



BRIGHT SPOT

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

How does Children’s Village keep New York City children safe with their families and connected to their communities?

Walking into the new multi-use development in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood, one can’t help but notice the modern design, abundance of natural light, landscaped terraces with stunning views, and positive, welcoming atmosphere. The design and layout is proof that transformation is possible: What once was an abandoned lot is now home to a development offering housing to low-income families, clinical services, and a variety of other supports. It reflects the power and promise of community, a leader’s unwavering belief that housing for people with low incomes can be both affordable and beautiful, and that co-locating a diverse range of people and programs can reduce isolation and strengthen opportunities both within and outside of the building’s four walls.

The development features 60 apartments for low-income families from the surrounding neighborhoods, a medical clinic for foster families, a food pantry, prevention and clinical service teams, and space for community programming. Rent for the one-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments are significantly below market rate, and 12 units are set aside at an even lower monthly rate for young adults aging out of foster care who may otherwise be homeless.



casey family programs

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One might expect such a project to be the work of a city housing agency or one of the many local housing nonprofits working to address New York City’s housing crisis. But a strong public-private alliance — led by [Children’s Village](#) — is the driving force behind the building’s construction and design. Once known as the largest residential treatment center in the country, Children’s Village has evolved into a short-term, therapeutic residential treatment program for children in foster care, juvenile detention, or probation. Children’s Village began moving its model further upstream 15 years ago to focus on preventing child maltreatment and out-of-home placement, ultimately teaming up with [Harlem Dowling](#), [Alembic Community Development](#), and other agencies to build the development. Other partners include New York City’s Housing Development Corporation and Department of Housing Preservation and Development, and the Corporation for Supportive Housing.

This project — combined with other strategic partnerships that Children’s Village forges throughout the region — serve as daily reminders that creativity, commitment, and collaboration can generate solutions that alleviate the need to separate children from their families and isolate them from their communities.

Shift in business model

Until the early 2000s, Children’s Village primarily focused on providing residential care for hundreds

of youth of all ages, some as young as five. For the most part, youth would reside on campus for long periods of time, and a significant proportion would transition into adulthood without an identified family or community connections. About 15 years ago, new leadership at Children’s Village advanced a [bold new vision and accompanying business model](#), one in which children were maintained safely in their homes, and, if necessary, served in out-of-home care for short periods of time before being reunified with their families as quickly as possible. The agency created a comprehensive continuum of services, including an intensive family finding unit, a program to recruit and support foster parents, and after-care supports. It also began investing in home-based prevention services in which clinicians and case managers focus on efforts to keep adolescents safe at home with their families.

But creating this continuum still wasn’t enough. As Children’s Village expanded prevention services throughout New York City, it became clear that a more transformational approach was needed to keep families from becoming involved in the child welfare system. “Child welfare involvement is just the symptom of a much bigger set of problems that families face, and we need to find more permanent solutions,” says Jeremy Kohomban, CEO of Children’s Village. “If people have safe places to live, people who love them, and opportunities for their children, then family functioning is guaranteed to improve.”

I hope in five years that what defines us is not more services or buildings, but bringing people together under a common belief that families deserve what we all want for ourselves: a sense of belonging, access to safe places, and opportunities for our children to do better than we did.

- JEREMY KOHOMBAN
CEO OF CHILDREN’S VILLAGE

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Core Components

Ultimately, Children’s Village decided to advance more of a [population-based approach](#) to supporting families, investing more in primary prevention interventions to ameliorate the root causes of involvement in child welfare, such as increasing community safety, [access to affordable housing](#), quality child care, early education and health care, and creating opportunities for employment and community connections. The essential elements of this shift upstream are detailed in the sections that follow.

Put values and vision first

Children’s Village is driven first and foremost by a belief that every child needs a family and a sense of belonging. That vision manifests in the pursuit of permanent, community-based solutions for families: a safe and beautiful place to live, a social network that cares about them, and opportunities to succeed and become financially stable. Children’s Village endeavors to stay true to those values and not get swayed by promises of more money, bigger facilities, or opportunities that detract from its core mission, Kohomban says.

