

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**  
**Lifetrack Resources**  
**Frogtown Family Connections**  
Interim Report



EnSearch was awarded a contract by Lifetrack Resources to conduct an evaluation of the Frogtown Family Connections program. This preliminary report is an initial look at the program after only 6 months of operation. A comprehensive final report will be available December 2002.

Lifetrack Resources was founded in 1948 as a community human service organization providing services that help adults who are disadvantaged or who have disabilities become employed and support families or live independently, and to help children and youth achieve success in school or in the transition to work.

In Fall 2000, the organization received funding from The McKnight Foundation for the Frogtown Family Connections program. The purpose of the funding was to develop a home visiting program to serve Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) recipients in the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) who fail to attend the initial Overview of the Minnesota Family Investment Program, also referred to as the Employment Services Overview and often referred to by staff as the overview or overview meeting.

Between January and July 9, 2001, there were 79 MFIP individuals referred to the program; 31 became active and of those 26 continued to be active and 5 became inactive, or their cases were closed.

EnSearch was asked to answer the following evaluation questions:

- What are the components of the model?
- What are staff learning about which components of the model are working and which ones are not?
- What are the barriers to attending the initial overview?
- What are the characteristics of the families who use the home visiting services?
- What are some of the initial outcomes for families?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the program?

Data were collected through monthly focus-group interviews with program administration and staff, one-on-one telephone interviews with program administrators, staff and MFIP Job Counselors and an analysis of demographic and outcome data collected by program staff for the families active in June 2001.

## THE PROGRAM MODEL

This report begins to answer questions about the initial 6 months of operation. It is too soon to give definitive answers as the model changes as staff learn what is working and not working and makes modifications.

### The Need for a Home Visiting Program

In the proposal to the McKnight Foundation the need for a home visiting program was described as follows:

The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) has been operating for three years. Lifetrack Resources has the highest percentage (57%) of MFIP participants who are currently employed from among all Ramsey County vendors.

However, the experience of all welfare-to-work programs . . . is that the population of welfare recipients is increasingly hard to serve. Lifetrack Resources' sanction rate is 12%, three times higher than our sanction rate during the MFIP demonstration program. This sanction rate falls in the middle compared with other Ramsey County vendors. At Lifetrack Resources, 80% of welfare participants who are referred by Ramsey County to Lifetrack Resources don't attend the initial MFIP orientation. Failure to attend the orientation puts individuals at risk of being sanctioned.

Very little is known about the people who don't show up for this first step of the MFIP program or why they don't respond to the first letter. They may never receive the letter because they have moved with no forwarding address . . . Families may not be able to read the letter because of learning disabilities or language barriers. They may not be able to participate because of family problems, such as not having any care for children with special needs. They may not open the letter in time to attend the orientation. They may have been told things about MFIP that make them fearful of becoming involved in it. They may be facing family crises which take priority over MFIP compliance.

Lifetrack's MFIP program recognizes the need to make a concerted effort to reach people who are at risk of being sanctioned with the message that there are resources and support to help them . . .

## **Key Components of the Frogtown Family Connections Program Lifetrack Resources Organization**

Lifetrack Resources was founded in 1948 to respond to the need for physical and occupational therapy in the community following hospitalization. Shortly thereafter, Lifetrack Resources began a therapeutic preschool for children whose disability or illness resulted in developmental delays; and vocational rehabilitation services for adults to enter employment after illness or disability. Lifetrack Resources seeks to empower persons with physical, mental, social or emotional challenges in the Twin Cities metropolitan to fully utilize their abilities.

In the year 2000, 6,642 individuals were served through two divisions; 2,852 in rehabilitation therapies and 3,790 in employment-related services. Services are provided regardless of people's ability to pay.

