

Advocacy Fits Agency Mission with Ease

Family & Youth Counseling Agency transforms itself and its community reputation

“We know in this community that, if there is any need to be met, the first call to make is to Family & Youth Counseling Agency.” These words, offered by a representative from the Lake Charles, La., mayor’s office, speak volumes about the community reputation of Alliance for Children and Families member Family & Youth Counseling Agency (FYCA), Lake Charles, La.

Since its founding in 1970, FYCA’s counseling services have made the organization an integral asset in southwest Louisiana. During the past few years, however, the organization has upped the ante of its reputation. Under the leadership of Executive Director Julio Galan, FYCA has transformed itself into a regional and statewide leader in mission-based advocacy and civic engagement efforts. In the process, the agency has quickly earned itself a stronger community presence along with additional power and leadership.

There are many challenges to increasing advocacy and civic engagement within an organization, acknowledges Galan. “Many organizations that work with children and families do not see advocacy as part of their core mission,” he says. “Often there is no perceived immediate return on the investment. In addition, funds are often unavailable to cover the cost of advocacy work.”

Yet, FYCA has stepped up to meet these challenges head on. That’s because, as Galan explains, the core mission of the organization requires FYCA to commit itself to advocacy. “The end result of everything we do is to support stronger communities, family life, and quality of living. Advocacy is a key ingredient in achieving that end result.

“It’s not just about delivering services. Delivering service is what we do but, if the overall outcome is to improve the quality of life, then we have to engage ourselves and the rest of the sector in advocacy work. That’s what brings us all together.”

Mission-based advocacy is defined by the Alliance as the process by which organizations harness the political potential of all individuals who are committed to an organization’s

mission. These individuals include board members, trustees, volunteers, staff members, and friends, who, in concert, take actions that can lead to more effective advancement of the organization’s big-picture goals.

Mission-based advocacy gives salience to the concept of civic participation, which the Alliance defines as those efforts designed to more actively involve an organization’s constituents and clients in building their own community voices. This includes activities that encourage clients and constituents to be more active in directing their own plan for improvement and raising their voice around policies or systems that impact them and their families.

In order to meet the challenges of mission-based advocacy, Galan says



The Human Services Response Institute meets about immediate response to needs in southwest Louisiana after hurricane Rita in 2005.



FYCA Executive Director Julio Galan is co-chair of the Alliance 2008 National Conference Planning Committee. He is pictured during a meeting with Elizabeth Carey, Alliance chief operating officer.



he and his staff make the most of their membership in the Alliance. From the Severson National Information Center’s resources to Alliance-sponsored trainings on the topic, FYCA turns to and learns from the Alliance on many occasions.

“I think the concept of mission-based advocacy should be a key issue for all nonprofit organizations that serve children and families,” Galan says. “It should be part of each organization’s overarching mission because it’s not about what’s in it for us, but what we do for the community to improve quality of life. Advocacy is not about one organization. It’s about building voices. I see civic engagement as the outcome.”

FYCA Uses Resources to the Fullest

Candis Carr, associate executive director of FYCA, echoes Galan’s passion for FYCA’s mission-based advocacy efforts. “FYCA’s founders wanted a strong leadership organization with a focus on mission. We have stayed true to that original mission and we’ve been successful because of that.”

Galan credits the Alliance for many of FYCA’s accomplishments in mission-based advocacy. It was the Alliance that first initiated what would become an agency-wide transformation for FYCA, he says, when in 2005 it invited Galan to join its public policy committee.

“When the Alliance asked me to serve on that committee, I wasn’t sure about my impact,” Galan admits. “But it gave me an overview of public policy, and soon I realized there was so much missing in our community and within the family service agencies of southwest Louisiana.”

His committee experience was instrumental in helping Galan recognize that filling the void in advocacy and civic engagement in southwest Louisiana would first require a core coalition of civic-minded nonprofit leaders. He and his staff began planning and preparing for the Children and Families Action Network (CFAN), an FYCA initiative created in partnership with three other organizations.

