

# ChildNet Stresses Early Intervention

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**T**he story of Eva Daley, a mother of a suspected gang member who drove her son and a group of youths to a Long Beach park seeking retribution, recently made headlines. Ultimately, a teenage boy was killed and the public was alarmed that a mother would condone this type of detrimental behavior. When Robert Di Stefano did the math, however, he realized that the mother was just 15 years old when she became pregnant with her son, an outcome that could have been avoided if effective intervention was provided for the young woman.

By the time a government agency recognizes a child's severe behavioral problems, it is often too late to implement effective services that could alter the child's destructive course, says Di Stefano, president and CEO of local nonprofit organization ChildNet Youth and Family Services, which employs a different approach.

"Our goal has always been to try to deal with that 15-year-old girl and her crisis and try to obviate that negative outcome, rather than focus on the punishment, which you now have to do," he explains.

"You can't change people. You can provide an opportunity for them to change and encouragement and support, but they're going to change or not change on their own," he adds. "Once



ChildNet President and CEO Robert Di Stefano has been with the nonprofit organization for 25 years. ChildNet operates on a philosophy that reinforces personal responsibility and the need for a strong family unit. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

they get started on a change process, like all of us, we become more and more responsible, we become more interested in improving further and further. It's like an exercise program. Sometimes it's hard to get started, but after a while, you want to do more and more and more, and you like being that better person and that more productive person. So the question is, how long can we stay involved?"

Twenty-five years ago, ChildNet Youth and Family Services had a budget of about \$800,000 and served 40 children. Today, the nonprofit organization's budget is \$23 million and it serves 4,000 individuals on any given day through its "Continuum of Care" model, established to provide necessary, ongoing support for those in need.

And while the range of its programs has changed significantly since it became incorporated in 1970, ChildNet's mission has largely remained the same: to provide safe homes, education and counseling to vulnerable children and families, and emphasize personal responsibility and a strong family unit.

The organization's first program was an alcohol and drug rehabilitation center for teenagers. In 1975 the program reorganized to accept and guide troubled boys with problematic behavior. Known as the Long Beach Youth Home, the program closed last year as a result of funding

issues. In the interim, however, ChildNet implemented several new programs aimed at providing family-driven, strength-based services to at-risk youth and their families.

The ChildNet Wraparound program, for instance, has provided emotional, material and financial support and assistance. In fact, nearly 90 percent of the program's clients remained with their families while receiving services, 85 percent achieved academic improvement and 75 percent maintained school attendance or improved academic attendance from the previous quarter.

Family Support Services, meanwhile, was established in August 2007 and is designed to help children and adolescents with serious emotional and behavioral problems. Through providing vulnerable families with preventive services and teaching them new skills, ChildNet aims to strengthen families and build cohesion and confidence. The organization's newest program, it depends entirely on private funds. In fact, ChildNet just began its new fiscal year, and one of its goals is to raise \$225,000 for the program.

"We have about 100 years in our upper management of people dealing with troubled children, and all of us recognized that it was very difficult – often impossible – to change the course of a 16-, 17-year-old boy who had a long history of problems," Di Stefano says. "You can do it, but it's not easy, and in some cases, it just isn't possible. So the best thing to do is to try to get involved earlier and try to change the trajectory of that child's life."

"It's a great concept in the sense that we're focusing on families who have children who are showing signs of serious problems," he adds. "It's not something that government funding usually addresses, so we'd love to expand it, but we're really dependent on the community to support it."

ChildNet also operates a large Behavioral Health Services program, which provides mental health services to more than 600 children and families in the community and includes a partnership with the Long Beach Unified School District that offers \$3 million worth of services at 10 local schools. In addition, the organization's Foster Family Network serves foster children and recruits and trains foster parents, who are always needed by the organization to care for children.

The organization also operates Zinsmeyer Academy on Anaheim Street and the Vista Ridge Academy in Monrovia. Both are special education schools that serve children who have emotional problems that interfere with their education.

All programs are part of a "Continuum of Care" model

that is designed to provide support services as needed. For instance, a child may be referred to one of the private schools, which may then prompt the organization to involve the student's family through Family Support Services. The child may ultimately go back to public school, but continues to receive follow-up counseling through Behavioral Support Services.

"They may take two steps forward, one step backward, they may need more services, [or less]," Di Stefano explains. "We want to make the support fluid and keep it all under our control so that we can guarantee that there's not going to be any slippage."

For more information, call 562/498-5521 or visit [www.childnet.net](http://www.childnet.net). ■