

Outreach and Recruitment

In Bushwick, we initially asked the BMCI agencies to identify parents on caseload who they thought had “leadership potential.” We suggested thinking about parents who had done everything their Case Planners might have hoped to reunite their own families, who had used agency services well, and who had good interpersonal communication skills. This proved to be more difficult than we had anticipated. The Case Planners were preoccupied with many other tasks, and also seemed unaccustomed to envisioning parents in leadership roles. It took about six months to identify our first group of Bushwick Parent Leaders. The Case Planners did wind up identifying some excellent candidates. Many, however, later reported some conflicted feelings about joining the Curriculum based on their Case Planners’ recommendations. Those with children still in foster care were unconvinced that participation was truly voluntary. They suspected that it might be another tacit prerequisite to reunification, like a parenting training class, or a form of group therapy (“another hoop to jump through.”) It was only after meeting with CWOP staff, including a Parent Organizer, that they came to fully understand the purposes and goals of the Curriculum, and confirmed their interest in participating.

When we first introduced the Curriculum in East Harlem, independent of any explicit partnership with local agencies, we modified our approach to outreach and recruitment. We belonged to an East Harlem Human Services Consortium, and we invited the member agencies to refer candidates, but we saw this only as an adjunct to our own direct recruiting efforts. We accepted primary responsibility for our own recruitment, and relied upon community outreach by the Parent Organizers on our staff. East Harlem is a community noted for high rates of ACS activity, including protective removal and foster care placement. There are few families in the community whose lives have not been impacted by ACS in some way, directly or indirectly. We expanded the eligibility criteria for Parent Leaders to include not only parents of children in foster care and preventive services, but subjects of child protective investigations that did not result in removals or referrals for services, kinship foster parents, and adults who had spent some portion of their own childhood in foster care.

Parent Organizers helped design flyers (sample included) and tried to saturate the community with them. They distributed flyers in housing projects, schools, daycare centers, Laundromats, beauty parlors, local elected officials’ district offices, and at Family Court. They posted them on lampposts and bus shelters, in lobbies, and store windows. This direct outreach turned out to be more productive than relying upon agencies for recruitment purposes. By eliminating the agencies as intermediaries, we were able to connect with local parents on a parent-to-parent basis, communicating an unambiguous message that the Curriculum existed for the parents’ benefit and was free of any hidden coercive agendas. Parents who had graduated from the Bushwick Curriculum were able to vouch for this personally. The local Human Services Consortium turned out not to be a significant source of referrals. Only one of our original East Harlem Parent Leaders learned of us through her agency, an inpatient mother / child drug treatment program where CWOP staff had offered an on-site parents’ rights training. The rest were engaged through community outreach. About fifty parents requested interviews, half this number appeared for interviews, and twelve were chosen.

CHILD WELFARE ORGANIZING PROJECT

East Harlem Neighborhood Center
80 East 110th Street 1E; New York, NY 10029
Tel. (212) 348-3000 * Fax (212) 348-1605

Agosto 2003

¿Sabía usted, qué en el año 2002, 380 niños de East Harlem fueron removidos de sus hogares por la Administración de Servicios de Niños (ACS) en la Ciudad de Nueva York?

¿Sabía usted, qué este fue el tercer-mayor numero de niños removidos de sus hogares que de cualquier otro vecindario en la ciudad de Nueva York?

PADRES DE EAST HARLEM DE LOS NIÑOS QUE ESTAN O HAN ESTADO ENVUELTOS EN HOGARES DE CRIANZA DE ACS, SERVICIOS PREVENTIVOS O PROTECTIVOS

Le gustaría a usted:

- ¿Obtener un mejor entendimiento de sus derechos legales y responsabilidades?
- ¿Ayudar a otros padres y familiares en su comunidad?
- ¿Trabajar para cambiar y mejorar el sistema del bienestar de niños en la ciudad de Nueva York?
- ¿Desarrolle sus habilidades y conocimiento que lo cualifique para un empleo de tiempo completo con el sistema del bienestar de niños?

El **Child Welfare Organizing Project** esta reclutando padres para “**Padres Liderazgo en East Harlem**”. Si usted es un padre y vive en El Barrio que ha tenido experiencias personales con ACS, y le gustaría la idea de trabajar y ayudar a otros padres en su comunidad, y tiene cerca diez de horas disponibles cada semana, quisiéramos hablar con **usted!**

POR FAVOR LLAME A MIKE O TERESA AL (212) 348-3000 PARA UNA ENTREVISTA.

CWOP is supported by the Child Welfare Fund, the Community Resource Exchange Reality Checks Fund, the Daphne Foundation, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Fund for the City of New York, the Hite Foundation, the New York Foundation, the New York Women’s Foundation, the North Star Fund, the Open Society Institute, the Valentine Perry Snyder Fund, a variety of individual donors, and a Member Item Grant from New York State Assembly Member Roger Green administered by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services

CHILD welfare Organizing project
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80 East 110th Street 1E; New York, NY 10029
Tel. (212) 348-3000 * Fax (212) 348-1605

August 2003

Did you know that, in 2002, 380 East Harlem children were removed from their families by the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS)?

Did you know that this was the third-highest number of removals from any NYC neighborhood?

