

The Benefits of Togetherness

Group home sibling care, the newest option

What can be more traumatic than when siblings must be removed from their home because of parental abuse or neglect? Most children suffer an additional blow when they are separated from their siblings and sent to various out-of-home placements. Away from everything and everybody they know, children must learn to adapt to entirely new living circumstances. As an alternative, if siblings can be kept together in the same out-of-home placement, the pain of family separation can be eased for children who can stay with their brothers and sisters.



In recent years, the Board of Child Care, headquartered in Baltimore, Maryland, noted an increase in referral requests for siblings to group home care. This, coupled with the fact that very few facilities in the Baltimore area offered services to children 14 years and younger, amplified the growing needs of younger sibling groups.

As part of the Board of Child Care's vision "to be a community of hope," the agency's leadership wanted to help meet the growing demands of serving sibling groups with care and compassion. Tom Curcio, president and CEO of the Board of Child Care, began planning how to address this need in 1997.

Through the agency's affiliation with the United Methodist Church, Curcio became aware of a vacant parsonage in a residential neighborhood near the Board of Child Care headquarters that might be modified into a viable group home for children in transition. After in-depth discussions between the agency and the church, they both soon agreed that a collaboration to keep siblings together would serve a valuable community need and meet their joint organizational missions.





The program plan for siblings was based on an assessment of the service needs of Baltimore and surrounding counties. The plan also secured the support of county placement officials. Once the program viability was substantiated, community meetings followed to ensure that nearby neighbors and residents would support the group home as well.

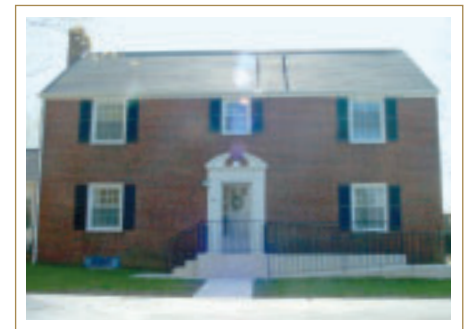
THE COMMUNITY

As is frequently the case with opening group homes in a neighborhood setting, local residents had many questions and concerns about the proposed facility.

Even before the group home project was underway, rumors were circulating. Residents were voicing fears that “the facility would be turned into a home for juvenile delinquents.” A local newspaper quoted residents as saying “children from broken and dysfunctional homes would roam without supervision, make life miserable for area residents, and bring down property values.” As administrators of group homes know, community fear and trepidation can thwart even the best program intentions.

To quell unsubstantiated fears, Curcio strategically planned for a successful program opening. He hosted meetings and extended open invitations to community residents and neighbors, answered questions for local media to ensure accurate and more positive news coverage, and made sure that all of the constituents involved were informed and supportive of this group home partnership between the Board of Child Care and the United Methodist Church.

Because of this effort to inform the community and the process of engaging in straightforward discussions about the children who would be served, the concerns of the residents were abated. In fact, the program’s neighbors became quite supportive in wanting to meet the needs of vulnerable sibling groups separated from their parents and caregivers. “By talking openly with community residents about the children we planned to serve, we were able to turn their fears into support,” said Curcio.



THE BUILDING

The building, which was once used as a parsonage, was in fairly good condition. But altering its usage to that of a modernized group home would take rehabilitation and updating. The first step was to move the building within the property to a location that was better situated. The home was jacked up from its foundation, put on I-beams, and aircraft wheels were placed underneath to move it to its new location. Once the home rested in its new plot of ground, the next steps involved rebuilding and refurbishing it to accommodate the needs of children, visiting family groups, and the 24-hour-a-day staff.

The facility needed to be ready to offer the children as home-like a setting as possible. To accommodate this, renovations included refurbishing four bedrooms, two baths, a living room, dining room, family room, recreation room, and kitchen—with a key purpose of establishing a close-knit, familial setting for children. The home also needed updating to meet all of the zoning requirements, as well as installing an elevator and ramp, sprinkler system, air conditioning, and office space for staff. “All in all,” Curcio reported, “the agency spent close to \$350,000 in the renovation process.”

