



A Natural Fit

How aligned services keep children and families together in Jacksonville

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There is rarely one single factor that causes children to be placed in foster care. Trauma, domestic violence, substance abuse, health issues and more all place overlapping pressures on a family's underlying foundation until the mortar cracks and the bricks begin to tumble.

Shoring up those supports — or better yet, preventing them from weakening in the first place — requires more than one kind of intervention. That's why Family Support Services of North Florida (FSSNF) provides a range of programs to help families preserve their stability and improve their outcomes. Over the past decade FSSNF has gone one step further, combining forces with local partners to provide almost every service imaginable to one of Jacksonville's most economically distressed communities through the Schell-Sweet Community Resource Center in the New Town neighborhood.

"As the lead agency responsible for child well-being in Duval and Nassau counties, we realized around 2008 that we needed to reach out into the community before families come into contact with the child welfare system," explains Lee Kaywork, FSSNF CEO. "Casey Family Programs was a key partner in our work to essentially redesign the foster care system. With their technical assistance, we brought in representatives from other community-based service centers around the country and also did our own site visits to Brooklyn, New York, and Allentown, Pennsylvania. Those visits gave us an idea of the kind of community development we could do here in Jacksonville effectively."

FSSNF staff and board then studied ZIP codes in the area to find communities with the highest incidents of child removals or calls to the child abuse hotline. That data pointed them toward New Town in northwest Jacksonville.

"The New Town community is one of the most socio-economically deprived and medically underserved in the Jacksonville area," says Larry West Jr., vice president of case management at FSSNF. "It's also an area with high rates of crime and child abuse. Together with law enforcement, the medical community, the Department of Children and Families and others, we realized that we were all dealing with the same families, and that those families needed more access to services."

Building on an existing asset

In 2010, the FSSNF team began to explore the New Town community, contacting local leaders and hosting community meetings to share their interest in creating a community-based services center and to learn more about needs, gather feedback and explore potential sites.

"We were thinking of starting from scratch, but the community recommended using the Schell-Sweet Community Resource Center," says Kaywork. "They were already established with a goal of serving seniors, but looking to expand their programs with the right partners."

The Schell-Sweet Community Resource Center (Schell-Sweet) was established in 1999 as part of Edward Waters College, a historically black college, and had a prime location

on the edge of campus in the heart of New Town. The center was initially a collaboration between the college, the city of Jacksonville, and Shands Hospital. When the hospital closed in 2009, some New Town residents were forced to walk a mile or more for medical care. In response to this and other needs, the city created the New Town Success Zone in 2008, signifying its own interest in investing in the community, with Schell-Sweet as a key player.

“We were awarded a 30-year contract to develop a program for senior wellness, and mandated to partner with at least eight community-based service providers for onsite services,” explains Marie Heath, who’s been director since Schell-Sweet first opened its doors. “We realized that we couldn’t serve seniors well without a holistic family approach. Many were stressed about the conditions of their children or grandchildren, and many were serving as primary caregivers for those grandchildren. So when Casey Family Programs and FSSNF came and talked with us about being part of a comprehensive approach, it seemed like a natural fit.”

Under the new partnership, established in 2011, FSSNF took on the leadership and management of programs for families and children, while Schell-Sweet continued to develop their senior programs. It was a great marriage, because Schell-Sweet has a strong senior volunteer team that eagerly engaged in work with FSSNF families.

“Our seniors are our volunteer work source,” says Heath. “They serve as a recruiting arm for programs, they are trained in the services we offer, and support a wide range of special projects like food distribution, holiday meals and back-to-school events.”

The first joint program offered by FSSNF at Schell-Sweet was a food pantry that still operates today. It was quickly followed by the full range of programs and support services offered by FSSNF throughout the New Town Success Zone.

What makes a Community of Hope?

A Community of Hope is a place where people share a vision of safety and success for every child who lives there. It’s a place where public and private organizations — nonprofits, philanthropies, government agencies and businesses — collaborate closely with communities to help achieve that vision. As a result, children are safer, families are stronger, and communities are more supportive places for everyone.

Communities of Hope share the beliefs that:

- Every child deserves a safe, supportive and permanent family.
- Every family should have the support of a strong and caring community.
- Every community can create hope and opportunities for its children and families.
- Everyone has a role to play in building Communities of Hope.

