

Blue Ribbon Commission  
On Children's Behavioral Health  
Julia de Burgos School – May 3, 2006

Good evening, my name is Olga Bermudez, and I serve as the Parent Counselor & Community Support Manager with Congreso de Latinos Unidos, the largest Latino health, education, social services, and workforce development community-based not for profit agency in Pennsylvania. On behalf of the over 23,000 clients we service at Congreso, I am honored to be here today to share about our work in the mental health arena.

Congreso de Latinos Unidos commends the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Children's Behavioral Health's efforts to improve the quality and efficiency of the behavioral health system of care for Philadelphia's children and their families. The goals to address the large health disparities in accessing services, expanding service options within the child welfare, education and juvenile justice systems; and the promotion of evidence based intervention practices are all issues that need to be address so that we can provide services that reflect the cultural richness of the City's children.

Congreso de Latinos Unidos is a community based organization (CBO) founded in 1977 by Puerto Rican advocates as a health-focused service agency. Since then Congreso has grown to be a leading provider of social, behavioral health, health and educational programs to Latinos and other communities in the Philadelphia region and touches the lives of over 23,000 each year. Congreso's mission is to strengthen the Latino and other communities through social, economic, education, and health services; leadership development; and advocacy. All programs, services and advocacy serve to confront and address the myriad of challenges facing these communities, and to secure a future for their families and children. Additionally, Congreso offers a wide array of Child Welfare services that are comprehensive, multicultural and are provided to the community residents to overcome language, cultural, educational and economic barriers. Through our social work case management programs, our social workers work with families and individuals to accomplish the following objectives:

- a. Increase family stability and well being
- b. Increase protective factors and reduce risk factors for families and children
- c. Increase community and educational support networks and linkages for families and children

As the Blue Ribbon Commission works to integrate Children's Behavioral Health Services with Child Welfare services, it is important to consider parent education and support programs along with supports to children. Understanding that a family is a place where possibilities for growth and creativity are discovered is crucial; it's a learning space where values, norms, attitudes and behaviors are achieved. Within the family, as children, we learn the ways to relate to others and to ourselves; the role of parents/care givers as agents of social change becomes important.

To address these complex family issues the Behavioral Health System must develop a more holistic approach to the process of change and mental health services for children within a family context. It is important to understand that this is a complex-multivariable issue that needs to consider the importance of: education, at home and at school, parent's skills, and therapy and, ultimately, social change. Integrating services with parents, children and professionals, including mental health professionals is the key to providing the care and attention our children and families need. To illustrate how this integrated service is benefiting one of our families at Congreso, I present this case:

A 14 year girl is receiving services within Congreso's Delinquency Intervention Program, as an infant she was placed in foster care because her mother was involved in drugs. While in foster care the child was transferred to at least 10 different families and exposed to abuse situations before she was placed with her maternal grandmother at the age of 7. Since then, the child has been acting-out in school and at home; engaging in school and street fights; has been truant from school and has had several school suspensions and did not communicate with her maternal grandmother. The social worker, parent educator, mental health counselor, MGM and the child met to share their observations and discuss the family needs. As a result, an integrated plan was developed for all parties to implement and the child has shown measurable success in reducing the incidence of aggression in school, the child has shown academic improvement, MGM has been able to establish communication with her granddaughter and the biological mother is attending parenting support and recognizes that she needs to make efforts so that she can improve her communication with her child, while working on her own issues.

If the joint effort had not taken place, this child would have been in placement and not much could be done to help her overcome her issues. If we did not work together we would have compromised the hope and promise that this child has within her. Despite her mistakes, which were contributed by her

family's issues, this child has hope within herself, a warm loving heart and dreams to go to college and become a teacher.

*We have to be flexible enough to meet our client's needs and meet them where they are, encourage them to start planning how to change and provide them with the supportive system that can offer better possibilities to engage, improve and change. If we, as professionals, are involved in the services to a family, services must be orchestrated to make sure that the clients are given an opportunity to participate in their service and that ALL professionals involved must actively participate in the interventions and avail themselves to do so, no matter how busy we are.*