

Increasing the intensity of our work with multi-problem families: Beyond's proposed practice

26th February 2010
Beyond Social Services

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Executive summary

This paper details why and how Beyond Social Services intends to intensify our existing work in family strengthening. Our experience in partnering low-income communities reveals that in order to work proactively in preventing crises from recurring or happening at first instance, we need to work intensively during the phases in between crises. We propose to put in place:

- **a more purposive and integrated approach** in working with families struggling with complex, multiple problems. In particular, three core areas have been identified as constituting the essence of building family resilience. These include:
 - a) family economic stabilisation;
 - b) strengthening and expanding on supportive family bonds;
 - c) connecting families with formal and informal community resources that also create opportunities for families to contribute meaningfully to their communities and in the long-run, will enable them to reject a lifestyle of welfare dependency.

- **an experiential live-in programme (or the Family Learning Centre)** for families for whom traditional methods of intensive case-management (e.g. home-visits and counselling) are not effective and/or seen to be insufficient.

The paper then proceeds to map how we intend to mobilise and maximise on existing services both within Beyond and those offered by our community partners in order create a one-stop programme for families known to us, and those we intend to partner in the future.

1. Understanding the universe of low-income families in Singapore

In a recent report presented by the Inter-ministerial Committee on Dysfunctional Families, it was estimated that Singapore may have as many as 7,500 low-income families struggling with complex and multiple problems.¹ Furthermore, it went on to state that given prevailing socio-demographic trends such as the continuing increase in divorce rates and single-parent households, this number is likely to increase (pp.5).

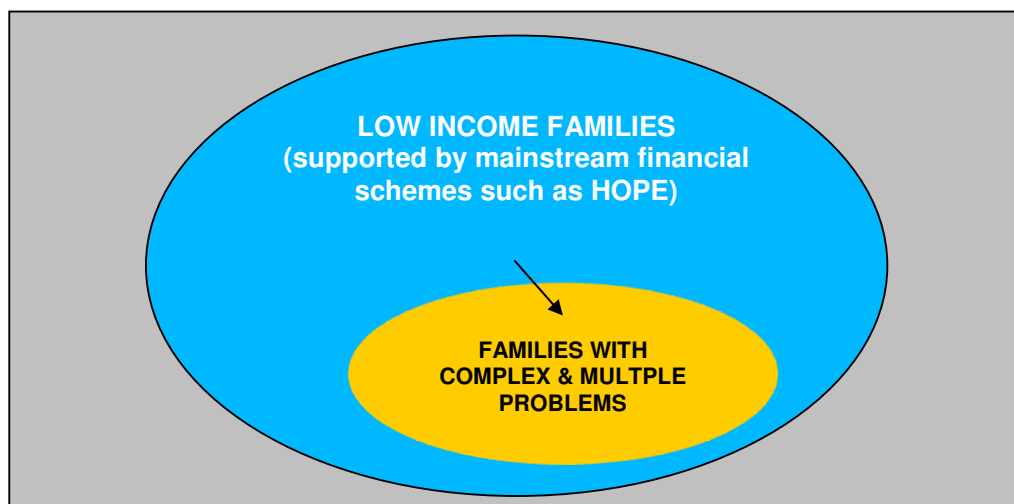
The Singaporean state has therefore placed greater emphasis on strengthening existing programmes and services that were able to respond to the needs of such families in a more integrated and holistic manner. More recently, there has been increasing public interest in how intergenerational problems such as early school leaving, substance-dependence or chronic poverty, particularly among low-income Malay families, may be addressed through proactive community-led effort.²

At Beyond Social Services, the families we typically partner:

- share a **long history of poverty** and have an average household income of S\$1,500 or less;
- are seen to face **complex and multiple challenges** that often span across generations, be it a family history of incarceration, substance-dependence, prolonged unemployment or ill-health among others;
- have **little community support**, in that they are seen to be among the most 'neediest' yet, for a variety of reasons, are not known to helping agencies and other forms of community support

It is important to note that the families we serve constitute a subsection of the 7,500 'dysfunctional' families that were referred to by the IMC (see subset shaded in Figure 1). The families identified are those who suffer from chronic poverty, and are more often than not, socio-economically marginalized. For diverse reasons, they may not be plugged into the mainstream array of state-driven and voluntary welfare services. Many of them live in HDB rental flats and are seen to be struggling to support as many as 5—8 children.

Figure 1: The subset of multi-problem families we serve



¹ Inter-Ministerial Committee on Dysfunctional Families (2008) *Report of the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Dysfunctional Families*, MCYS: Singapore

² See Goh, S. 'All is not well with the family in Singapore, Straits Times.' January 6, 2010

2. The need to intensify our efforts in family strengthening

As a child-serving organisation that works with Singapore's poorest communities, we have been maximising our capacity and capability to support children and young people move beyond their problems, and ultimately, find themselves stable enough to refuse a lifestyle of welfare dependency.

Over the course of this journey, we have partnered caregivers and extended families in ensuring that young people grow up in supportive and nurturing environments that attend to their overall wellbeing, whilst keeping them on track and out of trouble with the authorities. As an anti-delinquency agency, much of our work has revolved around *de-escalating crises when they hit*, be it in the context of a youth caught for shoplifting, an unplanned teen pregnancy, or a child abuse allegation, for example.

Family strengthening will **concentrate its efforts at preventing crises from happening, and if it does, from reoccurring**. Hence, we have identified the pre-crisis and "peace time" in-between crisis to be the phases during which meaningful family strengthening work can be done. It is during these relatively calm periods that the families will have the mental, emotional and physical space to consider specific areas or issues they want to work on. We believe that improved communication, stronger family relationships & links to community built during these periods will help the families ride the next wave of crisis that may occur.

Strengthening family functioning strikes at the core of our preventive work: low-income families who are yet strong and resilient imply that caregivers are less stressed and are plugged into forms of community support, particularly within their own extended social networks. It indicates that parents have enough money in their pockets to meet the material needs and aspirations of their families, and that those families are cohesive enough to cope with challenges they are likely to face in the future.

Q What is family strengthening?

Family strengthening is a deliberate and sustained effort to ensure that parents have the necessary opportunities, relationships, networks and supports to raise their children successfully, which includes involving parents as decision-makers and how communities meet family needs.³

Family strengthening is *not* new to our work. As far back as the early 90s, we realized that front-line generic social work interventions were insufficient or incomplete to offer forms of integrated family support. In 1995, with the support of the National Council of Social Services (NCSS) we piloted the Family Learning Centre (FLC), to provide live-in therapeutic interventions for low-income, complex-multi-problem families. More recently, the reintegration of 31 young residents at our Kids United Home with their families of origin, reflect the kind of intensive family strengthening and preservation work we have been doing over the years, and have been relatively successful at.

