

San Benito County Sheriff's Office Strengthening Families Program Evaluation

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INTRODUCTION

The Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program is a federal justice funding provider for state and local jurisdictions. JAG provides critical funding to support programs that involve technical assistance, strategic planning, research and evaluation (including forensics), data collection, training, personnel, equipment, forensic laboratories, supplies, contractual support, and criminal justice information systems. The goal of this program is to provide justice strategies to achieve safer communities.

In 2015, the San Benito County Sheriff's Office (SBCSO) were awarded a JAG from the Board of State and Community Corrections. This JAG was for a three-year period (2015 to 2017), for a total of \$659,252. The award was to fund their existing Unified Narcotics Task Force and introduce the Strengthening Families Program (SFP), to aid in prevention and education of at-risk youth and their families. The goal of this three-year project was to make an impact on the illegal and illicit drug trade that is often procured by local criminal street gangs. In specific regard to the SFP implementation, in each of the three years, the SBCSO would strive to identify at least ten families who would benefit from SFP. Per the grant requirements, SBCSO was to submit a final evaluation of the results from the implementation of the SFP. This report addresses that requirement by providing background information on San Benito County, research supporting the veracity of the SFP, the implementation and data collection of the SFP, and finally an evaluation of the program's effectiveness.

BACKGROUND

San Benito County

Located in the Coast Range Mountains, San Benito County is 1,400 square miles in area. The population of this largely rural region is focused primarily in the City of Hollister, which accounts for approximately 65% of the 60,310 (as of 2017) County residents. In recent years, gangs from the adjacent communities of Salinas (157,596), Wastonville (~53,000), and San Jose (1,035,000) have entered San Benito County, attempting to acquire 'unclaimed' territory. From 2011 to 2014, the number of gang members in the community rose from 50 to 300. This has led to increases in illegal marijuana grows, drug manufacturing/sales operations, and gang violence. Since 2012, the City of Hollister has had a gang homicide rate of 10.9 per 100,000 and a homicide rate of 16.4 per 100,000.

Increase in drug and gang activity has been paralleled by a 40% decrease in staffing in the County, since 2008. As a result, the County's two patrol deputies, per 12-hour shifts, have been struggling to keep up with the demands of the growing community. Prior to receiving this JAG funding, the inability to proactively prevent, investigate, and prosecute gang activity was putting the County on the cusp of becoming a community of violence. In recent surveys, the youth and residence identified gangs, drugs, and violence as their main concerns in schools, their neighborhoods, and while out in public.

The Unified Narcotics Task Force (UNET) operates as the only inter-agency law enforcement team in the County and provides directed pro-active enforcement services. Prior to this JAG funding, UNET was extremely understaffed, with only two full-time agents and one part-time agent, and was unable to respond to crime tips from the community and/or criminal informants.

The SBCSO sought JAG funding to address the growing drug and gang problem within the County. To accomplish this, they were going to use the JAG funding to introduce both reactive and proactive community responses. On the reactive side, funding would provide continued housing for the UNET, additional administrative support, and one additional, full-time, employee agent. On the proactive side, they would expand the communities' prevention and education programs to get to the root of the gang and violence issues and deter youth from participating in these lifestyles. This would be accomplished by introducing the Strengthening Families Program, which intended to provide life-changing education and resources to at-risk youth and their families, to help break the cycle of drug abuse and violence. In addition, gang education and intervention would be integrated into the training, given the large Hispanic criminal street gang culture and influence in the rural farming/rancher community.