Casey Family Programs has identified Communities of Hope across the country, where demonstration projects are showing us all how to make more effective investments in children and families so that they can thrive together. These communities are places that will help Casey Family Programs achieve its goal of safely reducing the need for foster care by 50 percent by 2020.

“It was a seamless transition,” Heath says. “My frontline reception staff is good at assessing needs and connecting the dots to make connections to the right service. FSSNF takes it from there and refers families to the services they qualify for.”

In 2014, the Schell-Sweet Community Service Center and all the partners that collaborate with it to serve the New Town neighborhood, including FSSNF, received a Community of Hope designation from Casey Family Programs.

Customer service along a continuum

Throughout its service area, FSSNF strives to offer programs that serve families along a continuum — from having no risk of child removal to immediate risk of removal. All services are anchored in 10 principles designed to keep children and their caregivers at the forefront.

FSSNF created a cadre of community resource specialists to help families assess their needs and find the right mix of services and supports to meet them, with the goal of preventing involvement with the foster care system.

Wraparound service principles

FSSNF adheres to 10 principles that ensure all services are "wrapped around children and their families in their natural environments."

Voice and choice: Families and youth drive decision-making in case planning and service delivery. Families are partners in the process of increasing parental protective capacity and decreasing risk of future abuse or neglect.

Team-based approach: Children are cared for by a team of their family, community partners and professionals. Treatment options for children and families are reviewed as a team. Child safety is non-negotiable but the paths chosen to reach the safety goal are many and are unique to individual family dynamics.

Natural supports: The team supporting the families includes natural supports, or people outside of the formal child welfare system, such as teachers, friends, faith community members, neighbors and extended family members.

Collaboration: Professionals and families work together to preserve families and children, respecting others' views and listening to others' opinions.

Community-based setting: Whenever possible, services are provided to parents and children in their home so that they stay close to their supports and what is familiar.

Culturally competent: The wraparound process demonstrates respect for and builds on the values, preferences, beliefs, culture and identity of the child, family and community.

Individualized support: Families receive individualized services that focus on specific safety and skill assessments and provide corresponding intervention and progress evaluation to decrease risks. FSSNF uses evidence-based practices that match each family's needs.

Strengths-based perspective: Family plans and services are provided from a strengths-based perspective that focuses on abilities and resources to meet needs and decrease risk rather than solve problems.

Persistence: Despite challenges, setbacks and discouragements, teams persist in achieving family safety goals.

Outcomes: Services and supports are tied directly to goals and outcomes. An outcome-oriented approach makes measurement and evaluation possible and progress identifiable.

Providing all programs and services under one roof at Schell-Sweet streamlines access and reduces stress on families who otherwise would have to visit many locations.

"It's a one-stop shop for a lot of people," says Barbara Jones, an FSSNF family preservation supervisor who oversees the work of community resource specialists at Schell-Sweet and four other FSSNF locations. "We may start out meeting emergency needs, but then we can address the issues that caused the crisis. From there, we can get them into one of our programs so they can stabilize their lives and avoid other crises in the future."

Achieving family stability

Emergency needs are a key inroad for many community members. Some families need food and visit the bi-monthly food pantry. Others may face eviction and need help dealing with landlords. Perhaps an undetected gas or water leak resulted in a high utility bill and now residents face the loss of a critical utility. Perhaps a mother desperately needs medicine for a sick child. Or maybe it's just the need for help providing a holiday meal or back-to-school supplies for a family. Schell-Sweet provides all of this and more, and it supplies seamless referrals to myriad agencies that can help families emerge from or stave off crises.

Once emergency needs are addressed, FSSNF offers a number of family preservation programs at Schell-Sweet. One of the first and most-often used is the **Strengthening Ties & Empowering Parents (STEPS)** program.

STEPS is a voluntary prevention program for families where children are currently safe but the risk of family instability is high. Families are referred to the program by the FSSNF community resource specialists, the Department of Children and Families, or other community agencies. Dedicated STEPS workers provide in-home intervention to prevent families from entering the foster care system and to help them work toward

stabilization. Depending on the family's risk level, STEPS workers conduct one to three home visits per month, for an average of three months. These in-home visits include coaching on parenting techniques, budgeting and behavior modification, as well as case management and connection to other community resources. STEPS participants also are encouraged to take advantage of parenting, budgeting, GED prep and other classes available on-site at Schell-Sweet.

Emergency needs and the STEPS program often go hand-in-hand, and guiding families through the process is a shared responsibility between FSSNF and Schell-Sweet staff.

