



NATURAL HELPERS FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD

“Maria has a heart big enough to help many families in need. As she walks around her neighborhood, she often sees families who look as if they may need help. She sees children running down a sidewalk when they should be in school. She sees a mother with young children standing on a street corner looking distressed. In these situations, Maria reaches out, offering her help as well as the Center’s. She helped to change the life of that mother on the corner. The mother told Maria that she had no way of providing for her family and was even considering taking the lives of her children, and then her own. Maria quickly stepped in. Through her own connections, she found a job for the mother, offered her ongoing emotional support, and encouraged her to become involved with the different programs offered at Abriendo Puertas Family Center. The professionals at the Family Resource Center assisted by finding her a home, helping to enroll the children at school, addressing her immigration status, and linking her to counseling.” (Miller, 1998, p. 3)

As we develop comprehensive neighborhood systems of care, it is important for us to recognize that professionals and the formal service delivery systems in which they work have not always been able to resolve problems facing families. When we overly rely on professional helpers, formal agencies, and system solutions, we may fail to create strategies fully relevant to specific communities or we may fail to produce experiences that result in increased self-efficacy and empowerment among families seeking help. In addition, a lack of partnership between formal services and informal support systems may constrain the opportunities for families to receive support on a 24-hour, seven days a week basis. Families may be left to seek out support from relatives and neighbors who may not have the skills and resources necessary to respond to a crisis. Professionals



may experience frustration at setbacks that families experience after office hours, when professionals are unable to respond. Often, there is a significant disconnect between formal and informal systems, between formal service providers and natural helpers. Efforts to create neighborhood-based systems of care will fail unless the

assets of formal and informal systems are brought together to work in partnership, with full value placed on what each has to contribute to the well-being of children and families.

Child and family service systems are moving from institution-based to community-based services and supports, from individual to family-centered approaches, from a deficit-driven to a strengths-based model, from a strictly clinical approach to a combined social support model, and from a monocultural approach to cultural competence. To support this movement, training and ongoing support are needed. The implementation of comprehensive, neighborhood-based systems of care requires developing and supporting partnerships between formal service systems and informal supports in the community. At its heart, this process involves establishing and nurturing partnerships between service providers and natural helpers (Lazear, Pires, Pizarro, Orrego, Lara, & Lavernia, 2001).

This article describes EQUIPO, a frontline practice strategy to form professional/natural helper partnerships. EQUIPO was originally developed to serve families and providers in Miami, Florida’s East Little Havana neighborhood. EQUIPO (which means “team” in Spanish) was developed through the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Mental Health Initiative for Urban Children with the Abriendo Puertas Family Center as the hub for system-building efforts. EQUIPO del barrio, as it is called at Abriendo Puertas, was originally designed to be

responsive to the strengths and issues raised by Latino families. Currently, the EQUIPO approach is being implemented in other diverse Annie E. Casey and Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS) grant communities, including Hillsborough County, Florida, where the two communities of focus are primarily African American and Latino; and Seattle, Washington, in a primarily Latino neighborhood.

EQUIPO operationalizes the principle of engaging, linking and supporting formal services and informal supports to work in partnership in a community based system of care. The EQUIPO approach begins with the acknowledgment that families and neighbors historically have provided critical supports to one another in a myriad of informal ways. When family members first recognize that they cannot solve a health or mental health problem by themselves, they typically turn first to family, friends, neighbors, or coworkers. The instinct to seek help from people close to us or provide help to those in our own family or community has been evident in areas such as birthing children, rearing and protecting children, providing shelter and meals, celebrating achievements and holidays, and sharing grieving over the loss of loved ones. Informal supports also play a critical role in supporting personal development and in coping with a significant change in family life, such as separation or divorce. This capacity for mutual support and the practice of providing informal supports by natural helpers in neighborhoods are essential to child and family well-being. First and foremost, EQUIPO is a frontline practice change strategy with the objective to form professional/natural helper partnerships. It is also concerned about mobilizing existing community resources and developing new ones. EQUIPO is a strategy to increase the capacity to reach families that have been underrepresented in our formal systems of support and involve them in meaningful ways. It is a family centered, culturally competent, individualized process, which supports the planning and coordinating of services and all helping efforts. Through the EQUIPO process, participants are acknowledged as leaders in their community, learning together with professional service providers ways of sustaining a neighborhood system of care.

