

MercyFirst Building Bridges to the Future

by Fred Scaglione

In effect, MercyFirst was created by the Sisters of Mercy more than 100 years ago. St. Mary's of the Angels Home opened as an orphanage for young boys on 120 acres of Syosset farmland in 1894. Five years later, Angel Guardian Home was established in Bay Ridge Brooklyn to take in young girls. However, the two agencies operated independently throughout most of the last four decades, each with its own specialized programs and geographic focus. In 2003, however, faced with mounting financial pressures from a rapidly evolving child welfare system, the Sisters of Mercy chose to reunite St. Mary's and Angel Guardian. MercyFirst was born.

The programmatic pieces fit together nicely. Individual specialties and strengths were complementary and joined to create a broad continuum of child welfare services.

"St. Mary's primarily ran residential programs," says Gerard McCaffery who joined MercyFirst as Chief Executive Officer in early 2006. "The campus is where its roots were. It also had a number of group homes in the community and a small foster boarding home program. Angel Guardian had a large foster boarding home program as well

as a number of preventive programs. Angel Guardian was strictly in Brooklyn and Queens while St. Mary's was primarily in Nassau with some programs in Suffolk." Since the merger, MercyFirst has expanded its prevention and youth development programming, adding two after-school programs in New York City and one in Nassau.

MercyFirst's residential programming is highly specialized. "We have 122 beds on the campus, but it is not 122 beds of the same thing," says McCaffery. "We have nine different cottages each of which is a different program." The agency operates a Non-secure Detention program, a Diagnostic, a Residential Treatment Center, and an OMH-licensed Residential Treatment Facility. "We are working with kids who have very serious emotional and behavioral issues," says McCaffery.

MercyFirst's campus also has the only program on Long Island for youth who have been involved in sexual abuse. "It is a very specialized program for kids who are in need of very intensive supervision as well as an awful lot of family treatment," says McCaffery. The program initially began with one 16-bed cottage in 1997 and doubled in size by 2005. "I have to give the Sisters of Mercy a lot of credit," says



Gerard McCaffery

McCaffery. MercyFirst is providing follow-up services since last year through a contract with Long Island Jewish and OCFS funding.

The agency's 11 community-based group homes are equally specialized. Four mother/baby programs serve a total of 19 teen mothers and their children. MercyFirst also operates two Diagnostic Group Homes in East Massapequa and Holbrook as well as an OMH-licensed Community Residence in Merrick. The agency uses the balance of its group homes and two SILP apartments for youth who can't go home to their families but can benefit from a lower level of care.

MercyFirst's foster boarding home program cares for over 600 children in Brooklyn and Queens. Here, too, the agency is continuing to strengthen its continuum of services, offering 24 Therapeutic FBH beds for children with higher levels of service needs and a broad range of family counseling programs for families to avoid the need for foster care placement wherever possible.

"We are focusing on neighborhoods," says McCaffery. "We are trying



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Office of Resource Development
at 631 921 0808 x 162
or visit www.mercyfirst.org

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to build new services in communities where we already have a presence." In the Fort Greene/Bedford Stuyvesant and Coney Island/Sheepshead Bay sections of Brooklyn, the agency offers both foster care and preventive services for families where a child is at risk of foster care placement. Similarly, MercyFirst offers both foster care and prevention programming in the Howard Beach and Far Rockaway sections of Queens.

In 2006, the agency took several additional steps in building its neighborhood-based service networks when it opened three new after-school programs and two preventive programs, all with ties to communities where MercyFirst already had services. "We are lucky it didn't kill Sharon Dillon," says McCaffery, referring to MercyFirst's Senior Vice President for Preventive Services who also carries responsibility for the after-school programs.

Two of the new initiatives were Out-of-School Time (OST) programs for New York City's Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). The program at P.S. 95 is located in the Gravesend section of Brooklyn where MercyFirst operates both foster care and prevention programs. In Queens, the I.S. 226 OST program strengthened the agency's presence in South Ozone Park. Similarly, a new OCFS-funded Advantage After-school in Uniondale High

School complements MercyFirst's existing foster care prevention program for Nassau County. (See sidebar on below.)

