

March 2011 E-Newsletter

From The Director, Joe Valentine:

A recent “New Yorker” article profiled the work of a dedicated young pediatrician, Nadine Burke, working out of a clinic in Bayview-Hunters Point, who has re-organized her practice based on groundbreaking new research that early childhood trauma leads to significant and long-lasting chemical changes in the brain of the growing child [“*The Poverty Clinic-can a stressful childhood make you a sick adult?*”, Paul Tough, The New Yorker Digital Edition: March 21, 2011, pages 25-32]. Repeated activation of the body’s stress response system as a result of ongoing trauma leads to chemical changes in the brain and a buildup of toxic chemicals in the blood stream. Negative health outcomes and long term behavioral changes can follow. School children who have experienced early trauma find it harder to sit still and follow directions. As teenagers, they are more likely to be drawn into high-risk behaviors. As adults, they often show increased aggression, impulsive behavior, weakened cognition, and an inability to distinguish between real and imagined threats. In the New Yorker article, Dr. Burke sums up the connection by saying, “*You can trace the pathology as it moves from the molecular level to the social level.*” Poverty of course, is the overwhelmingly largest determinant of adverse circumstances, and persons who experience periods of poverty as young children will suffer the widest array of trauma events.

Why is this relevant? We are now witnessing perhaps the most significant increase in childhood poverty in modern times. In 2000, about 16.2% of all children were estimated to be living in families whose income fell below the official federal poverty line. By 2009, this percentage had grown to 20.7%, in other words, more than 1 in every 5 children are living in poverty. The “*Institute for Research on Poverty*” at the University of Wisconsin is estimating that when the 2010 census data comes out in September, another million children will be shown to be living below the federal poverty line, and that the total percentage in poverty will have climbed above 21.3%. Children are the fastest growing percentage of persons in poverty. However, it’s widely accepted that the official federal definition of poverty is woefully inadequate. A more accurate and timely measure is given by the percentage of households receiving Food Stamps [now called “CalFRESH” in California and “SNAP” at the national level]. In the last 3 years, the percentage of persons receiving SNAP jumped by 54% and this increase included an additional 6.6 million children. How does this compare to Contra Costa County? The number of children receiving CalFRESH has increased by 45% - from over 29,000 in February of 2008 to over 41,000 in January of this year. *That’s an increase of over 12,000 additional children.* This number is worth repeating. Using Food Stamp participation as a partial measure of the number of persons in poverty, over 12,000 additional children have fallen into poverty in Contra Costa County as a result of the recession. Given the evolving body of research on the long term impacts of poverty on children we should be concerned.

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SparkPoint Centers Showcase Government-Community Partnerships

With more than 13,000 foreclosed properties, unemployment at above 11%, and unprecedented numbers of people applying for public benefits in Contra Costa County, the need for financial services, coaching, and counseling is higher now more than ever. One such effort called SparkPoint Centers, will offer free resources to residents and families who are seeking economic stability.

With leadership from County Supervisors John Gioia and Federal Glover, along with the Employment and Human Services Department’s Service Integration Program and the Richmond Community Foundation, two SparkPoint Centers in Richmond and Bay Point are slated to open at the beginning of June. The SparkPoint Centers were conceived and strongly supported by United Way of the Bay Area with significant funding from Chevron and local private foundations. Each Center brings together some of Contra Costa County’s strongest nonprofit agencies in partnership with County government departments to offer integrated, complementary services in one convenient location with a goal of helping people become financially secure

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Equally as frightening is that core elements of the safety net that mitigate the impacts of poverty on children are being shredded. As we analyze the impacts of the proposed cuts in the state budget to health and human services, we are struck by how many of the impacts fall on the same population – young children in low income families. Some of the planned reductions with the most critical impact on children include: CalWORKS grant reductions of 8%; a reduction in the amount of time a family can receive a full grant from 60 months to 48 months with additional 5% reductions every year thereafter in the aid provided to children; significant reductions in services to help CalWORKS parents become employable and find jobs; cuts in mental health and substance abuse services for CalWORKS families; devastating reductions in child care support, including cuts of 15% in state funding for the number of children served, further reductions of 20% in licensed exempt provider rates, a 10% cut in Title V reimbursement rates, and elimination of child care to 11 and 12 year olds [for a more detailed summary of the impacts visit our website at: www.cccounty.us/ehsd]. Then there is the 50% cut to First Five programs. Furthermore, if the Governor and Legislature are not able to agree on a revenue solution, the additional cuts to Education and other health and human service programs will reach nightmarish proportions for children. Although one can recognize the political realities that led to these budget decisions, the impacts to children will be the same nevertheless. We will pay a steep price for balancing budgets on the backs of our children. The future will be poorer for all of us as a result.

