Communiversity

History of the Vento Village Partnership
&
Community-Based Participatory Evaluation Model
for the Vento Village Partnership
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History of the Vento Village Partnership
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Introduction

This is a history of Vento Village Partnership (VVP), written for the Evaluation Unit of Ramsey County Community Human Services (RCCHS), in St. Paul, Minnesota. The VVP is a trial social-work program started in 2006, in which a social workers from the County and a social worker from a local non-profit were placed directly in an inner-city school to serve the community. Among its diverse and evolving goals, the program sought to help the families of students in that were at risk of being reported to the county for abuse or neglect, and also to work with school staff to reduce and improve the reporting of students to the county’s Child Protective Services unit (CPS). A central motivation was the problem that families of color were being over-reported by schools to the county’s CPS, and the VVP wanted to redirect resources and staff away from reporting (and investigating) families of color to supporting them. One inspiration for the program was that if social workers could get vital services to at risk families before they got deeper into trouble, everyone would be better served.

Across the United States, children of color are reported to CPS as victims of abuse and neglect at a much higher rate than white children. This issue is known as racial disproportionality. The problem is that children of color are abused and neglected no more than others (Hill 2006: 1, 3). While disproportionality has not been a problem that was well-known outside of administrative and research social work circles, ethnic inequality is and institutional racism is becoming more so. However, the problem of disproportionality has been taken seriously recently by community organizations in St. Paul, the St. Paul Public School System, and the Ramsey County government had all been struggling on their own with racism and inequality, each with their unique perspectives and unique challenges.

To tackle the specific problem of disproportionality head-on, a partnership of various professionals, community members and agencies in St. Paul was cobbled together. The initial three partners were the East Side Family Center (ESFC) (a community-based, non-profit that served in-need families in the East Side of St. Paul),1 RCCHS, and the Bruce Vento Elementary School (an inner-city, neighborhood-based school with a largely poor and minority population). They called their collaboration the Vento Village. However, in an effort to make equal partners out of the many and diverse people and organizations in the area, these three original partners hosted a number of community meetings right in the lobby of the Vento School. Out of these meetings grew the Vento Village Partnership.

This history is much more than a chronological reporting of the actions of the VVP. It will describe the plans, values, frustrations and goals of the partners, the social problems that they tried to solve, the initiatives and organizations out of which the VVP emerged, the changes in the program over time (including the changes in the way that members saw the project and each other), and the many continuing challenges the VVP faced. This history strongly reflects the people who are a part of the VVP, as is mostly based on interviews with them.
The history will begin by defining and summarizing the national and local problem of disproportionality, as well as detailing its possible causes. The history will then give some background on two of the Ramsey County projects dealing with racial disparities that the VVP to a partially born out, the Casey Breakthrough Collaborative and Ending Racial Disparities.

Next will be discussed how diverse were the ideas, places, and people out of which the concept for the VVP came. While traditionally the county’s first awareness of neglect or abuse was when an CPS intake worker received a call from a mandated reporter in the community, the county began wanting to somehow get to these families in crisis and get them help before things were so bad that someone reported them to the county. However, the problem was how to do this given that historically the county could not know about a problem before it was reported to CPS.

After discussing the ways that VVP members began to rethink this intake process, this history will describe how it was decided that the way to get early help to families was to place workers at the Vento School. The history will then delve deeply into the work at Vento, including not only how it was started and developed, but the working relationships between staff from different institutions. Initially at least, there was some resistance to the county from both school staff and school parents, and the working out of these relationships is an important piece in the story of the VVP.

Next the history will document the many changes in the program since the county first placed a social worker at Vento, focusing on the many reports partners gave of the many and diverse interventions that the county worker had with Vento families.

In the interviews, the most common goal expressed by Vento partners was to create “systems change.” This was also the most common phrase uttered in interviews and at VVP meetings, and is extremely meaningful for the partners. “Systems change” is a window into all aspects of the project and into its members, and this history will delve deeply into its meaning and implications. The history will end with the fears that members have that they program could be terminated (and hence systems change will not be realized), and how these fears have impacted the program itself.

**Disproportionality**

Disproportionality became a major public concern in Minnesota after many in the African-American community lobbied the state legislature to investigate the extent of the problem, and got the legislature to demand a study. Hill defines disproportionality as the “differences in the percentage of children of a certain racial or ethnic group in the country as compared to the percentage of the children of the same group in the child welfare system” (2006:3). In Ramsey County African American and American Indian families and children are involved in the child protection and foster care systems at a higher rate than their overall population in the county, and stay in the systems longer (RC ERD Project 2007).
A crucial distinction needs to be drawn between the fact of disproportionality, and the condition of disparity. Disparity is the “unequal treatment when comparing a racial or ethnic minority to a non-minority” (Hill 2006:3). The problem is that racial/ethnic disproportionality is influenced by and reproduces racial/ethnic disparity. The higher rate at which children of color are reported to the county is a symptom of both prejudice toward minorities and ignorance about them. Meanwhile, the higher rate of children of color being investigated as victims of mistreatment, and as having cases with the county, is itself unequal treatment.

While considering the condition of a child or his home are valid ways to determine maltreatment, subconsciously allowing racial stereotypes into the judgment is not. Hill finds that “most studies identified race as one of the primary determinants of decisions of child protective services at the stages of reporting, investigation, substantiation, placement, and exit from care.” (Hill 2006:1)

Disproportionality is a national problem, being found in county after county. A disproportionate number of African American children are being referred to Child Protective Service agencies (Fluke, Yuan, Hederson, & Curtis 2003), while children from low-income families and children in mother-only families are also overrepresented in child protection (Hill 2006:12-13).

If the problem was merely that children of color were being reported in greater numbers by biased reporters, then this disproportionality could be corrected for by trained social workers who do not allow race to cloud their judgment and who are well aware of the cultures different from their own. However, in 2004 African American children were only 15% of child population but 34% of children in foster care (US GAO report 2007). And children of color as a whole make up nearly 60% of foster care cases (Hill 2006:1). Even more alarming is that the median length of stay in foster care for African American children is 18 months, compared with 10 months for Caucasian children (Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System:2). Regardless of what is driving this, disparity (unequal treatment) exists deep within the national child welfare system.

Unequal treatment could be exacerbated by a number of conditions. There is a state law that demands that when foster children do not go to a relative, they must go to a family that most reflects their background. However, it was brought to my attention that in 2007 all of Ramsey county there are only eleven Latino foster families (and the person who told me this felt very strongly that an effort needed to be made to find more Latino foster parents).

These trends have been found to hold up even within Minnesota, a state that prides itself on its progressive programs and its history of equality. Blacks and American Indians were six times more likely than whites to be reported for child maltreatment in Minnesota (Hill 2006:18 from Ards, Myers, Malkis 2003). And African-American children are about five times more likely than white children to be placed in out-of-home care (Jones 2004).
In 2005 African American children made up 16% of the child population in Ramsey County, but were 35% of the maltreatment reports, and 44% of children in out of home placement were African American (RC ERD Project 2007). American-Indian children made up 1.1% of the child population in Ramsey County, but were 5% of the maltreatment reports, and 5% of children in out-of-home placement were Native (RC ERD Project 2007). Compare this to Caucasian children making up 66.3% of the child population, but being only 29% of the maltreatment reports, and only 36% of out-of-home placements (RC ERD Project 2007). African-American and Indian kids were reported four times as often as white kids. Meanwhile children of Latino and South-East Asian origin are being underreported.

According to Hill, theories about the causation of minority disproportionality can be categorized into three types of factors (2006:8):

**Parent and family risk factors.** Minorities have disproportionate needs and are more likely to face risk factors such as unemployment, teen parenthood, poverty, substance abuse, incarceration, domestic violence, and mental illness. These risk factors may result in higher levels of child maltreatment (Hill 2006). And in Ramsey county, almost 38% of African American children are living in poverty (RCCHS Anti-Racism Initiative 2004), placing them at both a higher risk of not getting their basic needs met, and a higher risk of being misidentified as mistreated.

**Community risk factors.** Minorities tend to reside in neighborhoods and communities with high risk factors (including poverty, welfare assistance, unemployment, homelessness, single-parent families, crime, and street violence) (Hill 2006). Simply living in a neighborhood that is seen as “bad,” and that has a high level of police, social service, and government welfare activity, makes all the residents more visible to surveillance from public authorities and mandated reporters. This higher greater visibility then translates into more reports to CPS, while the quiet streets and larger, more private, more closed-off houses in high rent neighborhoods hides the abuse and maltreatment that inescapably goes on.

**Organizational and systemic factors:** Disproportionality results from decision-making processes of child protective service agencies. Not only does the cultural insensitivity of individual mandated reporters and social workers contribute, but also the institutional (systemic) racial biases built into governmental policies and procedures (Hill 2006).

Hill finds sources of racial disproportionality in most of the stages of decision-making at all levels in the child welfare industry. This includes reporting, investigation, substantiation, placement into foster care, exit from care, and reentry into care (2006:17). A study of risk levels and decision-making in Minnesota found that “African American victims were significantly overrepresented in initial maltreatment reports, they were more likely to be reported for neglect than abuse, they were generally at higher risk, and they were more likely to have their cases opened for ongoing CPS services than Caucasian victims” (Hill 2006:17, from Lyle 2003).
In Ramsey County, disproportionality in the child protection and out-of-home placement systems is a complex issue that stems from a combination of social and political disadvantages at the individual, community, and institutional levels. CHS has identified four key barriers they face in reducing the rates of children of color entering the child welfare system (Ramsey County BSC Application 2005):

- Institutional and societal racism.
- Policies, practices, and laws within the legal system.
- Lack of enough early intervention and prevention programs in the county, specifically in racial/ethnic communities.
- Inadequate funding for comprehensive in-home parenting, parenting skills development, home management and chemical dependency services, and safe, affordable housing.

**Ancestors of VVP**

At CHS, much of the energy for tackling disproportionality and therefore creating the VVP came out of the Ending Racial Disparities Project (ERD). Started in 2003, ERD is multi-year and multi-phase, aiming to end racial disparities throughout all aspects of the child protection and the out of home placement systems (particularly with African American and American Indian children). CPS referrals are not the only place that social services see a disproportionately high ratio of children of color. ERD itself grew out of a Children’s Justice Act grant from DHS and is led by the Family and Children’s Services Division. A Steering Committee was formed to oversee the project, which includes representatives from RCCHSD, Ramsey County Attorney’s Office, Public Defender’s Office, Second District Judicial Court, St. Paul Public Schools, St. Paul Police Department, and Ramsey County Sheriff’s Department.

Cultural Consultants from the African American, Southeast Asian/Hmong, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian communities have been valued contributors to the project. They work with their respective racial/ethnic communities to educate people about the issue of racial disparities. Importantly, they also obtain input and strategies from these communities in order to reduce and hopefully eliminate existing racial disparities.

ERD worked to eliminate racial disparities in the child protection system through three domains. For the later VVP, these three domains then translated into three sites where the VVP looked to make changes:

- **Individual**: focuses on change within individuals/professionals within the system, including staff, managers, mandated reporters, etc. At the work sites of these professionals, the VVP worked to make front-line improvements by training teachers, social workers and others in cultural awareness skills, thereby making professionals better at serving those different from themselves.

- **Institutional**: focuses on changing policies, procedures, and practices within the county system. The VVP wished to investigate at how policies at the sites of
government institutions, like CHS or the courts, were having unintended negative effects on families of color.

- **Community**: focuses on partnering with racial and ethnic communities to design supportive prevention and intervention. At this third site the VVP looked to enhance the connections between organizations and between families.

The work of the VVP is an aspect of the third and final phase of ERD, Implementation (Planning is the first, and Making Connections the second).

Another program closely related to ERD that also helped birth the VVP was the Casey Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC). Susan Ault, a director at CHS, called together the many people that had been involved in the BSC to do an evaluation tool to see where there were gaps in the quality of service to minority groups. They identified three gaps:

- **Mandated reporters**: CPS was getting too many African-American and Native-American referrals from schools. There was an over-reporting of students who where of color, urban, and poorer.
- **Service to clients**: to improve assistance CHS needed more input from clients on what it was doing well and what could be improved.
- **Developing Staff**: there was a need to look at biases inside CHS instead of just from outside reporters. Social workers will form biases both if they only see mostly minorities in their work, and if they only see minorities at work and not outside their offices and professional duties.

As the VVP later developed, each of the three areas for improvement in both ERD and the Casey BSC were folded into the VVP mission.

**It Begins with Intake**

For RCCHS the story of any family in trouble starts when the phone rings at the desk of one of the four screeners at CPS. “It begins with intake,” I was told more than once. The hope and goal is that this process be more of a “holistic approach” to helping families than simply a cut and dried, clinical method of taking down the facts about a family, passing them on to a CPS (or Family Welfare Worker), and labeling a family as a problem or not a problem.

However, since there is a disproportionately high ratio of minority families being reported to CPS, county staff feel that the problem of disproportionality occurs, in the words of a Susan Ault, somewhere “further up-stream” of them (in other words, the county is not generating the problem since the numbers are already skewed before the families arrive at “the county”). Another county employee described this as a “passive system” where “we don’t go looking for reports.” CHS had little impact on the welfare of families before they “showed up at our door,” and little impact on who did end up at their door. These families were uninvited (but welcome) guests. However, this passivity had begun to be questioned, and CHS wanted to become active in the lives of families before they found themselves in such trouble that they appeared on the radar of a mandated reporter.
So where was upstream? Just about anyone who works with children is a mandated reporter. And where were kids? In schools. So those most poised to make CPS reports are the teachers, nurses, councilors, social workers, and administrators at schools. So according to Becky Montgomery in planning, “we began to look at schools as the entry point in the system,” and truancy as the primary vehicle through which kids find themselves on the path to CPS’s door. This is why ESFC’s idea of placing a county social worker at a school was so attractive to CHS.

Linda Parker at Vento told of one student who was afraid to go home at night because the power company had cancelled their power and they had no lights. Linda felt that with social workers from the ESFC and the county at the school, they could help this family get their power back on, without having to go through the extra and punitive steps of a CPS report. As an educator, Linda saw this problems this power outage was causing the family, as a barrier to the child’s doing well in school, and wanted the resources to tackle these everyday obstacles.

However, at CHS, schools were not seen as the only source of the stream that eventually flowed through the door of CPS. Families experiencing only moderate risk, and the barriers they faced to getting their basic needs met, were also seen as potential new areas that the county could target. In fact, starting back in 1994 …

While there was a perception at CHS that the problem of disproportionality lies beyond themselves, people at CHS were also beginning to feel that CHS could be taking a more critical look at its own practices. There was a feeling that perhaps CHS should be more reflective upon what had happening inside its own house, and on how its own ways of doing business were adding to the problem or hampering the solution.

To understand the problem better CHS did focus groups with both their own staff and with parents who were past clients of CPS. These alumni were asked, “what could have prevented you from coming into the CPS system?” Parents answered that if they had only known beforehand about all the services out there for helping families, they could have gone to those agencies and received help before things got so bad that they were referred to CPS. One VVP member described the findings this way:

We had compiled a focus group of African American parents who had been in CPS to hear their experience. The said that they had been trying to get help, but not until they were reported to CPS did they get help, and then a lot. It was like all the fire trucks came out after the house had burned down.