However, recent experience has shown us that we need to **intensify our efforts at purposive family strengthening** because of:

1) the social profile of families we serve

A sizeable number of families we serve struggle with chronic poverty-related issues. At present, our Healthy Start Programme alone has 344 families. Of these, 40 families have at least one primary caregiver who is incarcerated, 38 families who report a history of substance-dependence,

³ This working definition has been adapted from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, USA. For more information on family strengthening, please refer to Annex B.

whilst almost 40% comprise single-parents who cope daily with the challenges of child raising, unemployment, or often, having to maintain multiple shift-jobs in a frequently volatile labour market. In sum, these are families that **may well slide further into crisis situations** without the support of formal and informal community resources that would enable them to stabilize their situation, and move them beyond their immediate problems.

2) **the current efforts we have in place are not enough to prevent family crises from recurring**

In the past, home-visits have constituted the key component of our family strengthening initiatives. We find home-visits to have limited success particularly with respect to building a more open and transparent partnership with caregivers. The reason for this is because clients often see home-visits as yet another means of monitoring their lives as opposed to playing its part as a therapeutic tool. We need to **explore more creative means of truly journeying with families** if we are committed to supporting caregivers in addressing the underlying cause/s of their problems.

3) **the need to attend to family issues in an integrated and holistic manner**

Often, addressing a particular issue (for example, the risk of early school drop-out) in an isolated way is unhelpful if we are to address the heart of a problem. Thus, **we need to work with whole families to understand a gamut of interrelated issues from different perspectives**. To create solutions that are to be sustainable in the long run, we need the mandate and cooperation of all family members who must play their part in the problem-solving process.

4) **the need to engage and partner caregivers in more effective and meaningful ways**

We partner the kind of families who are often unable to verbally articulate their issues. For such families, mainstream forms of intervention comprising 'talking cures' such as counseling or home-visits are not very effective. Intensive family strengthening work **creates opportunities for problem-solving and decision-making through experiential learning** and other methods and techniques that are useful to the people we serve.

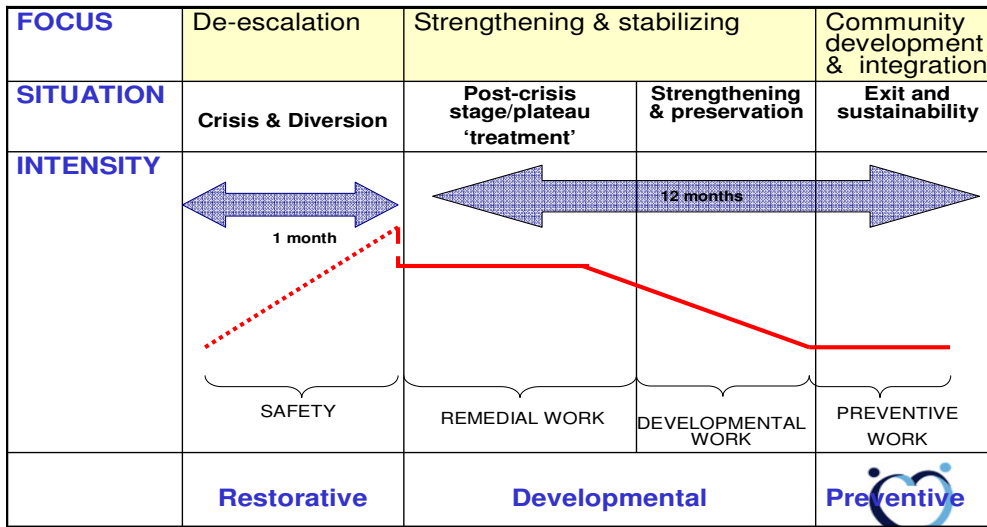
5) **our focus on prevention and reintegration**

At its core, family strengthening is about preventing crises rather than de-escalating them. However, family strengthening is also needed in the context of post-care work, where young people who age out from care facilities or are discharged from institutions, need to return to supportive, well-functioning families. Where family bonds are weak, young people naturally tend to feel marginalized and unsupported, and at worst, run the risk of turning to a lifestyle of delinquency. Our work with the Reformatory Training Centre (RTC) and more recently, a number of children's residential homes, has rendered **more urgency to intensify our capacity in integrating young people back with their communities through family unification**. We see prevention and reintegration to be inseparably interlinked.

6) **the fact that family stability is the closest step towards an exit from welfare dependency**

In instances we have worked with families for years, we have noticed patterns of recurring crisis, followed by periods of stability. It is the short-lived nature of this stability that concerns us. Family strengthening work is best done during the period of stability, where families are able to work together to resolve their issues. In the past, we may not have been fully aware of these windows of opportunity, or times during which we could have put in more intensive, family-focused interventions. The graph shown overleaf (Figure 2), depicts the 12 month phase in which we intend to intensively work with families, from the post-crisis/'treatment' phase to their subsequent exit from welfare dependency.

Figure 2: Family strengthening intervention phases



Q “Why start intensive family strengthening at this point in time?”

It would be right to say that that Beyond has been doing family strengthening and preservation work since its inception. However, we have found that we need to deepen/intensify our work in family strengthening, particularly in instances where crises may reoccur. The family strengthening initiatives we have had in the past have not been enough for certain families. In looking back, the successful cases we have exited from welfare dependency are those families we have been able to intensively partner in changing their situation around. We want to share this opportunity with many more families that are within our reach. The family strengthening initiatives we currently have in place can only take us so far.

Furthermore, in terms of resources/capacity, it has been difficult to augment our family strengthening programme with a much needed *live-in facility* due to the limited physical space we’ve had in the past.

3. Existing services in the community

At present, low-income families in Singapore who require assistance (at grassroots level), have the following channels of formal community support they can turn to:

- Community Development Councils (CDCs) that administer social assistance schemes such as ComCare, pre-school subsidies, utilities and conservancy grants among others;
- Four ethnic-based welfare partnerships (for example, MENDAKI and SINDA) that run a range of programmes and funding schemes
- Family Service Centres (FSCs) that provide casework and counselling services;
- Other community-based Voluntary Welfare Organisations that run a host of diverse intervention programmes targeted at addressing specific social needs – be it inhalant substance-dependency, family violence or the reintegration of ex-prisoners into community.

However, the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Dysfunctional Families assert that, “**more could be done to cater to the needs of dysfunctional families as a unit**” in order to prevent the increasing number of families that are falling between the cracks (IMC 2008:10).





In order to strengthen existing programmes and services, the Committee recommended four strategies that were meant to address the needs of such families in an *integrated* fashion.

These core areas of work comprise the:

- 1) **identification** of at-risk families;
- 2) **prevention** of families from deteriorating further;
- 3) **intervention** to strengthen the resilience of dysfunctional families;
- 4) **resourcing** *the community* to better help at-risk and dysfunctional families.

