



## **Neutral Ground's Proud Parenting Program Local Evaluation Report**

### **Executive Summary**

Neutral Ground's (NG) mission is to create a healthier safer Santa Ana centered on its communities most impacted by gang violence, breaking the cycle of gang violence, poverty, academic failure, and teen pregnancy through restorative practice, youth development, academic support, and the strengthening of meaningful relationships. Nati's House, DBA Neutral Ground is dedicated to youth development, gang prevention, intervention, and restorative justice. Neutral Ground is committed to intervening in the lives of youth and young adults who are at-risk for contact with the justice system and reducing recidivism for those who have already become juvenile justice involved. Our organization has demonstrated a long-standing commitment of support and service to youth and families throughout our city.

First established in 2013, Neutral Ground has built an impeccable reputation for targeted services in prevention, intervention, and mediation for students and families residing in Santa Ana. In partnership with the Santa Ana Unified School District, Neutral Ground staff assists with facilitation and training of restorative practices and conflict resolution, effectively helping to guide school/district staff in shifting school culture. NG serves elementary, middle and high school students district wide, centering services at 5 of its school campuses, serving 13-18 year old youth across the City of Santa Ana. Neutral Ground has provided restorative practices, gang prevention/intervention services, for over 10 years and proposed to not only bolster services provided to young fathers/parents, but to take on a more targeted approach with coordinating and facilitating supportive services for young parents in Santa Ana.

Over the past 10 year's Neutral Ground has participated in The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative alongside 30 representatives from community-based organizations, governing bodies, and law enforcement. Neutral Ground has also served as a key partner in the Prop. 47 Conexiones grant, providing job and career development, placement, enrollment in training courses for high-risk youth. Since 2015 NG has been a recipient of the City of Santa Ana Community Development Block Grants to successfully provide Summer Night Lights programming at targeted gang imbued locations. Further serving to bolster NG's reach has been a resource received from Padre a Padre grant from the State Board of Corrections

to implement programming to support and train young, justice-system involved parents. Additionally, for over 7 years Neutral Ground has been granted funding in partnership with Santa Ana's school district to provide restorative practices centered on conflict resolution, further providing a platform to train and engage with youth/families on conflict resolution best practices. Working with and alongside Santa Ana's youth has inherently provided access to the city's young parent population. By acquiring funding support and resources, Neutral Ground was afforded the opportunity to provide targeted services. With the support of the Proud Parent funding, Neutral Ground worked with young parents, ages 14-24, serving to instill a sense of responsibility and contribution to the well-being of their family, under the guidance of mentors with similar and shared lived experiences. The curriculum utilized, promoted healthy parent-child bonding and aided case management staff in relaying messaging aimed at reducing repeat adolescent births.

## Introduction

Neutral Ground has been operating in the heart of Santa Ana for the past 30 years and has established a strong network of collaborative partners. The founder, Nati Alvarado, was a teen father himself at the age of 15. His passion to help others and avoid the trauma and heartache that he and his family experienced in his youth have given him the desire to pursue this work and lead his agency with a strong collaborative spirit. His deep commitment to new and existing partnerships demonstrates a strong foundation of collaborative readiness to serve Santa Ana youth through a wide range of community activities and events. Over the past 10 years NG has participated in The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities (BHC) Initiative within Santa Ana Unified School District, developed the Summer Night Lights Program with funding from the City of Santa Ana which served thousands of youths from all over the city. In addition, Neutral Ground was selected as a partner to provide job preparation and drug abuse prevention in the Prop.47 grant with the alternative education programs within SAUSD and funded to provide Restorative Practices at secondary schools throughout the community. Neutral Ground also implemented the Proud Parent grant in SAUSD which included a collaborative partnership with community agencies and OC Probation Department. The partnership was so successful the Memorandum of Understanding has been renewed although the grant ended in 2021. Throughout the years NG has been a reliable and cutting-edge community agency ready and willing to serve the community through collaborations and partnerships with law enforcement agencies, school districts and other community agencies.