Frogtown Family Connections is housed within the Rehabilitation Therapies Division. Lifetrack Resources has more than 10 years of experience in providing support to hard-to-serve families through home visiting. Two of the programs, Families Together program and Ramsey County Early Head Start, and the home therapy services that result from Lifetrack Resources being designated as an Essential Community Provider by the Minnesota Department of Health in 1998 provided the staff with important insights into the needs of the MFIP families living in the Frogtown area. Regarding the home visiting program for the Families Together program, staff had learned:

... What has worked with this population is home visiting where you go out and ask, "What do you need help with?" ... We have found it works best by modeling the behavior and working, on a one-to-one basis, with families. And that you start by meeting the parents' needs because until the parent has some needs met they have nothing to give. They don't have the energy to change their behavior with the child. Most of these parents weren't parented themselves and so they don't have some of the natural things that we as middle class people just assume everyone knows ...

The Frogtown Family Connections program staff work directly with the MFIP Job Counselors who are located in the Employment Resources Division. Lifetrack Resources is a major provider of MFIP services in Ramsey County, serving approximately 1,000 families each year.

## **Frogtown Family Connections Program**

The Frogtown Family Connections program is a home visiting program designed to serve 80 MFIP families. Staff identify families' strengths and areas of need, develop a family support plan and assist families in meeting their basic needs and becoming self sufficient.

### **Staffing**

The program is overseen by the Vice President of Lifetrack Resources Rehabilitation Therapies Division. The staff include a Program Coordinator, Home Visitor Family Workers, and a Home Visiting Case Aide.

The program staff work most directly with the MFIP Job Counselor Supervisor, MFIP Job Counselors and MFIP Case Aide, employees in the Lifetrack Resources Employment Resources Division.

### **Eligibility**

To become eligible a family had to fail to attend the MFIP overview or intake, putting them at risk of being sanctioned. Other requirements include having children under age 6 and living within a narrow definition of the Frogtown area. These restrictions meant that many families referred to the program could not be served. Of the 18 referred during the month of February, 4 (22%) could not be served because they lived outside the geographical area or did not have children under age 6. Since that time, the age and geographical area requirements have been loosened and are considered on a case by case basis.

### **Activities, The Work of the Staff**

The work of the staff has been organized into nine steps. Staff tend to go through these steps sequentially; however, there are times when staff actions are not quite so linear because meeting families' needs is of primary concern.

**Step 1 -- Referral Sent from MFIP to Frogtown Family Connections Staff.** The first step starts when the MFIP family fails to attend the Employment Services Overview (a mandatory meeting where MFIP services and regulations are explained) or intake. The Notice of Intent to Sanction (NOITS) is sent from the MFIP Case Aide.

A flyer regarding Frogtown Family Connections, printed on hot pink paper, is sent along with the NOITS to the MFIP family. The MFIP Case Aide notifies the Frogtown Family Connections staff of the name, address and phone number of the family receiving this mailing.

**Step 2 -- Attempt to Reach By Mail and Phone.** Staff will try by mail and phone to reach a family that has missed the overview meeting. This strategy came from another home visiting program. In some cases this has worked; however, in most cases it has not, often because the letter is returned and/or phone numbers provided by the MFIP Case Aide were disconnected or no longer in service or the families have an answering machine but do not return calls.

I always have this standard speech [ready for in case they answer the phone] . . . "My name is . . . And we have this program that does . . ." So I tell them about the whole program, and send my card, and that's when I make the first home visit. Then they know exactly who I am.

**Step 3 -- Multiple Attempts to Reach the MFIP Family.**

If phoning does not work, staff will go as a team to the home site. Often they will not locate the family during this first visit. Then the same hot pink paper is used for another flyer that staff leave in the door.

Steps taken to make an initial contact include:

. . . Sometimes we get two, three different phone numbers. They're all disconnected so you have to drive to their home. I've had very few where I can call and set up something. It's very difficult because most of the times they've changed their number already, several times in fact.

An important piece is how we get in . . . I don't think they have a clue to the lengths we go to make that first contact . . . We're not going to scale the building, but ---.

It's really important to be nice to the people that are there. On the first few visits you get to know who's there. I went on a visit just last week. And I remember the young woman that was there . . . I know that if I ever [need to track down my client it's] going to be that person that I'm going to get information from . . . They see you there for the umpteenth time looking for your clients. And after a while, if you can't contact them, others at the building become a source of information.