EAST HARLEM PARENTS OF CHILDREN WHO ARE, OR HAVE BEEN, INVOLVED WITH ACS FOSTER CARE, PROTECTIVE, OR PREVENTIVE SERVICES,

Would you like to:

- Gain a better understanding of your legal rights and responsibilities?**
- Help other parents and families in your community?**
- Work to change and improve the NYC child welfare system?**
- Develop skills and knowledge that may qualify you for full-time employment in the child welfare system?**

The **Child Welfare Organizing Project** is recruiting for an **East Harlem Parent Leadership Initiative**. If you are a parent living in East Harlem who has had personal experience with ACS, if you like the idea of working with and helping other parents in you community, and you have about ten hours per week to spare, we would like to talk to **you!**

**PLEASE CALL TERESA OR MIKE AT (212) 348-3000
TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW**

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Sidebar 3

From Survivor to Parent Organizer – One Parent’s Perspective

To be honest, in the beginning, I wasn’t really interested in doing any community service relating to foster care issues. I just really wanted to get my kids out of foster care and go. I just wanted my children back. But then, when I got started in my own case, I really started seeing the *unfairness*. I was trying to work with professionals who didn’t seem like they really wanted to work with me. I was trying to do the right thing. I was doing exactly what ACS asked me to do, yet I wasn’t getting any cooperation. I had people around me that cared about me – my sister, my youngest son’s father, his grandparents - and they weren’t getting any recognition. What I began to feel at this point was more like an *anger*, and an outrage. I had done different kinds of community service in tenant and school organizations, but I really had no interest in service involving the ACS system.

That’s where Sharmeela Mediratta came in. She was the social worker working with a group I was in called Homeward Bound. She saw that my anger came from confusion, from asking the right questions but not getting the right answers. She referred me to the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP). She described this program to me. She said it seemed like CWOP might be a good way both to get some of my anger out, and to get information that would clear up some of the confusion behind the anger. It was a six-month training program, but I ended up staying 4 ½ years and counting.

I entered the program looking for more information, ways of helping my children and my family, trying to get my children home. Plus, I felt it might look good on my Court papers that I was in these self-help programs. But then I saw so many other people who were going through the same thing. I met a lot of people that really wanted help, really wanted to do the right thing, wanted information to help their children, but nobody was giving them the kind of help that they needed.

If we want to do the right thing as parents, why can’t anybody help us when we’re reaching out our hands for help? I was asking ACS for help, but they decided not to give me any until it was too late. It wasn’t until my children were placed in foster care that evaluations and various services were put in place. Why did it have to go that far? And I guess that’s one of the reasons why I stayed, and why I continue with CWOP. I now understand that *it doesn’t have to go that far*. If a parent is putting their self on the line, asking for help, they don’t have to be penalized for asking.

I now work for an organization where I can provide information to parents about how to get help without being penalized. I know people that have a deep knowledge of the system, and my own knowledge has deepened. We can help parents get what they need. When you come to CWOP, you have people in your corner where you can describe a situation in your life and not worry about someone picking up the phone to call State Central Register. We won’t try to hurt you because you come for help. I like providing that assurance that I’m not a Mandated Reporter. A person shouldn’t always have to watch what they say and how they act. They shouldn’t have to worry about “Do I look like somebody who deserves help?” That just bothers me. I want to be able to give a person assurance that if you’re telling me you need a drug treatment program, or that you need something to eat, you don’t have to worry about telling me the truth. I like being at a place that you can come to without that fear. I like being in a safe house.

Interviewing and Selection

Criteria for admission into the Curriculum tend to be very broad and inclusive. We consider any parent who has had direct personal experience with the public child welfare system to be a constituent, and feel an automatic sense of obligation towards them. We are reluctant to exclude candidates from the Curriculum based on how they present in an interview. Some possible exceptions include candidates who:

- Seem overly focused on the financial reimbursement offered to Parent Leaders
- Appear to be active drug or alcohol users, or to have an untreated mental illness
- Seem unlikely to be available for the suggested ten hours per week (e.g., a single parent who is working full time and attending college).

Most interviews are conducted by small groups of 3 – 4 CWOP staff members, initially including the Executive Director, Parent Organizers, and student interns, each with an equal vote in the final decision-making. Some of the Parent Organizers' early decision-making in East Harlem seemed counterintuitive from the Executive Director's point of view as a social worker and administrator. While the Executive Director questioned the appropriateness of candidates who seemed very angry, overwhelmed, or unfocused in their interviews, the Parent Organizers found these to be some of the most relatable candidates ("I remember when I felt that way. It was hard for people to see my potential through all that emotion.") In subsequent cycles of the Curriculum, Parent Organizers and student interns assumed more, and eventually, all responsibility for Parent Leader interviewing and selection. Rates of Parent Leader retention and graduation have improved steadily over time.

An interview protocol developed by CWOP staff is used as a means of guiding and documenting the interview process. A typical interview begins with CWOP staff giving a brief overview of the Curriculum, roughly, as follows:

CWOP is an organization of parents who have been involved with the child welfare system. Many of us have had children in foster care. We help and advise other parents on how to reunite their families, based on our own experience. We also work together to help change the system, to make it more respectful of parents and families. The CWOP Parent Leadership Curriculum was developed by parents for parents, to help us gain a better understanding of the NYC child welfare system, and prepare us for roles as peer advocates and organizers. It began in Bushwick in 1999. While we cannot guarantee any specific results, the large majority of our graduates who had children in foster care have succeeded in reuniting their families, and over 50% have gotten jobs as Parent Advocates. We don't do any of this for you. We try and teach you how to advocate for yourself. The Curriculum is (six to eight) months long, and requires a commitment of about ten hours per week. It consists of both classroom sessions ('CWOP Academy') and hands-on learning activities (give examples). We reimburse you for your expenses in connection with your participation.

The outreach / recruitment phase of the Curriculum has varied in duration from three to six months. In recent years, we have begun asking candidates to attend our weekly Support Group and other CWOP activities during this time period, both so that staff can get to know them better, and so that the candidate can gain a better understanding of the organization before committing to a six-to-eight-month course of study and community service.