Neutral Ground's Father to Father/Proud Parent program addresses the needs of teen parents who have been involved in the justice system and/or child welfare system. While under the guidance of parent mentors, this innovative youth and young adult program develops young parents ages 14-24 by instilling a sense of responsibility and contribution to the well-being of their family. Our program consists of workshops, continuity of education services, father mentors, mental health referrals, and youth/young parent development. In partnership with the Santa Ana Unified School District, Neutral Ground staff assist with facilitation and training of restorative practices while effectively helping to guide school/district staff in leading said efforts.

Neutral Ground works closely with parents and supervising adults to help guide the healthy social development of participating youth. Additionally, Neutral Ground provides prevention, intervention and mediation services while connecting some of our most at-risk youth/families with employment support/workforce development and job coaching. Neutral Ground collaborates with SAUSD's Coordination of Services Team (COST) to ensure services are tailored and rendered to the appropriate population of youth/students. Utilizing this platform, Neutral Ground gains access to the students/young parents who are in highest need of linkages and support.

Further, Neutral Ground sought to increase the time gap between pregnancies among young people, while increasing physical, mental health and well-being among young people who are pregnant and/or parenting. In addition to increasing this time gap, Neutral Ground insured young parents were connected to the community by creating youth-friendly programming (Summer Night Lights), inclusive and safe spaces where young families could engage meaningfully amongst each other and community members. Further, increasing the safety, housing and financial stability for program participants while increasing the capacity for young parent/program participants to nurture the positive development of their child.

## Project Design

Neutral Ground's innovative program design utilizes existing partnerships and community networks to extend services to those who need it most. Having partnered with the Santa Ana Unified School District since 2013, Neutral Ground is able to access young parents city wide. Neutral Ground's Father to Father/Proud Parent program served to provide a holistic approach to supporting and empowering young families to thrive addressing the following three goals. Goal 1 was to instill a sense of responsibility of teen fathers or young parents towards taking care of and contributing to the well-being of their children and family. An aim was for 95% of participants to spend 10 hours a week with their child. 95% of participants were to provide resources such as income, food, medicine and clothing, etc to their child. 95% of participants were actively involved in life skills training which inturn will give them the tools that they will need as young parents.

Goal 2 was to promote the development of the father/parent-child bond. 95% of participants were partnered with fathers/parents who have overcome similar struggles. Participants understood the importance of establishing relationships with their children and their partners. Participants were encouraged to engage in bonding activities at least 2 times per month with their children, and Neutral Ground provided incentive and/or resources to support outings, assisting with facilitation of bonding activities.

The final goal of the Father to Father/Proud Parent program was to increase the likelihood that participants will stay out of the justice system. 95% of participants will stay in school, will seek and secure employment, 95% of participants will engage in career specific training and courses, increasing educational attainment (i.e., High School, Post-Secondary Education, Vocational

Training). Neutral Ground sought to increase educational attainment by linking youth to Restorative Practice Specialists/Case Managers assigned to each Santa Ana Unified School District partnering school. Restorative Practice Circles and 1-1 case management served to assist adolescent parents with social-emotional challenges, ease frustrations and anxieties they may have experienced or were still experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Restorative Practice Circles provided a venue to express and foster healing for students who had experienced various forms of community trauma. Continued outreach was extended to all district schools. Students demonstrating serious mental health concerns were referred to SAUSD School Social Workers by Neutral Ground staff.