Elsie had heard from parents who in the past had been referred to an agency that specialized in solving the particular problem they were having, but then were “refused service because they are in the system as already working with the county. Then the parents are already so frustrated by refusal for no reason, that they won’t even talk to us [at Vento and the ESFC], so then they get seen as problem parents because they can’t interface with us.”
Becky Montgomery reported that it was around this time that CHS posed to itself the question, “how do we move from deep-end services to up-front services” for families in need. Kim White in CPS reported that “one of the key things the parents in the focus group said was: I asked for help and didn’t get, I felt isolated so I gave up. And then I ended up in the CPS.” Instead of isolation, “we wanted to teach parents how to maintain long-term relationships with social service vendors in the community” (and support them in sustaining these relationships), rather than parents only having relationships with social workers here at the county.

From the focus groups it was also learned that often the only response that schools had to family problems, was to call CPS. By partnering with a school, CHS could get itself onto the major tributary upstream of itself, and work with the people on that stream to change the very way the water flowed.

The Vento Village Partnership

Reflecting the values driving the project itself, the impetus for the VVP came out of different interests and diverse places. At CHS the county wished to reduce the number of unwarranted reports of child neglect/abuse of families of color that were coming in to CPS. In addition to wanting to simply reduce its own workload, the county also was seriously looking to: reduce the racial discrimination driving this disproportionality, reduce the corrosive impact that this discrimination was having on many families of color, and bring direct help to families in need. So at CHS alone, different but compatible interests were at play. These interests came together to form a commitment to address the twin problems of disproportionality and families in need.

It can not be said that the program was even preliminarily germinated at any one agency. Even though the first phone call made to float the idea for creating a partnership was placed by Joan Schlecht at ESFC to Susan Ault at CHS in 2004, many of the partners involved had already initiated their own projects out of which the Vento Project naturally flowed. For example, Ramsey County had been working on its Ending Racial Disparities initiative (ERD), and the goals and values of the concept of a partnership at Vento fit nicely into ERD. Also, CHS had already wanted to reduce the number of neglect and abuse reports that they were getting, while increasing the services to families before they became enmeshed in investigatory arms of the county system.

Meanwhile the ESFC was struggling with the overwhelming and pandemic poverty of the (especially minority) neighborhoods and families in the East Side they served. Always they encountered the problem of families lacking the resources to adequately cope with the many demands of life, and yet not being connected to the jobs, goods, support, and services either that existed but were not easily available or that did not but should exist.

At the same time the St. Paul school district was becoming increasingly aware of and concerned by the disparities in measures of academic performance between white and minority students (particularly African-Americans and Native Americans). They very much wanted to eliminate these disparities and give underprivileged kids an all-around quality education, but were stymied by factors beyond their control, such as poverty,
homelessness, lack of social services, society-wide racism, and generational disadvantage.

**Bruce Vento School**

Coming out their joint work in the St. Paul Children’s Collaborative, Joan Schlecht at ESFC approached CHS with the idea of working together to form community partnerships for protecting children.

What was missing was a connection with the county, because many students have services with the county. … We already had a great connection with the school district [through their work at J.A. Johnson Elementary], so I called Susan [at CHS] and asked for a social worker. … We were needing someone to do more of the preventative work in order to get away from always doing crisis work” … and Band-Aid stuff.

The idea was to choose one school as the site for a test case for working on the related problems of disproportionality, child neglect over-reporting, and parents not connecting to helpful services. In the Plan Do Study Adjust (PDSA) for these problems, the Plan was to do something differently about families in crises than how it had been handled traditionally. The Do was Bruce Vento School (the Study will be a community-based evaluation (the school system element of the disproportionality issue was reduced to the Vento School). Based on the results of the evaluation, the Adjust would be a re-tooling of the Vento program, as well as possibly starting the program in other St. Paul schools).

One reason that The Bruce Vento School (Vento) was chosen was because of its high number of CPS referrals of children of color. Vento however was not extraordinary, in a way Vento was simply representative of the thousands of schools across the U.S. that exhibit disproportionality. Also, CHS wanted a “neighborhood school” in order to test how a network of support around a school could help families (neighborhood based in the sense that it is not a magnet school that draws kids from across the city, but instead draws almost all its students from within walking distance from school). Vento also offered a good test site since it was in a high poverty neighborhood, where families would be experiencing many challenges.

Vento was also an obvious choice since ESFC was already working there to support families. As original as the VVP was, in a way it was a replication of how families were already being served at J.A. Johnson Elementary less than a mile away. The ESFC has their main office there, and was already working extensively with families there. The difference with Vento, is that the collaboration was widened, and not only between the ESFC, the county, and school administrators, but also community consultants (and was managed by not just county managers, but a diverse team from all these participants including parents). “So instead of reinventing the wheel,” as Kim White put it, we went to Vento where ESFC already was.

A crucial component was Vento having an administration open to both working with the county and working on lowering its number of referrals to CPS. Susan Ault told the story of her first meeting with the principal of Vento,
I talked to the principal, and showed him the disproportionality numbers in Ramsey County. He said that AA kids are 45% of the student population of Vento, but 90% of the behavior referrals are AA boys, so he’s concerned as well. So this was the common ground with him, and he wanted to work with us.

Linda Parker, the assistant principal, understood the county’s goal of cutting down on reports to CPS. “That sounded good” to her, especially if the county was going to help provide direct assistance to Vento families that otherwise would have been investigated by CPS. And if the students being helped were the same ones who were having behavior issues at schools, the county “can help us.” Becky Montgomery summarized well how Vento appeared to CHS and ESFC, “Vento’s had a lot of challenges, and good leaders.”

Since schools are primarily in the business of education and not of supporting families with often severe difficulties, CHS saw an opportunity at Vento to make the staff aware of the many services available to their families. Traditionally the only thing that school staff knew how to do when faced with the possibility of child neglect, was to call CPS. CHS however wanted to help facilitate direct partnerships between Vento and local family services.

Compared to other schools, Vento had a higher proportion of reports of neglect to abuse. Along with the racial disproportionality, this signaled to CHS that many of the referred cases could be mild cases of parental crisis rather than serious parental maltreatment. Many of the partners at ESFC and the county were working under the idea that the largely white, middle-class staff at public schools often do not understand some of the differences between them and their lower-income students of color.

What may look to a school nurse or teacher like clear signs of parental neglect, may instead simply be a symptom of a poverty, or of the family having to move often, or of a stressed-out, out-of-work, single parent who lacks a solid support system. Perhaps there were cultural values and practices that were clashing in the classroom. However, instead of teachers recognizing this disconnect and seeing it as an opportunity to learn about the students’ backgrounds, perhaps teachers were assuming the worst.

In planning for the VVP, CHS employees interviewed school staff to get their perception of child protection and reporting. One interviewer detected from some staff the belief “that parents that are in the CPS are not normal or healthy.” She felt that this could be a problem of culture; a problem of white, middle-class professionals misinterpreting the life circumstances and customs of some African-Americans families. As an example of a cultural divide, Becky Montgomery used coin rubbing among the Hmong. In a traditional healing practice hot coins are rubbed on the skin of the ill to draw out the disease. The rubbing often produces welts, and this can be falsely interpreted as abuse instead of culturally appropriate care-taking.

An overriding idea among VVP members was that the parent of a child lacking some basic needs is probably not a bad parent who needs punishment, but perhaps a down-on-their-luck care-giver who needs classes on parenting, conversations with public servants
who do not condescend, and resources such as food, housing or employment. For staff at CHS, many of the problems Vento families faced were ones that could hopefully be solved with education, communication and assistance.

**The County Goes to School**

Working under this belief, CHS assigned one of their social workers to Vento to carry out educate, communicate with, and assist the Vento staff. Elsie Miller was selected because she had the right set of skills. Also, being a child welfare worker instead of from child protection she would know about the CP system, but come from a place more concerned with strengthening families than possibly separating them. Elsie was a county social worker, knew the appropriate CPS protocols, had successful experience working with ethnically diverse families, and crucially she was gifted at talking to people about tense issues without making them feel uncomfortable. In other words, she knew how to advise without condescending, confront without angering, and role model without over-moralizing.

In March 2006 Elsie first started at Vento. The initial plan called for a social worker at Vento for only two hours a week, and only for a few months. However, once Elsie began meeting with the Casey BSC group, it was changed to half-time, and after she started at Vento she became full-time. Since Shellie Rowe from ESFC was already set up in the school’s family, center Elsie joined her. Shellie found Elsie a chair and at first they shared a desk. When Shellie started she didn’t have an office, and “it was the kindergarten teacher at Vento that went to the Principal and said we need an ESFC office.” Shelly had been building the relationships at Vento for a year, and Joan Schlecht observed that when Elsie arrived “everything just seemed to blossom. … It was a smooth transition, but it wouldn’t have happened without relationship building. Vento was willing to open their doors.”

At that point a crucial development was the staging of a few community meetings on the VVP that were right out front in the large atrium lobby. Invitations went out to the many agencies that work on the East Side, including city district members, the police department, public housing, inspections department, and non-profits. These meetings brought upwards of fifty to sixty people from the community. Clyde Turner, a manager at CHS, felt that these meetings gave the community a lot of hope, and also established ties with people that Elsie could call on later for help. Since “we felt like it was not a county problem, but a community problem, … for us to resolve it we needed collaborative involvement.”

While the meetings started with high attendance, they later dwindled down to around fifteen people, and then fewer that were working to develop the program and craft its mission. Professional cultural consultants from local minority communities worked with the VVP agencies, but this also died out around the middle of 2007, as did the participation of parents. The early organizers of the VVP very much wanted broad based participation, including parents. However, one member noted that while staff from agencies were getting paid to work with the partnership, parents and other community
members were not. Nor did they often have the time and resources to participate regularly.

**Resistance from School**

Of the many challenges Elsie faced in her new role, one of the first was resistance from school staff who did not all know exactly why she was there. Sometimes when Elsie would try to advise school staff why the problems with a certain family did not truly rise to the level of neglect/abuse, she saw staff adamant that this family should have a CPS report opened. Julie Porath at Vento had perceived “barriers” to the agencies working together. Depending on where one worked, it was “either the school’s the enemy or the county’s the enemy.”

In order to instruct the staff on the factors that CHS uses to judge a legitimate CPS case, Elsie asked a CPS representative to do a training at the school, and she felt that this allowed the school staff to “get a better picture” of how CPS reportings and investigations work. There was one student who a school employee wanted to report to CPS because she came to school sick. However, Shelly and Elsie felt instead that the student was simply sick, end of story, and not that his parents were so neglectful as to not care that he was sick and send him off to school anyway. Soon after they were working with that family.

When Clyde Turner was asked if CHS had to educated staff about reporting, he corrected that it was not about education but awareness. And Elsie “was able to beat that staff down with her charisma and expertise.” By “beat down” he did not mean force them to bend to her will, but graciously win them over by proving herself. By awareness and not education he meant not brain-washing them but showing them a new way to do business, in the hope that through continued conversations all parties could negotiate a new model that worked for all of them.

To further reduce the number of unnecessary reports, the county asked the school staff to route all their reports through Elsie. This way she could weed out the ones that she knew did not make the county cut. This was a learning process for everyone involved, as some staff at first continued to report directly to CPS. CPS then learned to re-directed them to Elsie, until the staff leaned the new protocol. Elsie however felt that over time she and the staff developed a better report, and that staff no longer resented her.

An example of a change that VVP members helped was in how the school handled African-American boys who were performing poorly. VVP felt that the SPPS were disproportionately sending African-American boys to Vento’s Learning Center, which was a sort of sub-school within Vento for kids needing more help. However, partners helped create a new policy that before sending a student to the Learning Center, school staff must first do six months of intervention work with the child to bring that child’s performance up, before making the decision to send them to the Learning Center.

Linda Parker at Vento also tells of the change in collaboration,
At first it was just remembering to include them in things, but now it is natural, they are just part of the team. It’s such a great feeling to connect a family with what they need, they are walking away from the school feeling better, and will feel better about the school. It can be very intimidating for parents to come to school.

For Joan Schlecht this learning process was about,
Changing the whole culture of the school, into accepting outsiders into the school. … Schools are a close knit community, they [SPPS] say that they collaborate and partner, but it is within themselves, with other school agencies. For the Vento school to give us an office, and let us make decisions with them is really different. It’s kind of like going to that next level, not being embarrassed to go outside of your institution and asking for help, let’s do it as a team.

Joan had once heard the director of St. Paul schools asked, who the school system collaborated with, and in his answer he “mention every office in his own school institution. I said that’s not collaborating, and he said, no, no, this is how we collaborate. And now ten years later we [ESFC] are in four schools.”

**Resistance from Families**
The second major challenge Elsie faced was getting parents to accept her. Families do not usually want to be in the county child protection system, but what Elsie found they wanted was help and someone to talk to.

Once a family is referred to CPS their name is in the system for a long time. Not only does this mean that a family may feel like authorities are continually looking over its shoulder, but there is a stigma attached being reported to CPS. It can feel like having a permanent black mark placed on your record, or being branded a bad parent.

Even Shellie Rowe from ESFC, who works at the Family Center at Vento, admitted that “sometimes county workers are intimidating, so people want to work with community orgs. I feel intimidated by them, ‘oh my God the county is around.’” “There are a lot of sanctions going on, so they [parents] feel powerless, so they think that all county people are bad, oh they are here to take my kids.” One mother told Shellie that she didn’t want to be referred to the county for simply help because her house was messy, and the county may take this as a sign of serious parental irresponsibility (Shellie advised her that she could clean the house or meet the social worker outside the house).

Having the ESFC already at Vento had helped ease the process of parents getting over their fear of the county. Shellie offered that sometimes it is hard to come into a school building because parents know that school or other government authorities are there. Shellie felt that families had learned that ESFC was in the school to help them get stable, like help with clothing, medical resources, the mortgage, child care, or transportation costs. So when families came to the school to go to the ESFC for this help, they also got to sometimes meet the school administrators, something they otherwise never may have done. After meeting these authority figures parents no longer felt they had to be intimidated by them.
However, the fear of being investigated by the county can be strong among minority and
class families. One social worker at CHS added,

As nice and friendly as CPS workers are, people are really scared, people are afraid
they are going to lose their kids. Parents don’t know why CPS is there, and parents at
that point can’t hear what is being said. They are scared shitless and that impacts the
communication between them all.

A county worker echoed this, “Everyone thinks we are the police, but we are not the
popo. We are not about taking people’s kids.”

To combat these perceptions, Elsie introduced herself to parents as from the Vento
school, and only later as from the county. She had seen that for parents, the county was
about what it could do to you, not what it could do for you. Once Elsie started helping
out families, and in way that they did not feel devalued, she found that good word got
around about her. Once when she contacted a new family, they already knew of her, and
accepted her. “Children are our best spokes-persons. Kids tell their parents about how
nice we are and so parents are comfortable with coming to see us instead of seeing us as a
legal entity that they have to deal with.”

Another time a mother was called to the school to meet about her child acting out and
being continually late to school, and she arrived late, drunk and belligerent. Elsie took
the woman aside and asked her, “do you know why you are here today?” “Yea, these
people are telling me that my kid is stupid and bad. And why would he want to come to
school [if this is how they think of him]?” Hearing this, Elsie identified with the
woman’s concerns, especially because Elsie could hear in the patronizing tone of voice of
the school professionals what was setting the mother off. She also understood how
mothers can feel disrespected. “I have six children, one has huge needs. I have had so
meetings with school and social workers who have told me all the things I’m doing
wrong or need to change, …”

However, on the other hand Elsie perceived how the officials’ tone was in response to the
mother’s combative attitude. After Elsie had gained some trust of the mother, she told
the mother that needed to show up at the school sober, dressed appropriately, and not two
hours late. And “we are not saying that he’s a bad kid, but you need to think about
what’s happening here.” Elsie offered that while life hasn’t been fair to her, “we can
change that. I can offer you services, but why would I if you won’t change, if you only
go through the motions. You’re chemically dependent and are running your home like a
flop house.” “Three days later she called me and asked if I could get her into treatment,
had been raided and her kids were taken away.” Elsie felt that to make change
in a family you have to offer them something, such as support groups, or an invitation to
simply drop in and talk whenever they want. “They come to the center and sometimes
just sit to get out the craziness of their own homes. And when kids see the mom at school
it brings out more positive behavior in them.”

