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## Building Family Empowerment: CSF Buxmont's Individual Service Plans

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In 2002, Community Service Foundation and Buxmont Academy (CSF Buxmont) began redefining the way its Individual Service Plans (ISPs) were handled at their eight alternative schools, 16 foster group homes and supervision and counseling programs for struggling youth, located throughout southeastern Pennsylvania.

The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) mandates that an ISP be developed for every youth referred to CSF or any similar program, upon entry. DPW regulations require that the most pressing issues for each youth be identified. These issues serve as the focus of a youth's Individual Service Plan for the first six months of his or her time in the program.

Until this point, ISPs were developed with the best of intentions by CSF staff for young people entering their program, but the young people and their family members were not involved in defining the concerns that would determine the direction of the youths' initial service plans.

Because there were strict time deadlines—with ISPs due within 30 days of the young person starting in the CSF program—having the staff develop plans was the most efficient and reliable way to meet the deadline. Besides, this was the way it had always been done by most agencies.

But the ISP procedure was transformed, with far-reaching implications for youth and staff alike.

The sea change began when Ted Wachtel, cofounder and then president of CSF Buxmont (now president of the



**Judi and Sean Mariner, a mother and son who have benefited from CSF Buxmont's ISP process**

PHOTO: ALYSSA SLACK

International Institute for Restorative Practices), made a suggestion to a group of CSF Buxmont staff members who were working on a project for a class.

The staff members' assignment was to create a project employing restorative practices (RP) in their workplace. Ted Wachtel posed them this challenge: to utilize the values of family group decision making (FGDM) and family group conferencing (FGC) in developing a new ISP process.

CSF Buxmont's staff had recently been introduced to FGDM. Wachtel suggested that combining FGDM's values with the ISP process might be a good way to implement family engagement and empowerment for CSF youths and their families. In the spirit of FGDM, the group devised a way to let families have a real, direct say in the development of their children's Individual Service Plans.

FGDM is a process that empowers people—in this case, CSF youths and their families—to be in charge of their own lives. Its basic precept is that families know themselves—their problems,

strengths and resources—better than professionals do. In FGDM, a facilitator sets up a conference to address an issue regarding child welfare, juvenile justice or school behavior, to be attended by family members and close friends. At the conference, the family group comes up with a plan to address the issues at hand. (For more information on FGDM, please see: <http://www.familypower.org>.)

One part of the FGDM process, in particular, was key to promoting family engagement and empowerment: "family alone time." At an FGDM conference, first, the professionals (social workers, counselors, probation officers or sometimes police officers) and the family discuss the concerns that brought the family to the conference. Then the professionals leave the room, and the family group is left alone to come up with a plan to address these concerns.

For the purpose of ISPs, CSF students and their families would be asked to fill out an Individual Service Plan themselves, without CSF staff present.

After experimenting with several prototypes, the group of CSF Buxmont staff members created a user-friendly approach for families. This is the process they came up with: "Preliminary Survey of Issues" forms are sent home with all newly enrolled CSF youth, and their families are encouraged to fill them out as a means of sharing their thoughts about their children's major issues. Families are also given a document entitled "Ways to Achieve" to help them identify specific objectives for their children. The latter pinpoints goal-setting

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areas concerning legal accountability, academics, vocational matters and communication, as well as personal growth and self-improvement concerns. These papers serve as a jumping-off point for family dialogue.

After each family has a chance to discuss their child's issues and objectives, they present them, at an ISP meeting, to CSF staff and the probation officer or social worker who referred the youth to CSF. The list of issues and specific objectives decided by the family then becomes the youth's Individual Service Plan. This meeting takes place, as required, within 30 days of the youth entering the program. Every six months the ISP is reviewed and is open to revision.

To the satisfaction of CSF staff, the new ISP approach has been of considerable value. It has provided them with direct knowledge of the youths' and families' most urgent concerns and the objectives the families feel are most important. The family-centered ISP model proved so helpful that it is now used with every youth entering a CSF program, no matter what entity has referred them, be it DPW, a school district or juvenile court.

Rev Rhodes, director of CSF's Residential and Supervision programs, is tremendously enthusiastic about this family involvement. "Until the new procedures were initiated, the ISP process was very much a counselor-driven, agency-driven *to* thing," he recalls. "We handed the youth the filled-out ISP at the initial ISP meeting. The counselors had identified the most important issues that they felt needed to be dealt with. We knew we needed to examine how this could become a family decision, more in line with the principles of FGDM. The process today makes the plotting of the course, the path to the goal clear."

CSF's ISP procedure, by directly involving youth and families, now abso-

lutely embodies the principles of restorative practices (RP): People are happier, more productive and more willing to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, instead of *to* them or *for* them. As a result:

- Child and parent feel more invested and empowered.
- Parents feel as though they are part of the solution, therefore more valued.
- Each family member, through this intimate involvement in the process, has become more committed to the youth's success in CSF programs.

Craig Adamson, executive director of CSF, summed up these positive effects: "The family gets to make the decisions. That kind of process of empowerment facilitates healing." Pam Thompson, assistant director of Day Treatment, noted, "We see the richness in the work being done. We can relate it back to the fact that the family has looked at the options, and they've recognized that 'Yes, we want to get better.'"

"The new procedure also helped make the ISP process more of a strength-based initiative," said Mary Jo Hebling, assistant director of CSF's Residential Program, and one of the original group that developed CSF's ISP process. "Families and students, who've been empowered and engaged in the initial phase of the ISP process, continue to be actively involved as the youth progresses through CSF. In meetings with CSF staff, families are asked to identify not only their children's problems, but their strong points, as well. This emphasis on strengths, not just concerns, helps the youth to grow and change."

Hebling sees family involvement in ISPs as only one indication of a far-reaching transformation in social interaction. As the social science of restorative practices spreads throughout the world, there is, contends Hebling, a movement

away from so-called "expert models." These *to* or *for* models are being replaced by a move toward restorative practices, including family group decision making.

The value of family engagement and involvement within CSF programs is reflected in the reactions of parents and students who have experienced the restorative *with* dynamic first-hand. Remarked one surprised parent, "Nobody ever asked *us* before!" One mother commented on the active role she and her daughter had in setting her daughter's goals at CSF: "We were all working as a team together. I was there to reinforce the counselor's plans and objectives, and they were there to reinforce me as well. I trusted them implicitly."

Another parent was amazed to discover how little she actually knew about what her son's aspirations were, something she might never have learned had they not filled out the ISP form together and taken time to talk about it.

A recent CSF graduate said that it wasn't until he entered the school that he became serious about what he was going to do with his life. The goal-setting and continual validation from his counselor gave him the incentive to finish school, something he had formerly given up all hope of doing.

Elevating the ISP process to a more empowering level marked an important milestone for CSF Buxmont. It also embodied a major paradigm shift. Instead of professionals doing things *for* students and their families, the process now involves family members actively participating in their child's future. The counselors benefited as well: They found themselves with allies—the youths and family members whose insights and experiences not only made the professionals' jobs easier, but proved invaluable in plotting the best path for students entering the programs at CSF Buxmont. ☉