## **Project Evaluation Methodology**

Metrics used in gaging efficacy are participant family engagement logs and pre/post surveys, as well as event sign-in sheets and logs of check in/1-1 meetings, attendance tracking and group participation were monitored. For participants enrolled in school, Aeries attendance and GPA/report cards are constantly checked. This, in an effort to ensure participants are attending and committed to school. Immediate follow up is done, if grades are low or there is a pattern of irregular attendance. Close monitoring and case management by assigned Restorative Practice Specialists ensured young parents were provided the proper linkage to services when needed. Other variables and measures used to measure whether each goal and its corresponding objective is achieved, are reports of relationship status with child and child's mother and/or father, reported time-spent with child, and reported effort to produce a safe environment for family. Reports of applications sent for employment and report proof of a career specific training and courses enrollment were also captured. Goal based methodology will be used to assess for efficacy, accessibility and effectiveness of the parenting support services. Neutral Ground defined variables and measures used to demonstrate whether each goal, and their corresponding objectives, were achieved: Variables included; Reported relationship status with child and child's mother/partner, Reported self-concept in relationship to fatherhood, Reported time spent with child, Reported effort to producing a safe environment for family. Goals were measured by the tracking of affective change, environmental conditions, behavioral change and learning change. Neutral Ground tracks and measures performance throughout service-delivery. Enrollment numbers are tracked through intake assessments and Restorative Practice Specialist caseload. Participant involvement is tracked and measured through attendance sign-in at all programming events/meetings, detailed case progress notes for one-on-one interventions, staff observations and tracking of street outreach and home visits. Internal incident reports, inclusive of site school violence and any interventions and de-escalations are also monitored and tracked. Additionally, students, parents, and school staff provide both quantitative and qualitative assessments and feedback on student growth and progress, as well as Neutral Ground's performance. Focus groups centered on community/client needs have served to produce qualitative data. In recent months Neutral Ground has purchased and integrated CRM software, CaseMGR Solutions. CaseMGR serves to streamline data reporting efforts, including tables and graphs that will visualize NG's community reach and program impact. In addition to collecting, organizing and compartmentalizing data, the newly purchased data system features tools to communicate directly with program participants and stakeholders through text messaging functionality,

ensuring consistent connection/engagement. Additionally, CaseMGR features a built-in customization tool that allows Neutral Ground to quickly adapt to changing reporting requirements while gathering necessary data for all contractual obligations. Data collection and enrollment records are reviewed monthly to ensure program participation/enrollment is increasing. Data reflecting linkages to employment are also tracked. Compliance-oriented metrics focus on the number of activities/meetings. Data gathered is measured/evaluated based on quality, schedule, performance, cost and stakeholder/partner organization/body satisfaction. Data is further measured/evaluated via partner organizations own data tracking systems, allowing raw data to be transferred freely. Once data is collected and current programming status/deliverables are understood, Neutral Ground will begin to plot long-term objectives while strategizing short term markers, serving to insure a stronger impact. Data gathered will reflect measurable outcomes and either an increase or decrease in participation and/or learning. Regular review of project outcomes/markers will assist in defining success early, providing clearly defined measures that will demonstrate results. Transactional data from partner organizations/programs will be used to track changes over time. Neutral Ground will aim to meet governance requirements, assigning staff/data analysts to review project outcomes/markers monthly.

A partnership is already solidified with Memorandums of Understanding with Santa Ana Unified School Police and Orange County Probation and has been awarded additional funding via the cities Revive Santa Ana initiative. Communication and collaboration will be developed with the Santa Ana Police Department. Referrals have already been committed by several partners and staff have already been recruited and on stand-by in order to ensure young parents are able to access services. A famous quote from a student in San Francisco once advised a conference room of service providers, "A child will walk around trouble and away from trouble, if they have someone to walk with and somewhere to walk to." By receiving funding, Neutral Ground was able to expand and fulfill this dire need for so many of the lost and impacted youth and young parents in our city.

## **Project Evaluation Results**

Expected outcomes differed from actual results due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, causing low participation rates and our proposed objective percentage inturn proved to be too high. Although committed participants were able to achieve goals, a number of participants disengaged with programming as the community responded to local shutdowns. Many participants aimed to spend more time with their children and stay in school and although all were afforded more time, the closing and social distancing restrictions across all sectors had a negative effect on engagement efforts and ultimately, continued participation in programming. Our ability to be at our partner schools, on campus, in person played a key role in helping participants remain engaged in academics and Neutral Ground programming. NG utilized trauma screening questionnaires that were administered at enrollment and culmination of program participation. NG aimed to maximize the potential of each participant by setting and achieving individualized goals and plans. On a continual basis, NG tracked and measured performance throughout service-delivery. Enrollment numbers were tracked through intake assessments and

staff caseload. Participant involvement was tracked and measured through attendance sign-in at all programming events/meetings, detailed case progress notes for one-on-one interventions were maintained, staff observations and tracking of street outreach and home visitation were also monitored. In addition, internal incident reports, inclusive of site school violence and any interventions and de-escalations were tracked. Additionally, students, parents, and school staff provide both quantitative and qualitative assessments and feedback on student growth and progress, as well as Neutral Ground's performance. Focus groups centered on community/client needs will serve to produce qualitative data.

