

**Kronkosky Charitable Foundation  
Roundtable Discussion**

**Topic:** Youth at Risk

**Date:** July 2, 1998

**Prepared by:** Liz Ostendorf

**Participants**

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**Invited Agency Representatives**

Bart Kelly	Clinical Director	Roy Maas Youth Alternatives
Patti Radle	Director	Inner City Development
Cynthia Lemonds	Director	Downtown Youth Center
Rachele Guerrero	Program Director	Downtown Youth Center
Jessica McQuilken	Program Director	Youth Against Gang Activity, Family Service Association
Kim Turner	Director	Good Choices
Cathey Vacker		

**Foundation Staff and Trustees**

Megan Kromer	Director of Program and Evaluation
Mark Carmona	Grants Manager
Liz Ostendorf	Student Intern

**Overview of Organizations**

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**Roy Maas Youth Alternatives**

- Serves abused, abandoned, and neglected children ages 6 to 17. In some cases, the state allows a variance for children who are 5 years old and in need of services. The available beds are designated 70% for boys, 30% for girls. This reflects the allocations of the program and the overall trend in use. Younger children and girls tend to participate in other, less-restrictive programs such as foster homes and non-residential settings, rather than this program.
- The program provides emergency shelter, residential care, and an outpatient center to approximately 1,000 children per year.
- There are two residential facilities, one in Boerne and one in San Antonio. The one in Boerne is set on 40 acres of land, and accommodates 80 children. The other is in San Antonio at the corner of West and Basse and is an emergency shelter for up to 25 children. Police officers or members of the DCI Youth Services Department typically bring children to the emergency shelter when they are found abandoned or wandering the streets.

- The average length of stay at the emergency shelter is 8-9 days, however, some stay up to 30-40 days. Children in the residential facility live there for 9 months to a year. However, in some cases children stay for several years.
- Referrals come from two sources, state agencies and families. State initiated referrals request counseling and residential treatment to stabilize the children and remove them from their family settings. They constitute 60% of the clients. Family referrals account for 40% of the youth in the program, are commonly initiated as a preventive measure because of existing behavior problems. Many of these children are on probation, but have not changed their behavior or lifestyle.
- Over the course of the organization's history, this program has a strong reputation for quality services. Consequently, funding comes from a variety of well-known sources including the TX Open, the San Antonio Spurs, Luby's Cafeteria, USAA, and various other civic groups.
- The number of referrals occurs in a cyclical pattern. High volume periods are during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> week of school when tests begin, the middle of January when report cards are issued, and in May surrounding the TAAS tests. Children exhibit high stress during these periods and many do not have the skills to effectively manage their stress. The stress they feel is in response to pressures from school, family, and performance expectations. Consequently, the program emphasizes decision-making skills and stress management.
- There is a great deal of emphasis on family relationships and family therapy is incorporated into treatment whenever possible.

### **Inner City Development**

- This is a community-based program located on the West Side of San Antonio near Alazon Apache Courts housing development. The directors live near the program house and most all board members are from the immediate community. Many of the people who participated as children now have children in the program. ICD helps to foster continuity and interdependence in the community.
- It is an all-volunteer organization and is a neutral gang area. Work-study programs and the San Antonio Youth Employment program are used to help people find employment after they have volunteered there for a long time. ICD serves 85 families in crisis per month by providing food and clothing. In addition, after school programs, the cultural arts program, and recreation programs serve children from the area.