This persistence is why Frogtown Family Connections staff have been able to contact 41 (52%) of the 79 referrals and were able to resolve all other cases: in 16 (20%) cases contact could not be made because their case was closed because they had moved out of the county or State of Minnesota or because their whereabouts were unknown; in 14 (18%) cases the family could not be contacted because they lived outside of the geographic boundaries of the program; and for 8 (10%) the case had been closed by the Financial Worker for ineligibility reasons such as losing custody of their children.

**Step 4 -- Getting a Foot in the Door.** Once a connection is made, the staff have to communicate who they are and what they are about in a very short time:

What I do is introduce myself and say, "I have your name from Lifetrack Resources and you did not show up at the orientation meeting." . . . I will often go to the door and ask if they received a letter with this pink flyer. Often they say they never got the letter or they never got the mail. Often that is the reason they didn't show up at the meeting. I show them the flyer and the notice of intent to sanction and say, "Here's the notice, here is what my program does." Often at first people say that they don't know what that pink flyer is or know what it's about. Once I start talking about it, however, I find that they know exactly what it is.

**Step 5 -- Being Invited Into the Home.** During the first contact, the staff move from the brief introduction of the program to beginning to explain the program and to establishing a relationship with the family. This was described in the following way:

We explain our role, we let the family talk about themselves. We mainly listen. We don't bring in any forms except the one [they sign if they decide they want to] participate in the program. [The first visit] is informal, and we are trying to establish a relationship with the family. We let them talk. Let them talk about anything they want to talk about . . . about their problems, the kids . . . whatever. We just try to establish that first relationship.

The following example shows how the staff work to address an immediate need:

She said she was struggling. She had no food in the house. We took this family to a food shelf and stayed with her in the line for those hours. And she came back home with all the food . . . She saw that we were willing to do something. We're not saying words, we are doing whatever we say we will do. We're making the effort . . . We're trustworthy. And after that she could not even stop . . . talking about her personal problems. She just let everything out.

Often staff need to ask a number of times if a family has any basic needs. They have learned that at first some families, not all, may be reluctant to talk. Sometimes it's the children who are the most forthright, or that it takes the third time the question is asked for the mother or father to talk frankly about their situation:

I always ask about the basic needs. The food, clothing, how's your shelter. Ask at least three times, when I first get there, the middle of our visit, and before I leave. Just because I've had one experience where the woman . . . I felt like there was something she wanted to tell me. But she wasn't, she kept kind of shifting her eyes. So I kept prodding her, and I don't think she was going to tell me that she was running low on food, and her little boy luckily was in the room. He said, "Mom, we're only having one meal a day." So I just told her, you need to tell me these kind of things. And she was embarrassed. She has a job, and she just doesn't feel good that she can't provide for her family.

Learnings included how to dress, "We dressed too dressy." Staff also learned how to read the situation and make it safe for themselves and the family member they were trying to contact (e.g. make visits in pairs, conduct home visit from doorway, arrange to meet family at a public place). Another technique of the program is having a gift bag to give families during the first home visit:

One of the things that some of the visitors do to start off with [is] they will show up with a gift bag, a bag of just some little things that they've picked up at the store. They often have a little appointment book in it or a calendar. If there are children, and there are children in all the families we work with, they might bring along a coloring book and some crayons. Might be a little package of gold fish and maybe a packet of a nice coffee or two in there. Some sort of little chocolates or candy, just a little something.

**Step 6 -- Second Home Visit; Goal Setting, Clarifying Roles and Expectations.** The second home visit is a time when the Home Visitors and families set goals, clarify roles and expectations. This goal setting process was described as follows:

We talk first about their goals. What are they, what are their goals? What are the strengths that they see in their families? And after that we write the goal down. Say that my goal, for example, is to look for housing. We put the goal into steps. This sheet of paper lists the goal and the steps [the family will take] to achieve that goal. This sheet of paper [also has] our role, what is going to be our contribution to that goal. There's a family contribution and our contribution. And it's all simple steps. For example, I talked about a goal to find housing. My role is to give this family a list of different apartment buildings, subsidized housing . . . whatever we have. The role of the family is to . . . call these places. My role is, "I'm going to help you go and look for these places and apply for these places."