We support the state in recognising the need to refrain from duplicating existing services. Therefore, we see our efforts at intensifying family strengthening work as complementing current resources and efforts put in place by the state to service troubled families. Moreover, our initiatives have been structured in a way that falls well in-line with the four strategies mapped by the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Dysfunctional Families (see table 3 below).

Figure 3: How Beyond complements the state-led initiatives in family strengthening

Core Strategies identified by state	IMC proposed plans to be put in place ⁴ (MACRO-LEVEL)	Our complementing family strengthening services (AT GRASSROOTS)
<p>1. <u>Identifying</u> at-risk families</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Equipping key ‘touchpoint’ organisations (e.g. primary schools) to identify potential families ➤ Creation of common database on families ➤ Developing national framework to track outcomes of at-risk groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Partnering schools and hospitals ➤ Outreach in low-income HDB housing estates ➤ Youth outreach on the streets ➤ Working closely with children’s homes, juvenile institutions, and other VWOs
<p>2. <u>Preventing</u> at-risk families from deteriorating further</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Public awareness raising through targeted media messaging and family life programmes ➤ Making the HOPE Scheme eligible for divorced mothers ➤ the school STEP-UP programme to provide stronger support for at-risk children ➤ Increased education bursaries ➤ Increased family planning incentives ➤ Strengthening mentoring programmes for at-risk youth ➤ Developing programmes for youths at risk of dropping out of ITEs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Supporting families in identifying, expanding and strengthening their natural support networks within their immediate communities ➤ Facilitating families in coming together to put in place care plans that keep children safe, cared for and out of trouble with the authorities ➤ Facilitating families in developing and problem-solving skills through experiential learning ➤ Bridging families with forms of community support they require ➤ Reintegrating / reunifying: young people who leave residential care with supportive family members who in turn minimise their chances of reoffending ➤ children and young people who age-out of care facilities into nurturing and loving family environments that keep them safe, loved and well cared for

⁴ These recommendations have been summarized from the *Report of the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Dysfunctional Families*, MCYS: Singapore (2008)

<p>3. <u>Intervening to strengthen family resiliency</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Strengthening psychological and casework support to children in residential homes, minor couples and serially reconstituted families ➤ Providing more training and employment opportunities for youth at-risk through Vocational Rehab. Unit ➤ Developing temporary housing solutions to those evicted from HDB flats ➤ Piloting the Intensive Case-management for 150 families, comprising of regular home-visits and family therapy ➤ Building capacity within residential homes to keep children-in-care connected with their natural community networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Facilitating caregivers' ability to put money in their pockets ➤ Repairing/healing relationships between caregivers and between children and caregivers ➤ Reunifying families in which one or more of its members have been in institutional care or been incarcerated ➤ Facilitating families in expanding and strengthening their social networks ➤ Bridging families with existing forms of community support (e.g. extended family networks, informal self help groups, financial assistance etc.) ➤ Creating opportunities for live-in experiential learning where families can work together to problem solve
<p>4. <u>Resourcing the community to better help at-risk families</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increasing staff capacity and capabilities of FSCs ➤ Expanding the number of FSCs ➤ Implementing accreditation scheme for social workers ➤ Increasing the pool of social workers from minority ethnic groups ➤ Encouraging greater specialisation within fields of social work through tertiary curriculum revision ➤ Increasing the number of trained social workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Enabling and strengthening the formation of self-help between beneficiary families within the community ➤ Assisting schools expand their capacity to resolve issues around child protection and juvenile delinquency through our programmes, resource sharing and training ➤ Supporting residential care facilities in uniting children with their families of origin / extended family groups as they prepare for discharge ➤ Nurturing a pool of volunteers to journey with families (ultimately we are working towards a ratio of one volunteer per family)

4. What will this work look like?

From a social work perspective, family strengthening is about attending to the needs of families with recurrent crises, through an integrated approach.

Our family strengthening programme adopts a three-pronged approach to building and strengthening family resiliency and enhancing overall wellbeing.

This work aims to facilitate:

- 1) caregivers' **ability to put money in their pockets** rather than attending to them as recipients or beneficiaries of welfare (i.e. achieving family economic stability), by:
 - first and foremost, supporting them identify abilities that are marketable;
 - creating opportunities which enable them to tap into community resources.
- 2) families to nurture **strong, supportive family bonds** (i.e. achieving positive family functioning)
- 3) families to **develop and strengthen a sense of belonging or connectedness to the community**

This intensive family strengthening framework will **draw on existing resources (in terms of both capacity and expertise) within Beyond Social Services.**

The diagram below illustrates how the current scope of the work we do, pans out against the three core areas of family strengthening.

Figure 4: Mapping our existing scope of work towards family strengthening

Family Economic Stability/Success	Strong Family Support Systems	Developing and strengthening a sense of community belonging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Families and work: plugging families into training/skills development projects, linking with employers ✓ Financial literacy ✓ Homeownership assistance ✓ Counseling ✓ Intensive case-management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Family violence prevention ✓ Safety and well being of children ✓ Connecting families with schools and neighborhoods ✓ Identifying, expanding and strengthening social networks ✓ Supporting reintegration of ex-offender caregivers ✓ Reunification of young people in institutional care ✓ Mentoring ✓ Experiential learning ✓ Supporting teen mothers ✓ School readiness and academic support ✓ Counseling ✓ Intensive case-management ✓ Family Conferencing and Family Group Conferencing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Outreach ✓ Supporting informal self-help groups in community ✓ Community mapping ✓ Engaging volunteers in family strengthening ✓ Community violence prevention ✓ Resourcing the community/capacity building within the sector through specific family strengthening techniques (i.e. Family Group Conferencing)

In our first year, we intend to work with a minimum of **30 families**.

Whilst the programme has been tailored to address the needs of families among the poorest in Singapore, we do not intend on restricting ourselves to serving just families from the lowest socio-economic strata. The families we partner will typically be **those who are deeply troubled by family relationships, have parent-child conflict and/or seen to struggle with children in pain**.

Families come in different forms and are functional in their own ways. Broken families do not necessarily make broken homes. 40 years of experience has taught us that no one we've served, regardless of how bleak their situation may seem at first, was ever beyond hope.

The families most suitable for intensive family strengthening work include:

1. families who seen to be isolated from natural support networks;
2. parents in conflict with children;
3. children who display various 'pain-based' and/or developmentally-delayed behaviours;
4. parents in conflict with each other but are committed on remaining together;
5. families who are to reunite with children or another member of the family who has been formerly institutionalised / incarcerated.

Referrals will come in from our own services including external means such partner schools, the police, the Reformative Training Centre (RTC), and other welfare agencies we have been working closely with.

Family Strengthening through The Family Learning Centre (FLC)

The Family Learning Centre is **an intensive experiential learning and temporary live-in programme** that provides guidance, resources and a healing space for families experiencing multiple problems to work through their difficulties. It seeks to address the **relational / family functioning aspects of the work**, and is where much of the intensive family strengthening activity will take place.

