Strengthening Community Bonds to Support Parents: The Strong Communities for Children Model

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The *Strong Communities for Children* pilot was one of the largest community-wide child safety initiatives ever undertaken in the U.S. This multi-year, comprehensive community-based initiative engaged hundreds of community members and thousands of families. The initiative measurably reduced child abuse and neglect at the population level, as well as the number of child emergency room visits and hospitalizations for injuries. How did they engage so many community members, and what did they do to achieve those results?

That is exactly what more than ninety participants wanted to find out when they attended the Strong Communities Forum in Austin on August 25th, sponsored by Project HOPES - Travis County. Dr. Gary Melton, Robin Kimbrough-Melton, JD, and Dr. Jill McLeigh, the design and implementation team behind *Strong Communities*, shared their experiences and perspectives on implementation.

Forum participants were struck by a number of elements of *Strong Communities*. For one, it is more of a philosophy and a set of principles. *Strong Communities* was based on the notion that if community members worked together to ensure that "every child and every parent would know that if they had reason to celebrate, worry, or grieve, someone would notice and someone would care," they could transform their community.

That premise sounds so simple, but it is profound. What would it mean, if a parent was struggling, that a neighbor, a coworker or a passerby would offer a helping hand and rush to support them rather than judging? What would it mean, if someone who might be struggling could also be seen as a contributor, an asset, not only a "client" or a "case"?   It would truly require changing the norms of community and parental support.

Another element that surprised Forum participants was the lack of "programmatic" focus in the initial *Strong Communities* implementation. The *Strong Communities*

pilot took place in Greenville, South Carolina, and it did not have nearly the number of collaborations and coalitions actively working to address community needs. Strong Communities organizers did seek to offer a system of support services (referred to as Strong Families) for families with young children living in the service area. Strong Families' objectives were to: (a) build or strengthen a family's social support network; (b) encourage mutual support, parent leadership, and reciprocity; and (c) where needed, provide or arrange for professional support and direct services." ** A "universal" community engagement approach came first, followed by professional support and direct services only where needed.

Strong Communities shares some elements with initiatives designed for [Collective Impact](). One is a population-level focus – to reduce abuse and neglect for children across the entire community. Second, Strong Communities relied on "mutually reinforcing activities"; firemen and women, apartment managers, schools, churches – all were willing to brand their community engagement activities and events under a *Strong Communities* banner, even if it was volunteers doing most of the organizing. Third, Clemson University researchers provided the "backbone" for staffing and data management.

Learning about the *Strong Communities* model was inspiring. Where do we go from here? Is there an initiative or coalition – or several – with the capacity and desire to build *Strong Communities* principles into their ongoing efforts? Is there a neighborhood where residents and volunteers are already actively engaged and eager to work together to provide stronger support for children and families that would benefit from adopting aspects of *Strong Communities*? Project HOPES is devoting its next quarterly meeting to a follow-up discussion on the possibilities. The meeting will be held November 17th from 10-Noon at SafePlace. An RSVP is required for participation

(https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/RSVP_next_steps_for_Strong_Communities_in_Austin)

- To learn more about Strong Communities, please see the recently released Upbring white paper at: http://www.upbring.org/research/whitepapers/**

- To learn about opportunities for follow-up to the Strong Communities Forum or to explore collaboration opportunities for prevention of child maltreatment, please email Project HOPES (Travis County) Community Collaboration Facilitator: Suzanne@communitysync.com

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