



Champions for Inclusive Communities

Star Community

Travis County, TX

“People like to be respected. It doesn’t matter if they make less than \$12,000 a year or \$120,000 a year, people feel empowered when they are respected.”

- Pam Thomas, Parent Liaison for the Children’s Partnership.

“Family driven” is a perfect way to describe the system of care community of Travis County, Texas. Families participate in almost every facet of The Children’s Partnership, the organization leading the Central Texas system of care community. The Children’s Partnership focuses primarily on providing services to children and youth with complex needs and their families, particularly children and adolescents with serious emotional disturbances (SED), and on “changing the way business is done” in child, youth and family organizations. The Children’s Partnership, however, doesn’t operate in a typical manner as its best approaches to serving families are unique.

A Virtual Approach

Instead of having one physical location where children, youth, and families come to receive services, The Children’s Partnership operates virtually. This means the organization’s “location” is a P.O. Box, and services are provided at the families’ homes or at community locations.

More than one hundred providers are available so that youth and families can select whom they believe to be the best fit. The 44 team members that carry out the work of The Children’s Partnership are all employed by partner agencies, which are spread throughout the community. These agencies include Travis County Juvenile Probation and Health and Human Services Departments, the local Mental Health Authority, Casey Family Programs, and several Independent School Districts (a complete list of the partners is available online). These providers, partner agencies, and team members all work together to comprehensively meet the complex needs of participant children, youth, and families.

Princess Katana, Director of The Children’s Partnership, emphasizes that their unique approach is “truly a community-based way of serving and working with children and youth with serious emotional disturbances and their families.”

Developing a Family’s Plan of Care

The Community Partners for Children (CPC) initiative, one of The Children’s Partnership’s key partners, serves as the single point of community access to services and supports for children, youth, and families. CPC supports families’ access to the system of care in a distinctive way. CPC provides a unique opportunity for youth and families to share their experiences and talk about their hopes and

needs with representatives from approximately 30 public and private organizations who meet together twice a month. Families who attend CPC meetings leave with a plan of care that starts them on their way to accessing services in the community.

The Children’s Partnership collaborates extensively with organizations that serve children, youth, and families in order to strengthen the community’s safety net. This collaboration expands existing resources and makes possible the establishment of new services, which results in increased availability of services and supports for families. Of particular interest is the investment of resources offered by grass-root providers that support youth and family’s access to non-traditional services. Such strategic investments have effectively reduced the service gaps in Travis County.

Empowerment for ALL Families

Pam Thomas and Christianna Hale, Parent Liaisons for the Children’s Partnership, believe that the success of the community stems from their emphasis on family-driven care. Pam points out that many of the families she works with simply need to feel validated – to know that there is another parent who has had similar experiences,

What makes a Star Community?

ChampionsInC has created the Star Communities program to recognize exceptional communities.

Star Communities will show excellence in 6 Performance Measures:

- Families are partners
- A "Medical Home" provides coordinated care
- Children receive early and continuous screening
- Families have adequate funding/insurance to pay for services
- Services are organized so families can use them easily and are satisfied
- Youth receive necessary services to make the transition to adult life

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who understands and confirms what they are experiencing, and can show them ways to successfully navigate the system.

The Children's Partnership takes great pride in the success achieved by participating children, youth, and families. Much of their success rests on the fact that they do not offer a "cookie-cutter" model for every participant. Instead, the family is supported to customize a plan of care that builds on their strengths, meets their needs, and addresses their interests. This is crucial in empowering the family to take full advantage of the community's safety net. Christiana also notes, "It's really important to start where the family is." In some cases, the family may be overwhelmed by their situation and simply needs respite care to start out.

The Children's Partnership attributes the success of their system of care to the ongoing commitment to meaningful partnerships with families. Since inception, families have participated at all levels of the Travis County system of care. They have been hired as parent liaisons, service providers, and data collectors. Family members' participation on meetings of The Children's Partnership board of directors, various community committees, and related group meetings is supported by making stipends available, and through the provision of transportation childcare and a meal.

The Travis County system of care community is committed to being inclusive and strives for culturally and linguistically competent service delivery. The Children's Partnership works with diverse children, youth, and families. Members of the large Latino and Deaf communities participate readily due to members of The Children's Partnership team being able to communicate in Spanish and American Sign Language. Participation of immigrant families is further supported through the use of interpreters, and worries about documentation issues are reduced as participation in The Children's Partnership is not exclusive. In a nutshell, Pam Thomas says that parents and youth need to know they are a critical part of the system.

Unique Funding

Just as the infrastructure of The Children's Partnership is unique, so are the funding mechanisms that support its work. The Children's Partnership's non-profit status allows for certain tax benefits and provides the advantage of governance by a board of directors.

An important aspect of The Children's Partnership's community-based approach to service delivery is the flexible funding pool to

which partners contribute annually. This method ensures that categorical funding doesn't drive the service delivery, but that youth and families have access to the full array of services and supports required for them to achieve their goals.

Transitioning to Adulthood

Since the Children's Partnership works mostly with children and youth ages 5-18, and up to age 22 when the young adult is still in school, transition is a critical part of the organization's focus. In one situation, The Children's Partnership was alerted to the special circumstances facing a young adult with a disability who was getting ready to graduate from high school. Parent liaisons supported the youth and her family in teaming up with the Texas Department of Assistive & Rehabilitative Services (DARS) to develop the best plan for her. The adolescent's team promptly determined that instead of graduating right away, the youth could enroll in a post-secondary program that would allow her to obtain her high school diploma, earn college credits, develop independent living skills, and prepare to transition to adult life.

In addition to supporting youth and young adults transitioning into the adult service system and independent living, the Travis County system of care also supports youth who are transitioning back to the community from congregate care. Helpful mentors, many of them "alumni" of the foster care system themselves, are key in assisting youth transitioning out of the Child Welfare system.

The Children's Partnership is a truly successful initiative and a model for other Texas communities. It operates as a virtual organization that implements service delivery around the community; supports the development of individualized child-centered, youth-guided, family-driven plans of care; partners with child-, youth-, and family-serving agencies in the community; and uses resources effectively. The clear message that The Children Partnership and its supporting community of Travis County emphasize is that when resources are united and youth and families are supported in achieving their goals, they maintain their success. This results in children and youth with complex needs being able to live successfully with their families in their homes and participate positively in school and community.

This, according to the staff at The Children's Partnership, is most important of all.

The Children's Partnership provides training to community partners on a variety of topics. To learn more, contact:

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