Concerning racism and racial disparity, Elsie knows it is there but does not prioritize
these social injustices over helping families and kids. “But when I see racism I address
it.” In one incident Elsie observed a black mother flare up when a white, male
professional from the school system approached the mother and her child “the wrong way.” However, responsibility cuts both ways, and Elsie felt that both the professional and the mother needed to learn how to talk to the other. Elsie advised this mother on being able to talk to the school professionals in a calmer way that did not shut down communication with them.

On the other hand, Elsie sympathized with the mother because she saw the condescending attitude the professional gave her. In his dealings with the underprivileged kids in the schools, Elsie had noticed him broadcasting an attitude of, everyone should be proud of my work because I’ve helped many a poor black person. “I said to him, I bow down to you, the great white hope. Who made you the savior to come down here and save the black people. Those were some of the barriers that I had to get through. … He wasn’t my mission, but when he affected this family he became part of my mission to provide the family an environment where they could do better. He needed to be put in his place. But not in the mom’s presence.”

Becky Montgomery had noticed that when parents were asked to come to the school to discuss problems with their children, “parents would come in very upset and scared, and angry, and staff would respond to that. And by Elsie going in there people have seen things differently, and learned how to communicate more effectively.” Clyde Turner put it this way, imagine “you are a white women social worker” helping a family, and

A woman from Gery [Indiana] who has 4 kids from 4 different men, comes up to you with her hands on her hip, you might want to show her who’s boss. And it might not be a CPS report, but you squeeze it one way and report it. But instead, Elsie might think, you’ve got your hands on your hips, you are trying to tell me something, what is it I need to know? Then you can break them down and build a relationship with that mom, and get her to take a class, or work on her parenting skills, or be a better communicator.

Again and again interviewees commented on how the staff members at the family center were a calming influence on the school. One student at Vento reported that when he gets really mad and is sent to the office, Elsie comes down and “helps me calm down.” A SPPS social worker found that Shellie and Elsie made her job easier. “I would have called the police last week if Elsie had not been here to call” and help out with an out of control student. One Vento parent revealed that she had known Shellie for nine years, and Shellie had helped her out in the past with her electricity bill, gas fair, bus cards, and clothes. Shellie has known the mother’s son since he was two, and because of this she is able to calm him down easily.

One reason the Elsie is able to calm the students is because of the respect and time she gives them. At Vento there were seven children who were particularly known for taking up the most time and resources of the school staff. Previously these seven had been given a name that was less than complimentary, but Elsie renamed them “the magnificent seven.”

Through the collaboration, Linda Parker at Vento made the realization that,
The county is not a bad place, its not a bad thing to have a case with the family. It was a huge awakening for us to learn that CPS is not just about taking away kids. Now we are now seeing the support and help more, as opposed to the iron fist.

One story of the help that a Vento parent received from the VVP was particularly interesting, because it had little to do with the fact that she even had a child at Vento. Trisha’s son went to Vento but she was not aware that there were any resources for families at schools until a friend told her about ESFC at the nearby J.A. Johnson Elementary.

I called Johnson and since I had a son at Vento they sent me here [to the Family Center at Vento]. … I met Shellie first; I came looking for assistance with a security deposit for an apartment. … I was to meet with Shellie and she wasn’t there so I just started talking with Elsie. There was something about her that made me really comfortable, I shared with her my history, I’m a recovering addict. She was very encouraging. … this person was really interested and compassionate.

Elsie helped Trisha set up a plan for herself to achieve some small goals, and after Trisha was diagnosed with breast cancer Elsie was “very helpful with that.”

Later, Trisha took the parenting class with Shellie, where she learned how to handle her kid’s temper tantrums, and learned about the difference between good discipline and bad discipline. Trisha has also donated clothes to the family center. At the time that I spoke with Trisha the house she was renting was in foreclosure, and while the Section Eight office had not been helpful, Elsie had connected her with Legal Aid to try to get her security deposit back from the landlord. About the Family Center at Vento, “it’s a soft place to fall when you are experiencing difficult times.”

**A Change at Vento**

One specific aspect of the collaboration that moved its work along, was having someone from the county working right next to community-based, non-profit social workers and school staff. On top of the appreciation that VVP members have for the direct help that Elsie gives families, partners also appreciated simply having Elsie there to give them better access to the vast information, resources, influence and authority that the county holds. The collective power and wealth of the county (or at CHS) is much greater than that of one community non-profit, the social work wing of the SPPS, or one school nurse. And while that power is an object of fear has access to it. Elsie was the corridor through which that access has been granted.

Joan Schlect noted that the school social workers do not have all the relationships to service providers that a county social worker does, and they also lack the raw authority to do things like investigate families, take children out of a home, or place them in another. Elsie has that deeper relationship; she’s embedded in the county. She can call CPS and say don’t open this case. If my staff was to do that they would laugh at us. … Without her, we couldn’t build relationships with the county as much. She’s our bridge to the county, and all the services she can provide. … Shellie can go to Elsie and say, what’s going on with this family at the county, so Elsie can find this info out much faster and easier.
A necessary but sometimes debilitating barrier that Joan has run up against in the past is client confidentiality that CHS places such importance on. “If the county doesn’t know who you are they are not going to work with you,” because they will not talk about a client unless they know and trust you.

When a SPPS social worker was asked if it feels sometimes like she had to go through an extra step now that Elsie was there, she replied, “no it’s nice to talk to someone who knows the system. She helps with getting an angle on getting additional supports for families, who don’t know it, but need it. I don’t know if the voluntary thing is always right.” Here she is talking about the authority that the county has to force parents against their will into programs for their own good, something that she lacks.

She also found that “sometimes it would be nice to know if a [Vento] family already has a [county social] worker, and we have no idea.” She had been frustrated before, when after working for a long time with a family, she discovered that the family had been working with the county all along. If she had known this, she would not have been duplicating their work, or would have been able to connect the family to the county resources that would have been helpful. With the county’s new “direct communication with schools, up front,” this problem could be avoided. This problem was particularly challenging given how mobile the families in St. Paul could be. With the moving around that Vento families often did they could get lost in the system, and disconnected from geographically-based or mail-based services.

This SPPS social worker also appreciated that Elsie could answer questions about the viability of a case, if it will “go” at the county level, and appreciated that Elsie advocated to the county for cases that the school knows really do need “to go.” Susan Ault at CHS felt that “school social workers don’t know our system. … We are a mystery driven by laws and rules and details, a bureaucracy.”

Linda Parker at Vento noted that while school social workers had a lot of knowledge, working with the county system laid another direct line to other services for our families. “Before we had to go through the red tape, and now we can avoid that extra step.” Also, now when Linda has meetings with parents, she frequently has someone there from the county or ESFC to get more frontline services for the parents.

Shellie Rowe at ESFC found that “it’s been nice having Elsie putting her name on applications, throw a name around, or work it through different systems.” However, at the same time, “there are things I do that Elsie couldn’t do, not ethical as a social worker. We [at private organizations] don’t have to do things by the book.”

When one partner was asked if there was anything that made the VVP unique, collaboration was immediately zeroed in on.

Now you are utilizing resources from a large group of agencies and people. Now that people are understanding their roles, they are working together more. It reduces turf war. In the past one organization knew of a resource, and held tightly to it, now it is
more likely to be shared among the partners. And the worse thing that can happen is a resource goes unused, because the families don’t know about the resources.

**Cultural Consultants**

The ESET provided the VVP with various kinds of support, including bringing to the VVP the wisdom of cultural consultants from various minority communities. During the December 2006 ESET meeting, John Poupart, from the American Indian community, shared some of the distinct conditions and perspectives of the local Native peoples, many of whom were Dakotah with long standing roots to this land. Poupart had heard mixed reports about Native relationships with RC social workers; while some spoke highly of their social workers, others found services to be poor. And given the history of betrayal that Indians had long experienced at the hands of US government agencies, it was critical that social workers work particularly hard at earning the trust of their Native clients.

From the local African American Community, Mary K. Boyd and Kwame McDonald, reported the input from families that they held six community meetings with. Families reported a lot of frustration with getting help from the county. When one family asked for help, they were told that their situation wasn’t yet bad enough to warrant county assistance. And families wondered why there weren’t more preventative services for keeping them out of trouble. On the other hand, some parents felt like once they were in the CPS system they were stuck inside a system they didn’t understand. The consultants pointed that since so many parents lacked education, they often didn’t understand how they had gotten into the system and how they could get out. Also, many parents were feeling overwhelmed, and caught between the demands of work and responding to their children’s difficulties at school.

In the African American community respect and church were key values. When a social worker presents as respecting themselves, and also respects their clients, they are more likely to receive respect from the families. Families also were very concerned about children being separated from their families by the county, and wanted to see this reduced. However, when children are taken, it is important to try to place them with extended family members and not strangers.

Neal Thao from the Hmong community reported that the focus groups that were conducted in a traditional Hmong way were much more productive. In the more successful groups parents told of the importance of their kinship systems. When a child is separated from their family, it is not simply a matter of finding another Hmong family to place the child with. For example, children of the Thao family group should live only with other Thao families, and not with Lee’s. Families reported wanting more mediation with the county, so that the extended families have more control over the fate of their children. They also did not want to have to rely on welfare and public school services, but instead rely more on their own community and on the strengths in their culture.

Amber Hanson of Casa De Esperanza reported to the ESET the results of surveys and listening sessions with the Latino community. Parents reported needing more access to libraries, sporting leagues, recreation centers, community centers, and anywhere they
could do family activities. They also desired more access to jobs and English classes. And while families wanted to participate in more community activities, they often did not know about them. For example, community meetings were usually only advertised in English. However, within the Latino community itself word of mouth spreads quickly, and people use Latino radio stations and newspapers to stay informed.

**The East Side Extended Team**

In addition to these focus groups with minority communities, a group specifically of Vento parents expressed they wanted more communication and contact with the schools than simply receiving flyers from the school. They also felt that the school could use resources in the community more, and exploit the wisdom of its parents.

At this December 2006 meeting the ESET discussed how “things are most successful when parents interact with schools and school social workers. They get connected to community resources and supports” (ESET minutes 12/06). It was voiced that the schools and the county could do much more to communicate better with parents. And the way to make this happen was through more one-on-one, personal contact. This would show parents that the school cares about their input, and would increase their participation.

At next month’s ESET meeting members brainstormed ways for getting the word out to the community about ESFC, including new events like community dinners, and “plugging into what’s already happening” in the community (ESET minutes 12/06). Members also expressed the need to facilitate new collaborations in the community, involve parents in funding decisions, and build capacity within the community for solving family problems. “How do we support people doing things for them self?” (ESET minutes 12/06). And at the August 2007 ESET meeting the members crafted its vision and mission.

At the next meeting in October 2007, the team renamed itself the Ending Racial Disparities Leadership Team, with a revised mission. However, a few minutes later it was then decided to discontinue the Ending Racial Disparities Leadership Team, and instead have each of its component parts meet separately. Joan felt that it seemed like each month the ESET met and talked about the same things. While the ESET had served its purpose and allowed its diverse members to share information, people felt that each project (East Side Human Services Network, Ministerial Alliance, VVP, RCCHS, Merrick, ESD, Summit-University AIFC), could function fine on their own (the irony of creating a mission for the ESET and then immediately killing the ESET was not lost on the members).

However, before dissolving it detailed the focus and activities of the VVP:

**Focus:** activities at Vento Village as it relates to improving outcomes.

- Student attendance
- Parent Support
- Connecting parents to resources around basic needs.
• Parent stabilization
• Parent development/leadership/empowerment
• Assisting parents in dealing with child’s behavior
• Supporting children (mentors, after-school activities)

Activities/Tasks of Team:
• Annual Work-plan
• Evaluation of efforts
• Developing identified resources needed by parents and kids, including access and usage of adult and child mental health services.
• Searching for Funding

Immediately following this meeting, (after a pizza lunch) the VVP members met on their own and worked again to define their goals and mission:

Goals by different partners:
• ERD: Reduce and eliminate racial disparities.
• SPPS: Eliminate racial achievement gaps.
• VVP: Reduce racial disparities by working with parents to strength their parenting and reduce risk of entering CPS system.

Reduce and eliminate racial disparities by:
• Strengthening, supporting and empowering families.
• Increasing schools staff ability to work effectively with parents and children.
• Connecting families and children with resources to assist them in reaching their full potential.

At the VVP next meeting in November, the team compiled a more comprehensive list of all the activities and events it had been involved with, including all the parent classes that the Family Center had facilitated.

**Systems Change**

**Collaboration An End in and of Itself**
For Joan Schlecht the larger project of the VVP was never simply about ending disproportionality, or even just helping families; collaborating itself was an end in and of itself. In order to get to the point of even being able to work successfully on disproportionality and family troubles, the collaboration would have to work. For Joan and other members of the partnership, creating a successful collaboration had been just as rewarding as helping families. And creating the collaboration had been about creating change.

In a way, it was almost as if fighting disproportionality was the vehicle for building relationships, instead of the other way around. Once there was a collaborative structure in place for dealing jointly with complex problems that required multiple kinds of
institutions and methods to solve, then a huge collection of problems could be tackled. Over-reporting to CPS or misinterpretation of abuse could be seen as simply the issues that happened to be used, in order to move ahead with a collaboration between the schools, the county, and the non-profits. Any number of problems could have been the excuse for teaming up with other agencies for the purpose of helping communities in the East Side. Joan felt,

We really needed to do a systems change at the school. … We needed to work on trusting each other, building relationships, learning about each other, what are our limits. It was a full year working on them and integrating Elsie and Shellie into the school, so that Elsie and Shellie were not outsiders anymore, more like staff. To the point where no one even knows who pays someone’s check.

Of course once they were integrated it was much easier to divert families from CPS to direct help, but it was also a lot easier to attack any other problem that involved families in St. Paul.

Re-Networking the System

A question that anyone first hearing about the VVP might pose is: if Vento has social workers already, what’s the point in bringing in social workers from other agencies? When Susan Ault was asked if she would like to change the way that school social workers help families by changing their job and their mission, surprisingly she answered no. “The best way is through a partnership, to meet the social needs of students and families so that the school can focus on education. Our [county] system is a mystery, school social workers don’t know our system, and don’t have enough time to serve all families …. There isn’t funding for more social workers in schools.” While Vento has two social workers, 80% of their work must be dedicated to the needs of special education students (one social worker does special education in the main building while another in the Learning Center. However Vento also has a counselor that works exclusively with non-special ed students).

The value expressed here is not compelling systems change by changing one institution like the St. Paul schools, but changing the way that institutions interact, in order to produce a network of services for families that together is greater than the sum of the parts. The solution is not to create more social workers, but to connect the people who already are working with kids, but in different venues, to each other. If the people needing help are at schools, and school social workers are overwhelmed, then connect them to the county and neighborhood agencies. The change was not making more of something, it was doing more with what they had. It was not making one agency bigger, but making the system bigger by connecting different agencies. Susan saw the school’s mission and specialty as education, so why not give them the resources for social work, allowing them to spend more of their time on doing what they do best.