THE BOARD OF CHILD CARE

The Board of Child Care is committed to providing quality programs in a safe and caring environment for children and their families. With programs in Maryland, the District of Columbia, and West Virginia, the Board of Child Care is building a lasting foundation for hundreds of children and families each year. Founded in 1873, the Board of Child Care focuses on seven core service areas: residential treatment, foster care, day care, emergency shelters, counseling, adoption, and an on-campus school serving special education needs of community children.

Over the last decade, the agency has expanded its service outreach tenfold. The agency employs close to 450 staff with an annual budget of \$30 million deployed to serve children and families. The Board of Child Care is accredited by EAGLE (the Educational Assessment Guidelines Leading toward Excellence) and the Council on Accreditation.



Thomas Curcio has been president and CEO of the Board of Child Care since 1993.

Tara Pessia is clinical director at the Board of Child Care.



THE COLESVILLE GROUP HOME FOR SIBLINGS

The sibling care facility provides a home for up to eight boys and girls from the ages of 7 to 14. Staffed in three eight-hour shifts by three professional child care workers with bachelor's degrees, each child's case is assessed and treated individually and as a member of a family. The group home is also furnished with private areas that are suitable for family visitation and therapy sessions. The sibling youngsters stay as long as needed until they are reunified with their family or placed with a foster care family.

THE PROGRAM

At the same time the group home was under renovation, the program plans were in development. As in all of the Board of Child Care's residential programs, the agency would provide counseling services and structured academic, behavioral, clinical, and recreational opportunities. Because of the agency's affiliation with the United Methodist Church, spiritual enrichment activities were also an option for each child. Psychiatric and social work services would be provided on-site, as well as 24-hour access for clinical emergencies.

The children placed in the sibling group home would have all of the advantages of the Board of Child Care's nearby campus recreational facilities, and opportunities to participate in field trips and other sponsored activities. It was also planned to integrate the sibling groups into community life through their enrollment in nearby public schools, participation in recreational programs, and attendance at local church services of their choice.

OPENING DOORS

In May 2003, the Colesville Group Home for sibling care greeted its first young arrivals, two sisters. These two girls were quickly joined by six other children. In all, three sibling groups became the first residents. Tara Pessia, clinical director at the Board of Child Care, finds that referring agencies have been supportive and encouraging of the sibling group care model. "This program model is unique to our area, and the Department of Social Services has enthusiastically welcomed this healthy alternative of placing brothers and sisters together. We have had no shortage of families who can benefit from their kids being together," Pessia continued. "The group home has been fully occupied since its opening."

Heather Shimmamon, a foster care intake worker in the Department of Social Services in Howard County, collaborated with the Board of Child Care by placing a sibling group of three children in the Colesville Group Home. "It's gratifying to find a placement option that accepts groups of siblings," she said. Fortunately, most child welfare workers are sensitive to the needs of keeping siblings together and connected. They know that for children removed from their homes, the added emotional security of staying together with brothers and sisters is a big comfort to them. "The Board of Child Care sibling group home gives the kids support as a family," Shimmamon continued, "and individual support as well."

According to Pessia, "One of the big advantages for siblings who are placed together is their feeling of greater stability. They look to each other for guidance and support, and can grow and change together." She added, "When kids are located in one placement, it's also far easier for family members to become actively involved in treatment goals and plans for the family as a whole."

The group home is a transitional placement until the children can be moved to a permanent home. Siblings generally stay about six months to a year until their family life can be stabilized or a foster home is found. Pessia notes that children transition into foster care when they're clinically and behaviorally ready for a less restrictive program setting. When they must be moved into foster care, agency staff and the Department of Social Services make every effort to keep them together as a family.

BOTTOM LINE

Experts agree that one of the best ways to help siblings when they must be removed from their family home is to keep them together. Because these children have already endured so much and sustained painful losses, it helps them feel more whole and aids in facilitating the family's treatment plans when they can be placed with their brothers and sisters. The Colesville Group Home is doing just that. ▲