Strengthening Families Program Description

Strengthening Families Program (SFP) is a parent, youth, and family skills-building curriculum designed to prevent teen substance use and other behavior problems, strengthen parenting skills, and build family strengths. The program was developed by Dr. Karol Kumpfer and associates with a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, from 1983 to 1987. It involved a true pre-test, post-test, and follow-up experimental design with random assignment from families to one of four experimental groups: 1) parent training only, 2) parent training with children's skills training, 3) the three component SFP program, including the family relational skills component, or 4) no treatment. Because of the positive results, SFP was then replicated and evaluated on five CSAP High Risk Youth Program grants, with diverse ethnic groups, using a quasi-experimental design, with pre, post, 6, 12, 18, and 24-month follow-ups comparing drug-abusing families with non-drug abusing families. SFP has also been evaluated in two rural Utah school districts, employing a true experimental pre, post, 12, and 24-month follow-up design in which elementary schools were randomly assigned to: 1) the full SFP, 2) a child-only school-based program, 3) a combination of the two, or 4) no family intervention services. SFP was found to be highly effective in decreasing anti-social behaviors, conduct disorder, and aggression. Overall, SFP has been evaluated in as many as 15 different research studies. The preliminary two-year results of an effectiveness research study with 195 African-American and White families suggest very positive results in reducing children's behavior problems (e.g., aggression and conduct disorder) and improving children's social skills.

The SFP curriculum consists of 14 two-hour behavioral skills training sessions. Parents meet separately with group leaders to learn how to increase desired behaviors through positive reinforcement while also learning about clear communication, discipline, limit setting and how to solve problems. Children also meet separately with two child trainers for an hour to learn how to comply with family rules, how to communicate properly, how to understand emotions, how to develop their social skills, and the consequences of substance abuse. In the second hour of each session, both parents and youths engage in family activities and meetings, learn how to communicate, reinforce positive behaviors and effective communication, and learn how to plan family. Booster sessions and ongoing family support groups for SFP graduates are utilized to increase generalization and support skills.

The program aims to enhance communication in families, parenting skills (including parental empathy and the promotion of effective parenting styles), and improve decision-making and life skills in youth, including managing stress, diffusing conflict, the resistance of peer pressure and empathy, all while strengthening family bonds.

The SFP evaluation is conducted through a multi-method and multi-informant strategy. The evaluation includes at least two forms: The Family Attendance Form (the attendance, participation, and

homework completion for each session for each participant) and a Group Leader (therapist or trainer) Session Rating for each session. Prior to the beginning of session #1, parents and youths attend a pre-program enrollment and pre-test session which starts with an introduction to the program, incentives, the risk and benefits of enrolling, and informed consent forms for the evaluation. Once consent forms have been finalized, parents and youths are separated and interviewed (either individually or in groups). The evaluation staff read the questions while clients answer. One week following the end of the program, the families are post-tested with the same test. Follow up tests are carried out at the 6-month and 12-month booster sessions, also with the same questionnaires. Measures for the SFP local evaluation include the standardized *SFP Parents Interview Questionnaire*, *SFP Children's Interview Questionnaire*, and *SFP Teacher/Trainer Interview Questionnaire*.

The SFP has been evaluated many times by independent researchers in randomized control trials or health services research with very positive results in reducing substance abuse and delinquency risk factors by improving family relationships. Hence, SFP is rated at the top of the list by international and national review groups including the prestigious World Health Organization, Cochrane Collaborative Reviews in Oxford, United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime in Vienna, White House, National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Program Implementation

To properly implement the SFP, SBCSO proposed hiring and training at least four group leaders, with two running the youth's group and two running the parent's group. Through existing partnerships, SBCSO had people ready to serve in these capacities. On December 12th, 2014 facilitators completed the SFP curriculum training.

Recruitment was focused on youth currently in the delinquency system, while most parental recruits were referred by, or came from, the San Benito County Probation Department. Recruitment emphasized improvements in family relationships, parenting skills, and youth's behaviors and grades. Creative recruitment and retention strategies matched the needs of participating families, such as special incentives, family meals, transportation, and child care. Families who participated received an incentive \$50.00 budget, and all educational and instructional materials were provided to participants free of charge.