1. After school programs include tutoring and support programs. Children have somewhere to go after school. Moreover, they have people who will look at their homework and report cards. College students serve as tutors.
  2. The recreation program is very popular during the summer. The program is limited to 115 children per day and focuses on children age 12 and under. There is a core group of 55 teenagers who serve as leaders three days per week. They help make lunches, clean, and supervise the younger kids. The program incorporates arts and crafts, field trips, indoor and outdoor games, and swimming. Field trip destinations include museums, video arcades, Fiesta Texas, roller skating rinks, and bowling alleys.
  3. The cultural arts program helps children paint murals in the community, write and publish a newsletter, and videotape oral histories. This program recently became independently incorporated as San Anto Cultural Arts, but is still housed at ICD. The goal is to contract with artists to show the children that it is a viable form of employment.
- The Volunteers in Mission program allows people to live at the center for free room and board in order to learn more about the community, participate in the activities, and lead programs. There are six beds available. Volunteers must work a minimum 15 hours per week to live there. One bed is generally reserved for someone who wants to come and learn more about the neighborhood for academic reasons. Volunteers may organize programs, act as an office assistant, or run the emergency food pantry.

#### **Downtown Youth Center**

- The center is located on Commerce Street as you enter downtown, and designated a neutral gang territory. The location seems to catch kids as they are going into downtown to hangout after school and during the summer. Because it is located close to the SAMM Shelter, children come to the Center while their parents work or look for jobs or permanent housing.
- It is open from 12-8:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday during the summer. Many kids come after the city sponsored After School Challenge Program around 5:30 p.m.
- Serve the same type of children as ICD, approximately 60 children per day. They serve 500 different children per year.

- Provide recreational activities for youth as well as academic tutoring and other educational programs. College students from UTSA, Incarnate Word, Our Lady of the Lake, and St Mary's University serve as tutors.
- They have 13-14 computers donated by local businesses and individuals. Children also use them for games and schoolwork. In addition, the Center conducts weeklong training sessions on how to use them in a business setting. Only 3-4 computers have Windows applications. There is no Internet access on these computers.
- Field trips to museums, schools, businesses, and Fiesta Texas.
- Staff of 8: 4 activity coordinators, program coordinator, development coordinator, community liaison, and director.
- Monitor success of academic programs and tutoring by tracking report cards. Children are not always cooperative. More effectively, track by counselor's notes on improvement over 4-6 week period during tutoring sessions.
- Participants are required to provide their background information the first time they participate, but after that everyone just signs in and out.

#### **Youth Against Gang Activity (YAGA)**

- Program serves middle and high school students by meeting in the schools once per week. Each group also meets on Saturday for the planned activity. In some cases school groups are combined to promote racial and community mixing. Over the summer, they also make contact once per week. This is sometimes a problem because many of the kids do not have telephones.
- There are 3 high schools, 1 middle school, 1 housing development (Point East Apartments) which have groups that participate. There is a core group of 100 students, but over the school year 360 children attend the activities. School groups range from 8 people to 35 people. Students all live on the east side of San Antonio, many in Wheatly Courts and Seton Homes. Recruitment occurs when schools invite the staff to hold presentations for the student body. Active members wear T-shirts and recruit their friends. The staff members also post fliers and hand out cards at school and community events. Children are also referred through other Family Service Association programs.
- There are 2 staff members who run this program which is funded by the United Way and TCADA. The small staff limits the expansion of the program because of the finite resources and time available.

- The groups provide alternative activities to gang involvement. Participants are encouraged to invent and plan their own activities. Volunteer projects in the community are the most common activities. Such projects include graffiti removal in the neighborhood, working at the zoo, feeding the homeless, etc.
- One ongoing program is the Best of Both Worlds program. It is an intergenerational program that brings the students into 4 different nursing homes and the nutrition site at the Claude Black Center once a month. The project started in September. Once the students go to the nursing home a few times they learn names and form relationships with the elderly people. In some cases, children form family-like bonds, which are not available to them in any other way.
- It is a hard struggle to make an impact on these kids because you cannot remove them from their environment. The parents are often drug addicts, unemployed, incarcerated, etc. Many of these children go without food. To work through this, the staff keeps a small food pantry and donated clothing to provide the children with some of the necessities. After community service activities, the group normally goes out for ice cream or another treat to try to bring something special and fun to their lives.