“One lady came in for help because she was facing eviction,” says Jones. “She had nine kids with her, and no diapers. We gave her diapers, along with food for the kids, and got them all cleaned up and into a shelter. Those kids could have easily gone into care, but we referred them to the STEPS program instead, which helped her secure housing, apply for TANF and food stamps, and keep the family together. We all worked together to save this mom and kids — not one agency, but the whole building.”

While the STEPS program is a successful route for most families, there are some that need more intensive intervention.

“After we launched our STEPS program, we realized that we still didn't have a program that would reduce the number of children in foster care, which is our ultimate goal,” says Kaywork. With assistance from Casey Family Programs, he says that they were able to work together with community partners to develop more robust responses to ensure the safety of children while they remained in their own homes.

The **Family Assessment Support Team (FAST)** is an in-home voluntary program that provides intensive supervision and services to high- and very high-risk families where children are considered to be unsafe. FAST deploys a rapid response to assist families in crisis by directly addressing the safety threat and keeping the family stable until they can engage in longer-term supportive services. Once the immediate crisis is addressed, FAST case managers work with parents to help them take control of their lives. FAST connects parents to wraparound services through a team made up of a certified child welfare case manager, FAST therapist, a mental health family intervention specialist, and a specialist for addressing high risks for ages 0-5. Like the STEPS program, FAST offers in-home counseling, and parenting and behavior modification. It also adds family team conferencing, anger management help, substance abuse education and domestic violence advocacy and counseling.

“This homegrown program has continued to mature, and now serves about 1,000 kids a year and has significantly reduced the number of children removed from their home,” says Kaywork. In fact, FSSNF now has the lowest removal rate in the state.

As a final protection from child removal, FSSNF also leads an **Integrated Practice Team (IPT)** that includes representatives from more than a dozen child- and family-serving agencies. The IPT meets four times a week and can mobilize instantly to address cases that aren't moving forward or that are experiencing crises. The IPT works directly with families to make decisions about which services are needed, and provides tools to support the family in lieu of removing a child.

Integrated Practice Team members

- Family Support Services of North Florida (FSSNF)
- Case Management Organization (contracted)
- DCF Family Advocates
- Child Guidance Center
- Hubbard House-Victim advocate
- Duval County school board
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health
- Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities
- Gateway Community Services
- Lutheran Services of Florida
- Department of Juvenile Justice

“The IPT came about as a result of a technical assistance phone call that Casey hosted for us with a group in Connecticut that used the same approach statewide,” says Kaywork. “It’s been critical to our overall diversion system, and is what sets us apart from other areas of Florida.”

Creating long-term success

All the immediate interventions listed above are designed to lead to longer-term supports, trainings and activities that will provide ongoing stability for families. At Schell-Sweet, families can find:

- GED preparation classes
- Parenting classes, including Dads All Day, a monthly fatherhood support program for dads ages 16 and up. Participants learn effective co-parenting strategies and communication skills, and build their own self-esteem as parents. The Circle of Security parenting class offers an evidence-based curriculum specifically for parents in the STEPS and FAST program.
- Financial management and budgeting classes
- A monthly breakfast learning series that includes community expert presentations on topics such as child abuse, human trafficking, infant mortality, child health, caring for LGBT children and much more.
- Kinship care trainings and kinship care support programs for those caring for grandchildren, nieces, nephews or other related children who do not live with their parents. (Kinship care support can also include emergency assistance for food, diapers and other needs.)

Recently, Schell-Sweet found a new health care partner, Dr. John Assi of Children’s Health Associates, to provide an onsite clinic. Families in the STEPS and FAST program

receive priority medical care at the clinic, and a health care prevention worker provides parent education and helps them coordinate medical care and keep scheduled appointments.

Creating new hope for a young family

Shanita Brown clearly has a strong sense of maternal responsibility. When her sister lost custody of her three children because of addiction, Shanita adopted them as her own. Not long afterward, when she had just given birth to her fourth biological child, she returned home from the hospital to find that her electricity had been shut off.

Depressed and desperate to provide adequate shelter for her seven children, Shanita came to the Schell-Sweet Community Resource Center in the heart of her New Town neighborhood.

There, she met Barbara Jones, a family preservation supervisor with Family Support Services of North Florida. Jones didn't judge or blame Shanita. Instead, she welcomed Shanita and her children to the center, helped her work with the power company to restore electricity, provided food for the young family, and then explained all the programs that were available to help single moms like Shanita care for themselves and their children.