He notes that while it might be easy and convenient for agencies to respond to proposal requests that lead to

funding, they are better served when they explore only those contracts tied to their core vision and values. That is what happened when Children’s Village was building the Harlem housing development, Kohomban says. Project planners had decided to include two community spaces and terraces in the design of the building that all occupants could access and enjoy. In a city desperate for affordable living, Children’s Village faced skepticism for wanting to include community spaces and terraces vs. adding 12 additional apartments to the design. But Children’s Village held steadfast to its vision and values, explaining that the increased density wasn’t worth the community space they would be giving up, as the green space in the neighborhood was controlled by rival gangs and not safe for children. “Our families need a space where they don’t have to worry about their children,” Kohomban stated. “Density would have given us 12 more apartments, yes, but the long-term cost would have been significant. Access to safe space makes a big difference for families and the building reflects that value.”

Empower families

Circle of Dreams, one of three family enrichment centers in New York City, is managed through Children’s Village’s strategic alliance with Bridge Builders, a collaboration of community-based



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organizations in the Bronx. It is located in Highbridge, a neighborhood where a high rate of families are referred to New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services for investigations of child abuse or neglect.

Programming at Circle of Dreams is tailored to – and led by – the families and community it serves. All aspects of the center — including its name, the physical layout, and the resources it provides — are co-developed with a community liaison who oversees daily operations, on-staff parent advocates, local parents, and other community members who rely on their own experiences. This approach required an ideological shift from one in which families are told what they need or are simply invited to the table, to one in which families and community members are directing the work and are the [primary voices at the table](#).

Starting-up was a challenge, as Bridge Builders and Children’s Village had to change their own mindsets to embrace this new way of working with families. But the approach worked. Once families began to feel a sense of ownership of the center, participation and involvement increased dramatically. The center works diligently to deliver what families and community members request. “When the community comes up with an idea for what they want, we do whatever it takes to help make it happen,” says Warren Kent, vice president of community based programs at Children’s Village. What the families implemented surprised them. Today, there are programs spanning from art classes to a Muslim women’s support group. “If family enrichment centers can become hubs where ideas are incubated and community residents take ownership, that will be a game changer,” Kent says.

Circle of Dreams is developing a dashboard to collect outcome measures aligned with the other two city family enrichment centers to ensure consistency in application of the primary prevention model. Circle of Dreams focuses its programming around seven target areas: health and well-being; economic stability and employment; child development and education; parent skills; positive relationships; community engagement; and supportive advocacy.

While the family enrichment center is funded by the city’s child protection agency, it remains in the background as a silent partner. It isn’t mentioned on any literature or marketing materials, and while child protection staff do attend community events, they are not a strong presence. “They realize that they have done a lot of damage with these communities and that they need to let other community entities be in the forefront of healing and family strengthening”, Kent says.

Hire people with lived experiences

Another core value integrated into Children’s Village’s prevention work is employing [individuals with lived experiences](#), such as “credible messengers,” or mentors who develop trusting relationships with youth that are built on shared experiences and understanding. In Harlem, these credible messengers have been involved with child welfare and/or probation and can relate firsthand to the experiences of the youth that they mentor. Their role is to instill hope in youth, provide stability and guidance, and help empower those who are struggling. When they meet youth for the first time, they make their intentions clear, saying, for example:

When the community comes up with an idea for what they want, we do whatever it takes to help make it happen.

- WARREN KENT

VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNITY BASED PROGRAMS, CHILDREN’S VILLAGE

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“I have done enough prison time so you don’t have to.” Without passing judgment, they guide youth to make safer decisions and explore more constructive outlets.

The transformative mentoring model is based on the idea that credible messengers are best positioned to engage the young people who are hardest to reach. They hail from the same communities as the youth, which sends the message that the community has all the resources it needs to guide and raise its youth. The program is designed to promote restoration from harm. As a result, “the community is healing the community from within,” says Carl Johnson, director of mentoring programs at Children’s Village. “The community now takes care of (its) own children by acknowledging the issues and repairing them.”