However, Elsie was explicit that all rhetoric about collaboration must actually result in something real. “And not just the dog and pony show, but talk about the growing pains.” And deal head on with “territorial and boundary issues. We need to be walking with the children and parents. The team has to be a team, it can’t be a bunch of folks just working
together.” And being a team meant that “the Bruce Vento Village is not Elsie, when you focus on the individual it gets watered down. I don’t do the work, it is done by everyone. If people believe that this program is one person, it will die.”

THE INFORMATION IN THIS PARAGRAPH NEEDS CORRECTING [[[An example of a small but important change in the child welfare system a VVP member advocated was dealing with truancy. Because of a political turf battle between an administrator in criminal corrections and another in CHS, truant and runaway cases are sent to corrections to be handled as serious crimes. Meanwhile, any child already in the county child welfare system, that committed any crime was always dealt with by CHS. The result was that kids who were missing school because of family problems were being prosecuted for crimes instead of helped by social workers, and kids that were committing murder were being handled by social workers instead of the police.]]]

Shift from Neglect to Poverty

Another change that the VVP tried to bring to child welfare was a shift in the way that welfare problems were viewed. When a child’s care is lacking, instead of seeing it as a serious problem of parenting, it can be seen as a societal problem, or as a scarcity of resources. What if the parent’s desire to give their children everything they need is there, but the things they need is not there. This moves the issue from one of child neglect to a more holistic issue of total child welfare.

While multiple bruises on a small child are fairly concrete evidence of abuse, dirty ripped clothes may not mean that the parent does not take care of their kid. It may instead simply be a sign of a parent who lacks the money for clothes (or even more simply a child who refuses to wear new, clean clothes). In this case what a family needs is a referral to a free store, not to CPS. In one instance, a Vento teacher was concerned about the hygiene of a boy, and asked Elsie for help. Rather than single out that child by coming into his class and directly confronting him, Elsie instead did a presentation on hygiene to his entire class. In the course of the presentation, Elsie learned that this kid’s mother had been after him about hygiene, but the boy just wouldn’t do what his mother asked.

Not only are CPS cases disproportionately of families of color, but there is a large overlap between families in poverty and CPS reports. Parents who found themselves under CPS tend to be not only lacking resources for their children, but also lacking the resources to contest charges against them. They lack the contacts, knowledge and money to contest the findings and orders of the police, social services, and/or courts.

The thinking at VVP was that it is often poverty that drives neglect cases, not bad people. If the VVP could motivate itself around the problem of poverty, it could design programs where the solutions better fit the predicaments. In turn, this change would reflect in the way that workers engaged families, and parents and kids would feel more like they were being respected and taken seriously, rather than condescended to or shamed.
The members of the VVP tended to see larger, institutions as influencing the problems that poor and minority families face. Member’s first reaction is not to look down on parents whose children come to school lacking proper clothing. There reaction is two-fold: how can we help this family today by getting the child some clothes and getting the parents connected with support services; and how can we change the very ways in which the educational, welfare, and community systems are negatively impacting this family. Here we see a short-term and long-term response from the VVP.

This perspective can be seen in the ways that members talked about the families they served. They referred to them as “families in crises.” Families in crises or facing challenges, are not inferior, but for what ever reasons, are currently having difficulty getting their basic needs met. This does not assign blame to families needing help, it merely but crucially identifies them as people who need help (this is similar to the shift from labeling people as “homeless” to “currently experiencing homelessness”).

**Shift from Referrals to Truancy and Beyond**

Another change in VVP services was from focusing on CPS referrals to school attendance. Truancy is one of the easiest ways in which students get noticed by reporters, and so addressing the causes of truancy would be going even farther upstream of the disproportionality problem. Elsie asked the question, “How can we get kids who are missing school not to miss.” Are these kids hungry or homeless, and how can we help the whole family that is in crisis.

Our goal is to figure out how we can help families, what do they need. It’s partnering with families around what their needs and issues are. … This program is important for families on the cusp, on the fence, all but the arms are over the fence. The more they use community resources the more they can stay out of the system. … If we can work with those families that are high risk, if they are going down the path, and we can divert them, we see fewer reports of African-American kids.

To achieve this goal Elsie feels everyone needs to get talking to each other. “How can we understand each other and talk to each other, so that families don’t come away from meetings with school or county staff feeling stupid.” Solving these problems opened up a way to switch from disciplining students to connecting them with mentors, registering parents for parenting classes, inviting parents into the classroom, and working on self-esteem issues.

**Natural, Evolutionary, Voluntary, & Flexible**

For Elsie this shift in the program (to considering the total welfare of the family and connecting it with all possible services that my help it) “was natural.” Elsie felt that since the partners of the VVP were so committed to the task, their brainstorming conversations led to new methods. “It is mind boggling to think about how the shift happened. It wasn’t strategically planned out. We tried things out, I keep using the word natural because that’s all I can think of.” A vital ingredient to Elsie’s work was that no one ever told her the things she could not do.
Part of partnering with others to help families, was making the program voluntary. Families chose whether or not to accept services, to talk about their difficulties, to donate clothes to other families, and to be interviewed for this history. By being voluntary the program’s many parts were much less under a central control, like a Human Services Manager. Instead they were more diffusely managed by not just professionals and committees, but also by families that had actually being served.

In this complexity, the program could bend, grow, and adapt in creative and unforeseen ways. According to Becky Montgomery, “at Vento Village, the skill level is there. We haven’t micromanaged it. We’ve had the outline, it has just happened, you have to let it evolve.” This evolutionary character fit into its voluntary nature.

It’s evolutionary, it spreads more organically than being imposed on families. It not a model that is forced on everyone the same everywhere. What are family characteristics that change the needs.” … “It’s a framework more than a model. … You plug in the individual characteristics of the community and school. The model implies that this is the way you do it, but a framework implies that it’s an outline and you fill in those things that are unique to your situation. A model is more fleshed out than a framework.

At the last ESET meeting, as Becky was facilitating a discussion on what the mission of the ESET was, she even commented that, “see, it’s evolving right here.”

This family service model was based on a number of flexible and affirming approaches. It was strength-based, as social workers focused on the strengths that a family possesses, and worked to solve their problems through these strengths (as opposed to identifying weaknesses and then trying to fix them). Part of being strength-based was also looking beyond just the nuclear family to other kin, by exploring resources that extended family members have to offer. This lead into a holistic approach, instead of simply using county resources, social workers connected families with a wide variety of people including kin, friends, school staff, neighborhood organizations and local non-profits. For example, Elsie could see that a family is living in substandard housing, and she could contact the city attorney to improve their building.

After the VVP started Joan Schlecht saw that “it evolved” from a program focused on racial disparities, but not knowing exactly how to tackle that problem, to “working on changing the culture of the school, and disproportionality was the side project. So we were all over the place.”

**From the Individual to Institutional Level**

The desire for system’s change by VVP partners, mirrored the calls that national child welfare organizations where making for institutional changes in the industry. For example, Robert Hill stresses that the solution is primarily not to be found in changing individual people or in ferreting out individual racists. “At the institutional level you’re not talking about individuals but about systems.” It is beneficial to “acknowledge that differential treatment can be done unintentionally by good intentioned people, regardless
of their color.” “The point is to not to label people as racists. … it is to be honest about what you’re doing, … trying to understand what your practices are doing as opposed to your intentions.” And Khatib Waheed points out that this struggle “is not about beating up on social workers.”

For the Ending Racial Disparities project at CHS,

The factors that drive the issue of racial disparities are not simple. It is not about what any one person has done or not done. Rather it is about years of multiple societal issues, policies and practices affecting certain families over time in a way that results in poor outcomes. The emphasis of this project is not to find fault or place blame but to work together as a system and community to find ways that yield better outcomes for children and their families (Ending Racial Disparities Project, 11/06).

As well, the VVP project is not about beating up on mandated reporters at schools or on social workers at the county, but changing the culture and policies of non-profits, the school system, and the county. More than just changing individual institutions or existing systems, the VVP used the uniqueness of the partnership between these three institutions to develop a whole new system.

For Susan Ault at CHS, there were four “key elements” to making the VVP revolutionary and fruitful. The first was to “change frontline practice.” By putting Elsie into the school practice was being brought closer to the people in need. Another element was “building neighborhood networks.” Social workers would help in identifying resources in the neighborhood for families. Families could then be connected to a valuable, already existing, but unlinked store of assets. Another elements was “governing a community partnership.” Parents would be part of the governing body of the program and the project would be “consumer driven.” The last was “improving child safety and family function.” This was the ultimate goal; the purpose is to work with families to change their condition, not work on families.

Ironically, for all the talk about “systems” at the VVP, there was also concern that “we need to use a non-system language” when talking to parents and others not a part of the social work system (ESET 1/16/07). By using the technical terms of the bureaucracies of CHS, SPPS, the courts, and the world of public policy, service providers could be distancing themselves from and miss-communicating with the very people they were trying so hard to reach. Linda pointed out that “it’s about learning to talk to parents without acronyms so that they can understand us.”

The Risk of Losing the Program

Another part of the history of this program was its future. Anxieties about the future has had an effect on how the project has changed. The VVP was always searching for funding to supplement and extend the program. The whims of funders and administrators have been at times frightening and perplexing things to partners, and decisions have to made in the face of an uncertain future.
Susan Ault whose division helped start the VVP, couldn’t make “any promises about the money [from the county for the VVP], because every dime I’ve saved for the county has gone to budget cuts instead of reinvested [into CHS programs]. … I need the county board to promise that saved money gets reinvested.” And in the face of federal money drying up and the state not funding children’s services as it used to, She was hoping that the VVP would be successful enough to be able to go to foundations for large amounts of money for future expansions in the VVP.

She had also felt she had experienced resistance from county administrators who see suspected didn’t see as much value as she did in working on issues of race and racism. She found their sentiments similar to the attitude found often in America that, “we aren’t racists, we don’t have institutional racism” here. She also felt pressure from other CHS administrators who felt that it was a waste of time to work on early intervention services. They felt instead that those resources should be put into their divisions. At the time she was interviewed for this history she had given her notice to the county and was moving to a non-profit organization; “there’s never any guarantee that this work will continue as is. Without me here the project could be in jeopardy.”

Joan Schlecht was also concerned that at any time the county leadership may no longer see the value of VVP or decide that its work is done at the Vento School and pull its resources out to place somewhere else. Joan was also not sure about the school system’s increasing its commitment to VVP. While it doesn’t cost much for a school to provide a desk and a phone for another social worker, staffing itself is very expensive and ESFC did not have the means for providing staff at all the schools on the East Side.

If SPPS wanted to replicate this, it must be willing to fund raise to have representatives in each school. We [at ESFC] do basic need family living, mental health, medical health info, signing up for medical plans, [this is] way beyond what current school social workers do.

For the model to expand to other schools, the school system would have to not only change the way it thinks about serving it’s families, but also put up a significant amount of money.

While being interviewed by the author for this study, Clyde Turner at CHS contrasted the tenuousness of experimental programs in local government with projects in the corporate world; “General Mills has a hundred million dollars to do research, but we have to go out there to raise money, we even have to do that just to get you in here [to do this history].”
Acknowledgments

Amy Miller researched all of the statistics on disproportionality in the Disproportionality section, wrote almost all of the section on Causes of Disproportionality, and wrote most of the material on ERD in the ERD and BSC section.

Thanks is due to the members of the evaluation unit at Ramsey county, particularly Rahel and ?. Thank you to the staff at the Vento school for providing me assistance and space to work. My supervisor, Cameron Counters, was extremely supportive, particularly in listening to all my ideas and concerns about the project, and in trusting me and giving me the leeway to take the project where ever I felt it should go.

And thank you very much to all the members of the Vento Village Partnership and all the people who generously gave their time to talk to me, some of whom were not even on the clock.

References


Breakthrough Series Collaborative 2005 St. Paul: Ramsey County.

Casey Family Programs 2006 Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System.


Endnotes

1 The ESFC is a community based nonprofit, part of the East Side Development Company (ESDC). Its centers are directly within the neighborhoods, and the community they enter decides what the center will focus on. Its work involves a lot of relationship building. One example of this is that the ESFC found an established agency in the community to be its fiscal agent. “The ESFC was created in 1996 by the St. Paul/Ramsey County Children’s Initiative as one of 8 neighborhood-based family resource centers in St. Paul to provide a welcoming environment for parents to receive help in nurturing and parenting their children. During its 9 year history of successful operation, demand for its services has continually grown and its programming has evolved into the holistic service model used today by hundred of East Side families.” “The program mission of the East Side family Center is to value and strengthen the capacity of St. Paul’s East Side communities, cultures and families to help healthy, nurtured children achieve their full potential and become active, contributing members in the community.” The ESFC addresses the needs of child health, child development, school readiness, family functioning, and parent and community organizing (ESFC brochure).

ii This history was researched and written over the course of the fall and winter of 2007/2008, by a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. The research was funded by the Communiversity program at the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs in Minneapolis, which connects student researchers with community or government agencies in need of help with a project. This history is one part of a two part research effort into the VVP. The other half is a model for how to do a community-based evaluation of the program. These two reports share certain data and are very relevant to each other, and the reader should see the evaluation model to further understand the VVP and its future. At times, it was difficult for the author to separate these two projects, and to determine what data should be placed into which document (this issue will be tackled in the evaluation model report). The reader will no doubt note that much of what is reported in this history is evaluative (judgmental, highly subjective) statements on the VVP, but these opinions are in many ways just as much part of its history, as its future evaluation. Most of the data for this history came from nineteen interviews conducted with VVP partners, including staff from the CHS, SPPS, and ESFC, parents and students at the Vento School, and other professionals (except for the one by telephone and one by email, all interviews were in-person and lasted from fifteen minutes to over an hour). The researcher also attended five meetings of the VVP, and hung out a few times at the family center in the Vento school. The methods and writing reflect the background of the researcher, and PhD student in cultural anthropology, trained in ethnographic methods of participant-observation.

iii In 2004, the Disproportionality Index for African American children in foster care was 3.63, compared to 0.63 for white children and 7.31 for Native American children (US GAO report, July 2007)

iv According to the RCCHS Anti-Racism Initiative, a review of the research has demonstrated a large impact of poverty on involvement in child protection system.

v As of 2007 ERD was proud to have engaged in the following activities:
1. Developing partnering relationships with recognized and emerging leaders from four racial/ethnic minority communities (Native-American, black, Asian/Hmong, and Latino).
2. Educating professionals involved in all aspects of the child protection and out of home placement systems about the existing racial disparities and institutional racism.
3. Conducting focus groups/talking circles with professionals involved in CPS and out of home placement systems.
4. Researching “best practices” that have either reduced racial disparities or kept children safely in their home or within their communities.
5. Increasing community capacity to support families.

vi Although no one came out and said it in interviews, it seemed that there had been some feeling among the school staff of not appreciating an outsider coming into their school telling them how to do their job. On top of this, Elsie felt like there was some fear from the staff that the VVP was going to take away their jobs. However, no one at the school relayed this fear in this study, or seemed concerned about this. This perception could itself have been an initial barrier to establishing a close partnership.
“It’s not the fault of the school, that’s how it’s always been. Opening it up to help outside of their own culture, community is big systems change.”

Another label that parents sometimes fear is “homeless.” Linda had found that “some families don’t want to say they are homeless because of the consequences.” The consequences being not only the stigma, but if you are classified as homeless wouldn’t that be fodder for having your kids taken away? A related problem is that “sometimes families don’t consider themselves homeless because” while they have lost their home they are not on the streets, but living with extended family. What families don’t know is that even under these conditions the family is still eligible for (title 1) funds to help homeless students.

