

Safety Management Services Team at Brevard CARES helps children, families stay together; honored with the Child Abuse Prevention Task Force Award

By Ken Datzman

ROCKLEDGE — Since it was established as a nonprofit entity in 2009, Brevard CARES has worked to prevent child abuse and neglect by supporting and strengthening families so that they can remain together.

And its system — which features the components of Coordination, Advocacy, Resources, Education, and Support — has been a big success, turning negative situations into positive ones over time and rebuilding families.

“We have served more than 17,000 children since the inception of Brevard CARES,” said Phebe Powell, its executive director. “We’re proud of our success rate working to bring families together in Brevard County.”

Brevard CARES has provided support to more than 17,000 children representing over 6,000 families. It was originally started as a program of Brevard Family Partnership, the county’s lead agency for child welfare.

Years ago, the Florida Department of Children and Families transitioned to a community-based care system. It combines the outsourcing of foster care and related services to competent service agencies with an increased “local community ownership” of service delivery and design.

This innovative statewide reform increases accountability, resource development, and system performance.

At the center of Brevard CARES’ success is its Safety Management Services Team. This is a crisis-response service for children at risk of removal from parental care when “present danger” has been identified. Safety Management Services are utilized to reduce entry into the foster-care system by providing a rapid response to families in need of intensive support.

Heather Howlett, the diversion program manager for Brevard CARES, started the Safety Management Services Team when she joined the organization in April of 2015.

“And we have since served 118 families and 301 children. We have prevented removal in almost 90 percent of those cases, which is amazing. Our referrals come from the Florida Depart-



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

The Safety Management Services Team at Brevard CARES was named the recipient of the Social Service Group Award at the 2017 Child Abuse Prevention Task Force Recognition Banquet. The team is a crisis-response service for children at risk of removal from parental care when present danger is identified by the Department of Children and Families. In fiscal year 2015–2016, the Safety Management Services Team prevented the removal of 81 children from their homes as a result of working closely with the families. From left: Phebe Powell, executive director; Staci Faenza-Seward, family engagement coordinator; and Heather Howlett, diversion program manager.

ment of Children and Families. The investigators or supervisors call us directly. When they think that a child is in present danger, they ask for our help at that moment. We swing into action and go immediately to the home to help commence the case with them. We develop a safety plan,” said Howlett.

The team’s services include an assessment of family needs and strengths, individual and family counseling services, and education for parents on how to effectively manage stress and resolve conflict.

The small-in-number Safety Management Services Team is the so-

called “boots on the ground,” said Staci Faenza-Seward, the family engagement coordinator at Brevard CARES.

“The investigator has to believe that the family is capable and they have the ability to change. They just need a lot more support, and that’s where we come in. We help prevent the child from going into the foster-care system. We want children to stay at home with their families. Children do better at home. We’re here to keep families together,” said Faenza-Seward, who was one of the first members of the team.

About two and half years ago, Powell said her organization saw a need for

diversion services to better help families stay together.

“We noticed there was a spike in the number of children coming into foster care and then going home somewhat quickly. We brought in our community partners and looked at what was happening and the root causes, which led to the formation of the Safety Management Services Team.”

Howlett said the Safety Management Services Team deals with a “wide array of family situations, including domestic violence. We also work with teen

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mothers and families that have long-term addiction issues, as well as families that have significant mental-health issues. We all work together as a team to create the best environment for the children and the families.”

The Safety Management Services Team was named the recipient of the Social Service Group Award at the 2017 Child Abuse Prevention Task Force Recognition Banquet. The event was held at the Holiday Inn Viera Conference Center, and recognized members of the community who are making “a world of difference” in the lives of at-risk children and families in Brevard County.

The Social Service Group Award honors a group or team working in the field of child welfare that has promoted efforts toward strengthening families, specifically in the prevention of child abuse.

In fiscal year 2015–2016, the Safety Management Services Team prevented the removal of 81 children from their homes. Part of the team’s plan includes “intensive” home visits.

“We start out with about five home visits a week to the family that we are reaching out to,” said Howlett. “Think about having someone in your home five days a week. You really get to know them and I think you develop trust and rapport. We are going to be there for them. We’re going to advocate for them. That’s our philosophy.”

The Social Service Group Award was presented in

April, which was first declared “Child Abuse Prevention Month” by presidential proclamation in 1983.

Since then, April has been a time to acknowledge the importance of families and communities working together to prevent child abuse.

The majority of child-abuse cases stem from situations and conditions that can be prevented when community programs and systems are engaged and supportive, according to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

A body of research has identified factors known to prevent and reduce child abuse and neglect. These factors include parental resilience, nurturing and attachment, social connections, knowledge about parenting and child development, and concrete support for parents.

Brevard CARES uses a model called “Wraparound Care Coordination,” a proven, effective, strength-based and family centered approach that safely diverts entry into the mental health, juvenile justice, and child-welfare system by strategically reaching families before stressors they experience lead to child abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

“The Wraparound model has been a big success,” said Powell. “We start with a family’s strengths and build off that assessment.”

The program has had a positive impact on the families and children, helping to prevent situations or events that would result in a child being removed from

his or her home. Its success is because of the proactive participation of families in need who openly engage in the process, said Powell.

The Safety Management Services Team works with a family about 60 days. “We help them get motivated toward long-term behavioral changes,” said Howlett.

“Halfway through our service, the Department of Children and Families will determine what the next ongoing services will be for that particular family. At that point, the department turns it over to the ongoing service provider and we stay on for an additional 30 days as part of the transition process. Then the ongoing provider works with the family more on a long-term basis.”

Brevard CARES continues to follow-up with the family three months, six months, and even one year later to see how they are doing. “It’s more than a warm handoff. And I think that is a big part of the success we’re seeing with the families. We’ve built solid relationships,” said Powell.

“Even the babies in the families know us,” added Faenza-Seward. “We provide the major support they may have needed to say ‘I can do this.’ The phone number we give them is our personal cellphone.”

There are two teams that service Brevard County. The professionals include master’s level licensed clinicians. “We are incredibly proud of them and the work they do everyday in the community to help strengthen children and families,” said Powell.

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