The FLC aims to:

- 1) help families experiencing multiple problems regain a sense of **control and competency** over their lives ;
- 2) enhance **family functioning** so they can be nurturing environments for its members, especially for the young people in their care;
- 3) facilitate families in **strengthening ties with their natural and community support networks** so that they feel they are less isolated, less under-resourced and more resilient when dealing with life's challenges.

Q "Why is the Family Learning Centre essential to our family strengthening work? "

In the past, we have been case-managing families. However, this framework of case-management slants more towards monitoring behaviours, and it is not at all conducive to problem-solving, healing and repairing relationships. Frequent home-visits we have found, have limited success in respectfully helping families move beyond their problems by translating their *ideas and words into action*. Counselling is often a good 'talking cure' but these are families who find it difficult, or would otherwise, be disinclined to articulate their problems verbally. Therefore, in order to support families in finding solutions that are sustainable in the long run, it is paramount that we work in real partnership with these people by:

- * building on their existing resources by supporting families identify what they do best;
- * healing and strengthening relationships, and;
- * encouraging them to attempt solutions that they are able to translate into *immediate practice*.

The FLC is therefore about finding creative interventions that are meaningful and relevant

Over the course of two or more days, our community workers will journey with families. Where families are able to come and spend time together, community workers have the opportunity to observe dynamics within the family. The intensive family strengthening programmes at the FLC:

- may comprise a **temporary live-in element** over a weekend or a few days; ‘
- will be **activity-based to facilitate experiential learning** through *doing*;
- aims at **creating a space for healing and inter-personal reflection**;
- should **allow issues to emerge** so they can be addressed.

Typically, the FLC will not run according to a standard and rigid programme but instead, will tailor its daily activities to suit the particular needs and aspirations of each family. Whilst the daily programme for each family may differ, what remains constant is the hospitality and undivided attention that we are able to provide in a programme such as this, with a possibility for a temporary live-in component.

Each intensive family strengthening session will be progressive, and build on the previous, and will run according to an individual development plan put together collaboratively between family members and community workers, to address a range of issues families themselves have identified and put together.

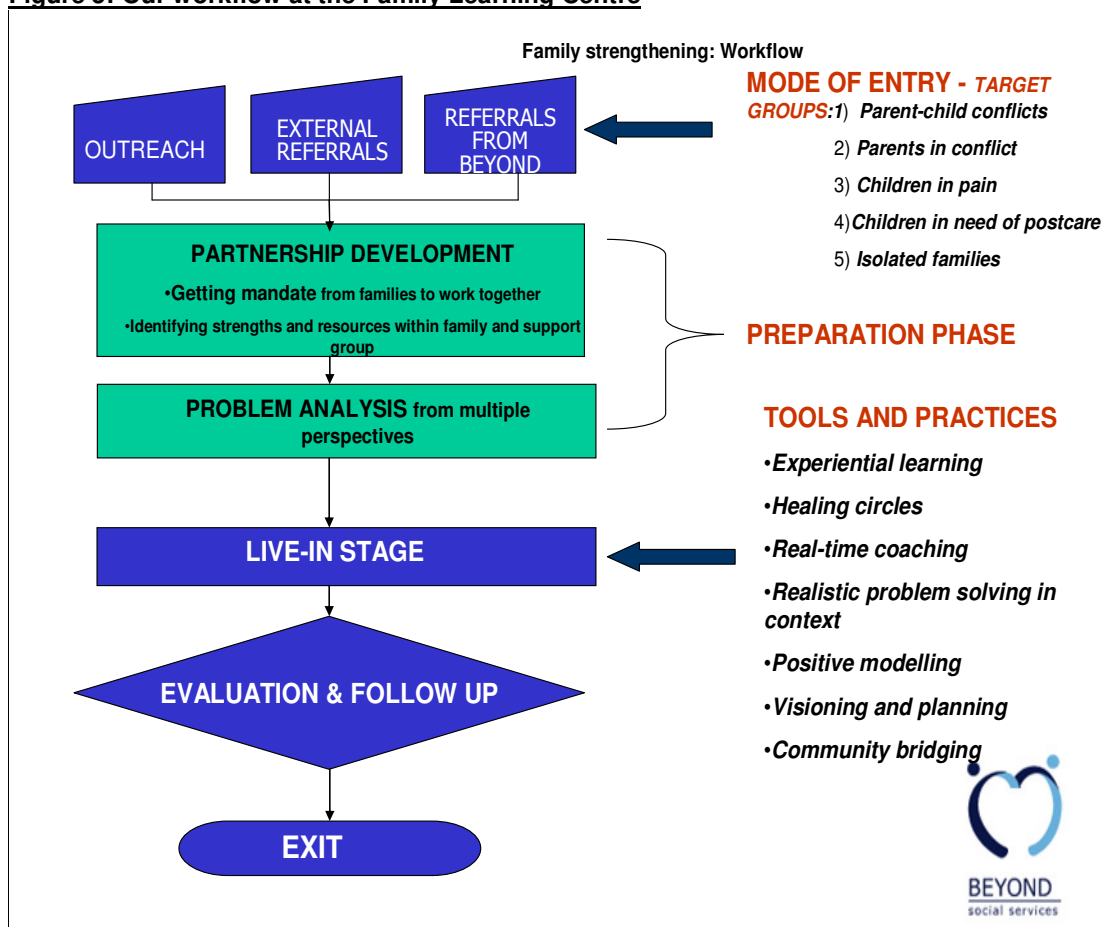
The experiential learning will be activity-based, and community workers, drawing from the support of more experienced staff, **will help families create scenarios/contexts that are purposeful but not incidental**. Such activities need to be as close as possible to families’ everyday lived experience, such as cooking a meal together, watching TV, or taking the kids out to the park.

Q “Would it not be more beneficial to facilitate experiential learning within families’ homes?”

Activity-based learning within the home is beneficial only to a certain point. To allow for healing, we need to create opportunities for deep reflection. Running programmes in a home environment is not conducive because families have little opportunity to break away from the treadmill of their daily routine. Space away from home is considered ‘time-out.’ The temporary live-in component of the FLC is considered a working retreat

In sum, our intensive family strengthening programme will be seen as a journey with each and every family serviced by the FLC. Their exit from the welfare system marks their final destination. The journey or intended workflow/process at the FLC is mapped below (refer to Figure 5).

Figure 5: Our workflow at the Family Learning Centre



The preparation phase of this work is arguably, the most crucial and is often the hardest part of this work. It is where we work towards **creating a mandate with families** to work with them. Intensive family strengthening activity allows us to take this work deeper by engaging caregivers in ways they find most useful.

