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New neighborhood center in Arlington aims to strengthen families

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Some statistics about Arlington's 76010 ZIP code range from discouraging to frightening.

Twenty-eight percent of young children in the east-side neighborhood are living in poverty, according to a recent assessment. It also has the highest number of registered sex offenders in Arlington and has had a quarter of the city's homicides in the past four years.

But residents and local social services providers behind the new East Arlington Family Support Center say that's not the whole story.

The support center is in the city's Hugh Smith Recreation Center at 1815 New York Ave. and is a partnership between the United Way of Tarrant County and the nonprofit All Church Home for Children. Organizers envision a place designed by those in the community to help their neighbors strengthen their families and keep children safe.

It is led by a council of neighborhood representatives and parents with decision-making authority.

"East Arlington is a wonderful community. There are lots of families that have been living here for decades and truly love their community and are very active in it," said Marcela Nava, manager of the support center. "There are some people who have lived here a few years and are very invested in it."

High-need areas

For now, support specialists at the center are signing up families for case management services and connecting them to other agencies that might fill their immediate needs. Organizers hope to offer on-site programs like support groups, family and teen fun nights, health fairs, English as a second language classes and more.

The United Way is also funding another new family support center in Fort Worth, this one run by another nonprofit, the Lena Pope Home. That center, which is in the Bethlehem Center at 970 E. Humbolt St., will formally open Aug. 8.

Both centers are modeled after a successful program in Allegheny County, Pa., and were started with a \$50,000 grant from the United Way in January. Each received \$111,000 more in United Way funding for this fiscal year. Arlington's center also recently received \$50,000 from the Arlington Tomorrow Fund, a nonprofit that awards grants from the city's gas-lease revenue, Nava said.

The 76010 ZIP code and south Fort Worth's 76104 ZIP code were selected for the centers because they are high-need areas, said Pat Cheong, the United Way's assistant vice president for public policy. She said the project grew out of efforts to find ways to protect Tarrant County children. The United Way also wanted to make services more easily accessible to families in those ZIP codes.

Neighborhood agendas

Letting the neighbors set the agendas for the centers and having them buy into the idea was also a major component.

"Sometimes, particularly in high-risk areas, families haven't been empowered," Cheong said. "They haven't felt they have a choice in what goes on."

Sherry Wood-Fairchild, a mother of three boys who serves on the Arlington center's neighborhood leadership team, said she was startled by some of the negative statistics in a needs assessment compiled by All Church Home for Children. She likes the approach that center organizers are taking. Social service providers asking neighbors, instead of telling them, is a good idea, she said.

"Sometimes what they think we need may not be what we're really needing," she said.

Family support centers The East Arlington Family Support Center is in the Hugh Smith Recreation Center, 1815 New York Ave. 817-277-3050 or familysupport@allchurchhome.org

The Fort Worth Family Support Center in the Bethlehem Center will have an opening event for interested families at 10:30 a.m. Aug. 8. Sonya Mosley, 817-255-2654

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