Case Story: EMQ Children & Family Services

EMQ Children & Family Services formed in 1987 through the merger of two Bay Area nonprofits devoted to serving children in need – the Eastfield Children’s Center and the Ming Quong (Radiant Light) Rescue Mission. As reported in Youth Today (June 2003), the staff of the newly merged agency experienced “a collective epiphany” during a visioning process in 1991.

They were caring for 130 emotionally disturbed or mentally ill children in their residential treatment facilities in San José and its suburbs, at a cost of about $90,000 a year for each child. These children often arrived at EMQ angry, depressed, suicidal or combative. When they left 18 months later, some were even worse.

“We kept saying, ‘There’s got to be a better way to deal with these high-end kids,’” recalls [F. Jerome (Jerry)] Doyle, EMQ’s chief executive officer. The agency’s board authorized Doyle to find a better way.

A review of research literature convinced Doyle and his staff that “wraparound” – a philosophy of care, rather than a service, which begins with an inclusive planning process and focuses on individualized, in-home services and links to natural community supports – would serve troubled children and youth more effectively, with less cost to taxpayers. So, EMQ decided to advocate changes in the state reimbursement policy.

EMQ ventured into public policy advocacy by meeting with Santa Clara County’s directors of social services and mental health services, as well as the County Board of Supervisors. All were familiar with EMQ and its long history of serving troubled children and youth, and were persuaded by EMQ’s review of scientific research on the effectiveness of the wraparound approach.

Sue Mayers, EMQ’s public policy director, explains that EMQ was effective in large part because the nonprofit recognized that government decision-makers value relevant, well-researched facts from trustworthy sources.

It’s a two-way street. We seek support from legislators and government decision-makers for programs we know will help children and families in need. And legislators appreciate our being a source of useful information.

EMQ and Santa Clara County agreed that the California law limiting state-funded mental health treatment to residential group homes for children and youth with severe emotional disorders should be changed. They began their efforts to change state policy in 1993, finally succeeding in 1996 after changing their policy goal to establishing a county demonstration project rather than statewide policy change.

“We learned some things,” said Doyle. “We learned that if we wrote this legislation in a way that scared the whole group home industry, we were never going to get anything passed. So we proposed instead a demonstration program in Santa Clara County only.

“And we had learned also that, because we had a Republican governor, we better get a Republican sponsor if we wanted him to sign it. EMQ got state Assemblyman Jim Cunneen, a Republican from its area, to become the principal sponsor.
In 1996, the Legislature unanimously approved the use of state funds to provide wraparound for up to 125 children annually during a five-year demonstration program in Santa Clara County. Governor Pete Wilson signed the bill.

Los Angeles and Sacramento counties persuaded the Legislature to expand the pilot project statewide in 1997. The 1997 law also established standards for wraparound programs and awarded an exclusive contract to the Family Partnership Institute, founded in 1996 by EMQ, to provide the required training and technical assistance to participating counties.

In the following years, EMQ successfully sought additional legislation expanding wraparound eligibility to include children in other types of group homes, and eliminating sunset provisions that would have terminated state funding for wraparound in 2003. As Doyle noted, “That law was very easy to get passed because by then, everybody had seen that this does work.”

EMQ has become a leading public policy advocate in its area of service. In the November 2004 elections, California voters approved Proposition 63, the Mental Health Services Act, to raise new funds for mental health services and that any county accessing those funds to serve children and youth either adopt the wraparound approach, or demonstrate why they shouldn’t. Jerry Doyle chaired the committee that wrote the children services portion of the Act.

EMQ’s decision to try to change public policy was driven by the organization’s mission and its more than a century of commitment to helping children in need. Public Policy Director Sue Mayer notes:

> Advocacy has become a central component of our mission. Our mission statement now says that “our mission is to transform the lives of children and their families and the systems that serve them.” Our discovery and success with wraparound programs brought the importance of systems to the fore. We are oriented now to systems, as well as the individual children in need whom those systems should serve. That is reflected in the addition of “systems” to our mission statement.”

**Lessons for Nonprofit Advocates**

1. Identify the roots of the need or problem you are addressing to discover opportunities for deeper, longer-lasting systemic change.
2. Leverage relationships with local government officials to create policy change at the state level.
3. Be patient and stick with it.
4. Compromise strategically – for example, starting with a county demonstration project rather than changing statewide policy right away – in order to achieve longer-term policy goals.
5. Read and respond to the political realities – for example, engage a bill sponsor from the party in power.
6. Codify advocacy as part of your organizational mission.

Excerpted with permission from *Youth Today: The Newspaper on Youth Work*, American Youth Work Center (original article by Martha Shirk, “The Gift of Wrapping,” June 2003). Additional interviews with EMQ Director of Communications Kristine Austin and Associate Director for Public Policy and Business Analysis Susan Mayer, conducted by Michael Cortés.

© Copyright 2007, Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest.