

Westside Family Preservation Services Network

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Mission

*Fortaleciendo Familias Latinas con Dignidad y Respeto en
Comunidades Rurales*

To Treat the Latino Farm Worker Families that we Serve in our Rural Community,
with Dignity and Respect

Vision

Every child in Huron is safe from violence, poverty, abuse and neglect; lives in a nurturing family environment and is supported by a vibrant and vital community; is educated and has a real chance to accomplish a happy, productive life in an occupation of their choosing, consistent with their individual talents, skills, culture, and ambition.

What we do:

- We operate a Family Resource Center in Huron. Last year that center provided almost a thousand families with over twenty thousand services. We are located in the community. Our principal location has been in Huron for the past thirteen years.
- We provide monthly Emergency Food Distribution in collaboration with the Food Bank of Fresno County.
- We translate a wide variety of important family documents from medical papers to bills for taxes, or from hospitals. We provide emergency telecommunications and Internet services, for instance, we fax, scan, utilize the Internet, make copies, utilize Skype, and allow rare phone calls for families in crisis.
- We help with complex applications, and re-certifications, for social services. For example, food stamps, Medi-Cal, Cash Aid, Unemployment, Workers Comp, Passports and other citizenship papers, Social Security, etc.
- We help families create resumes – to find jobs.
- We provide victim services to those families suffering from sexual assault in the fields, or domestic violence, or child sexual assault, or violent crimes, and human trafficking. We work closely with local law enforcement and with the FBI.
- We help the families in court – with transportation, translation and advocacy. We do this for families seeking reunification with their children that CPS has removed, and for families with child custody or dependency issues. We also help families in domestic violence court and with Restraining Orders.
- We are a community location where high school students perform volunteer hours for their community service requirement.
- We provide volunteer on-the-job training and support our college-age staffers with flexible work hours as they pursue their degrees.

- When we are able, we provide transportation to families with doctor appointments, court ordered services, court appearances, and other emergency and important services where public transportation is not possible.
- We help families with citizenship matters, for example with U Visas (for those with police reports that they were victims of domestic violence or other violent crimes). We provide referrals for T Visas for certified victims of human trafficking that are willing to work with law enforcement. We work closely with the Mexican consulate.
- We provide services to families working to get their children back from CPS. We provide supervised visits at our location in Huron. We provide case management for families to ensure that all orders are followed and that the families receive all court-ordered services in a timely manner. We help the families to understand the system in which they now must perform in order to have their children returned to them.
- We provide peer counseling and referrals to mental health services.
- We provide adult education both at our weekly women's support groups (on topics such as nutrition, breast cancer awareness, etc.) and for victims of violence. Our staff provides most of the longer classes, but we also invite outside speakers into our support groups on a regular basis.
- We treat our 40 most active volunteers to retreats where we also make time to work on personal development and family issues.
- We sponsor (organize and perform) family development activities such as our Mother's Day Celebration and Salsa Contest; our Easter Egg Hunt; our Children's Talent Show, our annual mini-conference (a community health fair with special topics, performances and presentations by community members). The volunteers set each year's focus and agenda. They prepare and serve the food and decorate the hall. We invite those organizations, which provide services in our community to attend and provide a booth/information on their services. We also invite them to make a brief presentation of the services they offer to the families in our community.
- We assess and screen families for high risk and emergency situations and work with selected families who really need our support on a Family Development Plan where they set the goals and we coach them toward accomplishing these goals.
- We provide domestic violence services, but not shelter.
- We have home visiting programs for new mothers and families with very young children to make sure the families are receiving the services they are eligible for and that the mothers are not too isolated with their homemaking and childcare responsibilities. We teach budgeting, help with food (recipes, preparation, shopping, etc.), child-care, housing, housekeeping skills, and make referrals where needed for health care services.
- We help families with housing. We translate housing applications, help fill them out, and assist families to escape from unsafe or unsanitary housing circumstances.
- We provide parent support groups weekly in both Huron and Coalinga.
- We distribute toys each Christmas from United Way's Toys for Tots program.
- We participate in coalitions for health and human services as they affect rural, farmworker, Latino families. For instance, our agency participated in research for ethnography on family violence in Huron, on domestic violence in rural communities, and provided the most victims for Human Rights Watch in their nationwide research on the vulnerability of immigrant farmworkers in the US to sexual violence and sexual harassment.

Measuring Family Reunification as an Outcome – A Success Story

This is a success story. It may not feel like one, because the story is pretty dark – and after years of work the family, though now reunified, still is moving from crisis to crisis and absorbing tremendous resources. This success story is typical of the families we serve, and typical also of the tremendous barriers to resilience that our families face.