In each year of the three-year grant, there were to be ten families that completed the SFP class, beginning in June and ending in September; however, only two classes were conducted. The first SFP class commenced on July 17th, 2015 and consisted of eight participants: four youths and four parents. The class was taught once a week, for 2.5 hours, for 14 weeks. The second SFP class commenced on May 23rd, 2017 and consisted of five participants: two youths and three parents. The class was taught once a week, for 2.5 to 3.0 hours, for seven weeks. For the eighth week, families participated in a family

trip/event. In addition, dinner was provided prior to the beginning of each session.

For the first hour of both classes, parents and youths met separately and practiced skills together, through role-playing, discussion, learning games, and family projects. At the end of each session, the two groups would come together and discuss and attempt to implement the skills learned in the first hour.

METHODS

SFP Data

Data were collected from 13 participants across two sessions (2015 and 2017). The first SFP consisted of eight participants: four youth and four adults. Youth completed a survey evaluation comprised of ten quantitative questions and seven qualitative questions. Each quantitative question was scored on a four-point Likert scale, with the options: Never, Rarely, Some of the Time, and Most of the Time. While the survey evaluation was comprised of a pre and post reflection, both were completed at the conclusion of the program. Therefore, it is difficult to determine how much the participants behaviors/feelings changed as both sets of data were collected at the same time.

Parents of the 2015 cohort completed a *Things I Do Well as a Parent/Caregiver* survey comprised of 20 questions on a three-point Likert scale, with the options: Seldom, Sometimes, and Often. The purpose of the scale was to identify how often parents did each action with their youth. Parents calculated a 'Limits' and 'Love' score. Parents also completed a *Parent Evaluation* survey comprised of five rating questions, on a seven-point scale, four qualitative questions, and one yes/no question.

The second SFP consisted of five participants: two youth and three parents. Youth completed the *SFP 10-14 Youth Survey*, which was comprised of the ten questions asked to the 2015 cohort plus five additional questions. However, while the 2015 cohort had seven qualitative questions, the 2017 cohort had only one: "what was the most valuable thing(s) you learned during this program?".

Parents of the 2017 cohort also completed the *Things I Do Well as a Parent/Caregiver* survey and the pre/post *SFP 10-14 Parent/Caregiver Survey*. This was comprised of 20 questions on the same four-point Likert scale as the *Youth Survey*, and the same qualitative question as the *Youth Survey*.

Because of the low sample size in each cohort, we attempted to combine the data from 2015 and 2017. Six youth surveys collected across the two cohorts were combined, while the four parent evaluations from 2015 and the three from 2017 were analyzed separately, as the questionnaires did not overlap. Because of the small sample size, differences in the measurement tools, and when the data were collected, the validity and reliability of the findings presented below are limited and should be interpreted with caution.

Analytical Strategy

A comparison of the 2017 pre and post youth survey and parent survey responses was conducted to determine if the program had a positive impact on participants. Because of the low sample size, and the data not being normally distributed, the customary use of paired t-test analyses was not appropriate. Therefore, the non-parametric equivalent of a paired t-test, the Wilcoxon test, was conducted instead.

