

PROFILE

Nimble Agency Carves Out a New Niche

Metropolitan Family Service in Portland, Oregon thrives with community-based programming

Flexibility and foresight are the watchwords of Metropolitan Family Service in Portland, Oregon. Created in 1950, the agency initially focused on counseling and mental health programs. But managed care hit hard in 1995. When funding changes made it impossible for the small agency to compete, it spun off all the counseling services to another provider. The agency shrunk significantly, retaining just the community-based programming.

Metropolitan Family Service reorganized in 1995, and today is back up to size and has earned a reputation as one of the premier agencies in the region for community-based services. The core of the agency's mission—to strengthen families and individuals while enhancing their participation in community life—hasn't changed over the years, says Krista Larson, executive director. But the programs designed to fulfill this mission have changed substantially. The agency has been able to be flexible and adapt as family issues evolve.

"Metropolitan Family Service has successfully moved into new programs, achieved noteworthy financial stability, and gained a high standing among the



More than 100 foster grandparents work one-on-one with at-risk children, providing mentoring, support, and friendship.

community's social agencies," says Tom Stoel, founding board member.

When Metropolitan Family Service (MFS) reorganized, it identified three fundamental goals:

- Helping children succeed
- Strengthening families and their connections to community
- Helping older adults and people with disabilities live independently

The agency now offers 11 community-based programs, many of them designed to combine these goals and bring multiple

generations together to strengthen each other. More than 14,000 people were served last year.

Community-Based Programming Yields Results

Community-based, strength-based programming is not just a philosophy, emphasizes Larson. "We do it because it works."

When MFS changed its focus in 1995, it immediately attracted the support of local funders. This was a new approach focused more on prevention than intervention,

promoting resilience and self-sufficiency. “We help individuals and families build on their skills and assets. We link them to natural supports in their community,” Larson explains. “This reduces dependence on social service professionals and leads to more sustainable change.”

Providing services in the participants’ natural setting is vital. Clients are most comfortable in a non-stigmatized environment. “Taking the services to them is also more respectful,” Larson emphasizes. “It is a culturally competent approach to programming.”

Bringing the Generations Together

Nowhere is the agency’s intergenerational focus more evident than in the Foster Grandparent program, which pairs at-risk children with older adults who serve as role models and mentors. More than 100 foster grandparents put in 20 hours a week, working with children in schools, child care programs, hospitals, and other community settings.

Project Linkage also melds the generations. The program helps older adults and people with disabilities remain independent in their own homes. A force of about 800 volunteers provides rides for medical appointments and grocery shopping, friendly visiting, and telephone assurance. The program’s Summer Yard Project recruits a culturally diverse group of teenagers to do major yard cleanups for older adults and people with disabilities. Not only are the clients—some in danger of eviction—relieved of the stress of yard work, but the teen workers are themselves an at-risk population who receive training, employment, and job skills.

Volunteerism Is Central to Agency Programs

Volunteerism is a key value of the organization, as evidenced by the massive volunteer force of more than 1,300 people. “Volunteers make a lot of things possible for us,” Larson says. “They are a large part of how we provide services in the communities.”

Yet the agency does not have a volunteer department or designated staff member. Instead, every program is responsible for coordinating its own volunteers. “It’s really a part of every person’s job,” Larson stresses.

“We all do it all of the time. If someone calls inquiring about a volunteer position, we will drop everything to find something for them.”

Larson says it’s the agency’s attitude that enables them to recruit and retain so committed a volunteer force. “The volunteers are critically important to us, and we really foster these relationships. We make sure they know how much we value them.” The agency also is careful to use volunteers wisely, giving people important jobs that match their skills and interests.

Volunteers are recruited through television and radio ads, the Web site, and connections with local volunteer referral agencies, corporate volunteer programs, and service groups. Most volunteers, though, come through word of mouth. “Anyone that walks in the door is fair game,” Larson says with a laugh. “I wouldn’t be surprised to come in one day and see our mail carrier stuffing envelopes!” (The development director provides a little extra inducement: she often tucks packages of brownies or cookies in with the outgoing mail.)