Three new preventive services programs also expand MercyFirst's arsenal of treatment modalities.

A Juvenile Justice/Intensive Prevention Program opened in November 2006 under a contract with ACS and utilizes Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) to serve 48 Brooklyn youth who have been referred by ACS and Family Court. The MST service model provides intensive in-home family counseling for periods of up to 12 months. Staff follow strict treatment protocols laid out in the evidence-based MST model and receive regular feedback and supervision on a case-by-case basis from MST's own consultants.

"Our staff like the program design," says Elizabeth McCarthy, MercyFirst's Chief Operating Officer. Recruit-



At MercyFirst's new Career Day, youth are exposed to a range of job and career opportunities, including medical services, police, banks, construction companies.

ing for the new program, which requires Masters level MST therapists to work in family homes at times convenient for clients while always being on-call, was a challenge. "It takes a special kind of person," says McCarthy. "These are tough cases."

MercyFirst also applied for and won a contract with the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) to provide Intensive Preventive Services for Adolescents on a borough-wide basis in Queens. This program, too, called for the use of highly structured, evidence-based service models such as MST or Functional Family Therapy (FFT). MercyFirst, however, presented a proposal for its own program model which incorporates various components of family therapy, intensive case management and educational assistance.

Finally, the agency was awarded an NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) contract to provide foster care prevention services in the Far Rockaway section of Queens. (See sidebar on this page) All together MercyFirst works with over 600 families on a daily basis through its prevention programs.

McCaffery's arrival at MercyFirst coincided with a realization that the agency's financial situation was significantly more dire than previously anticipated. "We ended FY2006 with a \$2.2 million deficit," says McCaffery. The first task for MercyFirst's new CEO was to right the financial ship.

"I told staff that we would figure this out together," says McCaffery. "We

An After-School Advantage: Baby, Think It Over

MercyFirst's Advantage After-school Program at Uniondale High School on Long Island offers at-risk students a wide range of new experiences. They can design their own clothes; make jewelry; and, of course, have a baby.

That's right. Through the program's "Baby Think It Over" component, high school girls and boys get the chance to experience having a baby of their very own – one they must feed, clean, change, cuddle and care for over several days. The life-like "Baby Think It Over" doll is programmed to be just as cute and demanding as the real thing.

"They cry, go to the bathroom, burp and are generally a pain in the neck," says Michelle Laser, Director of the Uniondale Advantage program as well as the agency's 250-family preventive services program for Nassau County.

"The babies have to be fed, hugged and held," says Severio Ford, Program Coordinator for the Advantage Program. "They take it home, bring it to class and have to arrange baby sitting. If the baby wakes up in the middle of the night crying and the 'mother' doesn't respond, a computer chip records it," says Severio Ford, Program Coordinator for the Advantage Program.

"I don't have the patience," says Anesha, following her own trial run at teen motherhood.

"If the girls decide the baby is a pain in the neck, that is pretty much the point," says Laser.

Pregnancy prevention is just one focus of the Advantage program which provides a safe after-school space with academic support, groups and activities five days a week from 2:30 to 5:30 from September to June. The program has been particularly valuable in helping to reduce tensions and avoid violence in Uniondale where gang activity has been on the rise.

"If you take 75 kids off the street and give them something productive to do, that helps," says Ford.

went through a real process. We looked at every program, every staffing pattern and every contract to see how we were doing. We renegotiated numerous contracts for things like insurance and legal services and cut close to 50 positions. We were able to take a little of the sting out of the layoffs by moving about half the staff to other spots but it was still painful."

As a result, however, MercyFirst is now on a firmer financial footing. "We ended last fiscal year with a slight surplus and have a balanced budget this year," says McCaffery. "We were able to give raises for the first time in a couple of years and improve some benefits. I prefer having fewer staff that get paid better than having more staff who can't pay their bills."

Now, the agency is looking ahead. MercyFirst recently completed a strategic plan which lays out a series of organizational objectives for the coming three years.