If they have no means of transportation, we do transportation. [With the goal setting] we say we are going to do this if you did that. They have to make the call. They have to make the appointment. Our role is to take them to these places . . . and let them look.

Another component, philosophy if you will, is that the families drive the process:

You can't go into it thinking, I'm going to work on x, y and z with you because that's what I see needs to be done. But the family drives the process in terms of what they need . . . And so that's really important not to go in with a preconceived plan of, this is what I'm going to do for you . . .

Staff also try to focus on the strengths of the families:

I think our program is very successful because . . . we are there taking them . . . and leading them to whatever they need to get their self-sufficiency. We look at this as a strength-based program. We understand the barriers of the families . . . we don't just set goals out of nothing. We study what are the barriers, and we take it one step at a time.

**Step 7 -- Taking Families to Orientation.** At first, if a family decided to work with the Frogtown Family Connections program the sanction process would be waived and they did not have to meet requirements such as going to the MFIP Overview. However, Frogtown Family Connections staff realized that if they keep families connected to MFIP they will have access to many more resources.

The Frogtown Family Connections staff transport the families to the Employment Services Overview and often, especially when working with families who speak English as their second language, sit in the meeting with the families and explain what is being said.

**Step 8 -- Getting Families Connected with Job Counselors.** The initial plan for the program was that as long as the family was working with the Frogtown Family Connections staff they did not need to meet with their MFIP Job Counselor. However, Frogtown Family Connections Home Visitors found that the families have access to many more resources if they link up with their MFIP Job Counselor. In staff meetings and in one-on-one interviews, staff talked about this decision:

Believe it or not, that's where the biggest focus is. I know this isn't our outcome, and it's not our final goal. But we work so closely with the Job Counselors. And we've established such a good relationship with them that . . . it's going hand-in-hand. I'm not sure how it happened. Or what was the turning point.

. . . About half the time they don't know what MFIP is about, "Oh, I can do this?" Or, "I'm eligible for this? I didn't even know." And then they say, "Tell me what else I can get." [We'll say] "Go see your Job Counselor, she'll tell you." So a lot of it is . . . we're just the resource pointing them in that direction. But when they connect with the Job Counselor, then that's a really, really good thing. Because then, if they're going for interviews, they pick up money to get clothing for that, or bus passes which a lot of them are in need of. And you can just definitely see the change . . .

Bi-weekly staff meetings between Frogtown Family Connections staff and MFIP Job Counselors were scheduled early in the program. These have been found to be valuable so they have been continued.

**Step 9 -- Frequent Customized Contact.** Frequent contact, especially early, is another key component. Sometimes that is a home visit, other times it's a brief conversation on the phone:

And we always do continuous home visits. Just for even five, ten minutes. "Hey, what's going on, what's going on today?" If we could not get hold of them on the phone, the phone is disconnected, we go to their house. And we just talk to them, "Anything new? How is it going? Do you need anything for this week?" Sometimes they don't. Sometimes they don't have anyone even to care. They see that we care.

#### **The Resource Notebook**

To meet the varied needs of families, staff began to search for community resources. The Home Visiting Case Aide created The Resource Notebook. Because staff often called her for the information while they were working with families out in the community, a copy was made for each staff member and it has now been shared with other programs.

#### **Teaching Families The System, Then They Do It On Their Own**

Throughout the interviews staff talked about how they had to learn all the systems and ways things are done, then take their clients through the process. After a time their clients are doing it on their own. The example that follows is illustrative of many others:

She's gotten to the point where she goes to the county every month by herself to fill out her household report form and turn it in. I accompanied her to that twice. We [Home Visitors] did it on our own first, and then we took her. But now she does it on her own. Hasn't asked me for help once. And then she also goes to the food shelf on her own every month, once a month.