Joe Valentine, EHSD Director

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***The SparkPoint in Bay Point is located at 3105 Willow Pass Road.
Left is the new lobby which greets families; Right is the staff including Director Dave Thompson (far left).***

Instead of providing just a one-time handout, SparkPoint commits to working with families for several years, creating financial plans that incorporate a full range of services, including credit counseling and financial coaching, resume building and career development as well as access to higher education and savings accounts.

SparkPoint relies on a close partnership between nonprofit and government service providers who often work with the same populations but rarely share data or a commitment to the same measures of success. To date the effort has brought nearly \$1 million dollars of private money into the County that will leverage public funds towards a more economically secure citizenry.

For more information contact Paul Buddenhagen: pbuddenh@ehsd.cccounty.us or Jim Becker: jbecker@richmondcf.org.

Electronic Transfers Increase Efficiency and Ease for County Recipients

As of March 28, 2011, the Electronic Inter-County Transfer (eICT) solution was implemented throughout the State of California. This single automated solution allows County workers to perform an electronic transfer of case information and verifications from one county to another. The eICT network becomes the electronic connection of all the 58 California counties to each other and will greatly assist our increasingly mobile population as they move from county to county.

Human Service agencies across California are committed to assisting recipients when they relocate from place to place. However, the former manual processes of transferring information about recipients from one county to another were time consuming and cumbersome. They often left recipients waiting for needed benefits while files were copied and mailed and workers talked on the telephone. The eICT solution automates this previously manual process and will streamline the transfer of client benefits between counties.

For additional information or questions, please contact Anna Pineda-Martinez at 925-677-3044.

WestEd Study Shows Importance of Mathematics in Head Start Classrooms

The Community Services Bureau (CSB) recognizes and values the importance of helping children get prepared for learning mathematics in kindergarten. Research consistently shows a gap of about one year in the mathematical knowledge of low vs. middle-income children at kindergarten entry. Furthermore, this gap is already present at three years of age, when children first enter Head Start. To address this issue, CSB entered into a partnership with Dr. Alice Klein and Dr. Prentice Starkey of WestEd to examine the effects of a three-year preschool mathematics intervention on children's developing mathematical knowledge. This collaborative research project is being funded by a grant from Institute for Educational Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education. CSB is pleased to present the preliminary findings of the study.

Twenty-five of Contra Costa County's Head Start classrooms were randomly assigned to one of three research conditions: a two-year math intervention, one-year pre-K math intervention, or no intervention. Within each classroom, all age-eligible children were invited to participate at the beginning of the project up to a maximum of 10 children per class. As part of the project, children's mathematical knowledge is assessed in the fall and spring of each preschool year.

Teachers received training through multi-day professional development workshops. Bi-weekly observations and ongoing in-class support for intervention teachers were conducted and math centers were set up in the intervention classrooms.

Results of the first year of the study show that teachers participating in the training provided 3-year-old children with increased support for mathematics throughout the school day compared to teachers not receiving specialized training. This increased support resulted in significant gains in children's mathematical knowledge. In fact, mathematical knowledge grew 76% more in 3-year-old children receiving the intervention than in 3-year-olds receiving only one year of intervention or no intervention at all. The results of the "Desired Results Developmental Profile," an assessment conducted on all children twice per year, showed significant gains in math proficiency. Intervention sites in the first year of the math study had the highest average score while sites not participating had lower average math scores.

Data for the second year of the study is currently being collected and analyzed. As the study moves forward, all teachers assigned to the control condition will also receive similar training when the study culminates to ensure that we are providing the same level of math readiness to all CSB three and four year old children.