The second part of the preparation phase looks at **arriving at a problem definition that is shared by the family**. It is an intensive process that may take at least a day if not a few, where families are able to take time out and reflect on what they see to be the underlying issues of their problems, and sharing on what they want to see happening in their lives.

The next section proceeds to detail how we will be evaluating the success of the intensive family strengthening programme.

5. Evaluating our success

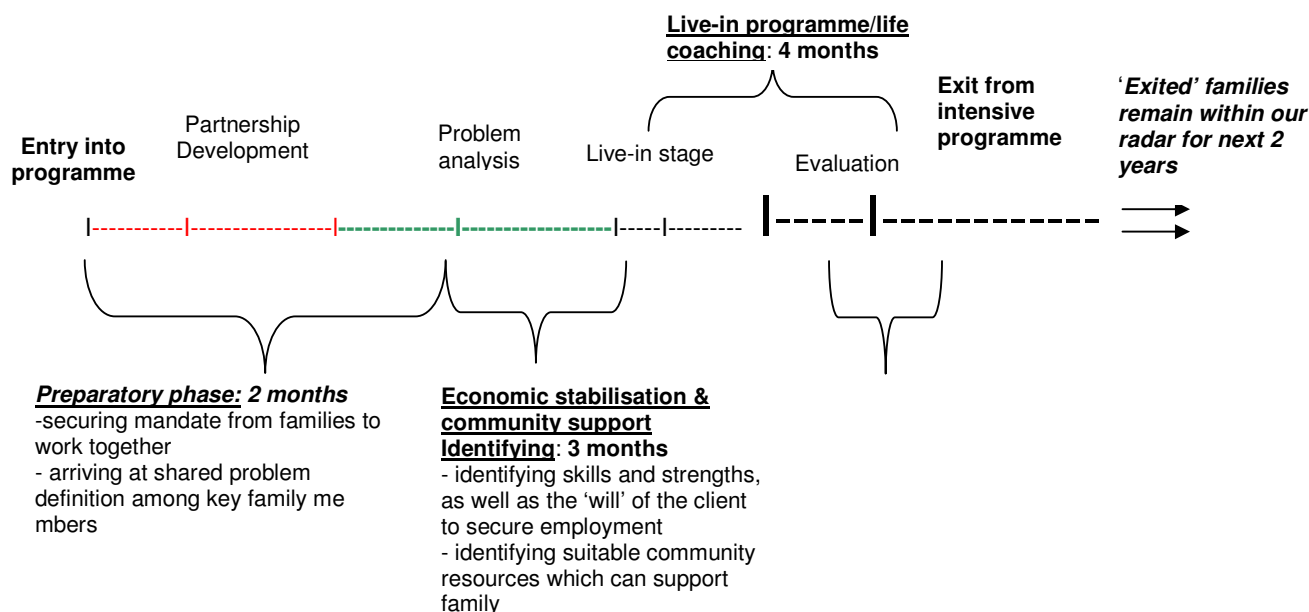
We intend to evaluate the effectiveness of our intensive family strengthening programme against the three core components that constitute this work, including the extent to which the issues identified by families were resolved during the partnership process.

The four key areas of our evaluation comprise the extent to which we were able to facilitate:

- 1) caregivers' ability to put money in their pockets;
- 2) the creation of strong family bonds through healing relationships, family reunification and strengthening;
- 3) a sense of belonging to the community, evidenced by peoples' subsequent involvement in self-help groups and other forms of voluntary support;
- 4) family ability to resolve issues that were identified at the onset of the programme

The intensive family strengthening programme will entail a **minimum of 12 months** per family. We expect to exit families from our family strengthening work in lesser time. Following the intensive 12 months, we have given a maximum period of 2 years as the lead follow-up phase. The intervention phases and their respective timeline, until the point of follow up from the programme are illustrated below :

Figure 6: The 12 month time-frame for family strengthening



In evaluating the effectiveness of our intensive family strengthening initiatives, we intend to measure the **overall resiliency of families over time**. By resiliency we mean families' ability to:

- a) come together and problem-solve in the face of a future crisis;
- b) adapt and cope with changing life circumstances;
- c) remain cohesive during challenging times.

In sum, much has been said and written about profiling dysfunctional families.

So what would strong and resilient families look like?

For us, a 'functioning' family group is seen where/when

- ✓ there is a moral commitment on the part of parents/caregivers in ensuring that their children grow up in a loving and nurturing environment;
- ✓ caregivers derive sufficient support from extended family group;
- ✓ the fact that family groups find themselves to be financially stable;
- ✓ caregivers are able to access information and other forms of informal and/or formal community support.

The milestones of the Family Learning Centre are as outlined in the next table which have been divided into three distinct yet inter-related phases of the pilot programme. Each phase represents 12 months

Figure 7: Key Milestones

KEY MILESTONES			
<p>1) FAMILY ECONOMIC STABILITY</p> <p>a) Caregivers are able to identify and/or expand skills that are marketable</p> <p>b) Key breadwinners are able to retain their jobs at least for 3—6 months</p> <p>c) Household income remains stable at least a year after intervention</p> <p>d) Caregivers are able to find other sources of income to supplement their household earnings.</p>	<p>2) STRONG FAMILY SUPPORT</p> <p>a) No reported incidence of family violence</p> <p>b) Families reveal better communication between all members</p> <p>c) Parents express ability to engage their children regarding behavioural issues and other matters affecting their children’s overall wellbeing</p> <p>d) Young people reveal and demonstrate greater sense of connectedness towards family</p> <p>e) Young people are successfully reunified with supportive families of origin/ extended families, where appropriate, after they leave residential care</p>	<p>3) STRENGTHENED COMMUNITY BELONGING</p> <p>a) During the programme, families are able to strengthen and expand their support networks</p> <p>b) Families are able to tap into formal and informal community resources and public services for which they are entitled.</p> <p>c) Families members are able to contribute to community through informal self-help channels (tracking six months after programme)</p> <p>d) Young people reveal and demonstrate greater sense of connectedness towards immediate community</p>	<p>4) RESOLVE SELF-IDENTIFIED ISSUES IN FUTURE</p> <p>a) Families demonstrate ability to cooperate and cope/adapt during challenges they face in the future (one-two years after programme)</p> <p>b) Families are able to come together and problem-solve</p>
OUTCOMES			
<p>By the 3rd year, caregivers are able to reach a level of economic self-sufficiency which ensures that basic material needs of each family member are adequately met</p> <p>All young people employed are given an opportunity to contribute to the family household income in whichever way they see fit</p>	<p>Families are able to attend to / resolve conflicts within the immediate family</p> <p>Families are resilient enough to prevent the recurrence of crises that would adversely affect the overall wellbeing of their children</p>	<p>All formerly isolated families who go through the programme will be plugged into the community support/ resources they need</p> <p>Families are able to ‘give back’ by our other beneficiaries at Beyond or through other forms of informal community self-help⁵</p>	<p>Families are seen to be able to remain cohesive and able to cope / adapt during challenges they encounter in the future⁶</p>

⁵ We intend to assess family members’ willingness to help – in different ways within their respective capacities, for example, by helping in the organizing of festive celebrations, cooking at community events, through voluntary neighborhood self-help groups, for example.