#### **Cell Phones - Useful Component**

Home Visitors will often have families who do not have phones. The cell phones are used by staff or families to call Job Counselors, make appointments, or ask for information. They are used as a tool to model effective communication skills and to coach a family as they improve their communication skills. They are used between team members to get information or to deal with unfolding situations.

#### **Safety Issues and Work with Public Health Nurse**

The administrative staff, because of their knowledge of other home visiting programs, made sure that safety was discussed and planned for. That is one reason that home visitors visit homes, at least initially, as a team of two. They also had the public health nurse talk with staff about not only their own safety but the safety of the children and family members with whom they work.

#### **Advocating with Financial Workers -- Helping Families with System Issues**

One of the major issues for families, which also becomes an issue for the Frogtown Family Connections staff, is the lack of communication between the MFIP Job Counselors and Financial Workers. Staff gave examples of when a family was going to lose their housing because the paperwork had not been completed to vendor the rent check and when sanctions had been imposed. Contributing factors are: families tend to contact the Financial Workers rather than the Job Counselors because their checks come from the Financial Workers; it often takes a significant amount of time to make necessary changes to resolve an issue; and the large case loads. Financial Workers often have case loads of 250 or more while Job Counselors may have as many as 160. Although Lifetrack Resources has advocated for smaller case loads, this request, to a large extent, has not been heard. Staff talked about the communication issue:

I think a lack of communication between Financial Workers and Job Counselors is the biggest barrier because one person has some information, the other person has a different set of information and a sanction can be imposed by either. Sometimes one party is imposing a sanction without knowledge of what the other party has. And Financial Workers are very hard people to get a hold of . . .

We're also finding that the Financial Workers do have a lot of information that we don't have and the Job Counselors don't have. And that's mainly because they're handling their money. They're getting their money from the Financial Worker. This is the person that they're giving their updates to.

### **Advocates of the Most Intensive Kind**

The Frogtown Family Connections staff devote countless hours to helping families. They are truly advocates for the families.

They've helped move a family out of the house into a shelter . . . in Maplewood . . . at 9 o'clock at night. The amazing part was that two mornings later the woman decided she was moving back to her mother's in [state] and got an agency in town to help her get the bus ticket she needed. Needed to go back and get her belongings from the house where she had been living. No one there would give her the belongings unless the person whose name the apartment was in was there, and she leaves for work at 7 in the morning. So [name] got up at 4:30 in the morning, got the agency van, drove out to the shelter, picked up this mother and her four children. So she probably had to help get them all ready at that hour of the morning. Drove them back in. By 6 o'clock in the morning they were at the doorstep of these folks in order to get all their belongings back. Then she took all of them to get some breakfast. And then went to the agency where they were getting the check to get the bus tickets. Took them to the bus depot. Realized that all the belongings of the family were in garbage bags and that wasn't going to travel on a bus very well. So went and got duct tape to tape all of these bags in such a way that they wouldn't come open in transit. That was her morning. And she was working late that night. By Wednesday of that week she had put in 39 hours. [Our staff] care about people and my sense is that's what's making this program as successful as it is. And you know what the current staff each has said to me recently, "I love my job." It's, like, my goodness, when will you burn out? Make sure you take your vacations . . . and get a good night's sleep when you're home. They are amazing people.

### **Working on Boundaries**

Staff discussed setting boundaries. This is not easy, especially when children are involved.

Most of my clients tend not to use you. But they can deceive you. Try to get the most out of you. They learn how to abuse the system. And then they think that they can do that with us, too. And I don't know how they do it, but just every time when we go there it is do this for me and do that for me. So one thing that we're facing right now is how we can tell them that this is not our role. They think that we can do everything. We can't. Oh, we can help them. Or we can teach

them how to do that . . . There's something that we are doing that makes this family feel this comfortable with us that they can call us at 10 o'clock at night. And just put their responsibility on us, and say we don't have food or something like that.

### **Regular Team Meetings to Help Staff Cope with Difficult Situations**

The importance of providing time for staff to talk about what they are seeing is another key component. Many issues are suspected but not fully documentable - drug use, severe mental health issues, domestic violence, child abuse and child sexual abuse.