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Quarterly a minimum of 20 unduplicated youth at SAHS and 10 at Chavez Continuation received intensive 1:1 and group mentoring/tutoring, assistance with school projects and remediation on academic challenges, and a streamlined referral system was set up with district schools. Young parents demonstrating a decline in GPA, academic performance, attendance struggles and upheaval in their family were referred for services. (Minimum of 80 per year at SAHS and 40 at Chavez =120 total, with a concentrated effort placed toward young parents) 75% of students demonstrated an increase in grades in targeted classes. This also had an influence in creating a strong bond with teen parents and our ability to mentor and provide case management services. Proud Parent award funding ensured Neutral Ground staff were available for monitoring and consistent outreach, further aiding in successful linkages and support. Award funds provided Neutral Ground the opportunity to not only equip existing staff, but to onboard support staff, all of which played a significant role in cultivating a positive impact in participating teen parents' lives.

## **Discussion of Results**

As the grant period has come to a close and evaluation results have been gathered, administrative staff has outlined several areas of needed growth and refinement. A continuity of program and client outreach/engagement strategy must be formally drawn. Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a hold on activities and a hurdle set on engagement strategies intended to maintain client participation. Various forms of programming were utilized to engage participants

(SAUSD School placements, Neutral Ground Boxing Club, Summer Night Lights, The Life Center-Faith Based Organization). NG provided job/workforce development, job coaching and employment support for participants as well as restorative practice interventions at assigned target school/s. In addition to intensive case management of young parents, Neutral Ground provided and/or reinforce academic goal setting & support, homework assistance, college/career development, leadership skills development, crime and violence prevention, mentoring, gang prevention, linkages to resources intervention/reentry services, after-school sports and recreation, restorative circles and mediation, and vocational development. Further, success included completion of the provided curriculum, Nurturing Fathers which is a 13-week group-based program that meets weekly for 2 ½ hours. Failure/incompletion was determined if the participant did not complete the provided curriculum.

Neutral Ground sought to bolster the continued establishment of referral systems with school administrators and school counselors at Santa Ana High School, Chavez Continuation School, Villa and Esqueda Intermediate as well as the surrounding Santa Ana Unified School District community as partnerships developed. Neutral Ground, Proud Parent/Father to Father focused on increasing academic gains while reducing hopelessness through the provision of supportive services for referred students/parents attending schools within the Santa Ana Unified School District, such as Santa Ana High School and Chavez Continuation School.

Despite local COVID-19 community shutdowns, Neutral Ground staff transitioned from in person case management to virtual service delivery. Further, Neutral Ground also leveraged resources, partnering with local organizations to provide dry goods COVID-19 N95 masks, diapers, and mobile hot-spots for families, students, and young parents in need. Since then, schools have begun in-person instruction which has provided Neutral Ground the opportunity to reconnect with students and cultivate new relationships with young parents.

## Conclusion

Neutral Ground's mission is to create a healthier, safer Santa Ana centered on its communities most impacted by gang violence; breaking the cycle of poverty, child abuse, academic failure, and teen pregnancy through restorative practice, positive youth development, academic support, and the strengthening of meaningful relationships. We can conclude that we had a successful program. This is not solely based on collected quantitative data, but qualitative data, on the impact we saw reflected in our participants' lives. In testimonies shared, participants expressed how this program forever changed their children's lives and theirs in a positive way. Our intention was to give these teen parents an opportunity for change and improvement, to help them become a better person and for it to be reflected on their children's and families lives. This program made a powerful impact on many teen parents as well as in ours. Neutral Ground is very grateful to have been given the opportunity and tools to make a difference, to change the story. We will continue to seek resources that will serve to bolster programming that supports young parents in our community. Ingrained in our services and declared in our mission, Neutral Ground

will continue to provide services aimed at decreasing the number of teen pregnancies in Orange County, while providing opportunities for young parents to succeed academically and avoid the social ills teen parent communities have experienced.