⁶ We intend to assess family resiliency through, for example, adaptability over family life stages, caregivers’ ability to problem-solve and cope, etc rather than specific incidents. Resiliency here will measure far-reaching outcomes of the programme based on the three components.

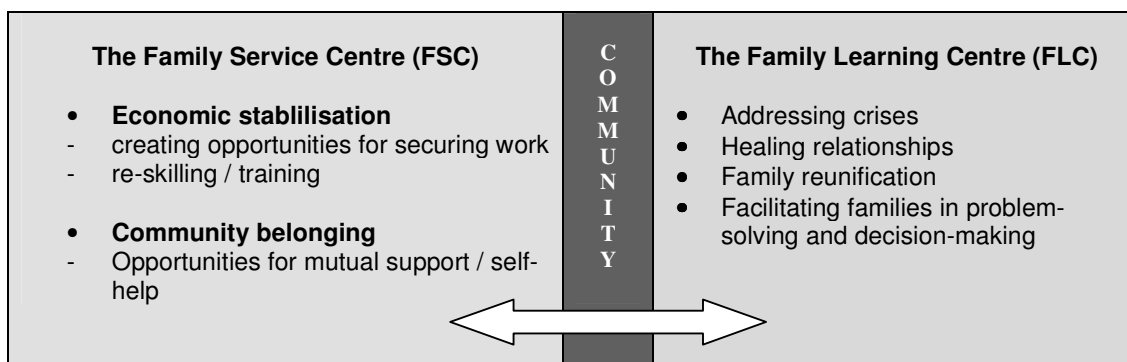
6. The resources we need to make this work effective

Three resources are integral to the success of the proposed family strengthening:

- ✓ **Staff** who are familiar with the work and have had considerable experience in working closely in real partnership with caregivers and other family members;
- ✓ The **appropriate space** to run programmes under the Family Learning Centre (FLC)
- ✓ A **strong Family Service Centre (FSC)** that is able to do the economic stabilization and community bridging components of the programme

The Family Service Centre and the Family Learning Centre will be working in close partnership, as the three key components of the programme will be spanning across the scope of their everyday work (see diagram below).

Figure 8: The tools required for building family resiliency



Staff

Existing staff who have worked with families of this nature and are able to support the caseworkers in their plans.

Space

We need a space that is able to accommodate 4 - 6 families at any given point in time. As the FLC will serve as a retreat space for healing and experiential learning and problem-solving, we need premises that are big enough to accommodate different family groups.

The existing premises at Sembawang that once housed the Kids United Home is ideal, as:

- ✓ The building **allows us to house as many as 8 families concurrently**
- ✓ It is essential that families who are temporarily “living in” work together in supporting each other. Mutual support goes beyond the benefits of one-to-one therapy, and this space **makes it favourable in building such partnerships which are considered to be part-and-parcel of the programme;**
- ✓ The **FLC is an experiential learning programme** and will be successful, in part, only if it maintains the dignity of the family. One way of ensuring this is to allow families to plan their own routines. The **land extent** at Sembawang is more than advantageous to conduct the kind of experiential learning programmes we’ve intended;
- ✓ The location at Sembawang gives us **the opportunity to draw on diverse community resources** that are close at hand such as Focus Adventure, the nearby park facilities and the beach, for example.

- ✓ With the existing arrangement at Sembawang, we are able to **draw on a ready pool of staff talent** as our Restorative Care, Juvenile Justice and Safekids teams will be occupying the same premises;

Funds

The cost for running the Family Learning Centre is estimated to be about \$450K for the first year of operation, with incremental increases in subsequent years based on number of families served.

This includes a fixed cost of \$390K with a staff strength of 4 full-time staff at the current Sembawang premises, and a variable cost of about \$60K for programme and operating expenditure.

Building and strengthening community partnerships

Our vision is that by 2025, every child and youth in Singapore, despite a disadvantaged background has the opportunity to refuse a lifestyle of delinquency and welfare dependency. If we are to translate this vision into reality, we cannot do this work alone without the support of community partners. Inevitably then, the success and sustainability of such a programme like intensive family strengthening should be proportionate to the degree of support and recognition give by other stakeholders within the community. Therefore, it makes working in real partnership with community stakeholders a necessity.

Family strengthening is resource-intensive work, and this is evidenced by the increasing number of referral sources we have been seeing in the past. Within Singapore's professional helping sector, there is visible demand for a service which is able to attend to the needs of more complex cases – a service which requires initiatives that go beyond mainstream case-management.

In the long term, we see ourselves as a community-based resource that brings together other resources and supports the social service sector to put in place more initiatives that lend families the necessary time, space and resources to **harness their own strengths and further build on the capabilities and capacities within their own family groups and immediate communities.**

We find that the most sustainable solutions are found in efforts at building family resiliency from inside-out, and in strengthening community resources from bottom up. In working with troubled families, our family strengthening initiative should also be seen as a means that allows us to share our resources as a way of learning together with others and enabling the capacity of the sector as a whole, in the long run.

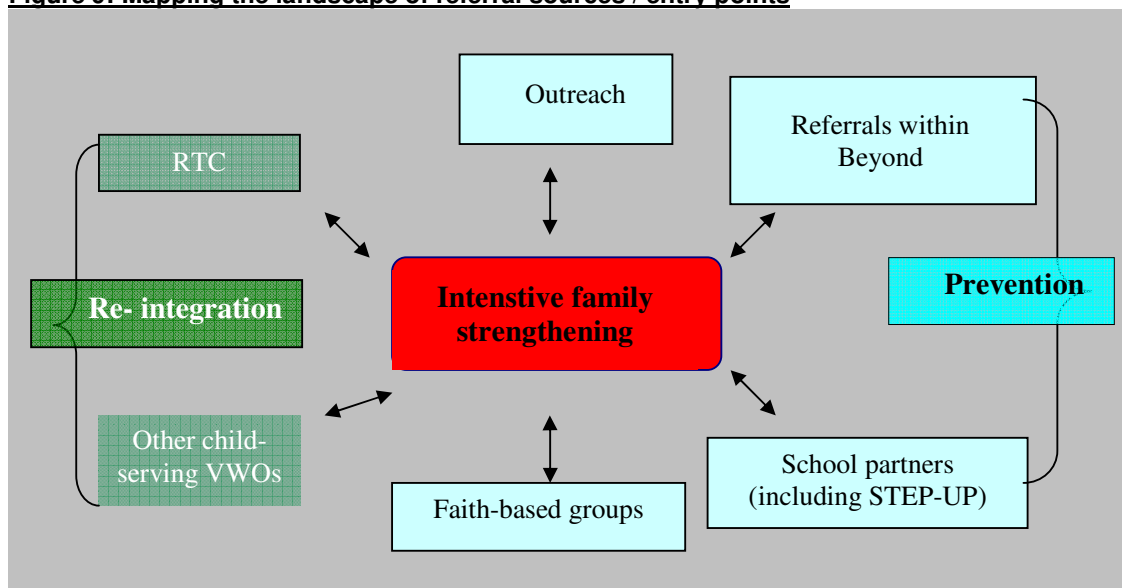
Community partnership in practice

Over the years, in working collaboratively with stakeholders and in building alliances across sectors (e.g. the BABES Network and Good Company), we have observed the need to pool our resources in intensive family strengthening as the **result of the growing complexity in issues we have been seeing**. It has made it necessary that we work in a cross-disciplinary fashion.