She and her husband had had a domestic dispute. I suspect the children are being abused. She said he beats them more than he should . . . If I do anything, she's told me she'll deny it.

We have a psychologist that works with us once a week or once every other week. And a public health nurse that works with us every week . . . We've had a few mental illness issues and abuse issues come up. And we talk about it in our staff meeting and try to find ways to work with that . . . I don't think that anybody has worked close enough with them to notice it because when we've gotten their referrals nobody's ever mentioned anything. We just kind of stumble across strange behavior or something in our visit . . . Some depression and some paranoia kind of things and the abuse stuff that wasn't evident at first . . . Some of these families just come out and tell you lots of stuff. And during the visit we just listen. And we leave the home and we just reassure them if you need anything please let us know. We talk about it amongst ourselves because we're not sure what to do at the time. And then we bring it to the meeting.

There's kind of a suspicion there, but I don't know her that well to approach the subject. She's very paranoid. And it smells heavily of weed . . . so you are pretty sure there's something going on.

He makes me very uncomfortable the way he touches his daughters. And one child has displayed certain things that just put up all the red flags. This child is being molested or something is going on . . . The red flags were there. You're almost physically ill when you leave there. But there's nothing you can do. Those kinds of situations are the ones that leave us feeling most helpless . . . [Child protection staff] just said, unless the child tells a mandated reporter, they or you observe something she said they can't really do anything about it.

But yet they are able to talk about good experiences too:

But we also have really good days . . . She's on the Welfare to Work program. She's now working . . . She and several other women are participating in a preventative abuse program. They work with other women in their community. . . She has housing now. Last week we got the go ahead. We're going to fill out the paperwork today. There's those where it's finally all working. She's been working really hard. She's calling up these people. Do you have a place dah-dah-dah. So that's been all her.

### Closing a Case

As of July 9, 2001, five cases had been closed. Staff had yet to establish firm policies regarding closing a case. They were unclear as to when a case should be classified as such.

### **BARRIERS TO ATTENDING THE OVERVIEW**

One of the evaluation questions asked, What are the barriers to attending the initial overview? Frogtown Family Connections staff are beginning to unravel some of these factors. They include:

- not receiving the letter regarding the overview or the NOITS because they move so frequently.
- not receiving the letter regarding the overview or the NOITS because the address given to the MFIP vendor from the county may be incorrect.
- receiving the letter and/or the NOITS but not understanding what to do.
- receiving the letter and/or the NOITS but, because it is written in English, not understanding what it says.
- receiving the letter and/or NOITS but ignoring it or not opening the envelope, partially because of uncertainty regarding what it means or the fear of what it might say.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF ACTIVE FAMILIES**

For this preliminary report, staff provided basic demographic information on 27 active cases.

- Most were female (21, 72%) although 8 (28%) were male. Two of the 8 males were single parents with children.
- Most families (18, 67%) were single parents with children, with two of these families

being headed by men. Nine or 33% of the Frogtown Family Connections families were married and lived with a spouse.

- Family size ranged from 2 to 6; the average size was 3. In 2000, the average family size for MFIP families, statewide, was also 3 people. The 27 families in Frogtown Family Connections had 57 children.
- Most (27, 93%) were U. S. citizens; the remainder were eligible non-U.S. citizens.
- Most individuals were African American (14, 48%). The remainder were European American (6, 21%), Vietnamese (2, 7%), Somali (2, 7%), Black (2, 7%), and Hmong (1, 3%). The ethnicity for 2 were unknown.
- The majority spoke English as their first language (24, 83%). The languages spoken by other families included Hmong (1, 3%), Vietnamese (2, 7%) and Somali (2, 7%).
- Most individuals (22, 76%) had reached at least the high school level and of these 7 had some college or technical education. There was 1 (3%) who had a primary school education, 1 (3%) who had reached junior high, 3 (10%) who were working on a GED and 1 (3%) who wanted a GED. The educational level for one was unknown.
- Many (21, 78%) needed food and the staff successfully helped them become connected with the food shelves.
- Staff knew of domestic violence in 8 of 27 families, and suspected it was an issue in another; this represents one-third (33%, 9) of the families.
- Two of the 27 families had lived in a shelter. There were 11 (41%) others who were living with friends or relatives because they did not have a place of their own.
- Many (13, 48%) used the bus as their primary mode of transportation; 11 (41%) drove a car and 3 (11%) used a bus or car.