The impression the author has gotten of CHS’s database is of a fortress, and only particular employees have the passwords to particular fields of information. While Joan Schlecht has known administrators and workers at CHS for a long time and may have the trust of them, having an official working relationship with the county gave her and her staff the cache to request more from CHS.

The author found that this flexibility among the private partners of the VVP strengthened it by deepening its abilities and widening the variety of services it could offer families.

Vision: All children of color achieve their full potential through strong families, culturally appropriate actions, connections to natural community supports and effective systems. (In addition to educating the systems appointed representatives).

Mission: Create a system that will be an accountable and anti-racist system that supports and strengthens the families and children of color and eliminates racial disparities.

Sharing activities related to ending disparities and disparate outcomes for children of color in Child Protective Services and Out-of-Home Placement systems.

To the author, the VVP appears to view families less as objects to be fixed, and more as subjects who are worthy of being listened to and helped. This is similar to the recent movement in medicine to move from seeing the patient as just a physical body that has a purely physical problem (think of the stereotypical situation where an overworked and arrogant doctor sees a patient and ignores that there is even a person in the room with them, ignores the patient’s interpretation of their illness, and instead treats the patient as simply organic material that is not working properly and requires pills or the knife to fix). Think instead of a physician who takes into account a wide range of mental, social and physical features in trying to understand a patient’s complaint, in light of their whole life and their overall wellbeing. Imagine a doctor who works together with the patient to creatively generate a multifaceted solution, that doesn’t simply try to fix the physical problem, but make the person satisfied, whatever that may be.

In America the standard (common sense, dominant) way to interpret poverty is to place the blame for being poor (and for being reported to CPS), on the poor themselves (Newman 1988). The explanation is that the poor are poor because they are lazy, irresponsible, undisciplined, and act impulsively instead of planning carefully for their future (lack a work ethic). In this same vein, the poor are also seen as lacking ethics, moral fiber, impulse control, and proper parenting skills. And so it only makes sense that poor children would be victims of abuse and neglect (this way of thinking is only re-enforced by the news reports, including the recent widely reported Minneapolis news story about the black grandmother who made her grand-daughter drink a large glass of gin so that she would pass out, so the grandmother could go party (Star Tribune, January 2008).

The author sees a third, even more long-term potential avenue, large-scale educational and welfare reform, that is, changing the state, county, and city laws and policies that regulate schools and social services.

People are not either at their essence either homeless or not homeless, it is simply that at the present moment some people lack a home. This is something that can befall many of us at any time if the wrong set of tragedies accumulate to leave us without a home. But to call someone homeless marks them as a damaged person, someone who has utterly failed and offers nothing to society.

A CHS administrator explained that when kids are under 12, truancy is assumed to be a problem with the parents. However, when kids are over 12 it is assumed that the kid is old enough to take responsibility for getting themselves to school on time, so being late is their fault and not the parents.

VVP appears to the author to have more capacity for adaptation to unforeseen problems and needs, and more capacity for creative development by planners, social workers, school staff, and parents.

These are quotes from the presentation, “Addressing Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System: What State Policymakers Should Know.” From the NGA Center for Best Practices.
As in any talk, there were a lot of metaphors used by VVP members to try to describe the systems change they were trying to get at. The author felt that some of the metaphors fell into larger metaphorical categories, like that of fishing. The phrases that evoked fishing included: “moving upstream,” “going deeper,” and “catching these families before it gets reported.” Related phrases that evoked getting upstream included, “Front end services,” “before they come in the door” [of CPS], and “early intervention services.” Other metaphors seem to describe these families (that were being fished for) as immanently “at risk” of falling into deeper crises. Families were “going down the path” to failure, and had “one arm over the fence.” The VVP itself seemed to often be about baking, as the program was described as needing to be “spread,” but “not cookie cutter.” While the metaphors and phrases used to describe the collaboration itself often evoked images of family: “partnership,” “family,” and “building relationships.” And the evolutionary metaphor has already been detailed.
Community-Based Participatory Evaluation

Model for the Vento Village Partnership

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March 2008
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Part 1: Introduction

This is a model for a community-based evaluation of the Vento Village Partnership (VVP) on the East Side of St. Paul. It was commissioned by the Evaluation Unit of Ramsey County Community Human Services (RCCHS), in St. Paul, Minnesota.

The VVP is a trial social-work program started in 2006, in which a social worker from the County and one from the non-profit East Side Family Center were placed directly in an inner-city school to serve that community. Among its diverse and evolving goals, the program sought to help the families of students that were at risk of being reported to the county for abuse or neglect, and also to work with school staff to reduce and improve the reporting of students to the county’s Family and Child Services unit (FCS). A central motivation was the perception that families of color were being over-reported by schools to the county’s FCS. The VVP therefore wanted to redirect resources and staff away from reporting (and investigating) families of color to providing them services that they needed and desired. One inspiration for the program was that if social workers could get vital services to at risk families before they got deeper into trouble, everyone would be better served.

Along with this evaluation model, CHS also commissioned a history of the VVP. Since the program was not institutionalized anywhere and was considered by its participants to be a valuable experiment, a history was required to document what the program was and how it had changed over time. For a fuller description of the VVP please see the “History of the Vento Village Partnership.”

This study is not an evaluation itself, but is a model for ways to possibly go about doing an evaluation in the future. Although it does contain some evaluative judgments
by members of the VVP, it is absolutely not an evaluation itself. Per the wishes of the VVP, this blueprint maps out methods for not just any kind of evaluation, but a community-based one. The VVP felt strongly that an evaluation should be heavily based on input from a diverse group of people from the communities of the school, the neighborhood, the minorities from the East Side, the agencies in the area, and beyond. This model therefore uses the methods and values of the emerging field of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR).

This report will start with a brief survey of the literature on CBPR, as a way of making recommendations for and setting the groundwork for a community-based evaluation of the VVP. Inherent in these values are a series of steps for creating a project that not simply includes the community, but works to transform it for the better. This report will then discuss one particularly excellent CBPR research project which can be used as a model for the VVP evaluation.

The heart of this evaluation design however should come from the suggestions of the VVP members for how they would like an evaluation done, which I organized into five general categories. These suggestions were collected through a series in interviews I conducted with various members of the VVP, in which I asked them, among other things, how they wanted an evaluation done and what questions they wanted answered. Next will be discussed major challenges that the VVP evaluation is likely to face. I will also report the evaluative judgments of the success of the VVP that interviewees gave me.

This will be followed by four appendixes providing valuable information taken from the literature on CBPR, including recommendations helpful for anyone implementing community-based research.
It can not be stressed enough however, that the “History of the Vento Village Partnership” will be one of the most important resources for guiding evaluators.\textsuperscript{i}
Part 2: Community Based Participatory Research

CBPR Methods and Values

CBPR is a strong commitment by researchers to the people they study, so much so that the community studied becomes a significant part of the research team and its governing bodies. CBPR is a direct reaction against traditional forms of research that treat those being studied as objects of study, as sources of data from which scientific knowledge can be extrapolated. Instead, CBPR attempts to treat people as subjects whose worth goes far beyond just their value to scientific knowledge. CBPR views people as whole people, in light of their larger lives, and in light of what they say their needs and concerns are. CBPR regards research subjects as creators of valuable knowledge themselves, as worthy judgers of their own problems and their solutions, as able decision-makers, and having the wisdom and skill to be co-researchers.

Viswanathan et al give a particularly good definition of CBPR for the healthcare field:

Done properly, CBPR benefits community participants, health care practitioners, and researchers alike. CBPR creates bridges between scientists and communities, through the use of shared knowledge and valuable experiences. This collaboration further lends itself to the development of culturally appropriate measurement instruments, thus making projects more effective and efficient. Finally, CBPR establishes a mutual trust that enhances both the quantity and the quality of data collected. The ultimate benefit to emerge from such collaborations is a deeper understanding of a community’s unique circumstances, and a more accurate framework for testing and adapting best practices to the community’s needs (Viswanathan:1).

To expand upon this definition, the authors further suggest that CBPR involves:
- **Co-learning** and reciprocal transfer of expertise, by all research partners, with particular emphasis on the issues that can be studied with CBPR methods.
- **Shared decision-making** power.
- **Mutual ownership** of the processes and products of the research enterprise. (Viswanathan:3).
In CBPR, the community being studied shares power with the researchers (and their associates) in ideally ALL aspects of the research at EACH stage of research. The community and its members are *partners* in the study. This means that people in the subject community have decision-making authority over the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the research. This may also include also having rights to the ownership of the data, results, and any publications.

**Steps in Integrating the Community into the Research**

At its simplest level, community-based research means receiving input from people beyond the core research group or its institution (for an evaluation this means listening to people beyond the doors of the agency whose program is being evaluated, and hearing in particular from people served by the program). However, to be true to the values of CBPR, the research would be much more, and also include the points below:

- CBPR does not just “go into the community” to get data, but the research project’s very design will be created with input from the community. From the very moment that the research is conceived, the community will be involved in what the research questions will be, the methods, the goals, etc.

- It is not only input from the community that is required, but giving the community status as *co-creators* and governors of the research. Researchers do not just ask people what kind of research they want, and take that information back to their office to design the project. They design the project within a committee that is just as much controlled by different members of the community as the agency that initiated or funded the research.
• The research is not only created for the purpose of scientific knowledge, but directly designed to help the community that is being studied.

• Research should do more than help the community studied, but can itself create and maintain lasting capacities within the community for helping themselves. This means building community in a way that develops concrete resources and skills.

• While a community-based approach may end there, seeing the researchers as having done everything they can for the community. However, the community is affected by larger, political-economic forces beyond itself. To create longer-term, systemic improvements, researchers would help lobby for changes in such areas as laws, government policy, business practices, employment, and the general economy.

• Changes in these areas may need to be much more than a few new policies or practices, but fundamental re-structuring of the very way that laws and policies are created (substantial systems change, such as changing the ways that resources are distributed in society).

**Nuclear Risk Management Among Native American Communities**

As a model for doing quality CBPR, I was present from the literature one particularly well-developed example of CBPR. This was a four-year, research and community development project in Utah among those Native American populations that had been exposed to nuclear fallout from weapons testing in the 1950s and 60s (Quigley, Handy & Goble, 2000). Quigley et. al note that the Indians in this area are among the many minorities nationwide that have suffered from environmental racism. Historically in the U.S., minorities and the poor have bared the brunt of pollution and environmental degradation. For example, in 1987 Houston was one quarter black, yet “75% of
municipal garbage incinerators and 100% of city owned garbage dumps are located in black neighborhoods” (Lipsitz 1998:8).

In researching the health effects of nuclear contamination, the researchers wanted to work against the notions that only positivistic science was legitimate research. They found that in the health sciences there was “tremendous resistance” to seeing as legitimate, the knowledge that one could find in any community that was being studied (306). The authors also found that reporting in a health study what people in the community thought about their own health problems, was considered “contaminated data” (306).

In the recent past “sympathetic health professionals and community members” had identified four general ways that future research on health among Native Americans could create more equitable relationship between researchers and the community (307). “Community participation must be required at all stages” including oversight authority over potential problems that arose, “community knowledge” of disease “must be integrated into the research process,” “community members must be educated about contamination … and be trained to” control and conduct research, and “solely quantitative research practices must not dominate” (307-8).

These improvements were in response to a history of neglect and deception of the local Indians by government and researchers alike when it came to nuclear contamination. Native activists had highlighted numerous problems with past research, including being lied to about research, having Native input appropriated without their consent, Native participation not being representative of the Native population, the
community being notified too late about environmental decisions, and being excluded from decision making (310).

To rectify this, the authors follow the proposal of Colorado (1988) in creating a “bicultural research model” that recognized the value of both Western science and traditional Indian ways of investigating the natural world. One way to do this is through appreciating Indian ways of understanding the natural world as more than simply interesting artifacts of a quaint culture.

Given these values and critiques, the authors developed four goals. The first was building a community-based environmental health infrastructure, which would include:

- **Sharing research funding** with the community. This resulted in a local Native program to hire staff that were trained by the research team (314).
- **Recruiting and training a community advisory committee** (CAC) for shared decision-making and control (314).
- **Building community control** and shared leadership within the CAC. Three years into the project CAC began taking more control of it as they began to feel more invested in it. Their investment was increased due to multiple factors, including the project’s greater visibility as it progressed, funders seeing the project as having staying power, the meetings becoming more enjoyable as its activities and meaning expanded, and the increased confidence and trust that the community developed over time in the researchers (315).
- **Development of new occupation opportunities** and job training for the Native community.
- **Strengthening of the project’s stability** through additional income and capacity.
• **Crafting the first satisfying experience** of public participation that Native community members had had with researchers.

One key to success was that the community members “appreciated the humility and apologetic attitudes of the scientists involved when the Native people voiced their disgust with the lack of ethics of western science that lead to the poisoning of their land and people and the decades of neglect regarding their health concerns” (315). While the parents at the Vento school were never exposed to nuclear tests, researchers and practitioners working on the East Side of St. Paul would be wise to begin their relationships with community members by admitting the ways that in the past government and research had mistreated or at least neglected them.

The second goal was *holistically* developing a profile of the community’s exposure to contamination. This profile included not only necessary quantitative data, but also qualitative data such as people’s experiences of contamination, and its more broadly defined results on their lives (316). Researchers, some of them Natives who were trained by the scientists, collected “lifestyle, cultural and sociodemographic information on 71 community members … who were exposed to” contamination (318).

Goal three was to implement education models and develop appropriate educational materials for the community. Among the driving values here, were to serve multiple audiences by targeting the materials to a diverse community, as well as making education a two way street where the technical staff and the community staff (and volunteers) train each other (319). While tutorials that taught community members how to be trainers themselves for the project were successful and necessary, one drawback
was that some new trainers had to leave the program for periods of time due to “personal or family stresses” (320).

In a way this has already been a challenge for the VVP, having seen parents join management teams only to leave soon after. And given the nature of the highly mobile and stressed population on the East Side, it is always a possibility that resources could be put into bringing community member into a project, only to see them leave. However, this should not be seen as time and energy lost, as that members retains what he or she gained from the VVP project and can apply it to wherever they go in life.

It was also found that training sessions needed to be kept flexible in terms of time and activities (320). The issues discussed would often trigger strong emotions and views that would require discussion. Also, given varied levels of knowledge and literacy, training modules often would have to be adapted to the students present (322). However, in the years afterward, the project’s materials were “being requested consistently by technical research and Native and non-native community members across the county” (322).

Goal four was to develop a hazard management plan that was primarily designed, implemented, and for the benefit of the affected communities (322). The authors of this article found that outcomes from participatory research “are more preferable to the traditional environmental health approaches whereby a technical team determines a health research methodology, with minimal community accountability, and conducts a health study whose findings have little meaning or benefit, and often are more of a detriment, to the community’s health protections” (324).
A challenge in this project that is relevant to the VVP, is that of competing demands that emerge when a project has multiple partners who all are under the stress of the demands of their respective institutions. Because of this the “project team understood the need to be accommodating to these other demands and accept unexpected changes in timeliness and deadlines. … It was essential for all community-based research team members to have flexibility and patience and be resourceful about alternative ways of accomplishing tasks” (325). Under these conditions, the technical team needed to be ready to take back tasks that people from the community did not have time to complete (325).