To support the implementation of EQUIPO in Miami, a training program was developed using a "training of trainers" approach. The EQUIPO training process encourages both the natural helpers and professional service providers to learn to recognize, respect, and utilize the strengths that each can bring to the community. The training uses a variety of interactive and participatory team building methods, including use of real family stories, opportunities to practice skills and tools,

and same day evaluation to adjust curriculum content and presentation. Through these methods, the training assists the process of building trust and developing the partnerships between natural helpers and professionals. The EQUIPO training process in East Little Havana was implemented in five phases: (1) planning and engagement of participants, (2) preparing natural helpers and providers, (3) training and implementing, (4) debriefing, and (5) training of trainers (Lazear, et al. 2001).

The first group of natural helpers in East Little Havana included eight community residents. Some members of this first group had utilized the services of the Abriendo Puertas Family Center, while others were concerned residents who wanted to become more involved with their community and the Abriendo Puertas Family Center. In order for the natural helpers to participate in the EQUIPO training, they first had to complete leadership and advocacy training in Abriendo Puertas' Madrina and Padrino program. In addition to being natural helpers, some of the Madrinas and Padrinos also held volunteer positions at the Center. The formal service providers in the first EQUIPO training at Abriendo Puertas included the family center's case manager, clinical director, registration coordinator, and family coordinator. Other formal service providers included the family service coordinator and therapist from Miami Behavioral Health Center. In Miami's East Little Havana, the EQUIPO training process helped both natural helpers and providers recognize, respect, and utilize each other's strengths to support families in the community. According to the program's evaluator, improvements among families served by the new, integrated approach were noted in just six months after the training. With the common bond of living in the same area as the families receiving services, the natural helpers in East Little Havana's EQUIPO related easily to the families. The training helped them become informal caseworkers and make the initial assessment of concerns and needs. They could then encourage families to seek supports and services offered at the center (Miller, 1998).

Two promising approaches to evaluating EQUIPO's natural helper model have been undertaken at two different sites. The first was a process aimed at engaging members of the community to assist in the design and implementation of an interactive participatory evaluation process so that they become active participants as designers, data collectors, analyzers, and, ultimately, users of the data produced by the evaluation. This approach was conducted by members of Neighborhoods United of Plant City, Inc., Florida, a grassroots organization representing a neighborhood with primarily African American families, in partnership with the

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University of South Florida. The program evaluated through a participatory evaluation process was the CHANGEMaker natural helper initiative, where all members of the evaluation team were CHANGEMakers themselves. The distinctions and connections between the participant evaluators, the evaluation, and the evaluated initiative were firmly established and honored in this evaluation approach (Contreras, 2002). The other EQUIPO natural helper evaluation collected data through interviews with families who had received services and support from the EQUIPO project in Miami, interviews with the natural helpers in Miami called Madrinas and Padrinos, file reviews, and a network analysis conducted under the auspices of the Casey Urban Mental Health Initiative and the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning. A network analysis examined the relations among 204 individuals who participated in one form or another in EQUIPO, including recipients of services and supports, Madrinas and Padrinos, formal service providers and informal supporters of EQUIPO participants. The network analysis revealed that almost every person from whom data were collected showed more linkages in their network of support after the EQUIPO had been in place than before the EQUIPO was in place. The report also highlighted the importance of the process of becoming a natural helper after being a recipient of services: "An important aspect of the role of natural helpers illustrated by the network analysis is the reciprocity of help. A majority of the Madrinas who were working with families in this study were, at one point receiving services from Abriendo Puertas; one of them was an EQUIPO participant during the first round of the evaluation. She went from not having anyone to list in her preEQUIPO network, to a dense postEQUIPO network, to becoming the Madrina to a participant in the third round of the study one year later." (Gutierrez & Wolfe, 2001, p. 23)

The EQUIPO approach and the training program that supports it provide a model for community-based services that are strengths based, culturally competent, and family centered. Yet, as a frontline practice change strategy tied to larger systems reform, the EQUIPO approach takes time and constant nurturing. Many natural helpers in our communities, whether or not they are formally recognized as Madrinas and Padrinos, or CHANGEMakers, or other informal service providers, often work in isolation, although they have a wealth of supports to offer families. For their part, the professionals

providing the formal services often do not know how to partner with and use the natural helpers to support and enhance their work with families. While EQUIPO offers a frontline practice strategy to strengthen neighborhood systems of family support and is at its essence a culturally competent service delivery model, there remain many lessons to be learned about developing, nurturing, and sustaining natural helper and professional partnerships. "Limitations on these sources of help derive less from their lack of willingness to help than from our lack of imagination in arranging it." Nicholas Hobbs

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