And the model works. A 2017 Urban Institute [study](#) found that youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who received transformative mentoring while on probation had a 69% lower recidivism rate within 12 months of starting their probation than youths who did not participate in the program. After 24 months, the recidivism rate was 57% lower than their peers. The strongest impact was seen with participants ages 16 and 17.

Treat the family holistically

Children’s Village operates a number of short-term, in-home programs designed to wrap supports

around families. The most common interventions are Multisystemic Therapy (MST) and Functional Family Therapy, both of which are evidence-based practices that help families struggling with their children’s behaviors. Following implementation, many clinicians found that families faced a range of practical, concrete needs that prevented them from effectively engaging in [prevention and treatment services](#). As a result, Children’s Village shifted to a holistic and family-centered model tailored to meet needs that the family identifies. “Families need a level of stability before they can work on healing,” asserts Tina Schleicher, director of evidence-based programs at Children’s Village. As a result, the agency hired caseworkers to work in partnership with clinicians, assisting families with housing, life skills, employment, education, and financial stability. Outcomes have been impressive. In 2018, 90% of youth receiving MST services were able to remain in their own home.

Clinical staff also discovered that while the majority of children had some level of emotional and social challenges, in many instances, their clinical needs didn’t rise to the level of a psychiatric diagnosis. Yet often the children were being labeled as such. Leadership didn’t want to expose children to multiple assessments, as well as the stigma of being labeled with a mental health disorder. “Exposing children to all of these extra assessments and the poking and the prodding that goes with it is harmful,” Schleicher said. “If it doesn’t have to be done, we find other ways.” The agency



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modified its tools to more accurately identify youths' social-emotional needs, rather than only address those that are psychiatric in nature, and tailored the menu of available interventions accordingly, including social skills groups and leadership-building events.

Build strategic alliances

As Children's Village systematically expanded its programming in the neighborhoods where children were most at risk for maltreatment and foster care entry, agency leadership quickly realized that one organization working alone was insufficient to impact the issues driving involvement with child welfare. Instead, the agency needed to build a strong network of allies within the local community to address the issues that families face and leverage the strengths of each entity. As a result, Children's Village now partners with a number of community-based agencies with historic ties to the neighborhood as well as shared values and goals. "We are so much more impactful when we unite and work together for families," Kohomban says.

In addition to the Bridge Builders Community Partnership Initiative to support the enrichment center, Children's Village also forged a strategic alliance with Harlem Dowling, a nonprofit founded in 1836 as an institution devoted to children of color. Its services are similar to Children's Village and include school-based supports, prevention, and concrete assistance to children and their families. Because Harlem Dowling has built strong credibility within the neighborhood, something that Children's Village had not yet established, it was a natural alliance and a powerful strategic partner. While each organization retains its

founding charter and mission, and Harlem Dowling has a strong leader in Karen Dixon, Kohomban became president for both agencies in 2012. Together, they now operate the Harlem Dowling multi-use housing complex. By partnering in this fashion, the two organizations have strengthened what they could each offer to the community on their own.

Children's Village also has forged new strategic alliances with Community League of the Heights, Ranger Properties, and Alembic Community Development to fund, design, and build the Eliza Apartment Center in upper Manhattan. The Eliza Apartments will provide 175 new homes for families, all of which will be affordable to households with incomes at or below 60% of area median income. The building will feature a residents-only area on the top floor with a lounge, gym, laundry room, and terrace, as well as a green roof with programming coordinated through Harlem Grown, a nonprofit that provides youth hands-on education in urban farming, sustainability, and nutrition. The complex also will include a new space for the Inwood Library, redeveloped in partnership with the New York Public Library, the New York City Department of Education, and the Robin Hood Foundation, along with a universal pre-K center, the ACTS Center with job training, classes, and cultural activities for the community, and a STEM Center with programming from First Robotics.

The goal is for these apartments to offer families the type of permanency and community that a government agency never could — a safe place to call home, a sense of belonging, and access to opportunities they once believed were beyond their reach.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

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