Our agency was instrumental in the reunification of this family. The mom has four children. Our caseworkers have worked to get her the resources she needs, and the parenting classes, etc. to have her children returned. Her children were returned to her care. However, the story doesn't end with that.

Her daughter was raped at eight, and now at thirteen beats her mother. Her oldest son walks around with eyes unfocused from so much medication that he is given at school for his learning disabilities. It is difficult to engage him in a meaningful conversation and he was such a sweet child when our agency first began to work with him at eight. Her youngest sons, twins, are struggling to learn in pre-school. When the children were placed in Foster Care (and our agency recommended this course of action at that point due to severe child neglect by a terribly depressed survivor of human trafficking and domestic violence – their mother). Their father was in prison in Texas for felony drug

trafficking and has since been deported. He is the perpetrator of the domestic violence and human trafficking the mom suffered. He left her with four children in Huron.

Even as I write these words, a tragedy continues to unfold. I have her picture on my desk. If I am able to do so, I will get her permission to use it with this writing so that you can see her too: a mother on track to lose custody, once again, of four of her children. I want you to see how normal she looks – and how vulnerable. She is not a drug addict and she is not violent. She has nothing to recover from, except life itself.

If her parental rights are terminated, she will be tossed onto the garbage heap of life and it is likely that her children, the two older ones at least, will spend the rest of their childhoods in Foster Care. That she will plunge from a bare existence in a rural, and isolated immigrant community, into the deepest poverty imaginable in America, is largely unintended. She, almost certainly, will have more children. A long and complex confluence of choice – both hers as well as the highest levels of policy makers, judges and politicians – renders her here. But she, she is left to live this.

A darker tale than I am about to tell, Charles Dickens could not have invented.

The mother is Mexican. She lives in Huron, California. Our agency has served this woman and her children for about three years. With our help, she gained her U-Visa status and a legal right to work in the United States. We also assisted her with court advocacy, health care, housing, emergency food, and peer counseling. Huron is a place of hope and dreams. It is also a place of despair and violence. Consistent resources and care are keeping this family going – but still not thriving.

What we know about this mother is that she was very sick as a child – and devastatingly poor, in Mexico. She tells of not being able to walk for six months when she was an adolescent. She can't remember why, just the sickness and the immobility. Three weeks ago she went, in great pain, to an emergency room in a nearby county. They told her she was very sick, but *she didn't understand what they were saying*. She kept saying something about her liver. They prescribed medicines. But she never purchased them, because she has no money. She says she is feeling better. She has absolutely no money. I wonder if we can wrap our heads around the starkness of that: absolutely no money. When we first took her to a clinic to address her depression it was so terrible that the doctor paid for her medication.

In practical terms, what this means is that she washes her body with cold water, which is very hard to bear, especially now in wintertime, and so she smells. She has not had a haircut in a long time, so she looks unkempt. Her clothes are not always clean and they are never new. When she goes to court to try and convince the judge that she can take care of her family she does not make a good impression. What we are looking at are the ravages of deep poverty, not necessarily incompetence.

At fifteen she fell in love. They left for the United States soon after she gave birth to her first daughter, a year later. They were both sixteen. Their daughter was left behind in the care of her grandmother. So many first children are left behind for grandparents to parent – but that is another story, and another common sorrow for the people of Huron. Nearly twenty years have passed and neither that child nor the grandmother has ever visited this country.

Her young man turned out to be immature and even mean. He beat her. He intimidated her. She had four more children with him, another daughter and three sons. The last two are twins. She lived a life of domestic violence.

They lived in Indiana. They lived in California. He tried to sell her to other men. She escaped. What he did could be classified as human trafficking. She didn't know anything about that. Nor did she realize that domestic violence is a crime. She, like so many of the ladies, endured.

The second daughter in this family, the firstborn in this country, is proud of her father. She tells us that he loves his family and will be with them as soon as he is able. Having a father in prison is not unusual in Huron. It is far too common to be a matter for shame. He has a very good job, she says; he is a truck driver. He is not a citizen, and now he is a convicted felon. We can't imagine that he would be allowed to stay in the United States. But that does not mean that somehow he might not show up in Huron.

A Police Report from years ago, in our files, tells of this mother being discovered, bloody and dazed, emerging from between two parked cars late one night in Huron. Was she raped? Was she beaten? An event of all too common violence, there was no follow-up, just a report on the incident. We got involved when a much younger man, of barely twenty-one, took up residence in her home and repeatedly raped her then eight-year-old daughter. Immediately, upon finding out, the mother got a restraining order against this young predator.