Partnership With Funder Creates Innovative Program

Because of its community-based programming, MFS works in close collabora-

tion with countless other agencies and resources. The GEARS program is typical of its effective community partnerships. GEARS was the result of creative strategizing with a funder. When the mental health business was spun off in 1995, MFS wanted to find a way to retain some of the United Way funds that would be lost. Working with United Way, they looked at effective program models around the country and created the GEARS program: Gaining, Empowerment, Access, Responsibility, and Support. The program focuses on education, health, and resources, working to build healthy communities from within.

Partnering with local, county, and state offices, other nonprofit agencies, health care systems, schools, and other community resources, GEARS helps connect people who have difficulty accessing services. Because of its strong information and

GEARS coaches help link families with community resources.



GEARS: Effective Community Partnerships

Jim’s situation is typical of the cases GEARS coaches handle. An unemployed father of four, Jim was searching frantically for a new job so his family would not have to go to a homeless shelter. The family was out of food and diapers for the two babies, and was about to be evicted. A proud, hardworking man, Jim’s desperation finally drove him to seek help. He had just enough money for bus fare to the GEARS Connection Site. There, a coach gave him bus tickets, diapers, and information about where to get food boxes. She helped Jim apply for public assistance, and stayed after hours to be sure his food stamp card was activated. Jim was also linked with several employment organizations. When Jim thanked the coach, he showed her his heavily calloused hands, which she had noticed even before he pointed them out. “This is who I am,” Jim told her. “I work. I take care of my family. I just want you to know that about me.” She already knew.

referral component, the GEARS program also maintains an exhaustive community resource directory. GEARS has 12 connection sites, including every metropolitan area welfare office, where paid coaches help people navigate the often complicated systems of care. The paid staff is supplemented with over 4,000 volunteer hours. Many services are provided in English, Russian, Spanish, and Arabic. More than 4,000 clients were served last year, and Larson expects the volume to double this year because so many more area families are unable to meet basic needs.

Partnering With Schools

School partnerships are a vital component of MFS programming. The agency partners with more than 60 area schools to build student success and strengthen communities. School-based services include academic enrichment, recreation, and health and social services. MFS was one of the first agencies in the country to offer the FAST program, serving more than 1,000 children and families in 10 Portland area schools, annually. In addition, MFS operates SUN (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods) programs in the Portland area.



Schools, parents, volunteers, and kids all come together for some serious fun and learning through the FAST program.

The agency works with elementary and middle schools to improve academic achievement. Activities may be recreational, academic, or family support, depending on each school's identified need. The SUN program is funded through county and federal grants to school districts.

MFS was also among the first agencies in the country to provide Experience Corps. Teams of four to six volunteers, all older adults, work in eight area schools with youth facing serious socio-economic and behavioral challenges.

Agency Wine Auction Is Among 10th Largest in United States

Good timing and good luck are responsible for Metropolitan Family Service's amazingly successful annual wine auction. This year's event attracted 700 guests and netted \$460,000. The 2001 auction brought in even more dramatic totals: \$1.3 million gross, with \$834,000 in profit. The three-day event features incredible meals, wine tastings, and silent and verbal auctions of not just wine, but "wine experiences"—the kind of thing you can't just buy.

The fundraiser began 18 years ago when several board members with an interest in wine dug bottles out of their own cellars and sold it to each other. They raised \$9,000 for the agency. The event grew from these humble beginnings, and is now among the top ten charity wine auctions in the country.

Larson, executive director, credits the auction's success to the strong economy and good timing. The auction began just as the region's wine industry was taking off. Although the agency has a full-time wine auction director, it's the volunteers who drive the event. "We're not wine experts, but our volunteers have the connections and the knowledge and the skill to do it," Larson explains. She acknowledges that the auction is a costly fundraiser, but it is well worth it. "It bring in big bucks. And it's priceless in terms of awareness."

Services are tailored to the needs of the individual school, and focus on 3 key areas—tutoring, mentoring, and family and community involvement. When a team worked with one principal to identify school needs, they discovered that homework completion and study skills were a concern. An after-school homework club was born, to enthusiastic response. Experience Corps yields impressive results: 100 percent of the principals say the school environment is improved because of the program.