Sanctuary

One key programmatic goal is full implementation of the Sanctuary model of service on an agency-wide basis. MercyFirst is one of five agencies across the state funded by OCFS to begin utilizing Sanctuary, a highly praised, trauma-based approach to treatment. Sanctuary is built on the recognition that a child's personal history of abuse and neglect is the basis of current behaviors which may be harmful to themselves and those around them; that youth react to events today in ways which are emotionally triggered by the pains of the past; that a key to treatment is helping youngsters to feel secure while finding their own ways to manage their emotions and avoid self-destructive behaviors.

Sanctuary is an organization-wide treatment model that requires providers to give up many of the tools traditional in residential programs. "We were very much on a behavior modification model: 'This is the way you do things,'" says McCaffery. "It was not so much about getting staff to understand what was going on with the kids." Sanctuary makes kids, and kids' problems, the real focus of treatment.

"It is having staff make the leap from getting a kid to behave for their

An Office-Based After-School Program

MercyFirst's Foster Care Prevention Program in Far Rockaway doesn't look like an after-school program, with its offices and hallways, but it feels like one. It is the kids who show up on an almost daily basis to chat with caseworkers, participate in groups and use the computers.

"It is unusual," says Barbara Denize, Director of the OCFS-TANF funded program which accepts adolescents ages 13-19 who have been referred by the local hospital, high school, Family Court and ACS. "We have kids who come every single day. They feel safe here. We provide a whole host of services and counseling for truancy, teen pregnancy, problems at school and problems at home."

"If I didn't come here I would have been kicked out of school," says Omi Peralta. "A lot of bad stuff would have happened."

"We ask the teens to set goals for themselves and then we work them to help achieve those goals," says Ms. Denize. "We give them incentives for making progress. We give gift cards, teddy bears, take them shopping," says Ms. Denize. One student, with a history of truancy, earned two tickets to the movies and a gift card to a local restaurant for him and his girlfriend after recording perfect attendance in summer school.

"Some people say we are bribing them but we are just rewarding positive behavior. These are kids who are not used to getting a lot of rewards," she explains.

The approach pays off. "I didn't know I could do it," says Katherine Huamani who nailed a score of 100 on her Spanish Regents after previously failing the class.

With a capacity of 30 teens, the program has a staff of three caseworkers, a family assistant and a secretary in addition to the director. Unlike ACS-funded prevention programs, staff treat the teen as their primary client. They work with family members and make home visits only with the teen's approval. Given an extensive waiting list, funding was just increased by OCFS to add a fourth caseworker and ten more slots.



eight hour shift versus trying to make an impact and helping the kid understand why he is in this situation to begin with and why he is acting out," says McCarthy.

Sanctuary emphasizes personal "safety plans" and support from "the community" over restraints. "I would rather have a kid storm out of the cottage and walk around the campus for an hour than punch out another kid," says McCaffery. "We all have ways that we manage our stress. Our kids have to find ways that are safe and effective for them. I don't think there is anything in Sanctuary that is anything but good child care, but it provides a framework for staff to understand their role and how better to handle the million and one things that come up which you can't plan for."

MercyFirst is already using Sanctuary on campus and is in the process of expanding it to its group homes. The agency will be breaking new ground when it begins applying Sanctuary, which has been developed and applied as a residential program, in its foster

boarding home and preventive programs. "No one else is doing that," says McCarthy.

"The principles are the same," says McCaffery. "We are working out how you apply them in these other settings. Some things are easier to do in cottages where all the kids wake up together and they know how the day is going to go. It is different when you have 600 kids in 300 different foster homes and your staff isn't there."

McCarthy believes that the model will be equally if not more valuable for kids in community-based and less structured settings. "We will have staff sit down with them and talk about safety plans for all the different situations in their lives," she explains. "If they are visiting parents and that wasn't always a safe relationship, what are you going to do? What about school? What are the triggers in their lives and how can they manage them to avoid acting out and making bad decisions? There is more that can go wrong for them when they are out in the community and out in the world."

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The agency has already trained 100 staff in its foster boarding home program and almost that number in preventive services. "We will begin implementing Sanctuary in our Therapeutic FBH program where we have more intensive staffing," says McCarthy.