"Miss Barbara helped me out with a budgeting program," Shanita says. "She asked me about my goals. At the time, I didn't have a high school diploma. I had been working on it, but it was hard to stick with it. Miss Barbara pointed me to Edward Waters College, she pointed me to the people I needed to connect with, and I finally received my diploma in 2014."

While she worked toward her diploma, Shanita also took advantage of the center's parenting classes to help her deal with raising three adopted daughters, three biological daughters, and one biological son who is deaf.

"Some of the things I learned were a confirmation of what I was already doing," she says. "But there was also a lot I didn't know. It taught me how to deal with my kids and my adopted kids. And I met other parents who were going through what I was going through. Everything I learned from parenting class I'm still using now. It actually made me a better parent."

As Shanita studied for her GED, she and her kids would do their homework together. After watching their mom work hard to learn, her children started to get good grades at school, too.

Since then, Shanita has worked part-time jobs as a youth development specialist and a bus driver at a local school, and she hopes to get full-time employment once her kids are a little more independent. She also hopes to go to college to become a social worker.

"Miss Barbara and FSSNF helped me get back on track. She is much more than a support person; we created a bond that no one can get in the middle of," says Shanita. "She sent me to different programs. She helped out with Christmas and Thanksgiving, and back-to-school book bags with supplies — things I can't afford as a single parent with seven kids. When my house flooded, she helped with clothing, toiletries and laundry detergent. When my food stamps aren't enough to provide for the whole month, the center's food drives help my family make it. That may seem small, but it's a great big help."

In 2015, Shanita spoke at a Community of Hope event. “That was something I had always wanted to do but was afraid because I’d always had problems with my speech. Miss Barbara said, ‘You can do it!’ She let me come out of my shell and define who I am as a person.”

“I would tell others to go to Schell-Sweet and take advantage of the resources,” she says. “It may not be something you can use at the time, but you’ll learn what’s available to you. And if we use the programs and resources, they’ll keep them there for us.”

Highlights of success

Over the past decade, through its new approach to preventing foster care placements, FSSNF has developed more front-end support for families and reduced the numbers of kids entering foster care by more than 60 percent across its entire service area. In neighborhoods like New Town where challenges are greater, FSSNF has still seen significant success. In 2016, through its partnership with FSSNF, Schell-Sweet delivered more than 5,000 unduplicated units of service, and in a single year FSSNF reduced the child removal rate by 15 percent.

The work in New Town also has created new employment opportunities for residents. Companies such as Amazon and IKEA are working with FSSNF and Schell-Sweet staff to help ease the transition to work for those in the community, and FSSNF and Schell-Sweet are looking for ways to work with small businesses to connect families with employment opportunities.

One notable aspect of the partnership between FSSNF and Schell-Sweet is the unique ability to serve older foster parents. Schell-Sweet’s expertise in serving seniors blends seamlessly with the family support programs offered by FSSNF to provide customized support for older caregivers. For example, the Schell-Sweet health care coordinators helped a grandmother who began caring for her three grandchildren when their mother was incarcerated. FSSNF community resource specialists met with the grandmother and children, ages 4, 3 and 13 months. The FSSNF team evaluated the family, provided mental health counseling and autism assessment screenings for the children, made sure all

Schell-Sweet Community Resource Center Service Providers

- AARP
- Casey Family Programs
- Choice Counseling
- City of Jacksonville
- Department of Children and Families
- Elder Source
- Family Support Services of North Florida
- Florida State College at Jacksonville
- Jewish Family and Community Services
- Magnolia Project
- Mayo Clinic
- Northwest Behavioral Health Counseling
- PSI family Services
- Schell-Sweet Community Healthcare Clinic
- Sheriff's Advisory Council
- Teen Leaders of America
- Three Rivers Legal Services
- United Health Care/Well Care
- United Way
- University of North Florida
- Veteran's Re-Integration Program
- War on Poverty
- Work Source

vaccinations were up to date and provided a referral for a free dental clinic. In addition, they sent the family home with a generous supply of diapers, wipes and books.

“We have a lot of grandparents raising kids, and they often need prevention services,” says Heath. “Schell-Sweet is no longer just a senior center. Casey and FSSNF have enlarged our reach. We are a best-practice project that can and should be duplicated.”

Challenges

Smoothly running a multifaceted community service center isn't without challenges.