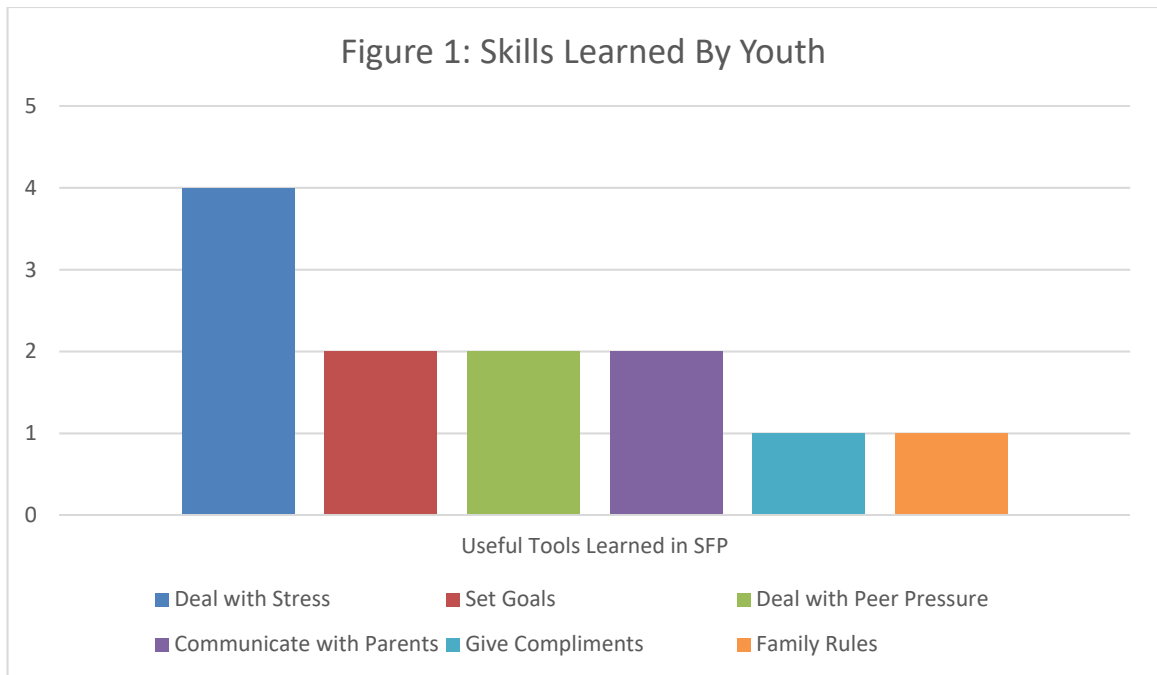
Due to the lack of variability within individual questions on the youth survey and parent survey, composite variables were created. To ensure that we had six participants for each composite variable, only the ten questions that appeared in both the 2015 and 2017 surveys were included. For the youth survey, three composite variables were created (see Appendix A). The first was Self Improvement, consisting of five questions. The second was Parent/Youth Interaction Improvement, consisting of four questions. The third was Peer Influence, consisting of two questions. Question “I know the qualities that are important in a true friend” was used in the Self Improvement and Peer Influence composite variables.

For the 2017 parent survey, three composite variables were created (see Appendix B). The first was Improve Communication, comprised of eight questions. The second was Activities with Youth, comprised of five questions. The third was Creating Rules and Boundaries, comprised of seven questions. The 2015 parent survey was analyzed separately, and used with the qualitative responses of the youth surveys and the 2017 parent survey to supplement the findings of the Wilcoxon test.

EVALUATION

The SFP appeared to have a moderate impact on the youth participants. While the program did not appear to influence the youth’s ability to make better peer choices ($p = 0.26$), it did have a slight impact on interactions with parents and self-improvement. Although not statistically significant ($p = 0.11$), youth felt that their interactions with their parent/caregiver was better. One participant noted that they “stop arguing with my family”, while another stated “I talk more with my mom” and that their mother “doesn’t force me to talk”. Where the greatest change was evident was in self-improvement. Again, while not statistically significant ($p = 0.07$), it was approaching significance ($p < 0.05$), and if there had been more participants, it might have been significant. In the qualitative responses from youth, one noted that they “feel better because I got to learn how to deal with stress”, while another said they learned “to care and love my family and community”. Finally, a third said “that I should never do bad things and just stay in school, respect my parents”.

In the 2015 cohort, youth were asked to identify which three tools learned in the SFP were the most useful (Figure 1). All four participants noted “how to deal with stress”, two noted “how to set goals”, “how to deal with peer pressure”, and “how to communicate with parent(s)”, and one noted “give compliments” and other said “clear family rules”.

