One of the Parent Leaders at Circle of Dreams found it to be a respite from the sometimes-isolating experience of full-time parenting. She now facilitates a regular gathering of other stay-at-home moms.

Though some features, like Parent Leaders and Parent Cafes, are common to all three FECs, each center is also developing a slightly different flavor based on the priorities and interests of its surrounding community. The C.R.I.B. has generated significant interest among local entrepreneurs,

who now gather monthly for a Minding your Business workshop. Circle of Dreams has found gang violence to be a major concern in their neighborhood. In response, a group has begun meeting with an art therapist to explore visual ways of processing trauma. Residents of Hunts Point are using the FEC as a platform for organizing a campaign to improve street lighting.

Over the year since they opened, the FECs have gradually built up calendars of these regular group meetings and events. When I visited the centers during daytime hours, though—when no particular events were happening—the spaces were fairly empty. A handful of people were there to use the computers; one or two curious passersby dropped in to ask what the centers were. At one center, an older gentleman sat watching the television news; staff said he was a common fixture, using the FEC as a way to get out of the house during the day. At another center, a girl came by after school to grab a snack and wait for her mom to pick her up. For these people, the FECs are clearly meeting an important need, but the centers may have more work to do to find the niches they can fill between events, to make sure the spaces are utilized as fully as possible.

The centers are continually trying to spread the word and bring more people in the door. As they reach out to people at community events or through neighborhood organizations and businesses, Center leaders carefully navigate the relationship between the FECs and ACS. The three FECs are in communities with high levels of ACS child welfare activity, and many residents are wary of anything with a connection to the agency. The FECs don't advertise their ACS affiliation—there are no ACS logos in the buildings or on brochures—but they say they're not hiding the connection either. Ultimately, staff hope that as people attend events or activities and get to know people at the centers, seeing ACS connected to something good in their community will start to change how people view the agency. "We see ourselves as part of healing people's trauma with ACS," says Alida Camacho, director of Circle of Dreams.

Joyce McMillan, a longtime family advocate and activist for change in the child welfare system, doesn't believe this trauma can be healed until ACS demonstrates that it is taking steps to operate very differently than in the past. She isn't convinced that the FECs represent a truly significant shift. "They're doing all these things to change their image, but how does the image change if the practice doesn't change?" she asks. One particular sticking point is around mandated reporting. FEC staff are mandated reporters, meaning they must report any signs of potential child abuse or neglect to ACS. McMillan believes this erodes the staff's ability to truly be trusted resources for struggling families.

As the FECs celebrate a year in operation, this tension between how ACS tends to operate and the FEC approach is cropping up in other ways as well. Though at the start ACS kept a certain distance from the centers, as they have developed into active community hubs "ACS has been wanting to have more of a presence, they've been wanting to have more ownership," says Segal from Good Shepherd Services. Though perhaps counterintuitive from a public relations perspective, ACS's ability to maintain some separation from the FECs' success may prove crucial to that success continuing.

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The idea of the FEC model is not entirely new. A family-centered, multi-service model is where the idea of “preventive services” in child welfare began, says Sister Paulette LoMonaco, executive director of Good Shepherd Services. “Sister Mary Paul Janchill used to do intake into our residential program [for teenagers] and she saw so many young people separated from their families who didn’t really need to be. If they had gotten enough support from early on, then the family would have been able to work with that young person and stabilize.” Janchill’s idea was that the focus should be on the whole family rather than just the child, in contrast to the prevailing wisdom at the time in foster care. Together with several other social service agencies, Good Shepherd Services got a grant from the federal Criminal Justice Coordinating Council to do a demonstration project of a program to support the entire family.

The center that Janchill founded in 1978, the Center for Family Life, is in many ways a precursor to the FECs. It offers a broad range of services, from after-school programs to family counseling to adult employment and education. When it began, the services were clinical and therapeutic, LoMonaco says, with psychiatrists and social workers on staff, but also recreational, with family nights and activities for teens.

The City kept an eye on these developments and, in the late 1990s, began building some of the insights of Janchill’s approach into the formal preventive services system, contracting with community-based organizations to provide locally rooted preventive services. At the same time, ACS began dramatically increasing capacity for preventive services: by Fiscal Year 2002, the preventive services system had surpassed foster care in size, with a daily average foster care census of 28,215 and an average daily preventive caseload just over 30,000.<sup>3</sup> Though the number of children in preventive services has decreased somewhat since, to 24,481 in FY 2018, the preventive services budget has continued to grow, from \$100 million in FY 1998 to \$307 million in FY 2018.<sup>4</sup> Accounting for inflation, that’s about a 50 percent increase in funding.

Though City contracts for prevention mean more funding for nonprofits, they also come with strings. Contracts are often built around use of specific and fairly rigid service-provision models, and specify things like the number of contacts a social worker should have with families or the number of home visits to be done each month. Because of this, says LoMonaco, “the budgets don’t allow the kind of open-ended activities that were in preventive services at the beginning.” As the preventive services system became bigger and more formalized, there was less of the flexibility and responsiveness to individual family situations that inspired the original efforts.