When Frogtown Family Connections staff located many families they found them overwhelmed:

I think some of the families just get into this rut. And they just can't seem to pull themselves out no matter how many things we can connect them to. They need to be able to make that first step of "Yes, I want to do this." We've had some families who say I want this, I want that, but when we say, let's go, [they respond] "I can't . . . I have to do this or I have to do that."

When they have complex needs, multiple needs . . . some of them have mental illnesses. They have chemical dependency. They have domestic violence . . . [They are so] overwhelmed they cannot even think straight. And some of them don't want to do anything. In our program . . . if they are willing to go one step, we will go two steps towards them. But when they don't want to do anything, this is a struggle. You can't do anything. You can't force a person to do this and that . . . So this is one of the weaknesses of the program . . . How can . . . we give them the strength just to think that they can . . . be somebody, do something about themselves. But if they don't have this thing within them, it's so hard. It's so hard.

### OUTCOMES FOR FAMILIES

Despite the barriers, families are making progress in stabilizing their family situations. Staff provided a summary of outcomes for each of their families. They documented the range of support the families received as well as the range of outcomes that have occurred from this intensive, comprehensive, customized program. A few examples were:

**Family A:** She could talk with community resource staff without throwing down the phone by the time she was out of our program. The parents were more involved in their children's schools.

**Family C:** Has had same job and housing situation now for 3 months. Kids had been in four schools this year prior to our involvement.

**Family D:** She passed an exam and is now licensed by the state. Works in the MN tax system -- not a seasonal worker anymore.

**Family Q:** Was sanctioned because she hadn't connected with MFIP. Now she is connected with MFIP counselor; is participating daily in job search, an MFIP requirement. Staff helped her obtain interview clothes, have taken her to job interviews. She calls staff daily, she is so grateful. Staff also connected her with child care resources and got clothing for her child.

**Family S:** She used to live with others. Home Worker got her to shelter and is now in her own place. Staff helped her apply for Section 8. She now has two jobs, she did not have any before becoming connected with the program. Staff helped her obtain child care, furniture from the furniture warehouse and food from the food shelf.

Some outcomes cut across the cases. These were:

**Access to Food.** There were 21 (78%) of the families who needed food and staff successfully helped them with this.

**Stabilized Financial Resources by Coming into Compliance with MFIP.** Initially the program did not want success to be measured on whether families came into compliance with MFIP regulations. Staff, and in fact families, found that there were many resources available to families if they did. Many families had been sanctioned when staff first started to work with them. Now all have learned about the rules and regulations, are in compliance and receiving MFIP benefits.

**Stabilized Housing.** There were 11 (41%) of the families living with relatives or friends because they had no place of their own and 1 who lived in a shelter. Staff was able to help 10 with housing issues.

**Access to Clothing.** A review by staff of their files revealed that 22 (82%) of the 27 families received help with obtaining needed clothing. In some cases the clothing was for children for the winter, in other cases it was for work clothes for a job interview or to start a new job.

**Getting Jobs.** Many obtained jobs. In the 27 families, 11 (41%) obtained a job; 1 (4%) lost a job, 2 (7%) are participating in job search. The others are taking care of their children, taking GED classes or are involved in other MFIP appropriate activities.

As was illustrated by the comments for each family, many of the outcomes are individualized. These include improved parenting, improved communication skills or are moving to where there is greater support.

### STRENGTHS OF THE PROGRAM

Key strengths of the program include the staff and the team work.

**The Staff.** A description of staff roles fails to fully describe the staff of this program. There is an attitude and approach inherent in the way they work with families that goes beyond the words in a job description.