Even in a community with high levels of need, one challenge is to raise awareness of the center's services. As families who are helped by the center move on, new ones take their place, necessitating ongoing marketing and communication. FSSNF and Schell-Sweet staff collaborate with community partners to get the word out through local media outlets, presentations, community meetings and even neighborhood walks. As a result, visits to the center increased from 3,500 to 5,000 in one year.

That growth is now pushing beyond the physical capacity of the Schell-Sweet building. In 2017, the center was granted use of space in a former middle school next to the Edward Waters College campus. The building houses a computer lab, library and classrooms for Schell-Sweet, and it hosted a first-ever summer learning program for children, funded by the city, and a breakfast program supported by FSSNF.

Both Schell-Sweet and FSSNF see the new building as a testament to their mutual success.

“I'm exploring new ways to expand the center into the new building,” says Heath. “And wherever I am, FSSNF can be.”

Another challenge is data networking. Every partner has different formats for collecting and reporting data; some still use pen and paper. And federal privacy regulations create a hurdle for sharing information.

“The agencies we refer to all have different criteria for service, depending on age, income, employment and housing status, and more,” adds Jones. “We have to know all the rules and criteria for each one, and help families navigate that. We also must help the families understand that our role is to make referrals, not address problems directly. We also have to know when those agencies receive their funding and when their budgets are probably running low so we don't overload them. In other words, we really need to know the landscape and how families will fit into what's offered!”

Jones's secret for navigating that complex web? Building relationships. “I attend a lot of events and share my information, find out who is doing what, and create new partnerships,” she says.

Partnering with a national resource

“One reason we partnered with Casey was because of a shared goal that by 2020, we wanted to reduce the number of kids in the foster care system by 50 percent,” says Kaywork. “We did it. In 2007, there were 2,100 kids in the dependency system. Today there are only 1,200 in the dependency system and 1,000 served by diversion and prevention.”

Kaywork credits Casey Family Programs with providing “tremendous technical assistance” when FSSNF first considered how to redesign its services with a goal of preventing child removals.

“The single biggest factor that Casey brought to the table was their philosophy of child welfare: stay centered on the child,” he says. “Because of their influence, we adopted three tenets: 1) Do everything in our power to prevent a child from coming into the child welfare and foster care system; 2) operate with urgency to get them out of the system; and 3) let no child grow up in the system. That keeps us laser focused on what we’re doing.”

“Casey also created a trauma-informed care training that helped our organization look at families and kids through a different light. We don’t value judge, but try to understand where a family is coming from — their internal and external stress factors and cultural issues, not just the incident. We realized we need to train our own people continually, and that was a permanent change to our own system.”

Although Casey has provided some funding for FSSNF, Kaywork says the greatest benefit has been access.

“I can call them any time. They have so much information at their fingertips. It allows us to bring levels of expertise to a problem that we wouldn’t have on our own. ... I like that they guide, but don’t direct. They show you options but don’t say you have to do this. That’s particularly helpful when you’re talking about evidence-based programming concepts.”

Having a national partner also helps others in the community become more open to new ideas, says West. “Casey has helped influence our state and local partners to look beyond traditional service delivery models and see what really is best for families and their community. Now we all agree that there can be ‘nothing about the family without the familye.’”

Heath appreciates the common framework that comes with being a Community of Hope. “Being able to see how everyone fits into a Community of Hope has been really helpful. All partners can see how what they’re doing relates to what we’re doing with FSSNF.”

Moving forward

As the FSSNF and Schell-Sweet partnership moves forward, Kaywork and West note the need to address changing problems in the community and a desire to replicate success in other neighborhoods.

“Communities and their needs constantly change,” explains West. “Once upon a time the biggest concerns might have been a dirty home or poor parenting skills. Now it’s dealing with the opioid epidemic. That gives us a ‘new client’ with new issues that we need to tackle. We’ll need Casey’s continued technical assistance, so we can see how other states and cities are dealing with similar issues and learn from their successes.”

As for replicating their success in other parts of Duval County or in neighboring Nassau County, Kaywork would like to explore the idea of creating a community center from scratch. “We know you can’t always take an existing center and move it to where you want it to be,” he says. “We’ve seen some great organic centers in other parts of the country, but we know it takes a stronger local community and a longer amount of time. Hopefully we can build off what we’ve done at Schell-Sweet to create a new center successfully somewhere else.”