One specific evaluation exercise that built trust with the community, was creating a deep timeline of the local Native tribes, complete with the major changes they had experienced (such as the invasion of their lands by Europeans, forming of reservations) (327). Since the VVP works with many different ethnic groups, this would prove more complex, but could also be used as a tool to educate members of each ethnicity about the histories of the other peoples in their midst. It also could be helpful to cultivate a mutual recognition among different minority groups that they share histories of oppression and struggle.

Vital to the success of the nuclear risk project, was a pre-existing and well-functioning, Native community organization that was able to work with and through the research team. At Vento, having the ESFC was seen by some as key to the VVP success, so using their resources for an evaluation may be equally vital to success. However, if there was another community group, particularly one managed by Vento parents or by residents of the surrounding neighborhood, that could form a strong, active, and long-
standing bond with evaluators of the VVP, I feel that this would greatly enhance the success of the evaluation and the success of whatever programs emerge out of it. This may be especially true if that group had legitimacy within the community.

While the VVP does not have anywhere close to the money that the nuclear risk program had, and could never be expected to provide the level of services and research that it did, some of it’s methods, goals, and perspectives can be integrated into a VVP evaluation.
**Part 3: The Suggestions of VVP Members**

**Doing CBPR**

In CBPR it is essential that the research is co-designed by members of the community being studied. All interviewees for this project were asked how they would like an evaluation performed.

When I first started this project my supervisor, Cameron Counters, briefed me on what kind of evaluation the VVP core team was looking for. The design of the evaluation was to seriously take into account the wishes and knowledges of many and diverse people. The model must include the input of many members of the VVP, and should reflect their values. Cameron explained that beyond the ways of professional evaluators and social work researchers, “there are other epistemologies out there. Parents aren’t about logical positivism and aren’t going to throw down a chart or table, but we want to include others.”

**Getting Diverse Perspectives**

When asked for recommendations for doing an evaluation, by far the most common sentiment was that a diverse group of people from the community should be asked their opinion of how the VVP was doing. Many partners noted that Vento School parents definitely needed to be made a part of the evaluation, as they were the ones often being served in various ways by the VVP. As one member put it,

Families should be talked to, what kind of an impact it has had. And kids, it’s all about the kids. Having a positive impact on kids lives. What intervention happened, how did it come together, the actual measurable changes, house, clothes, a winter coat. Did it help parents feel more confident, did it help their investment in their child’s success, because it is easy to feel hopeless about it.
Others that were mentioned as being valuable sources for the evaluation included Vento School staff (teachers, social workers, councilors and nurse) and students, local non-profits and community groups, community leaders, and county Child Protection workers. In short, all those who had been invited to participate as members of the VVP.

“All these people are important because they are on the journey.” The journey, is the ongoing process that is the VVP, as well as the society-wide initiative to contest racism, poverty, disproportionality, or any issue of ethnic inequality.

“Usually it’s the executive director that says, hey this is what we need, but we need to listen to the people.” Instead of a top down, bureaucratic approach to planning and appraising social services, this VVP member put high value on the words of those impacted by the service.

Many also expressed that the evaluation include an ethnically diverse group, including African-Americans, Native-Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, and Asian-Pacific Islanders. These minorities could be asked if the VVP had included “culturally appropriate personal for each group;” were there people and perspectives representing their ethnic community? And “was there information in print [in their native language] that could guide them to somebody” with the VVP for help.

Out of the nineteen people interviewed, twelve had suggestions that went beyond wanting a diverse group consulted in the evaluation, below I have organized these responses into four more categories, Spreading and/or Deepening VVP, Data and Measures, Lesson’s Learned, and the VVP History.
**Spread and/or Deepen VVP**

“What’s important is we spread this model” (Becky Montgomery). Among VVP members there is a lot of talk about “spreading” the model to other schools, but also about “deepening and sustaining” the existing program at Vento. For those that see the program as already a great success, expanding it outward to other sites is important in order to help families across the East Side and beyond. For these members, an evaluation that designed to test success would be very helpful. If there was evidence of real achievements at the school and substantial improvements in the lives of Vento families, this result could be used to obtain support and funding for similar programs elsewhere.

“How are we going to make this project deeper and sustain it” (Susan Ault). While all members put emphasis on improving the program at its current site, Clyde Turner at CHS felt that “we need to look more at the program, and critique it before it is spread.” He was afraid that expanding the program could end up as having county social workers just “out there floating around,” and “that’s not good enough, you need to produce some wonderful results.” And while VVP may have produced that, this was no guarantee that this same result would be reproduced elsewhere.

Linda Parker at Vento similarly felt that instead of spreading it out, first “we’ve got to have the meat on the bone. It needs to be well documented so that” if and when VVP members are not around anymore, we will know how to spread it in the future.

While the two goals of spreading and deepening are not mutually exclusive, and no one would suggest not working very hard to improve the Vento program, there are always limited resources. Time, money and staff put on one goal could possibly draw resources from the other. And while an evaluation could easily test for both level of
success and specific areas for improvement relevant to the Vento School, a primary focus on one could draw energy away from the other (However, identifying to what extent particular methods and services have worked at Vento would be very helpful in opening a second village site).

**Data and Measures**

Regardless of whether the program gets spread or deepened, some members feel it is very important to have an evaluation in order to get the message out how well the program is doing. Linda Parker at Vento was particularly excited to get the word out. When I asked her if the VVP had gone yet to SPPS administrators to try to sell the program’s expansion, she said that they hadn’t, but,

I would love for them to know what’s going on, and how much it’s helped our families. It’s not a cut and dried numbers thing, there’s so much more in just the stories. Like one mother becoming the advocate instead of the swearing parent. You can’t plan for these things and can’t do that with numbers.

Linda truly wanted an evaluation that would “hear the story being told about the good things” at the VVP. One problem she felt, was that “our current district is more quantitatively focused,” but the strength of the VVP was not in any hard statistics that it may or may not be able to show but in the actual instances of Vento families being undeniably helped. And if these stories could get out, then perhaps VVP would receive more money and “we could do even more, evening activities for families, mentoring support. I like for people to know when good things are happening.” Not only could the good news reach administrators and funders, but “I’d like parents to find out more about the program” as well.

Flat out, Joan Schlecht at ESFC felt that “numbers mean nothing.” What is important is the “difference it has made in the lives of those families. How have they
seen a difference? Is it accessing service easier, how you interact as a family? The
difference made in those families lives. I want it to be reported by the family, not us.”
The kind of data she was looking for was a parent that reported that “I can sit down and
have a meal together with my family and talk now. That would be huge to me.”
Statistics “are important to” keep on factors like race, number of children, and birthdates.
These are the "things you have to collect. But if you are trying to replicate [the program],
or raise money and resources, you need a difference piece” of the puzzle from the
evaluation.

Shellie Rowe explained that the ESFC has already kept statistics on how many
people it has served, who it was, and how served, in addition to a one page survey that is
mailed out to all the families served at the Vento Family Center. However, she felt that
numbers are hard to interpret, because the important result of a program “may be a family
having a life altering thing.”

On the VVP overall success Shellie responded, “I think it’s working, but I don’t
know how to gauge how it is truly working, I don’t know if you can gauge if kids are not
getting into the system because they don’t need to be in county system.” However, while
it may be impossible to show a causal relationship between the work of the VVP and
disproportionality rates at the county, members truly felt that clearly Shellie and Elsie had
made substantial improvements in the actual lives of families that they were serving
everyday.

Susan Ault however was looking for the evaluation to provide a “mix between the
anecdotal and the [quantitative] data,” that would “show measurable impact.” And
Becky Montgomery and Linda Parker both pointed out that with the statistical data, it
was important to desegregate it by ethnicity, because this is when one can see the
differences in student achievement. Becky noted that “lots of stuff gets hidden when data
is aggregated. Identifying the achievement gap is how you uncover things like
disproportionality.” And Linda wished to “tease out” of the desegregated data where
exactly the disparities lay.

For another member, “the main measurement I’d like to see is the reduction of
racial disparities.” This is an interesting response in that it was not very common. The
single most identifiable problem that was discussed in the creation of the VVP was ethnic
disproportionality in reports to Ramsey County Child Protection Services. And yet, this
was rarely brought up when members were asked what they wanted out of an evaluation
of the VVP. Perhaps this was because it was so obvious, but perhaps it was more
because the VVP had moved so far beyond simply desiring a reduction in one statistic.
Their focus is more holistic and more grounded in the welfare of families, so reducing
their hard work to one simple number might be disheartening.

What Lessons Have Been Learned?

Becky Montgomery spoke for many members when saying “I’d like to see lessons
learned. What could have been more helpful, what would you have done differently. We
need to sit down with the school and learn about each other’s services and what can be
provided and what can’t. Educating each other what we can and can’t do.” As we see in
this quote, for VVP members talk about an evaluation is always within the context of also
taking concrete measures to improve the program right now and in the future. Doing a
community based evaluation is part of the mission to be community based in the larger
sense. And doing community means always sitting down with community members and
other agencies to build relationships, educate each other, and brainstorm about novel ways of serving the community.

There were also some specific factors members wanted evaluated. One wanted the evaluation to ask families, “Did you feel as though the (VVP) staff was easily approachable, did they take seriously your concerns, … could you easily access the people working the program.”

Susan Ault wanted to know “what’s different now” in the culture of the Vento school. She also hoped that an evaluation would be able to ferret out “how we find other ways of making impacts on the school culture.”

Julie Porath at Vento wanted to know how the VVP had “changed the viewpoint of” people at the school about the county; had it improved or declined. From the viewpoint of each agency, “it always feels like the other agency is not doing enough, they need to change not us, it’s their problem. So how has the relationships changed with the collaboration?”

Likewise, another member wanted to know “if each individual partner had learned something new from other partners? Have they been able to rely on other partners? Has each partner gotten sufficient assistance from others? And what other resources can be brought in, another partner, such as at the federal level?”

When I asked one VVP member at the county what she would like to get out of an evaluation, she said,

I’m a prevention person, I want to know” how we can help a kid “early on. If a kid has a problem from a year before, what can we do to make sure a kid is attending, we want to keep kids out of the child protective services, but there are parents out there who lack the skill set of parenting. They don’t know about child development for crying out loud. We are trying to cut the co-dependency on us. How do we change
the community venders to being the co-partners, instead of protective services [being the co-partner], they should be getting the help from all these rich venders.

As a “prevention person” she is interested in very practical data that would show what particular services are best to put the brakes on family problems that are driving them toward more trouble.

**VVP History**

Also, any of the many, many issues that VVP members are quoted as discussing in the VVP history are ripe for evaluation. VVP members do not need to specifically craft evaluation questions to express what kinds of topics they would like to see evaluated. For example, school attendance had become a point of great interest for VVP, and an evaluation could certainly track the relationship between VVP services and attendance. Many members at certain agencies desired that the VVP helped to educate people in other agencies about important issues and methods. As a member already pointed out, the evaluation could gauge what members have learned about each other, about reporting procedures, and about new ways of doing social work and education. Again, the VVP history is chock full values and perspectives that can be translated into measures to be evaluated.
Part 4: Challenges

Challenges Particular to Evaluating the VVP

- When asked for suggestions on how to do an evaluation, members instead often gave their evaluation of the program.
- In an evaluation, when members are asked to evaluate the VVP, their reply may be, ‘but I already did this.’
- In an evaluation, members may almost universally give a glowing report.
- Finding and interviewing non-core members of the program will be difficult.
- People outside of the core team may not even know what the VVP is.
- The VVP mission is a moving target. What is the program’s mission?
- The VVP’s continually changing services.
- Ethnocentricity: in general agencies tend to view themselves as the flexible innovator and others as the dinosaur or problem.
- Being a product of a complex partnership can exacerbate any of these challenge.

The greatest frustration of creating a model for evaluating the VVP was in getting interviewees to tell how they would like an evaluation done. If doing a community based evaluation meant having the community co-design it, then how could it be designed if the community did not know what it wanted? When asking people what they wanted in an evaluation, they would answer by evaluating of the program (e.g. Elsie and Shellie have done a great job with families, we need to spread this program to other schools).

Likewise, when people were asked about the history of the program, often people would
again, say what a great job it’s done. However, these are normal challenges for any CB
research project, and can only be worked out in the participatory part of CBPR.

But why was I getting this kind of response from interviewees, I was not asking
people to tell me how Elsie was doing. If I was continually receiving this type of answer,
then at least in part it must have been because of the way I was asking the question. My
approach was structuring the responses, and in way that was apparently counter to the
purpose of my research.

A second reason people were not suggesting concrete ways of doing an
evaluation, could be because the members of the VVP are not evaluators by trade, and
therefore do not think or talk in terms of evaluation. When I asked some of the VVP
members what they wanted to see on an evaluation and they drew a blank, it was not
because they didn’t appreciate evaluations or understand them when they were placed in
front of them, but because they had simply not received training in the art of evaluation.
They were practitioners, planners, administrators or parents, and that was what they knew
how to do, not compose measures of evaluation. *Evaluating* is in some ways a very
different way of thinking than *doing, teaching, or managing*.

And if people have already given evaluative answers to the designer of the
evaluation model, me, then what would they say to the actual evaluator that eventually
would come to interview them. They may say, ‘I already told all this to John, why are
you guys asking me again?’ Also, if the vast majority of people I interviewed spoke of
the VVP in only positive and upbeat terms, then evaluators will have to seriously wrestle
with the question, what would be learned from an evaluation?
A problem with interviewing people about their own program is that it is in their best interest to sell the program’s quality, and why wouldn’t they think well of something they had sunk a lot of themselves into? As for the parents who have used the services, who’s going to say they didn’t like getting free help from a source they didn’t until recently even know existed to give help?

While parents may now know that there are new services available at the family center, they do not know those services by the title “Vento Village Partnership.” Since parents won’t recognize VVP or any of the other names that it has and does go by, or any of the acronyms that represent the initiatives and committees out of which the VVP has grown, an evaluator would best not ask parents, “what do you think of the VVP, but, what do you think about what happened at the Vento School that helped you” (Shellie Rowe). Also, while Shellie reported that she mails surveys to client families, “best way is to call the clients and talk to them face to face or over phone. Surveys aren’t the best because some” parents can’t read well.

A major challenge for both the VVP, me, and any future evaluators, is that being in a low rent, inner-city neighborhood, Vento families are notoriously mobile. They can be a floating population that often move from house, to apartment, to grandma’s house, to a shelter, to another apartment, to a different city altogether. Trying to find newly immigrant families and families that lack resources to maintain stable housing is time consuming.

I wanted to include many more parents in my research than I was able, and while Elsie and Shelly were very helpful in attempting to connect me with parents they had served, it proved quite challenging to contact, let alone meet them. Even when they are
locatable, that does not mean they have the time or inclination to meet with some strange man from the university or county who is doing some strange project they know nothing about. Also, such an experience can be intimidating and embarrassing for them.

Being a complex collaboration between various public and private agencies, and being funded through various grants, negotiating the actual questions, measures, and goals of an evaluation would be challenging. Each member has their own beliefs about how families should be served and what the VVP should be doing. Also, each agency has a unique perspective based on its purpose and needs. While RCCHS has as a mission to combat institutional racism and needs to reduce both the numbers and ethnic disproportionality of the referrals it receives, the SPPS is in the business of education (and under challenging circumstances) and seeks to end ethnic performance disparities, and the ESFC is simply trying to help out a few families and holds a more precarious position in regards to its funding streams and work sites. For Linda Parker at Vento it was a constant challenge to try to understand and balance the goals of different partners and committees, including Ramsey county, the extended team, the core team, and the school.