"I get glimpses into the seriousness of conditions in some of these children's homes, and it makes me glad I am here and can talk about things with them to help make their childhood a time for joy instead of worry," says Crystal Oliver, a 75-year-old Experience Corps volunteer. "I feel for these children, many of whom are poor, many who need to feel they are loved. I would feel useless at my age without this activity on a daily basis. Having a child who I am

not working with beg to be allowed to come with me is surely a great reward."

Agency Maintains Low Overhead

The agency boasts an impressively low administrative overhead, about 14 percent. As the agency grew from its 1995 reorganization, it has worked hard to hold in the reins, Larson says. A strong focus on outcomes, not just activities, helps keep costs in check. MFS avoids duplicating services provided by other agencies, and strong collaborative partnerships and heavy reliance on volunteers also reduces expenses.

Many administrative functions are decentralized. Rather than having a full-time staff member devoted to outcomes evaluation, information technology, and marketing, the agency formed teams of representative staff members from each program area to fulfill these functions. The finance department is kept small through a firm commitment to technology and software. "When a new system or new soft-



Experience Corps volunteers work in teams, tailoring their services to the needs of each school.

ware becomes available, we do anything we can to make it happen," Larson says. "It will always be a priority."

A Challenging Funding Environment

Oregon has the highest unemployment rate in the nation. Service requests are on the rise just as United Way is changing its allocation system and the state is considering social service cuts. Like most Alliance member agency executives, Larson is concerned about making up the shortfall.

United Way once represented about 90 percent of the agency's funding; now it makes up less than 10 percent. More than 60 percent of the agency's \$4.5 million budget comes from government contracts. That's a large chunk of government dollars, but Larson doesn't let it drive the direction of the agency. "It's true, in social services, especially if you're working with low-income people, the government is going to be a major funder," she acknowledges. "But you can go after it two ways: The government can put out a huge RFP and we can respond and do what they want us to do. Or we can have a strategic plan and clear idea of what we'll do, how we'll do it, and with whom, and if the government puts out an RFP in one of those areas, we'll say, great, they can help us."

The agency's programs are not designed to be revenue generating, although some are self-supporting. "We're considering adding more revenue-generating pro-

grams, but it's a major cultural shift," Larson says. "As for most Alliance members, it means serving a different market. We're looking at whether our mission is to serve only low-income people or a larger market."

Planned Giving Is Major Focus

With the reduction in United Way funding and tenuous government support, Metropolitan Family Service is addressing the funding source most within its control: private fundraising. "We're really concentrat-

ing on development, whether it's through corporate or individual donations or special events," Larson says. The agency has created a systematic development calendar, with written appeals twice a year and regular appeals to local foundations and corporations.

A planned giving program was created in the past year and the agency will debut a deferred giving society later this year. Because the agency serves primarily low-income people, board members and for-



Side-by-Side services for older adults

mer board members are its initial target audience. A board member reunion was enthusiastically received this summer. The agency is meeting one-on-one with former board members, offering site tours, and holding focused, small group get-togethers. Senior citizens, particularly those who are agency clients, are also a major audience. "The majority are low income, but many want to give something back to support the programs that helped them," Larson says. "We want them to know that

their contribution can make a difference."

Larson and her board keep a keen eye on changing demographics, particularly for ethnic groups and aging populations. "That's some forward thinking that may not have a huge effect on what we do today, but we pay attention to it in terms of positioning ourselves for the future."

Like many other nonprofit agencies, Larson acknowledges, MFS has funding problems and staffing issues. The overriding feeling, though, is highly optimistic. The agency has staunchly loyal board members, volunteers, and friends in the community. It has a solid foundation. And it has a well-defined, highly regarded niche in community-based programming. "I like to think of us as being positively opportunistic," Larson says. "We are overwhelmed with opportunities. Our problem is choosing among them." ■



Krista Larson, executive director of Metropolitan Family Service, believes emphatically in the effectiveness of community-based services.

Agency Snapshot

FOUNDED

1950

MISSION

To strengthen families and individuals while enhancing their participation in community life

GOALS

- Helping children succeed
- Strengthening families and their connections to community
- Helping older adults and people with disabilities live independently

BUDGET

\$4.5 million

PEOPLE SERVED

14,000

VOLUNTEERS

1,300