#### **Good Choices**

- This is a program to motivate and educate children about good choices and the impact that they have on your life. It focuses on positive character development for the children by bringing in a community leader to serve as a role model, in addition to Kim Turner and her husband. The community leader can be a government official, or in many cases a high-ranking military officer.
- The show is free of charge at public and private schools and other gathering places for children such as community centers and summer programs (e.g., PREP and Junior Achievement.) The program is available to children from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The program format aimed at 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> graders is designed to emphasize prevention and to facilitate discussion.
- It lasts 45-minutes to an hour and is geared to the audience's age level and size. The program is often used as a reward for improved attendance, TAAS testing, etc. At the elementary school level, the program can be presented for the whole school, but as the children get older, it is presented to specific classes and groups rather than the whole school. Following the programs, they leave a set of questions for the children and ask them to write a letter answering the questions and describing their impressions of the program.
- There are four basic profiles for the program, but Mrs. Turner only described two.

1. The first has the guest reader and a leader read a prepared script that describes the good and bad choices that two high profile Americans made. Scripts include Mike Tyson and Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bill Cosby and Elvis Presley, etc. The community leader then talks about the choices he or she made in her life and the impact that they had both good and bad. Following this, the children get free reign to ask any questions they want. The community leader is given a list of questions that children typically ask, but often times is met with hard, unexpected questions.
  2. The second is a point-counterpoint presentation given by Kim Turner and her husband. They are dressed as characters from the turn of the century. He is a riverboat gambler and she is a ditzzy character named Miss Guided. He leads the beginning of the program where he describes his own story, his life as a card cheat, and his experiences as a blind person. There is an interactive section next and then a game section that teaches analytical processes and emphasizes grade-specific core knowledge.
- They serve 125 schools in the area per year and 60 different organizations. They will travel no more than 50 to 100 miles to put on the presentations.
  - USAA, Fiesta Texas, and Southwestern Bell all contribute funds for organization costs and the pilot program. The pilot program began in 1993 and expanded in 1994 with improvements from suggestions. In 1995, the program began operating as it is now.
  - Mailers are sent out at the beginning of each school year to groups that have been recommended or referred in addition to all of the school in the area. They give first priority to groups that have at-risk children such as Edgewood and San Antonio Independent School Districts. The period of highest demand is during Red Ribbon month and at the beginning of the school year.

**Cathey Vacker-Meyer**

- She worked in public education for 10 years, in the FBI for 2 years, then began researching gangs and gang related activity in San Antonio. In 1991, she started with Northside ISD in the gang awareness program. Ms. Vacker-Meyer conducted research on the impact of gangs on violence in schools by working in the classroom with at-risk and regular students. She also conducted parent workshops to teach them what signs to look for in their children regarding gang involvement. She emphasized that children are looking for parental involvement and want their parents to be aware of their activities and involvement.

- Gangs and the pattern of their activity originate in LA and Chicago and migrate to other locations quite quickly. In Texas, new trends are first visible in El Paso and then move into San Antonio, Dallas, Houston, and Corpus Christi. Gang activity came to San Antonio 1978, blew up in 1986, but was only acknowledged by county and city officials in 1992. San Antonio officials hesitated to acknowledge the gang problem because of the potential impact on tourism. The state legislature still does not have an official definition of gangs, nor do government agencies share the names or information on gang members because of their rights as a juvenile.
- There are five different types of gangs: street gangs, prison gangs, ethnic gangs, and the Mexican Mafia. Street gangs are learning techniques and strategies from prison gangs, which make them more intelligent, and more stealth. The goal of a true street gang is to earn money and they do this by selling drugs or stolen merchandise.
- Gang members sophistication increased dramatically recently. This is largely because of the influence of prison gangs and the leadership of older (30 to 40 years) gang members who survived. Gang members now enroll in the military and police departments in order to get proper weapons training. In some cities, such as Chicago, known gang members serve in political offices.
- Gang-on-gang violence is the most common form of gang violence. Initiation rituals involving non-gang members are largely rumor. In most cases, gang members have no interest in non-gang members. Conflict may arise, however, when non-gang members associate with gang members. For example, attending a gang party, being out in public with a gang member, or dating a gang member causes one to be associated with the gang culture, and thus places the innocent individual at risk.
- Graffiti is the communication method of the gang community. It advertises who is in what gangs, where meetings are to be held, and what hits are planned. Tagging is different from graffiti because it is meant to be only a form of artistic expression and was started by non-violent groups. There is conflict between these two groups, however, because gangs often graffiti over the tags. This is seen as a lack of respect and the tagging teams defend the honor of the artwork through violent acts. This is an example of a non-violent youth gang turning violent.
- Nationally, street gangs have increased their prominence in the media. There are a number of known gang members who are popular rap stars. For example, Iced T is a known Crypt member. In addition to his music, he also had a television show *Players* which was produced by other gang members and perpetuated the Crypt's colors and slang. The show was cancelled, possibly because NBC determined the intent and illusions to