Which to focus on? (these are not necessarily mutually exclusive):

- Reducing disproportionality vs. Helping families.
- Ethnic disproportionality in reporting vs. ethnic disparities in student performance
- Anecdotal vs. Quantitative evidence
It seems that what makes the VVP program different is its novelty, its lack of being institutionalized as a long-standing or consistent program, and its being managed by a multifaceted community of agencies and people. The members also pride themselves on the evolving and organic nature of the VVP (see VVP History). By organic, they point to how changes often naturally emerge out of the work and collaboration, instead of being directed from above by rigid protocols. In this way services can quickly adapt to meet the needs of families, instead of being bogged down in bureaucracy and tradition. However, while these characteristics are seen as a boon by the members, it could be a bane for an evaluation. Even if evaluators are able to identify the many services and events that have come and gone through the history of the VVP, how will they decide which to evaluate and during which eras of program?

**CBPR: Vogue, Vague, and Conflated**

When it comes to CBPR, in my opinion there can be a lot more talk than action. Because of this, in designing community-based research one needs to pay careful attention to the specific, concrete ways that the research actually is based in the community. Although CBPR is a relatively new field of study, there has already developed a large and surprisingly common reserve of rhetoric used by people talking about it. Like Evidence Based Practice, CBPR has become a phenomenon that carries a lot of cache. Independent of its actual usefulness and legitimacy, CBPR is a fad, and like any fad it comes with its own set of lingo, styles, associations with past things prestigious, and disassociations with past things discredited.

For example, CBPR defines itself *against* the tropes of bureaucracy, red-tape, monolithic institutions (like “the county,” “the school district,” and “big business”),
playing politics, ivory tower research, white privilege, missionizing, saving the unfortunate from themselves, and unilateral, centripetal and top-down decision making (think of the image of the stuffy board of directors of all-white, middle-aged men in suits).

Meanwhile it associates itself with positive images of multiculturalism, civil rights, democracy, equality, and respect for others. It also is awash in terms like “collaboration,” “building bridges,” “mutual trust,” “mutual ownership,” “stakeholders,” and “shared decision-making.” The challenge for the community-based researcher, is translating these goals, values and lingo, into practice. It is not an easy task.

In the literature there also appears to be conflation of community-based (CB) programs with CB research, particularly when the research is on CB programs. For example, the VVP is a program forged by a partnership which includes the community, and the plan is do a CB evaluation of it. However, when doing an evaluation of CB program, it can be easy to slip into imaging that any evaluation of it is also CB, when it may in fact be nothing of the sort. Likewise, a CB evaluation of a non-CB program may forget that the original program was not designed or implemented by the community. It is tempting to let the idea of something being of the community, bleed into related programs that are not of the community.

Therefore a CB evaluation of the VVP must be rigorously designed AND implemented at every stage according the principles of CBPR, never assuming that because the VVP is CB, the evaluation is also. The two programs as related but separate entities.
Appendix A: Key Definitions of CBPR

- “There is an emerging movement within the field of social work to develop innovative research methods that effectively bridge the gap between research, practice, and policy. In the wake of widespread criticism on more traditional forms of scholarship that favor scientific discovery rather than integration, application, and pedagogy, social work researchers are emphasizing collaboration among key constituents, including community members, policy makers, and practitioners, as a requisite practice in conducting social work research. By incorporating the insights of multiple partners within a particular community, researchers can improve the quality, sustainability, and appropriateness of different interventions, while ensuring that research is more readily translatable into effective social work practices. Translational research emphasizes using multiple constituents within the research pipeline as a means of converting basic knowledge into practical applications that benefit individuals directly. In a similar vein, participatory research underscores the critical importance of bringing local community members to the vanguard of academic research” (Allen-Meares:29).

- “Essentially, translational research forges a bridge that links scientific discovery to patient care, while concomitantly linking multiple constituents (e.g., basic science researchers, clinicians, physicians, and patients) throughout the research pipeline” (Allen-Meares:30).

- “Participatory research is defined by a constant need to ‘negotiate a balance between developing valid, generalisable knowledge and benefiting the community that is being researched’ (Macaulay et al., 1999, p. 774)” (Allen-Meares:30). “Participatory researchers, for instance, are concerned with who ‘defines research problems and who generates, analyzes, represents, owns, and acts on the information which is sought’ (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1668)” (Allen-Meares:30).

- Collaborative research between scientific and practice communities “generally contain an explicit assumption that research is value-based, not value-free. They also promote research that serves social transformation and avoids harming those studied. Those being studied are believed to have extensive knowledge that requires their participation in the design, data collection and analysis, and use of research. Finally, the role of the researcher is also transformed in these models from one of detached expert to a partner, educator, and facilitator who works closely with those being studied” (Edleson 1998:2).

- “Stoecker (1999) stresses that participatory research is best understood as community development or community organizing project, of which the research is only one piece” (Allen-Meares:30). Taylor (1997) expounds on their point and suggests that simply establishing collaboration between researchers and community members, although challenging, is not a goal in itself; rather, collaboration is understood as a transformative mechanism through which researchers bring their professional
knowledge and academic expertise to solve significant community problems” (Allen-Meares:30).

- Park (1992) defines participatory research as a way of creating knowledge that involves learning from investigation and applying what is learned to collective problems through social action. Similarly, Green et al. (1995) define participatory research as systematic inquiry with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied for the purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change. The concept of participatory research grew out of work with researchers from the developing world seeking to empower disenfranchised oppressed populations in Latin American, Asia, and Africa (Fals-Borda, 1982; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Friere, 1970; Hall, 1993). Its applications other positive benefits for researchers working with minority, disadvantaged communities combating environmental health research inequities in the United States. Cancian and Armstead (1992) state that participatory research focuses on power relations and primarily is oriented to communities and not academicians. Friere (1970) and Tandon (1981) encourage the participation in all phases of the research by people being studied, usually members of a powerless group, who are to be the beneficiaries of the research. Participatory research assumes that there is a political nature to all that we do and that knowledge products and processes are not value-free or neutral. Ordinary people should not be excluded from knowledge creation processes (Maguire, 1987; Tandon, 1981). Nyden and Wiiewal (1992) stress that it is important to tap the knowledge in the community and to overcome the traditional view that “unbiased and objective” research rejects the interference of outside organizations. They challenge the assumption that academics can be more accurate and objective about a social issue than communities. Irwin (1995) states, “The challenge of sustainability is social – the relationship between our ways of living with and knowing the environment.” Hall (1992) emphasizes that participatory research contributes to the processes of shifting power or democratizing decision making in a variety of contexts (Quigley et. al 2007).
Appendix B: Factors in Creating Successful CBPR

Stages employed by partners to create sustainable collaboratories (Allen-Meares:33-34):

- “Engaging partners in the collaboration.” This includes partners respecting each other, and trusting each other’s instincts. Particularly for academic partners, trust must be built, and “acting as the expert could be off-putting to community members,” especially to those who know the legacy of poor university-community collaboration. Face-to-face interaction is important.

- “Supporting partners in their efforts to ensure their successful and continued participation in the collaboratory. This involves identifying the best ways to communicate with each member and meet with partners regularly to keep them engaged in the project.” Being aware of the constraints to different community members participation, and “recognizing the limits to the level of help that the collaboratory can provide.”

- “Defining the project, nature, and goals of the work.” This must be done mutually.

Other Factors in Creating Successful Collaboratories (Allen-Meares):

- “The collaboratories have all identified the need to provide incentives to keep busy agencies at the table. The agencies must see tangible and intangible benefits for themselves to participate in the collaboratory. The sustainability of the collaboratory needed to be evident to participants” (Allen-Meares:36).

- “Partners emphasized that having policy makers at the table throughout the project was critical to their success. Policy issues were identified by both policy makers and agency representatives and were built in to research questions” (Allen-Meares:38).

- “According to Patton (1990), a qualitative approach is appropriate when programs are implemented incrementally by a process of adapting to local conditions and needs. In these cases, he advocated using methods that were open ended, discovery oriented, and capable of describing developmental processes and program changes” (Allen-Meares:32).

Achieving Intended Outcomes (Viswanathan):

- “In CBPR, researchers must work with the community to select and justify the strongest possible research methods, while balancing research rigor with their responsiveness to the community. The researchers must credit community members with the ability to understand complex research challenges, if presented clearly and thoughtfully. One of the many benefits of making research partners of community members is that they begin to see the long-term gains associated with research, in comparison to the relatively short-term nuisance of data collection activities.
• “Enhanced community capacity was rarely mentioned in the EPC’s review of the literature as an explicit goal of CBPR projects. Rather, it was mentioned in descriptions of the collaborative process and was clearly considered to be a critical component. Studies were much more likely to report capacity building in the community, than in the cadre of researchers or their institutions. Perhaps a true indicator of investigator appreciation for CBPR might be published study results that include a discussion of capacity-building efforts on the part of the researchers.

• “Among the limited number of fully evaluated, complete interventions that were identified, the stronger or more consistently positive health outcomes generally were found in the higher quality research designs. This should convince CBPR research partnerships to pay adequate attention to the “R” component of CBPR. Given the long-term nature of true CBPR efforts, individual and community capacity-building efforts ultimately may result in positive health outcomes that have little or nothing to do with those targeted in the initial study.”


• Assumptions in Collaborative Research
  o **Advocacy as a metaphor for the research process.** (article doesn’t explain this well, I can do better. Being a metaphor, is a way that conflation can be good). Being an active and equal member of the community studied helps build the community perspective into the research itself.
  o **Blurring the line between researcher and those studied.** “Advocate-researcher,” “co-researchers,” “reciprocal learning,” who are immersed in the community they study and whose questions become their own.
  o **A value-based science in service to social change.** No research is value free, “all researchers bring a specific set of values to the enterprise … Collaborative research models call on researchers to make explicit their value orientation rather than assert they are value-free.” Value effect all stages of the research. Research objectives should be linked to [enmeshed within] community empowerment.” “As Small (1995) states, “If our research is to be more than an intellectual exercise, we need to seriously consider who we hope will benefit as well as who may be harmed by our work” (p.952).”

• Strategies for Successful Collaboration
  o **Provide equal access to funding.** “The organization that controls the budget often also wields the greatest power in the relationship. Practitioners and their agencies should be fairly compensated for their contributions to research (Miedema 1996). Collaborating partners should develop agreements in advance regarding funding allocations for operations and indirect costs, as well as strategies for fundraising (Gondolf et al 1997).”
  o **Involve survivors and practitioners from the beginning.** “Collaborations that involve battered women and their advocates in the research process will increase the likelihood that the research questions asked are relevant to the lives of battered women and the interventions designed to help them. Survivors and practitioners can help identify potential safety risks in the
research design and implementation, create effective strategies for improving response rates and minimizing attrition, identify outcome variables, and validate the interpretation of results (Gondolf et al., 1997; Short et al., 1998)."

- **Offer incentives for all parties.** This helps to ensure the commitment of community programs and dispel feelings of mistrust or fear of exploitation. Examples of benefits to domestic violence programs are scientifically sound data to use in grant applications, evaluation of programs to help improve services, the sharing and interpretation of new research information from published journals and conference papers, donated services and materials to the program, and a greater understanding of the experiences of battered women and their children."

- **Make research products useful.** And disseminate research even when it points in different directions than community agencies hope.

- **Establish on-going communication.**

- **Be purposeful about roles in the research process.** Decision-making strategies, lines of authority, authorship and publication, timelines. Or overlapping or evolving roles? Whose interpretation of the date will be upheld when researchers, advocates, or subjects disagree.

- **Be flexible in problem solving.** Listen to the advice of others, who know an issue or community more intimately than you.

- **Spend time together in each others’ domain and in neutral ones.**
How is Science Enhanced Through Collaboration with Practice (Edleson 1998 13-16)

- **Improved Research Questions.** Including added questions that would seem off topic to the outside researcher.
- **Enhanced Research Implementation.** Less chance of compromising the safety and confidentiality of participants. Easier to find participants for follow-up and longitudinal studies.
- **Benefit of Complementary Talents.** Synergy.
- **Enhanced Legitimacy and Utilization.** Practitioners can provide researchers access to data they wouldn’t otherwise have. Practitioners may benefit from the credibility that scientific researchers bring to their programs.
- **Enhanced Accountability to Battered Woman and Their Advocates.**
- **Connection to Larger Social Movement.**

“Social scientists and practitioners alike know of the frantic search for letters of support as grant deadlines approach. From the community perspective, calls and letters from academicians seeking their agency's last-minute support for research funding in amounts that often exceed their agency budgets are met with a mixture of anger and fear. They are angry that they were not included in the design and development of the research questions or methods and fearful that these researchers will use tremendous staff resources to collect data and never be heard from again. Practitioners may also fear that the research will compromise the safety of battered women and their children with their published results. Many social scientists also resent the expectation that community organizations will be partners in a research endeavor. It is sometimes viewed as one extra hurdle required by funders with very short deadlines. Such requirements are sometimes seen as compromising the independence of scientific inquiry or researchers' academic freedoms and are not often taken seriously by the scientific community. These tensions have led one advocate to reframe collaboration as "forced bonding." “ (Edleson 1998:2).

Creating Equitable Relationships Between Researchers and Communities in Nuclear-Risk Research (Quigley 2007)

- Community participation must be required at all stages of the research process, including design, implementation, results, interpretation, and dissemination, so that technical researchers or federal or state agencies having potential biases, unethical goals, and conflicts of interest do not maintain exclusive control over the detection, assessment, and outcomes of health risk research methods.

- Community knowledge and observations of disease excesses and environmental abnormalities must be integrated into the research process and not be rejected as “anecdotal and subjective.”

- Community members must be educated about contamination impact and be trained to make decisions and conduct community-based research with scientists in understanding and managing complex health issues related to nuclear contamination.
• Solely quantitative research practices must not dominate the assessment and interpretation of radiation health impact.
Appendix C: Challenges in CBPR

Challenges in CBPR (Allen-Meares:30-1):
- CBPR “that involves multiple partners at every research stage is time intensive.”
- Other pressing issues, such as deadlines, short funding cycles, and time lags between making and enacting recommendations, may require tradeoffs between democracy and efficiency.
- Priority shifts that may end the project prematurely.
- Unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved.
- Hidden political and financial participation costs.”

“Three key barriers to CBPR (Viswanathan:1):
(1) “Insufficient community incentives (staffing and resources) to play a partnership role in CBPR projects;
(2) Insufficient academic incentives (staffing and resources) for researchers to play a partnership role in CBPR projects; and
(3) Inadequate funding and insensitive funding mechanisms.”

Implications for Funding CBPR (Viswanathan):
- “The process of obtaining funding for CBPR projects through conventional review mechanisms can be a difficult one. This is often because reviewers are less familiar with (and perhaps even skeptical about) the possibility of integrating high-quality conventional research within the framework of a CBPR collaboration” (Viswanathan 4).

Disadvantages of Community Involvement may include (Viswanathan:5):
- “The introduction of selection bias (bias in recruitment),
- Decreased (and sometimes an absence of) randomization,
- The potential selection of highly motivated intervention groups not representative of the broader population.”

Challenges (Edleson 1998):
- Sharing control of the research process:
  - For example, Edelson writes that when dealing with woman battering, issues of power and control are central. It is important to practitioners and victims that the victims be given the tools, environment and opportunity to control over their lives. Therefore researchers studying woman battering must be particularly sensitive to power, and have the responsibility not to enter the research with any arrogant assumptions that they have the right to conduct whatever research on or around victims of battering. As with any research, researchers must be very respectful of the lives and privacy of those being studied, and give to them the ultimate authority over what research is done, where, when, and with whom.
“There is a perception among some funders and researchers that such a close relationship (between researchers and practitioners) will compromise the detached objectivity of the scientist by putting pressure on her or him to alter or hide results, especially when the results show unintended negative outcomes. At the same time, some practitioners hesitate to collaborate on research projects out of fear that potentially negative evaluation results will harm their program's funding or reputation” (Edleson 1998:3).