According to LoMonaco, the organizations that have been involved from the beginning of prevention are “thrilled” about the return to the more holistic, adaptable model of the FECs. In

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3 Center for New York City Affairs, “Watching the Numbers,” Child Welfare Watch Volume 12, Winter 2005-2006; Citizens Budget Commission, “Data Before Dollars: Are Child Welfare Preventive Services Worth the Investment?,” August 22, 2017, <https://cbcny.org/research/data-dollars>

4 Citizens’ Committee for Children, “The Wisest Investment: New York City’s Preventive Services System,” April 2010, <http://www.ccnyc.org/wp-content/publications/CCCReport.WisestInvestment.PreventiveServices.April2010.pdf>; Mayor’s Management Report, September 2018, [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2018/2018\\_mmr.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2018/2018_mmr.pdf); New York City FY2019 Adopted Budget, Budget Function Analysis, <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/omb/downloads/pdf/adopt18-bfa.pdf>

her view, though, the newer model is missing a few of the things that were important in the early centers. “We don’t have a part-time psychiatrist or psychologist, which we once had,” she says. “We don’t have money for the emergency needs of our program participants. [In the past] You could often avoid eviction, or help with things that are really needed.” While the directors of the FECs are licensed social workers or psychologists, they do not provide formal counseling on site. Staffing of the centers in general is quite lean, with a director, one to two family advocates, and one community liaison per center.

All of this is, however, part of ACS’s vision for how the FECs’ role will remain distinct from that of large multi-service agencies. Lorelei Vargas, former Deputy Commissioner for Early Care and Education at ACS, sees the building of community connections as the ideal role for FECs. Rather than reproducing services that already exist, she says, FECs can help enrich access to them by “amplifying what’s already happening in communities and building more connections.”

One way she envisions this happening, for example, is by linking the FECs to already-existing Community Partnership Programs (CPPs).

CPPs were launched in 2003 with goals similar to the FECs—to be places where families “could get whatever support they might need to get on their feet and take care of their kids”<sup>5</sup>—but funding cuts during the Great Recession stalled their expansion. Simultaneous to launching the FEC pilot, ACS reissued an RFP for the CPPs, dedicating \$11 million to them over two years, and according to Vargas, selections were made to intentionally pair up community partnerships and FECs in the same neighborhoods. In Highbridge, where Bridge Builders manages both an FEC and a CPP, the benefits of this doubling up are starting to become evident, says Warren Kent. The two sites are on opposite sides of a neighborhood that is difficult to traverse by public transit, meaning residents can go to either location to get connected to resources, and the sites have begun to partner on many events.

To operate primarily as connection-builders, FECs may not need to scale to a size comparable to the existing preventive services system. And, in fact, spending for the pilot project so far remains truly tiny in comparison to the overall preventive services budget. The one-year cost for three centers is \$1.35 million, compared to a total preventive budget of \$307 million for Fiscal Year 2018.<sup>6</sup>



Staff and participants at Circle of Dreams

5 Abigail Kramer, “No Easy Choices: The unmet vision of community partnerships,” Center for New York City Affairs, (Jan. 10, 2012). <http://www.centrernyc.org/child-welfare-nyc/2012/01/no-easy-choices?rq=partnership>

6 So far, the FECs are entirely funded by the City; since the centers do not track whether participants have open child welfare cases, the centers’ programming is not eligible for state or federal preventive dollars, which make up a significant portion of the total preventive services budget.

While ACS does hope to expand the pilot, they don't want to outrun their understanding of the program's outcomes and needs. "I wouldn't suggest scaling drastically until we have data to show that it works," says Vargas.

How will we know that it's working? So far, no one knows for sure. The very small scale of the FECs makes their impact hard to detect. Vargas also readily admits that the kind of information needed to evaluate the FECs is not the kind of information ACS has previously tried to quantify. Usually, registration information would allow ACS to track people over time to assess whether a program is helping with their family stability, but the FECs purposefully do not collect this kind of data. This presents enough of a challenge that the staff at O.U.R. Place are considering creating an optional "membership card" so participants could swipe in when they enter the center.

Valerie Segal from Good Shepherd Services has some other ideas about how the FECs could be evaluated in ways more in line with their mission. "There are some great evaluation tools, like social network analysis or ripple effect analysis," she explains. "These are qualitative methods that ask questions like, 'Are the people involved in our offerings connected or are they in separate networks? How is what we're doing at The C.R.I.B. creating ripples and connections, strengthening the community socially, culturally, or financially?'" Similar sentiments are echoed by Warren Kent from Bridge Builders: "You aren't going to see decreases in the number of child welfare reports or foster care placements in two years," he says. Building deep relationships is at the heart of how the FECs intend to create change in their neighborhoods, and staff hope the evaluation tools will reflect that as the primary goal.

I observed the FECs filling an important gap for several people just during my short visits: for the father trying to connect with his son; for the stay-at-home mom looking for support from other moms; for the older gentleman who needed somewhere to go during the day; for the girl waiting for her mom to pick her up after school. All of these people found at the FEC a point of connection where they might otherwise have been isolated. FEC staff seem confident that the power of these connections will grow exponentially as they continue to build relationships.

Building relationships takes time, though, and that can be in tension with government funding timelines. Although not all of the FECs have even had their doors open for a year yet, their current contracts end in May 2020. And while Vargas acknowledges that the centers are "still in the ramp-up period" and will be given the opportunity to renew their contracts for another three years, she also sees the reality that the City will not want to continue supporting something without proof that it works. The challenge for the FECs is to make their work legible enough to government bureaucracy to continue, but not so legible that they recreate the problems they aim to correct. While it would be challenging to measure these sites using the participation and outcome data collected by most social service programs, a thoughtful program evaluation could demonstrate the FECs' effectiveness at building relationships and community connections that have tangible impacts on family well-being.

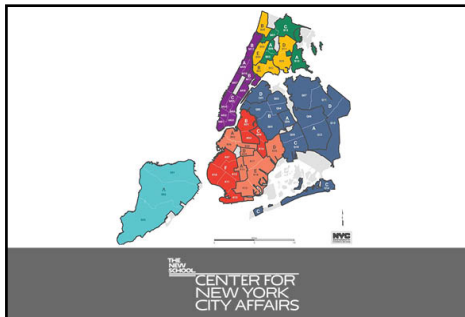
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