

Pilot program for New Beginnings to start on Monday

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New Beginnings, an experiment in delivering social services to families who live in a world marred by crime and poverty, will open for business Monday at City Heights ' Hamilton Elementary School.

The pilot program deliberately was placed in a neighborhood that has one of San Diego's worst crime rates, said Richard W. Jacobsen, the county's social services director. Once New Beginnings succeeds in the inner-city area, it will be duplicated in other parts of the county, he said.

"According to the federal government, New Beginnings is the only thing of its kind in the country," Jacobsen said.

The idea behind the New Beginnings Center for Children and Families is to bind together a fragmented system of public and private health, education and welfare programs, he said.

Working on the Hamilton campus, a team of specialists will attempt to bring services to people who otherwise might fall through gaps in the social safety net. The overall goal is to help people become self-sufficient.

"It's a different way of doing business," said Ross McCollum, a San Diego community program administrator. "We're excited about it."

Participating agencies have learned that children cannot be expected to do well in school if their home life is in disarray, said Maria Jimenez, one of four family service advocates who will work with the ethnically diverse Hamilton students and their families. New Beginnings will act as a clearinghouse to improve public access to a wide range of counseling, health and social services, she explained.

"We're trying to cut back some of the steps people take to go from agency to agency," she said.

Another goal is to create a non-threatening atmosphere where people feel free to discuss such personal family problems as child abuse and drug dependency. The program will stress early intervention.

Often people are discouraged from seeking help by having to tell their stories over and over as they search for the proper agency to help them with their problems.

"We recognized that the system was so fragmented that something needed to be done

to streamline," said Carol Baenziger, a spokeswoman for the Social Services Department. "So many customers were known to so many agencies. It just was not working the way it was designed to."

Among those collaborating in the project are various county departments, the city of San Diego, San Diego City Schools, the San Diego Community College District, the San Diego Housing Commission, UCSD Medical Center and Childrens' Hospital.

By streamlining service delivery, New Beginnings should reduce duplications of effort, said McCollum.

"We're trying to use existing resources better so it does not cost the taxpayer more money," he said.

Jacobsen said the cost of New Beginnings will be divided among participating agencies. The budget, which is expected to reach six figures, has yet to be finalized, he said.

"We're working on that and trying to sort that out. There are basically a couple of sources. For one-time expenditures and demonstrations, we have gotten foundation money."

For example, he said, "Irma Castro, the site coordinator, is actually an employee from San Diego Unified (School District). She is being paid for out of grant money. The family service advocates are just a redeployment of existing staff."

If the program is done well, "it will be very cost-effective," said Tom Payzant, superintendent of San Diego city schools.

More than 20 different languages are spoken by students at crowded Hamilton Elementary, which has more than 1,000 pupils, Jacobsen said. About 90 percent of the students are members of racial minority groups. Education there has been hampered by a high student turnover rate.

According to a 1989 study, 64 percent of student households were involved with at least one social program. Most students were found to qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.

The new center will be introduced to the community during an open house ceremony on Monday, between 4 and 6 p.m., Baenziger said. McCollum expressed high hopes for the program.

"It will be an opportunity to learn what each of us do, what we do best, and to collaborate," he said.

Payzant agreed.

"There is a lot of talk nationwide of agency collaboration, but I don't know of anywhere but San Diego where there has been such a comprehensive effort to involve all of the major public agencies," he said.

Caption: 1 PIC

Maria Jimenez, Family service advocate (B-6:5,6) The San Diego Union

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