If we'd hired different kinds of people I think it might have had [different outcomes]. They're so approachable. [Others trying to replicate this need to look at the staffing] but how do you interview for friendliness? It's like a real openness, non-judgmental, anything I can do for you kind of attitude. Going the extra mile and not being terribly rule-bound. If you're uncomfortable with an open-ended case plan you're not going to work well in this program. If somebody needs to lay out an entire grid for you, this is what you do on the first visit and this is what you do on the second and these are the rules, [you're the] wrong kind of person for this program.

**The Team Work.** Staff also talked about how they gain the support they need from the other members of the team and how critical that is to making sure that families get the support they need and that staff find time to re-energize:

[You have to hire] somebody who can believe in teamwork. I can't see myself doing this at the same effort or the same success that I'm doing right now without my team. So they have to build a program based on teamwork . . . because this is not a job that you can do by yourself, on your own, not for very long.

Interviews were conducted with Job Counselors who referred families to the Frogtown Family Connections program. They viewed the program as successful and as very important in helping MFIP families succeed. In terms of strengths they identified the following:

1. The Home Visitors' attitudes and ability to connect with the people they work with, their flexibility of being able to go to the family's home or help with obtaining various types of resources and at almost any hour.
2. The Home Visitors being able to help participants better understand MFIP, thereby acting as a bridge between families and Job Counselors and encouraging families to do what they need to do to be compliant.
3. The Home Visitors helping participants to feel more comfortable about meeting with their Job Counselors.
4. The Home Visitors easing the work load of Job Counselors and being able to meet families needs in a more direct and immediate manner.
5. The team approach used by the Home Visitors, possibly preventing burn-out and contributing to their effectiveness.
6. The Home Visitors being familiar with and having access to resources that can assist families in removing barriers.

#### **AREAS FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT**

In a conversation with one of the administrators a concern was the degree to which staff can sustain the level of intensity that has made the program so successful thus far. When talking about how exhausted and overwhelmed staff is becoming, she wondered if the two-person team approach and the full degree of flexibility and intensity of the work can be sustained.

Other areas mentioned infrequently were having more of a child development program and opening up the geographic limits. The staff continues to work on determining when cases should be considered "closed."

Questions have been raised about the cost of the program. A preliminary estimate is that it costs

\$3,000 per family per year. Some view this as a "costly" service; however, when considering the 31 active cases: 3 were closed because the families had moved out of the state or the county; 2 were viewed as successfully closed when the families moved to other states or cities of greater support; of the remaining 26 active cases -- 100% are in compliance with MFIP requirements, thus receiving financial and other resources which have greatly stabilized the families' situations, 42% became employed, 38% stabilized their housing, 85% obtained needed clothing and 81% obtained needed food. As a basis of comparison, the average cost of Head Start is \$5,000 per child (Office of the Legislative Auditor, Early Childhood Education Programs, Program Evaluation Report, January 2001).

Job Counselors offered the following as ways the program could be improved: expanding the program, adding more Home Visitors, adjusting the eligibility requirements, having Job Counselors accompany the Home Visitors from time to time, providing a monthly written report on each family.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

Lifetrack Resources proposed to create a home visiting program to serve TANF recipients in MFIP who fail to attend the initial overview. It was hoped that the program would reach families-at-risk with the message that there are resources and support to help them. In 6 short months, the Frogtown Family Connections program has become a critical resource for 31 families. Families' basic needs of food, clothing and shelter have or are being addressed; families are gaining access to MFIP resources; families are becoming employed.

The evaluators have been involved in examining the welfare reform efforts, first with the Minnesota Futures Fund (a coordinated response by the Minnesota Council on Foundations, the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, and the Minnesota Council of Churches). Questions were often raised about who was not attending the mandated overview meetings and why, who was being sanctioned and why, who was not going to be successfully employed at the end of the 60-month lifetime limit on welfare benefits and why.

The Frogtown Family Connections program is helping find answers to these important questions. They have a truly amazing staff and have helped families in many ways. It is an impressive program.



EnSearch  
2925 Noble Avenue North  
Golden Valley, MN 55422  
763-521-7571