gang culture. There are also many professional athletes who have gang tattoos. These tattoos are visible on nationally televised sporting events and glorify gang involvement.

- Crew parties are a new way for gangs to make money. Unlimited drugs and alcohol are provided after the participants pay a cover charge. The party has four locations and the kids move from one to the other as they are broken up by police. The final location is generally just outside the city limit where law enforcement is not readily available. The attendees of the party are not gang members and do not always know that gang members put on the party, and consequently do not understand the danger involved.
- Gang prevention should start in kindergarten or first grade; intervention is needed in middle and high school levels. Children learn at a very young age what gang activity is, where to look for it, how to avoid or become involved in it. Children learn about gangs from family members, neighbors, schoolmates, etc.
- There are many challenges in treating gang members. Some advocate maintaining homogenous groups to avoid inter-gang conflict, other advocate heterogeneous groups to foster inter-gang relationships and avoid increased animosity. Moreover, moving gang members from one neighborhood to another to live with family is not effective unless the child is given training and given the skills to change his lifestyle. This is how gang activity spreads into new communities. Gang members maintain their old ties and add new members from the second neighborhood. In many cases, gang members do not have the skills to make new lives for themselves. They do not know how to interview for jobs or to live outside the gang environment. Mentoring programs in the juvenile detention center exist to help facilitate the transition.

### **Issues**

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- Parental involvement is minimal in many children's lives. This is not determined by economic factors, but parenting style and attitude. Children want someone to care about them and the things that they do. Some children, when not provided this at home, seek it out. This may take the form of gang activity, community involvement, or full-time participation in a community center program. In all of these activities there is an adult sponsor or family-type setting who shows interest in the child and appears to value his actions and presence. Parents are often overwhelmed by all of their responsibilities and do not have the appropriate training or skills necessary to be a good parent.
- Many children's basic needs for food and clothing are not being met. Children who are hungry are not able to get the most out of school or a summer program because of this. Many organizations that work with children

have emergency food and clothing supplies in order to meet these immediate needs. After these are met, deeper issues may surface and can be addressed.

- Teachers are often afraid of gang members or have become hardened to the suffering of the children and appear mean and uncaring. They demand respect from the children, but do not show it themselves. This fosters animosity within the classroom and pushes the children away from the school environment. In many cases, rumors and assumptions are controlling the teacher's emotions. Children are often already leery of authority because of their earlier experience; hence, the communication link between teacher and students is destroyed.
- Prevention and early intervention are tremendously important. It saves lives and money. Children learn about gang activities and are mistreated very early in life. Unless something is done to break the cycle, an increasing number of young children will fall victim to their surroundings. Links must be made early to bring children to the attention of the appropriate agencies so that help does not arrive too late to make a difference.
- It is important that adults show children respect and that the children know that they are valued. Children learn to respect and value others from this. Allowing children to plan and carry out activities gives them a sense of self-worth, value, and completion. Children can take ownership in a project and develop self-confidence.