- **Time and Trust**: Research is time consuming, and even more so when collaborating between many people, especially when they come from different disciplines, or backgrounds of ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality etc., and so everyone must also spend time building relationships and trust. And when one or more partner will not receive (or does not see) a reward from the research, the research may not be a high priority to fit into their busy schedule. Practitioners and research subjects may feel exploited or intimidated by the researchers.

- **Differences between disciplines**: “Different perspective, terminology, methods, interpretations, and concerns may lead to misunderstanding and perpetuate feelings of fear and mistrust … if they remain unexplored” (Edleson:5).

- **Skills of the researcher**: “The interpersonal skills required to negotiate and maintain collaborative relationships are not commonly taught in graduate research programs.”
Appendix D: Questions for Helping Design An Evaluation

Below are the questions, verbatim, taken from Cockerill, Meyers and Allman, which they suggest evaluator use. Evaluators can attend to the questions when designing, implementing, and writing up a community-based evaluation (Cockerill).

THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION PROJECT
   a. Who are the key stakeholders, and which communities do they represent?
   b. What are the intended consequences or outcomes of the investigation for each stakeholder?
   c. What are the potential benefits of, and concerns with, the project to the individuals and institutions involved?
   d. Is theory development and testing an element, or a byproduct, of the project, and how does this relate to other project objectives and the roles of stakeholders involved?
   e. Is there an action agenda, and how does this relate to other project objectives and the roles of stakeholders involved?

RESEARCH METHODS AND APPROACH
   f. What evaluation design is most appropriate to meet the goals and objectives of the project?
   g. Will both the community and the evaluators be meaningfully involved in selecting the evaluation design?
   h. Who will be responsible for the creation of evaluation instruments? Data collection? Data analysis?
   i. What mechanisms will be used to ensure that all stakeholders are involved in the review and revision of the evaluation instruments? Data analysis? Interpretation?
   j. What control processes will be used to prevent error and bias?

PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING
   k. What are the respective roles of the community and the evaluation community?
   l. What tasks are associated with the community member? With the evaluation community? Are these responsibilities clearly defined and understood by all stakeholders?
   m. How will the project provide for the preparation and training of community members, if this is needed to fulfill responsibilities?
   n. What consultative mechanisms will there be between the evaluation team and the community (and any third party or sponsoring agency)?
   o. Will any stakeholder be able to exert ultimate control over the evaluation process (e.g., through control of resources, access to the study population, or control over dissemination of the final report)?

CONFLICT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION
   p. Have participants identified and discussed inherent difficulties in conducting the evaluation?
q. Are there strategies for developing and maintaining trust and cooperation between the community and the evaluation team?

r. Has there been discussion, and agreement, on the ethical values that will guide the evaluation?

s. Are participants prepared for unanticipated conflict from the collaboration? Are there suitable mechanisms for mediation and conflict resolution?

DISSEMINATION AND USE OF RESULTS

t. What will the final product or products look like?

u. Who are the potential consumers of the results?

v. How will the results be reported and diffused to the stakeholders involved in the project? To the funders of the project? To the consumers of the project?

w. Who will assume responsibility for presenting the results?

x. Is there a method for decision making in terms of the use and dissemination of research findings?

y. Will the final product include suggestions for how findings could or should be implemented (i.e., will it include an action component)?
Appendix E: Evaluative Judgments of the Vento Village Partnership

As already discussed, often when I asked people how they would like an evaluation of the VVP done, they would instead actually go right ahead and evaluate the VPP. Also, when asking people about the history of the VVP (the research of this evaluation model was also conducted contemporaneous with research for the history of the VVP, but the history was written slightly before this report), they would tell me how great a job Elsie and Shellie were doing. The problem of course was that I was doing a history and an evaluation model, not an evaluation itself. I have provided those evaluative statement here in an appendix, to be used however seen fit.

Almost unanimously, the people interviewed thought the VVP was already a success, and absolutely wanted it to continue and grow. One parent who had been served at the ESFC at Vento felt that the “parenting class was helpful, but I didn’t finish it.” Learning “how you would handle temper tantrums, talking to your kids, good discipline vs. bad discipline, that was helpful.” “I just love Elsie and Shellie. [Elsie is] a very positive compassionate person, she helps people, especially women.” Another parent reported that while she didn’t know anyone else who had also gone to the ESFC for help, for her “it would have made a big difference” if she had not.

Elsie Dugar felt that it was a success because “we had a school that was open and the agency that wrote the grant, and me who came and had no idea what was going on, and I didn’t bring my own agenda.” “Getting too big waters it down, getting too small dries it up.” “If they are looking to replicate this program, flexibility is key, and the
common goal has to be common, not about that agency’s mission, or who does what piece.”

Elsie was afraid that some people saw the VVP as her, and she was clear that it was the result of great number of people. However, “if people believe that this program is one person, it will die.”

For Becky, at the program had been successful at the Vento School because “the skill level is there. We haven’t micromanaged it. We’ve had the outline, it has just happened, you have to let it evolve. At each site it will be different, because students are different.” However, it wouldn’t work everywhere. “In high risk, high minority schools yes” .... However, in “achievement plus schools don’t need us, they have a program already. Schools need to want to have the program” for it to succeed there. If VVP is to be expanded, in every step forward “it’s important to be plann-ful,” to have a clear understand of goals and purpose. Expansion would be one school at a time because of the planning. Making sure that we pay attention, relationships are really critical. The people who are working in the schools are critical, making sure they are respecting and working with communities, racial and geographic.

Linda Parker had noticed that with Elsie and the ESFC, we are seeing improved communication with families, and less attendance issues. I think the strongest part to me, is when we have a family come in about an attendance or behavior issue, but they said there was a [larger] family issue and they were going to become homeless. We can get help for them right away now, whereas before we couldn’t do this.

As for the county mission of decreasing the minority referrals by Vento staff to Child Protective Services, Linda reported, “I don’t know if this effort cut down on disproportionality, but I can see how it provided families with easy access to services, and as a school we thought that this was what we wanted.”
On the issue of spreading the model, Linda believed “it will fail if we pull the model out of Vento just to replicate it elsewhere.” Susan Ault observed that at Vento, we’ve really started to get to a point that our work is institutionalized at that school. I don’t know how you measure attitude change, except attitudinally. School staff can tell about how they’ve become more professional. We didn’t go there to change the school, but to change reporting of maltreatment. But now they [school staff] interact differently with families now. There was a small group of parents who were in big conflict with school. The principal said that parents would come in cussing and threatening and he had no choice but to call police and have them arrested for disorderly conduct.

But through the efforts of the VVP, this doesn’t happen anymore, particularly in the case of one parent who used to have a very adversarial relationship with Vento administrators. “We didn’t go in with that goal, but it’s an unintended outcome, a huge shift in that woman’s relationship with school.”

Joan Schlecht saw the program’s great success was the “systems change piece.” The school had really opened up to guidance by community members outside the SPPS system. She sat on every leadership team at the Vento School, and “to have someone who’s not even a district employee [on these teams,] it is unheard of.”

However, Joan had some critiques.

My frustration is that I don’t feel that we have a clear path on what all of us are trying to accomplish. Each is working on a piece, they intersect but together we haven’t sat down and planned some outcomes. I want to move it forward.” “I’d like to see all of us put all of our resources into one issue. Right now we are all over the map, we don’t have a common focus. Attendance improvement seemed to be the issue that bubbled to the top at the last meeting.

Kim White at RC Family and Child Services reported,

I know that Elsie’s presence there is needed, … so I don’t know why there hasn’t been a significant change [in the disproportionality ratio or the number of referrals] over the past two years.” “But I know that having a worker there in the school has had some impact.” “It has changed because it has opened other schools to welcome us, administrative staff want us in their schools, they see that having this project has an impact. [However], we don’t have pushback on spreading it.
Kim also added,

But I think that the piece that we missed was to be able to tie in all the initiatives together [ERD, CASEY, etc.]. I thought, hey, we’ve been talking about all this stuff, but how does it relate, how does each part impact other parts. Court system, county board, medical community, all these people who have an impact on children in our system, changing the whole culture.” “What would be helpful is to have a retreat, a spot check. We would have kept a better focus on our outcomes, we lost track of what we were going after, we became like the blob, not a lot of focus. Now, in the near future, we should pull people back together to see where we are. In 05 we started here, and now we are in 08, how has this impacted your work and our community.

A social worker who helped plan the VVP had seen how at the original extended team meetings “there wasn’t a real clear direction, and this had an effect on people dropping out. If we had been able to focus on the mission when they first were involved, but this is hindsight.” At these early meetings,

I was taking notes, and feeling pretty lost. I don’t have the background, I felt pretty intimidated, and I’m not good at asking: can you explain this to me. I didn’t want to interrupt things, and make them back up. On the Casey team we were supposed to have a youth rep and parent rep [but often did not].

However, she did not blame parent representatives for not participating more, as she was part of the planning team and even “I would often feel lost” at meetings because of not having the technical background. Not only that, but if members continued talking about an issue from a meetings or conversation she had not been a part of again, again she felt lost and too intimidated to ask questions.

When asked about the original PDSAs (Plan, Do, Study, Act) for the program, she could not remember what they were, “but they felt important at the time.” She did definitely feel that in the meetings the VVP had with the cultural consultants from local minority communities, “their contribution was great.”

One member found that for the VVP
having partners means being able to do an end run to get what they need, if they know there is a different funder or different resources out there, it is a great accomplishment to work through the bureaucracy and get things done faster.

For her the value of the partnership arrangement was in having multiple avenues open for overcoming challenges. If there is a barrier to accomplishing something in one agency, one can go through another. She also found that over time the communication between the partners has improved, “it’s a nice start.”

Among staff at the Vento School, the successes of VVP were often more mixed. This appendix will conclude with various statements by school employees. For one Vento School employee, since the county placed a social worker at Vento,

I see families more willing to tell the school about challenges that are going on, sometimes we just introduce Elsie and let her do her spiel, and then they can decide, and then families can feel more supported. There are a few families whose situations have improved, or feel [more] connected to school, so [now] they will always keep their kid in the school.

“Elsie has really helped with erasing the perception among parents that the county is there to take away your kids.” However, “the teachers don’t see how much this has helped the families, they don’t see Elsie and I sitting down with a family, or the greater connection that families have now.”

In reference to the factors weighing on how Elsie has succeeded with families, someone at the school mused, “I don’t know if it’s because she’s African-American or looks like the parents, I don’t know.” “Elsie has a strong voice within the African-American community, she can say things that we can’t say.”

A school employee found that the ESFC is great, I have some place I can give parents when they call. It’s a lot easier for me to give a name of a person and their number, instead of telling them to call Salvation Army. Shelly and Mike have been really good with a kid who had MS
and a housing issue. Shelly and Mike were on their way over to the house within the hour, and that doesn’t happen often.

Among the Vento staff there was a feeling that having someone from the county working right in their school allowed for more efficiency in all their work and gave their families better service. But for one,

My compliant is that they [the VVP and CHS] didn’t do enough to get involved with the families, closed cases too quickly, when they needed more [assistance]. I was frustrated when we found out that a case was closed. County workers have a lot of cases that they have to manage, so the ones that are less serious would not be as much of a priority. Kids with attendance issues are not a favorite of the county workers to deal with. But kids that have bad attendance issues often have other issues and needs.

One Vento employee reported that the training that the county had given Vento staff on county reporting procedures allowed everyone to become “more on the same page.” She also was grateful for being able to ask Elsie for advice on reporting issues. However, she also felt that with the new system some legitimate cases of abuse/maltreatment were being delayed or not reported at all.

Sometimes [the county social worker] isn’t in the school [to get a report filed right away], and sometimes things get lost when I give them to her. If it felt like nothing was happening sometimes when I reported a kid to Elsie, it was frustrating.

A school employee felt that while she understood the problem of ethnic disproportionality, it was not so much a relevant issue at Vento. Since the vast majority of kids at Vento were minorities, how could Vento be over-reporting minority kids as compared to white kids? She appeared to me to have felt that the school staff had been accused of being racially motivated in their reporting. “And we’ve had problems with Caucasian kids too.”

The other side of the coin was this insight by a Vento staff, “I get frustrated, because I’ve heard someone say they didn’t refer [a child to FCS] because of color.” The
perception was that staff had failed to report African-American students who were valid victims of neglect because staff members feared being seen as a racist.

Another comment was on the size of the partnership. Someone observed that at the beginning meetings of the VVP, there were large meetings of about 50-60 stakeholders, and then it dwindled to about 15 people. “People were invited but they have other job commitments. Everyone has an idea, but I don’t know if 50 were needed.”
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Endnotes

1 This evaluation model was researched and written over the course of the fall and winter of 2007/2008, by a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. The research was funded by the Communiversity program at the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs in Minneapolis, which connects student researchers with community or government agencies in need of help with a project. This evaluation is one part of a two part research effort into the VVP, the other half is a history of the program. These two reports share certain data and are very relevant to each other, and the reader should see the history to further understand the VVP. At times, it was difficult for the author to separate these two projects, and to determine what data should be placed into which document (this issue will be tackled in the evaluation model report). The reader will no doubt note that much of what is reported in this history is evaluative (judgmental, highly subjective) statements on the VVP, but these opinions are in many ways just as much part of its history, as its future evaluation. Most of the data for this history came from nineteen interviews conducted with VVP partners, including staff from the CHS, SPPS, and ESFC, parents and students at the Vento School, and other professionals (except for the one by telephone and one by email, all interviews were in-person and lasted from fifteen minutes to over an hour). The researcher also attended five meetings of the VVP, and hung out a few times at the family center in the Vento school.

2 While mothers were usually the ones mentioned, fathers and especially single fathers and incarcerated fathers, should not be forgotten.

3 She also felt that “If it works you spread it to other families, if not we drop it.”

4 Many researchers and practitioners of CBPR have spent great effort at crafting understandable definitions of CBPR, identifying key factors in successful CBPR, and exploring common challenges. Most of the time their words and points would speak better than my own, so I have culled through the CBPR literature for key quotes and findings, and organized them by relevant categories separate appendixes.

5 When writing the history I found myself often writing something an interviewee had told me, and then realizing that that person’s comment was evaluative. At that point I would take it out of the history and move into my notes for the evaluation model, knowing that it did not really fit there either. However, after I had moved these evaluations from the history report to the evaluation model, I would think, but isn’t the story about how Elsie successfully helped this mother also part of the history of the VVP? If this is the kind of work the VVP was doing, and if the success it had with these families was part of what changed the mission of the VVP, then this IS part of the history of what the VVP was doing and how it changed. The stories people had been telling all along about the successes and challenges of the work of the VVP, were the very stuff of the VVP (e.g. about the families they had helped turn the corner, the methods they had found most useful in overcoming challenges, the ways that they had figured out how to get past the resistance from other VVP partners or families, and the gains made in building relationships and changing systems). Even before I arrived on the scene, these were the stories that they had been telling themselves about themselves. These stories were not just evaluations, but were also about the history of the VVP, and in addition were stories that themselves had shaped the VVP. Therefore, I included some of these evaluative stories in the history, and reported many of them in this appendix; a few are in both reports. They are reported here with little analysis, largely as I wrote down in my interview notes.