In 2006, the plan for CFAN was realized. The network is built on the principle that convening a group of leaders in the nonprofit sector to discuss the quality-of-life issues that affect children and families in the area could help ensure community voices were heard by the lawmakers capable of creating change. The network today boasts 150 individual members, most of whom represent nonprofit child- and family-serving organizations in Louisiana.

“The target of FYCA’s mission-based advocacy efforts has been the leadership of nonprofit organizations serving children and families because, in our community, nothing happens unless nonprofit leaders really bless the idea,” Galan says. “We felt that it was important for us to invest some resources into communicating the value of advocacy to encourage nonprofits to participate in becoming a voice for children and families”

A key component of FYCA and CFAN’s mission-based advocacy teaching plan is a toolkit on the topic that Galan received from the Alliance’s Building Community Voices civic engagement program, operated by the Alliance’s public policy and civic engagement office. The Mission-Based Advocacy Toolkit is a comprehensive document of more than 100 pages that provides valuable and tangible tools for implementing an advocacy agenda and participating in the democratic decision-making process.

“The Mission-Based Advocacy Toolkit has been our training package,” Galan says. “The toolkit has allowed us to communicate the value of advocacy work efficiently and cost-effectively because the training manual is already written.”

Civic Engagement Further Builds Strength

Another hallmark of FYCA’s advocacy efforts is the agency’s year-round emphasis on civic engagement, a commitment spurred primarily by the organization’s involvement with the Alliance’s National Family Week program.

“I think the second key reason why the organization underwent this transformation is because of the support we received from the Alliance for civic engagement,” Galan says. “Through the years,

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The Connections Count: Family Focus Professional Development Conference in February 2008 attracted professionals for two days of seminars, speakers, and networking.

Week into their year-long advocacy and civic engagement work,” says Paula Purcell, National Family Week director at the Alliance. “Meaningful change on behalf of children and families requires a deeper commitment to civic engagement, advocacy, and public policy as part of members’ National Family Week efforts.”

Positioned for Leadership, FYCA Steps Up During Crisis

Under Galan’s leadership, FYCA, its staff, and its board of directors have embraced the concept of mission-based advocacy, espoused it at every opportunity, and intertwined it into every facet of the organization’s programs, initiatives, and service delivery. This high level of commitment and direction has quickly thrust FYCA into a position of leadership and earned it an unparalleled community reputation.

It’s a reputation that led FYCA to a unique position in the wake of Hurricane Rita, which devastated southwestern Louisiana in September 2005. After the storm, funders and local officials searched for strong organizations with solid leadership capacity to build a “command center” for human services. They needed an organization that could build from the ground up—and quickly.

FYCA was the logical choice, and Lake Charles Mayor Randy Roach called upon the agency to take the helm. With support from the United Way of Southwest Louisiana, FYCA assessed the community’s needs and coordinated a responsive safety net for individuals and families providing access to food, shelter, and crisis support services.

In 2006, the initiative that FYCA played a key role in building was institutionalized as the Human Services Response Institute (HSRI), a disaster recovery organization that remains a program of FYCA. HSRI is positioned to respond to any crisis in southwest Louisiana and to support any other recovery organization in the state.



Julia Beatty, program officer for the 21st Century Foundation, was the keynote speaker at the Connections Count! Family Focus and Professional Development Conference.

The two-day training was initially limited to 100 people, but it has grown to accommodate more than 250. The conference tracks have increased from two to five, including a targeted one for attorneys.

In addition, the agency’s annual Child Advocates Night celebration during National Family Week provides a forum to honor volunteers and professionals who dedicate themselves to working on behalf of abused and neglected children.

In 2007, FYCA opted to expand its National Family Week observance as well as formally link CFAN—its established advocacy presence—with National Family Week. In addition to its regular event, FYCA hosted a mission-based advocacy summit for members of CFAN. The summit included sessions about how nonprofits can become involved with and more effective in using mission-based advocacy to affect public policy on behalf of vulnerable children and families.

In 2008, FYCA will add to what it established during the 2007 summit with additional year-round work. These efforts will include hosting quarterly mission-based advocacy trainings that encourage civic engagement, providing CFAN members with regular e-alerts about policies affecting children and families, and facilitating networking opportunities between child- and family-serving agencies.

