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PARENTING

Helping Families Right Where They Live

By [MICHAEL WINERIP](#)

NEWARK

AT 67, Mattie Gordon is still raising children, and she is weary.

When Ms. Gordon was 16, her mother died and she was sent from Georgia to Newark to live with an aunt. Instead of going to 11th grade, she went to work in a laundry. She married young, had seven children in seven years, and by the time she was 29, she and her husband had split, for many reasons, she said, including his drug use. He died long ago.

She is blind in one eye, crippled in one leg, and has lived for the last 20 years in Bradley Court, a public housing project known as a haven for drug dealing and a hot spot for murder. Three of her sons are dead — two in infancy and one from AIDS. Her only daughter died from breast cancer at 36, leaving two children whom Ms. Gordon has cared for these last 10 years. “I had to,” she said, “the father’s in jail.”

It was harder being a parent the second time around, she said. “Oh, my God, so hard. I’m older. I was strict with my own children, but by my grandchildren, I was too tired.”

She has relied on public assistance for years, and any crisis meant a trip downtown to the welfare office. “You take a number and wait for them to call, sit there, no lunch, waste a whole day, then walking back up the hill at the end of the day. Oh God, what a mess.”

But that has changed for her in the last year, with the arrival of one of the state’s 46 new Family Success Centers here at the Bradley Court projects. The little center has three trained case workers just down the hall from Ms. Gordon’s apartment, and they use high-speed computer hookups to deliver the government and community services poor families are entitled to, but often don’t know how to track down.

The idea, which has the support of both Gov. [Jon S. Corzine](#) and Newark Mayor [Cory A. Booker](#), is to deliver poor families better support faster, so they stay intact and children are kept out of the state’s costly and often troubled foster care system.

Last week, Theresa Ellis, a case worker in the office, arranged a job interview for Ms. Gordon’s granddaughter Annyah, 18. The month before, she helped Ms. Gordon arrange physical therapy three times a week for her bad right leg. Eight months ago, Ms. Ellis persuaded one of Ms. Gordon’s middle-aged sons to go into drug rehab. She spoke to him on a Tuesday, Ms. Gordon said, “and next day he had a book bag over his shoulder and was going to a program — he’s still in rehab, working and clean eight months now.”

Newark, which has 11 of the 46 new centers, is a prime target for the program. One quarter of the 10,000 [New Jersey](#) children who have been removed from their homes by the state and placed in foster care live in Newark.

Last year, the state appropriated \$7 million to create new centers, plus convert about a dozen existing programs that were part of earlier, failed welfare reform efforts. The Robert Wood Johnson and Nicholson foundations provided an additional \$2 million.

“Our hope is the stronger we make these families in the community, the fewer child abuse and neglect cases we see,” said Darrell Armstrong, a director in the state’s Department of Children and Families. “We’re not dwelling on what got you here, but how we can get you out of here. And we’re not making you come to a welfare office. We’re coming to you, in your neighborhood.”

New Jersey modeled the program on a network of 33 centers that has operated for the last decade in Pittsburgh and surrounding Allegheny County, Pa.

Most workers at the centers are parents from the neighborhood, trained by Family Intervention Services, a nonprofit started 27 years ago to help keep children out of foster care. Jeanne Warnock, the director, said Ms. Ellis is the prototype of the case worker they’re looking for.

She’s 41, lives at the Bradley projects, and has her own hard history. She describes herself as a recovered drug addict and mother of 10 who at one point lost custody of her own children to foster care, but fought her problems and won the children back.

Few at Bradley Court own computers, and Ms. Ellis’s ability to use the NJHelps Web site to assist them right there in the projects in applying for work programs, [Medicaid](#), food stamps or home energy grants seems like a minor miracle. “They may not understand the process, may have reading troubles, and I help with the application,” she said. “They can come in here and for no charge use the fax, phone or copy machine.”

Social services representatives visit the Family Success office regularly: a state employment worker comes every Wednesday from 1 to 3; Fridays, from 12 to 2, there’s a food pantry; a food stamp van visits monthly.

Studies show that when drug addicts finally seek help, they need immediate services or may be lost. Ms. Ellis said she is able to get someone enrolled within 24 hours. “We have people going off to rehab every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning at 6,” she said.

The state director, Mr. Armstrong, acknowledges that to have a significant effect on the foster care caseload, many more centers would be needed. He would like 30 in Newark and surrounding Essex County. He believes the financing level, \$200,000 per center, is about a third of what it should be. “Two hundred thousand doesn’t meet the kind of need, but it’s a respectable start,” he said. Given the economy, he said he was just grateful that the legislature recently renewed the program through July 2009.

“This is the third child welfare reform I’ve been through,” said Ms. Warnock of Family Intervention. “A program gets started, there’s a change of administration, and you can never tell what happens when a new governor comes in.” Still, she said, “This has the best chance I’ve seen in 27 years to get it right.”

Ms. Gordon hopes so. She is getting help from Ms. Ellis on one final project. “You know what my dream is,” Ms. Gordon said. “To live alone. I’ve never lived alone in my life. I’ve always had people to take care of. I just want to live by myself once, even if it’s just for a week. I’d love to see what it feels like.”

Now that her grandchildren are 18 and 23, Ms. Gordon thinks it may be time. Ms. Ellis has found her a residential senior center, in the suburbs, about a half-hour away, but Ms. Gordon is nervous. “I may not be ready,” Ms. Gordon said. “I’m a decent person, I want a decent place, I don’t want just any senior center. I might be lonely. I won’t know nobody there.”

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