She didn't know. The rapes happened mostly in the car going to the grocery store. The vastness of open fields surrounds Huron. At night, in a car, you could drive deep into these fields and no one would ever find you or hear anyone's screams. I can't tell you how many times I have listened as a woman whispered what happened to her in these same fields, alone with her perpetrator, at night. Or how many times, driving alongside one of the irrigation canals, he threatened to drown both himself, her and their children, if she would not do as he wanted.

This young man locked the child in from his side of the car, and the daughter, tearfully, confessed to us that it was her fault really because she couldn't run fast enough to get away from him. There was such a frozen immobility on the mother's face as she listened to her daughter tell all this to the police chief that it was difficult to look at her, and just as difficult not to. Repression and dissociation are habitual for victims of uninterrupted violence – and confusion is an emotion.

It took nearly a year even to get this young man arrested. By then the older son had begun stealing – stealing enough that he was com-

mitting felonies. His older friend was beating him and bullying him to steal. Luckily, we had a Police Chief who was also held a doctorate in restorative justice and we were able to do an intervention for this bullied child such that he did not enter the Justice System before he was ten.

I, myself, called Child Protective Services when the young girl started stealing and coming home at four in the morning – daring her mother to do something about it. I knew the child pretty well by then and I was more than worried that she was unsafe. In Huron, two or three times a year, when the lettuce is ready to be picked, thousands of men descend upon the small, isolated village. They sleep in their cars, in the fields, in people’s basements, garages... They drink, gamble, whore, and generally cause havoc in an already chaotic place. Some of these men are related (fathers, brothers, uncles...) to those in Huron. They live on the coast where work is steadier year-round. I began to be afraid that this young girl, then eleven, would end up in the back of a pick-up, or a van, and enter a life where she would find herself locked up in a trailer on a remote ranch forced to have sex with as many as sixty men a day. We know where such trailers are. We have reported them to the FBI.

I am a mandated reporter. That means that I am legally responsible to inform Child Protective Services if I believe a child is in danger. This doesn’t mean that I am necessarily correct in my assessment – just that I must report if I believe that circumstances warrant it. I take this seriously.

Generally, it is not clear if a child is really in danger. Children can be being raped, and they will not tell you. This is because most children are hurt by their families, or those the family trusts. They love the people who are hurting them – and/or they are very afraid for themselves or for their parent – the one that is not hurting them.

Sometimes it is clear. Mandated reporters get it wrong all the time. So do neighbors and schools, doctors, and community based organizations like ours. As the reality of this family’s circumstances unfolded, my staff and I became clearer and clearer that the trend line was moving in the wrong direction and we needed to act. So we did. We attended the Team Decision Making meeting held a few weeks later to determine if the children should be removed.

The children were not removed. Not then. A few months later the mom left the daughter as a baby sitter of her three-year-old twin boys. The girl fell asleep. The twins let themselves out. The daughter forgot to tie the door shut. The police found the boys – one totally naked – a few blocks away in the playground. He called Child Protective Services and our agency. We sat with the children, and the mom, at the police station in Huron until the social worker came for the children – that took almost nine hours. And then they were gone.

All of our cases are not this complex, but many of them are. A year later, and much more work, and the family are once again together in Huron.

It turns out that the core issue in this case is whether or not the mom was/is developmentally disabled. Can she learn? Can she parent her children? This is very difficult to determine especially for one suffering the effects of chronic traumatic stress disorder. She has been trained, like you would train a dog, to be silent, not to have opinions, not to make trouble, not to let herself become visible. In interviews she is confused.

Confusion is an emotion as well as a symptom of mental incapacity. It is certainly true that she is a slow learner – and she may even be on the boarder line of mentally incompetent. But she may not. This mother feels the loss of her family. She is alone in this country and a victim of violence. She has not found her voice. She cannot advocate for herself.

If she is deemed disabled, then what are her rights as a non-citizen, to continue to parent her own children who are citizens and who have different rights? She works in the fields when there is work. She is not physically fit and she is already in her early thirties. She will not be picked very often. Even in such hard and unpromising work, the male bosses only pick the pretty ones for the fields. Sexual assault among farm workers is far too common. Just last summer we had a researcher from Human Rights Watch in Huron interviewing the ladies about their experiences in the fields. She was overwhelmed. Can we guarantee that the children, as teens and young adults, will be safe? Can we be sure that their placement in foster care is not their best hope for their futures? Can we bear the agony and involvement of this mother who is beginning to realize what her future may hold? There are things worse than death in the depths of the darkness at the bottom of our common humanity.