Today, a number of VWOs we have been working with have come forward to share their resources in supporting families to resolve issues in a more integrated manner. A recent example would be our partnership with WE CARE Community Services, a VWO that supports individuals break/manage addictions through community-based programmes.

Therefore, we see the Family Learning Centre as a space that accommodates multiple disciplines and skills which families have ready access to. This is made possible given the FLC's **ability to pull together different forms of expertise under one roof** (see diagram overleaf).

Figure 9: Mapping the landscape of referral sources / entry points



7. Moving forward

The perspective that a significant number of ‘dysfunctional’ families are disinclined to seek out formal services, and/or seen to react poorly to such initiatives intended to help them cope better with their lives, is a relatively common belief among helping professionals both in Singapore and elsewhere. We have observed that whilst mainstream social work tools such as counselling, family therapy and other common techniques in case-management may seem effective ways of working with a majority of families needing more straightforward assistance, families who are seen to be coping with multiple issues surrounding chronic poverty, need more intensive strengthening-based initiatives.

First and foremost, these families may not be known to social services and need to be identified early. Regrettably, they are often discovered at the point when/after crises hit.

As a community-based organisation with outreach capacity and capability, and given the expertise we have been building over the years in working with multiple-problem families, intensive family strengthening is one of the most effective and meaningful ways in which we can contribute to Singapore’s social service sector and complement future state plans to bolster the resiliency of over-stressed and resource-strained families.

The biggest challenge we foresee rests in securing the mandate of families to work with us. Real partnership building in community-based work is about working with the will and aspirations of ‘beneficiaries’ – and in supporting them arrive at the point where they are no longer dependents of the formal welfare system.

Annex A: Questions and Answers at a Glance

1. *What is family strengthening?*

Family strengthening is a deliberate and sustained effort to ensure that parents have the necessary opportunities, relationships, networks and supports to raise their children successfully which includes involving parents as decision-makers and how communities meet family needs

2. *Is there a real need for intensive family strengthening?*

Yes. It is right to say that Beyond Social Services been doing family strengthening and preservation work since its inception. However, we have found that we need to deepen/intensify our work in family strengthening, particularly in instances where crises may recur. The family strengthening initiatives we have had in a past have not been enough for certain families. In looking back, the successful cases we have exited from welfare dependency are those families we have been able to intensively partner in changing their situation around. We want to share this opportunity with many more families within our reach. The family strengthening initiatives we have in place at the present, can only take us this far. Furthermore, our work with the juvenile prisons system introduces us to at least 30 families in need of urgent post-care reunification work in order to prevent youth from reoffending and returning to the criminal justice system.

3. *Why is the Family Learning Centre essential to Beyond's intensive family strengthening work?*

In the past, we have been case-managing families. However, this framework of case-management slants more towards monitoring behaviour and is not at all conducive to problem-solving, healing and repairing relationships. For example, counselling is often seen to be a good 'talking cure' but the families we often engage are those often find it difficult and/or may be left feeling disinclined to verbally articulate their problems. Frequent home-visits, another commonplace tool in case-management we have found, often bringing limited success in helping families move beyond their problems by translating their ideas into action steps that help resolve the issues they've identified. The FLC is space for healing and experiential learning where:

- ✓ families are encouraged to attempt solutions that they are then able to put into immediate practice
- ✓ conflicts within families can be respectfully worked through and resolved
- ✓ families are able to come together after a considerably long period of absence from one or more family members and over time, reunite
- ✓ multiple expertise / skills across the helping sector can come together under one roof

4. *Why would you want to take families out of their own home environment for experiential learning? Would it not be better to work with them in their own home environments?*

Activity-based learning within the clients' own homes is beneficial only to a certain point. To allow for healing, we need to create opportunities for deep reflection. Running programmes in a domestic environment is not conducive because families have little opportunity to break away from the treadmill of their normal routine. Space away from home is considered 'time-out.' The temporary live-in component of the FLC is considered a working retreat – a practice that organisations and managers are familiar with. The FLC is a retreat centre to have families progressively build capacity to problem-solve and cope with the challenges they face; it is *not* a holiday space for over-stressed families.

5. *Is the Family Learning Centre a residential facility like the Kids United Home?*

No; the FLC is not a place to house families who are in need of shelter. It is a temporary live-in facility where families come in voluntarily to work with us on their issues. The families we bring in are those who need *intensive* family strengthening support. The referrals we get in from within Beyond and externally, will be screened for appropriateness, and where there is no fit, we will work in meeting families' needs through a range of other services and community support links. In cases of crises, families may choose to join the intensive FLC live-in programme. Therefore post-crisis resolution will be considered an essential component of the work.

Annex B: Family strengthening: A historic overview

Family strengthening started as a grassroots, community-driven movement that helped families support members who were fighting inhalant substance-dependence.

In the United States, it also harkened back to debates and policies that emerged in the 70s, mandating child welfare agencies to **support greater involvement and decision-making of families** in ensuring the wellbeing of their children.

Family strengthening efforts led to a crucial shift in thinking – that children who needed to be in out-of-home placement, could be placed with extended family and with community support, these family groups were effectively resourced to care for young people.

More significantly however, family strengthening rested on the underlying logic aimed at **preventing families from falling into crisis situations, at first instance**. Its efforts were oriented towards taking an integrated and proactive approach in building strong and resilient families that were able to:

- ✓ Cope more adequately and creatively with challenges;
- ✓ Plug themselves to forms of community support during times of need or hardship;
- ✓ Feel that they belonged to a community and were valued as members

We adopt the Annie E. Casey Foundation's definition of **place-based family strengthening** as: *“a deliberate and sustained effort to ensure that parents have the necessary opportunities, relationships, networks and supports to raise their children successfully which includes involving parents as decision-makers and how communities meet family needs.”*

The principles behind family strengthening

Family strengthening work nests in the belief that our efforts should be family-centered rather than professional-driven. This ensures that families define their own issues and, are able to ultimately 'own' their healing process. We believe that the most effective community work initiatives are those that respectfully partner people in ways that make them value, trust and want to be a part of that process.