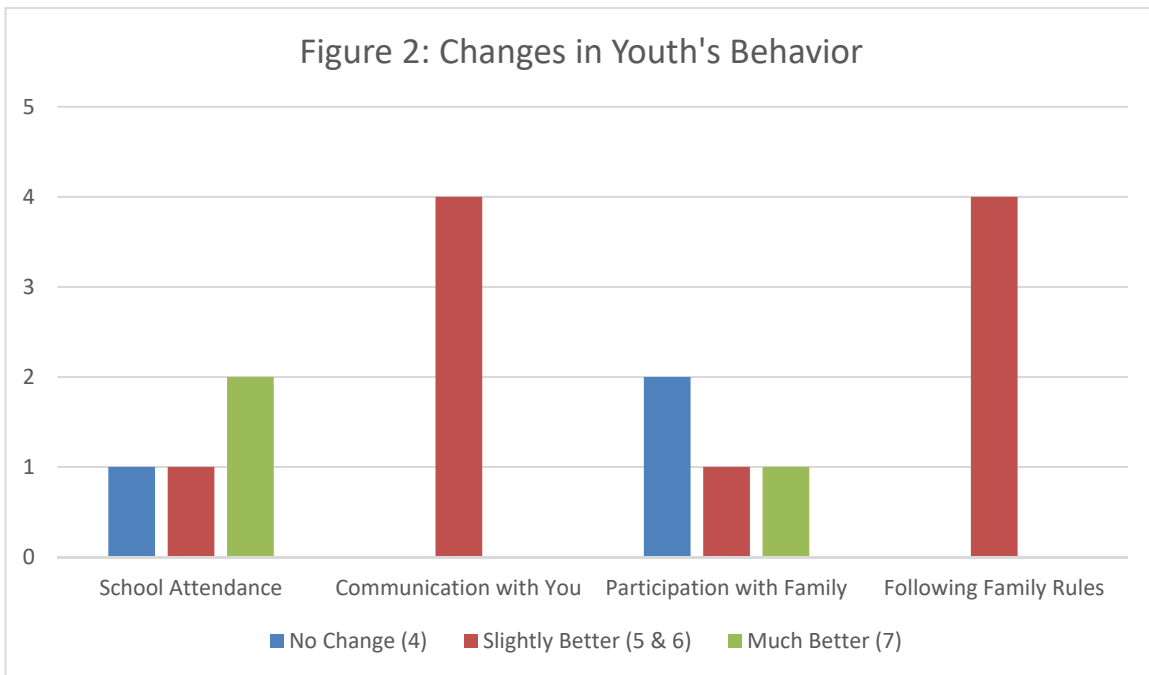


For the three parents in the 2017 cohort, the SFP was also a moderate success. Although their approaches towards communication saw the least change ($p = 0.18$), their ability to set rules ($p = 0.11$) and engage with their youth ($p = 0.11$) were better. When asked “what was the most valuable thing(s) you learned during” the SFP, one replied “I learned to set rules and be persistent”, while another said “to calm down before I talk to my child. Tell them how it made me feel. Listen and not yell”, while the third noted “communication, patient and learning how to approach them when their *[sic]* doing bad”.

The four parents in the 2015 cohort were asked whether they saw changes in the youth’s behavior across four domains (Figure 2). A Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (much worse) to 7 (much better). All four saw a slight improvement in communication and following family rules, while three noticed better school attendance; with two saying it was “much better”. Only half saw improvements in participation with family, both gave a rating of 6 or 7. That is, they did see noticeable changes.

When asked what additional changes parents/caregivers saw in their youth, one stated that their youth had “learned to slow down at times without a remark or action” and another said “he is trying to change his behavior & be responsible for his own actions”. When asked how *they* had changed after taking the SFP, one parent remarked that they “choose my battles with him bye *[sic]* letting small ones go”, while a second stated they “afford him the space & opportunity to grow as a young man”.

were also given 12 tools to enhance family experiences, and asked to identify the three that were most helpful. All four chose “communication”, followed by two selecting “respect” and “be equal”.