Bridges to the Future

A second new programmatic priority for MercyFirst will be to ensure that youth are well prepared to leave care and build a successful life for themselves as adults. "We think we do an outstanding job while a kid is with us, whether it is on campus, in a group home or a foster boarding home, or in one of our other programs," says McCaffery. "The problem comes when kids leave. It is at that point that the public funding no longer supports services. It's 'times up, have a nice life'.

"There is an awful lot more we can be doing to prepare kids for the future and help them get started," McCaffery continues. "We should be helping kids go on to college and vocational schools, helping them get work experience and find housing before they leave us."

Bridges to the Future is MercyFirst's new strategic plan to expand its work in these areas. The agency is establishing a college scholarship program for kids who need financial help for education or job training. It has already expanded its mentoring program to link youth with adults who can provide advice, support and positive examples of success. "Two years ago we had only five mentors. We have quadrupled that. It is still only 20 but it is a lot of progress," says McCarthy.

MercyFirst also plans to apply for a Youthbuild grant from the U.S. Department of Labor. Youthbuild programs train disadvantaged youth ages 16-24 for construction jobs as they work on affordable housing or other community projects. "We've talked about developing our own 'youthbuild' program, perhaps building a house here on campus so that kids could learn carpentry, electrical work, plumbing or roofing," says McCaffery. "We have construction and maintenance that goes on all the

time here on campus and in our group homes. Preferably, we could partner with Nassau or Suffolk County and in Brooklyn and Queens on renovating housing which might then be available for some of the families we serve."

MercyFirst already has a program in which youth train dogs to provide assistance with activities of daily living for disabled owners. Through a grant from the Town of Oyster Bay, MercyFirst now provides food services training and certification for youth working in the agency's kitchen and cafeteria.

Building Philanthropic Support

To take on these new challenges, MercyFirst hopes to build its own financial infrastructure of private philanthropic support outside the constraints of traditional government funding. The agency currently raises approximately \$1 million of its \$50 million budget through private contributions. "\$1 million is a lot of money, but it is just 2% of our budget," says McCaffery. "I would feel a lot better if 10% of our budget was raised from private donors."

MercyFirst hopes to reach this goal in stages with a target of 5% -- or \$2.5 million -- in three years. Sean Phillips recently joined the agency as Chief Development Officer after having served in similar capacities at United Way of Long Island and Family and Children's Association.

McCaffery believes that Bridges to the Future offers potential donors a way to make a real difference in the lives of kids. "We think we can convince people that this is not just a donation but an investment in the community and in the future of the kids who come here," says McCaffery. "Without private support these programs will simply not be possible."

MercyFirst is already building linkages to local businesses through volunteer programs and mentoring relationships. For example CMP Media, a technology and marketing firm based in Manhasset, has effectively adopted the agency after a few employees visited the campus. "Now the group comes back on a regular basis," says McCaf-

fery. "They started doing 'job shadowing' so our kids get to see all the different aspects of the business -- accounting, desktop publishing, human resources. They give them each an individual mentor. Now some of our kids are actually working there for the summer."

The relationship has paid off in other ways as well. "They have committed to raise \$100,000 to redo the gymnasium," says Phillips. "They also agreed to take on the renovation of our pool next. If you get people involved in the program, the contributions will come."

Looking Ahead

MercyFirst's new strategic plan calls for an ongoing process of program improvement and modifications to meet the evolving needs of children and families. The agency just received their Preliminary 2006 EQUIP scores from ACS and their Foster Boarding Home and Residential Programs both received an "Excellent" rating for the first time.

MercyFirst also is strengthening the connections between its various levels of care to ensure that youth always find the right placement.

"For every kid who comes to the campus, we want to develop a plan to get them back into a family setting as soon as possible," says McCarthy.

"We do residential treatment," says McCaffery. "There is a need for that. We are at full capacity. Kids feel good about what goes on here. There is a heavy emphasis on education and an awful lot of family work." He points out with pride that 70% of the kids in MercyFirst's on-campus school who were eligible to take State Regents exams took them and passed. (The school is the only NYC Department of Education-run school outside of the five boroughs.) "But, we also run community-based residential programs, foster boarding homes and a lot of prevention, over 600 families. We try to find the right program for each kid and each family."

It is what the Sisters of Mercy had in mind all along.