We are driven by the philosophy that any kind of family strengthening work should be:

- ✓ **Comprehensive** enough to address the multiple needs of families
- ✓ **Preventive** - to reach families early by assisting overstressed and under-supported caregivers before they encounter a crisis situation and as a result, enter the child welfare and/or criminal justice system
- ✓ **Collaborative** in ways such that partnerships are created across services such as health, education, workforce development, the prisons system, other welfare organizations, Residents' Committees (RCs), CDCs, state agencies, law enforcement authorities, businesses, the faith community etc.
- ✓ **Sustainable** enough to ensure that outcomes positively influence family resiliency
- ✓ **Strengths-based** meaning, building on assets families all ready possess, and working towards expanding resources available in the community
- ✓ **Place-based**, where families are supported to thrive within the context of their neighbourhoods and broader communities

Annex C: What will this work look like? A case-study

THE STORY

As Ismail sat at the bus-stop contemplating his family's situation, he came across an IMH poster sharing information on how to overcome substance-dependence through their CAMP initiative. It was at this point that he contacted us. Ismail wanted to see himself and his wife Fara fight their heroin addiction, and being a father of three, he'd decided enough was enough as their young children needed them.

Whilst he waited for his appointment at with an IMH psychiatrist, Ismail was equally keen to get involved in WE CARE's 12-step Narcotics Anonymous programme which his caseworker Susan had told him about. However, although he was driving the process, Ismail felt it was equally necessary that Fara, on her own initiative, comes clean.

Two weeks down the line, Ismail and Fara entered themselves into the IMH detox programme, Fara as an inpatient, and Ismail as an outpatient. Meanwhile, Susan, the caseworker, visited Ismail every other day to see how he was doing, encouraging him as he resolutely struggled through the side-effects of going cold turkey. By the end of his detox programme, Ismail came out clean, and in retrospect, he once shared that it was the fact that having his three children by his side, that helped him fight the addiction.

On Fara's sixth day however, as an inpatient she asked to be discharged. The IMH professionals, with our support, contacted Fara's own mother who offered to look after her. Two weeks later, Fara returned home to her own family and sadly, relapsed.

This family had, at this point in time, come a long way from where they once were. Ismail was managing his heroin addiction well, thanks, in part to the support community he'd garnered at WE CARE. In no time, Ismail secured a job as a security guard, bringing home a stable income to the family of five. However, the matter of Fara's continuing addiction had to be resolved.

Given intensive home-visits, Ismail shared with Susan that both he and Fara may benefit from working more closely together towards a resolution to their issues. Therefore, the couple were agreeable to attempt a weekend live-in programme at our Sembawang premises. A retreat such as this would give them the opportunity to come together, reflect on how they could problem-solve and work together as a family. More importantly, it would create the context to facilitate their re-connecting as husband and wife, and as mother and father.

IDENTIFYING ISSUES AS A FAMILY (PROBLEM ANALYSIS)

As a man who'd had grown up amid the care of a sturdy, extended family support system, Ismail understood that strong family bonds were essential to fighting with an issue such as substance dependence. He and Fara decided to come together and try to resolve their challenges, as a family.

Susan, the caseworker, with the help of her colleagues rallied around Ismail and Fara who met them over several sessions to arrive at a shared problem definition.

Ismail and Fara decided that the root of their problems lay, in part, by their different communication styles which often let to conflict within the home. Over time, they seemed to have forgotten what it felt like to be a couple, and their substance-dependence had made this more of a vicious cycle.

Furthermore, Fara shared that the fact that she felt she was failing as a mother. She couldn't remember the last time she had left home and they had done something together as a family.

The couple also identified that they felt more socially isolated due to their addiction issues. Ismail's mother, for one, had never in actuality, accepted Fara as a daughter-in-law, given that Fara had been in and out of prison for inhalant drug abuse before she'd met Ismail.

PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENTIAL LIVE-IN COMPONENT

Like any experiential family strengthening programme, solid preparation is always key. We needed to:

1) Facilitate a healing process that the family found meaningful and were able to 'own'

Susan and the rest of the family strengthening team were well aware that Fara was used to the techniques and methods of helping professionals who were in and out of her life since she was a teen. For a woman who'd been incarcerated more than once, she knew the justice and welfare systems inside out, and her early cynicism in partnering us in resolving their issues was not unsurprising.

Therefore, the preparatory phase of the live-in family strengthening programme had to be one that engaged the caregivers from the very start. The key was in giving Ismail and Fara control in deciding what they thought was most useful. This healing process was one that they had to 'own.'

2) Create the right context for the family to re-discover each other

A three-day schedule was put together collaboratively with Ismail and Fara. A programme that was "free and easy" and engaging enough for the whole family was paramount. Over games, the family, particularly Ismail and Fara were to be able to discover new things they might not have previously known about each other, in a relaxed environment.

3) Create the right context for issues to emerge

The activities chosen, both within the learning facility and outside, had to simulate experiences and events that were close to their everyday lives. A family swimming outing, the preparation of a meal, and a trip to the zoo were some of the different contexts that were woven into the three-day programme.

THE CANDLE-LIT DINNER

On the first night Susan and colleagues put together a candle-lit dinner. But the candles were blown out in a huff. Fara approached Susan seeking their assistance with respect to the argument she was having with Ismail. Rather than assuming the role of mediators, the workers promptly found ways to keep their children occupied, whilst the couple could take time to find their own ground and resolve their spat in the way they felt most comfortable – by leaving the confined setting of their dinner-table and going out for a walk. Subsequently, the couple returned hand in hand, and as planned, took their kids out for a Hindi movie.

The morning after, as they were making their way home, the couple reflected on the previous evening, sharing that life had been difficult for them and they had almost forgotten what it felt like to be happy as a family.

The standard intervention for strained family relationships would often be counseling or what we could call a 'talking cure.' While it is true that the quality of talking often determines the quality of one's relationships, yet how this talking is done and the context in which it occurs is equally important.

WHERE ARE THINGS TODAY?

Fara is currently in remand as she was unable to take the necessary steps towards breaking her heroin addiction. If she goes back into prison, she is likely to serve a jail term of 10—12 years.

Ismail is currently contemplating divorce if Fara is to be incarcerated again.

There are no pat solutions in life. But a broken home does not mean a broken family, and Ismail and his three young children are very much a strong, close-knit family unit. As a single parent coping with an incarcerated spouse, he was been able to:

- stabilise the family's income by continuing his work as a security guard
- adjust and cope with his wife's absence
- expand his extended family support network over time, who in turn support him as a father
- provide his children with a safe and nurturing environment in his care, with the support of his extended family

Today Ismail volunteers at Beyond as a painter. It is his way of giving back to community.