CONCLUSION

The aim of the JAG funding was to implement the SFP into the San Benito County community and conduct three classes, with at least ten families in each session. In addition, the original evaluation plan called for the standardized *SFP Parent Interview Questionnaire* (195-items), the *SFP Children’s Interview Questionnaire* (150-items), and the *SFP Teacher/Trainer Interview Questionnaire* (about 160-items). However, at the conclusion of the funding period, SBCSO had run two classes (2015 and 2017) with a total of 13 participants, while participants were given short, modified, questionnaires with little overlap between the two classes. As a result, it is difficult to accurately quantify the successfulness of the program’s implementation. However, it is possible to provide some trends and patterns that were evident in the data collected.

The SFP aimed to address family relationships, including family conflict, communication, cohesion, and organization. Both parents and youth qualitatively reported reductions in family conflict. Although the Wilcoxon analyses suggested that the least amount of change was seen in parent’s communication with youth, qualitative data suggests that communication is where some of the largest improvements were seen; from both parents and youth. In addition, the program was successful with improving parenting styles and parenting self-efficacy. In fact, the Wilcoxon analyses suggest this is where the most improvements were seen. The program also seemed to address another of its’ outlined goals by

addressing youth's aggression and conduct disorders, again with both parents and youth reporting less stress and arguments. Although the SFP aimed to reduce association with anti-social peers, it was not very successful in this regard. However, this finding should not be over-analyzed, as the low sample size and the composite variable being comprised of only two questions make it difficult for any analyses to be statistically significant.

Although the program did not meet its' sample size goal, the quantitative and qualitative analyses suggest that improvements were made for those who participated in the program. Of course, it is difficult to ascertain whether these changes were long-lasting, given that no follow-up was conducted. As a result, it is recommended that a follow-up with participants be conducted to determine if the SFP continues to positively impact communication, parental self-efficacy, and youth decision-making. Nevertheless, combined with the additional resources provided to UNET, funding from this JAG helped create a framework for achieving a safer community.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Three Composite Youth Variables

<i>Youth Composite Variables</i>	<i>Questions Included</i>
Parents/Youth Interaction Improvement (4 Questions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I appreciate the things my parents do for me • We have family meetings to discuss plans, schedules, and rules • My parents/caregivers and I can sit down together to work on a problem without yelling or getting mad • I feel truly loved and respected by my parents/caregivers
Self-Improvement (5 Questions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know one step to take to reach one of my goals • I know how to tell when I am under stress • I listen to my parents/caregivers point of view • I understand the values and beliefs my family has • I know the qualities that are important in a true friend
Peer Influence (2 Questions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If a friend suggests that we do something that can get us both into trouble, I am able to get out of doing • I know the qualities that are important in a true friend

Appendix B: Three Composite Parent Variable

<i>Parent Composite Variables</i>	<i>Questions Included</i>
Working with Youths and Teaching Them Rules (7 Questions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help my youth understand what the family and the house rules are • Let my youth know what the consequences are for breaking rules • Follow through with consequences each time he or she breaks a rule • Let my youth know the reason for the rules we have • Have regular times for homework • Give compliments and rewards when my child does chores at home or learns to follow rules • Explain to my child the consequences of not following my rules concerning alcohol use, even if they have not started yet
Improved Communication with Youths (8 Questions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wait to deal with problems with my child until I have cooled down • Remember that it is normal for children to be harder to get along with at this age • Talk with my child about his or her future goals without criticizing • Often tell my child how I feel when he or she misbehaves • Listen to my youth when he or she is upset • Try to see things from my youth's point of view • Talk with my child about ways to resist peer pressure • Show my child love and respect
Finding Ways to Keep Youth Involved (5 Questions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take time to do something fun together as a family • Find ways to keep my child involved in family work activities, like chores • Spend special time one-on-one with my youth • Find ways to include my child in family decisions about fun and work activities • Work together with my youth to solve problems that come up at home