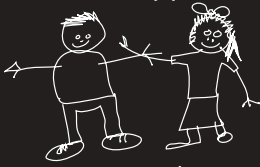


Communities Committed



to Children

KERN COUNTY:

"We're a force to be reckoned with"

A sprawling, agricultural county where unemployment exceeds 30 percent in some areas, Kern has become a nationally recognized model of commitment to children

By Melia Franklin

It's the third Kids Club night at the East Bakersfield Community Coalition (EBCC). More than 80 kids have showed up for arts and crafts. "We had three kids the first night and 50 the second," says Community Coordinator Brandi De La Garza, a longtime activist with EBCC. "We knew there was a real need."

Until last year, EBCC couldn't meet that need "because we didn't have the staff," says De La Garza. Once a group of volunteers fed up with "gangs and drive-bys," EBCC now employs six family advocates who connect kids and families to services and community events. The money to pay them, leveraged by the Kern County Network for Children (KCNC), comes from the Children and Families Commission and the California Endowment, but the community decides how it's used. As one of 21 local collaboratives created by KCNC, EBCC brings residents, service providers, businesses, and policy-makers together monthly to identify children's and families' needs and come up with solutions.

"We're still grassroots, but we're huge now," says De La Garza. "Just about every nonprofit and public agency is a partner with us."

"TEARING DOWN WALLS"

- In Kern County:
- 21 local collaboratives bring communities together to identify and meet families' needs. Each has also developed a family resource center.
 - County agencies and policy-makers are committed to "tearing down walls" between agencies and funding sources "to see that families get served," says Karen Cooley, director of the Kern Child Abuse Prevention Council.
 - Child care advocates—the resource and referral agency, the local planning council, and the family child care associations—are strong and active.
- The "engine" for change is the Kern County Network for Children. KCNC brings key decision-makers together, helps local collaboratives find resources, and provides support and leadership.

"THE TIME WAS RIGHT"

When Children Now's *Children's Report Card* came out in 1992, "We were at the top of the list for all the worst statistics," from child deaths to low-birth weight infants to high school drop-outs, recalls Steve Sanders, KCNC's executive director. Alarming statistics, pressure from "line staff desperate to do things better," and looming budget cuts "really got the attention" of key leaders, says



Kids Club night at the East Bakersfield Community coalition.

Judy Newman, assistant to Supervisor Barbara Patrick. Simultaneously the state offered funding for Healthy Start school-based services and for inter-agency children's councils. "The time was right to bring together the community on behalf of children," says Newman. The superintendent of schools, the county administrator, and the head of the Department of Human Services persuaded the Board of Supervisors to create KCNC.

KCNC's 45-member executive committee—agency heads, service providers, policy-makers, business and community leaders—provides a monthly forum where "everyone can come together to share ideas and find solutions," says Bill Reifel, facilitator of the Richardson Special Needs Collaborative in Bakersfield. "It's awesome," agrees Sandy Koening of the West Side Community Resource Center in Taft. "It's such a force [for] influencing policy."

PROGRESS FOR CHILDREN

- Collaboration has made a difference for Kern's children and families.
- **Outcomes have improved.** Low-birth weights, infant death rates, and high school drop-out rates have declined, while school attendance and child immunization have increased. Collaboration is key: In Lamont, school attendance increased 40 percent after health and school officials worked together to help parents stamp out head lice.
 - **Funding has increased.** The Board of Supervisors agreed to allow some state social service funds to flow through KCNC, which can steer them to the collaboratives. KCNC also helped collaboratives apply jointly for \$3 million from Prop. 10, says Sanders. Separately, "the strong communities would have gotten funding and smaller communities would have lost out."
 - **Communities have more clout.** Nancy Puckett, chair of the rural

Kern River Valley Collaborative, has seen a rise in "door-to-door" activism and a "sense of community—we're a force to be reckoned with." The collaborative recently mobilized the community to defeat a redistricting plan they felt was unfair.

- **Policy-makers are more engaged in children's issues.** Supervisors use the collaboratives as their "direct grassroots line" and have staff at every collaborative meeting, says Newman. And they're beginning to see issues like child care "as a necessity to the health of the community and the economy," says Pam Sanders, director of Community Connections for Child Care. For example, the supervisors added incentives for businesses coming into the county if they offered child care.
- **Business leaders contribute to children's advocacy.** "Business has a responsibility to make sure its voice is involved in the condition of children and families," says Morgan Clayton, a business owner and member of KCNC's board. By participating in collaborative meetings, business leaders learn about issues like child care, which "they didn't think affected them in any way," says Susan Buckingham, member of the Child Care Planning Council.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Keys to Kern's success are:
- **Inclusion.** "We really make a strong effort to make sure that as many folks are at the table as possible," says Tammy Burns, Child Care Planning Council staff. In some communities, like Lamont, town hall meetings attract more than 150 residents. Equally important was getting policy-makers' "buy-in," says Steve Sanders.
 - **Leadership.** Kern was "blessed with powerful and charismatic leaders" who could "get people stirred up and put ideas into action," says Cooley.

■ **Strong communities.** "We're not a commuter, big-city area. We are at home. People belong and can make a difference," says Pam Sanders. In rural Kern County, where she grew up, "nobody could ever be out in their front yard with a project without four or five people stopping by to see if they could help. That's a lot what this community is like."

■ **Leadership development.** Brandi De La Garza is one of 150 graduates of KCNC's six-month leadership course. "I was kind of winging it before," she says. "The passion was there but I didn't know what to do with it. Now I'm effective." Maria Rios, an activist with Latino Family Child Care Association of Kern County, credits local and state child care resource and referral agencies with providing the training that "empowered us to do things for the children."

■ **Support.** When Supervisor Jon McQuiston learned about KCNC's "cookbook"—a step-by-step guide to successful collaboration—he gave it to his constituents in the Kern River Valley. "We had to get organized," Puckett recalls. "This cookbook showed us how." She still refers to the KCNC staff as "Mom and Dad. If we don't know what to do, we call.... They either have an answer or help us find it."

■ **Listening.** "Find out what your community needs," advises Cooley. "If they say they need a washer and dryer, find a way to put one in the community center. Then they can wash their clothes while their kids go to school."

CHALLENGES AND NEXT STEPS

"We've got a great thing going here with the collaborative.... We need to be able to prove that this is the way to do business," to institutionalize sources of funding, says Wendy Wayne, head of Child Development and Family Services. And, says Cooley, Kern needs to "not chase the priority of the month. If you could pick four things and stand behind it, we might get there." ■

RESOURCES:

- Kern County Network for Children, 661-631-5566, www.kcnc.org
- *Recipes for Community Success: A Guide for Improving the Condition of Children and Families in your Community*, available from KCNC
- Community Connections for Child Care, 661-861-5267, www.kern.org/cccc
- East Bay Bakersfield Community Coalition, 661-323-6155, www.ebcoalition.org

Thanks to the David and Lucile Packard Foundation for its support of this series.