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Arlington, Fort Worth family centers need neighborhood leaders

Sometimes people in neighborhoods where there is a high risk of crime, poverty and other social ills have no sense of control over what happens to them, says Pat Cheong, United Way assistant vice president for public policy. "They haven't felt they have a choice in what goes on."

With the United Way of Tarrant County's help, a new family support center aims to change that for residents of east central Arlington. A similar center is scheduled to open next month to serve Fort Worth's near south and southeast sides.

The irony is that people who do not feel empowered often don't seek to gain control over the events surrounding them. The success of these family centers will depend on whether they can change that.

Like any new social programs, they will start on shaky ground. They will succeed only if neighborhood residents take advantage of their services, help guide what they offer and use the centers as a force for change.

That's exactly what United Way is hoping for. Initially, the family support centers will put people in touch with other agencies that can help meet immediate needs. Eventually, the centers may offer services such as support groups, family fun nights, health fairs or English as a second language classes.

But that depends on what types of programs neighborhood residents want. The centers are to be guided by councils whose members are parents and neighbors who live in the target area. Service providers will ask, not tell, the councils what their neighborhoods need.

Sherry Wood-Fairchild, a member of the Arlington center's leadership council, told *Star-Telegram* reporter Traci Shurley why that's a good idea: "Sometimes what they think we need may not be what we're really needing."

The Arlington center is in the city's Hugh Smith Recreation Center, 1815 New York Ave., and is a partnership between United Way and the All Church Home for Children. The Fort Worth center is scheduled to open Aug. 8 in the Bethlehem Center, 970 E. Humbolt St., and will be run by the Lena Pope Home.

Each has received grants totaling \$160,000 from United Way. The Arlington center also received \$50,000 from the Arlington Tomorrow Fund, set up by the City Council as a way to use gas-lease revenue from city-owned land.

The money is there to make these centers work and to help meet the needs of families. The support is there from community organizations with long track records of providing help. Still, the key ingredient will be leadership from the neighborhood councils.

It's an opportunity that these neighborhoods should not miss.