“FYCA is a great example of an Alliance member harnessing the momentum and goals of National Family

we’ve received mini-grant funds for National Family Week. That was the beginning of our promotion of different issues in the community. We used National Family Week as a base for our advocacy work and built upon it each year.”

For several years, FYCA has hosted events and activities related to National Family Week. But rather than let that work lie until the next yearly observance, FYCA has found ways to link National Family Week values to its year-round planning efforts.

Its premier event, the Connections Count! Family Focus Regional Conference, takes place early in the year. What began as a desire to provide more quality, cost-effective training for staff to receive continuing education credits, the Connections Count! conference has evolved into a well-run, informational, continuing education symposium that includes other agencies, social workers, law enforcement officials, and attorneys.

“Our association with organizations like the Alliance put FYCA in a position of strength,” Galan says. “In this case, that strength allowed us to build our own capacity to be in a positive position to deliver these critical services when the need is greatest.”

Reaping the Rewards

“It takes a high level of commitment to take on the challenges of mission-based advocacy in the way that FYCA has,” says Linda Nguyen, director of civic engagement at the Alliance. “The agency has done more than agree to meet these challenges. It has overcome them. They have taken leadership among other organizations in southwest Louisiana by educating colleagues about the policy issues that impact children and families. And, despite the fact that one of the biggest challenges is that there’s typically no immediate return on an organization’s investment in advocacy, in only a few years FYCA is already experiencing the rewards.”

Galan identifies one of these newfound benefits. “Because of our focus on mission-based advocacy, we now have a strong convening power. When we call meetings, people come. In addition, we have earned a new level of respect within the community because of our involvement in advocacy work. We receive telephone calls during legislative sessions from statewide advocacy groups, as well as the governor’s office, wanting to know where FYCA stands on certain issues at the state level.”

CFAN received a grant from the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation to further develop CFAN and to continue promoting mission-based advocacy. The Foundation for the MidSouth awarded the agency another grant to incorporate an initiative into CFAN to promote better healthcare access in Lake Charles.

Because of its efforts to promote mission-based advocacy, and especially



because of its work in developing CFAN, FYCA also was one of two Alliance members to be recognized in 2007 with a Building Community Voices Ambassador Award. The award was formally presented by Nguyen at FYCA’s Child Advocates Night during National Family Week.

“FYCA has been very successful as an organization, and a lot of what it has accomplished is due to its understanding of mission-based advocacy,” Nguyen says. “That’s one of the reasons it received the Building Community Voices Ambassador Award—it is an exemplar agency.”

There are many challenges, Galan restates. “But we are lucky because our board quickly adopted this concept. It didn’t take a lot of effort to get the board

to support the idea of promoting advocacy,” he says. “But beyond the board, this support permeates all levels of the organization. My key staff understands the value of advocacy. Our staff participates in a lot of the training opportunities that we’ve had and, as much as we can, we involve staff and volunteers in the conversations we have about advocacy.”

Go to fyca.org for more information on FYCA. ■

National Family Week Initiative Expands to Year-Round Effort



At Family & Youth Counseling Agency (FYCA) meetings and speaking engagements, and through its ongoing work with other agencies and the media, FYCA promotes National Family Week throughout the year in an effort to keep the event and the important work it promotes top-of-mind.

Each year on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, FYCA holds its National Family Week activities. Over the years, the activities have evolved:

- From 2003-2005, the primary event consisted of the Connections Count! Family Focus Regional Conference. The conference was built out of a desire to provide more quality, cost-effective training for nonprofit human services staff to receive continuing education credits.
- In 2006, FYCA held the Best Start Infant Mental Health Training, Child Advocate Night with presentation of Light Hope Awards, and National Family Week Advocacy Award.

- In 2007, FYCA held a mission-based advocacy summit about engaging the media in nonprofit work along with the Child Advocate Night that once again included the presentation of Light of Hope Awards and a National Family Week Advocacy Award.

- The 2008 Connections Count! Family Focus Regional Conference was held Feb. 20-21. Since its beginning, the conference has evolved into a well-organized, informational, continuing education symposium that is no longer limited to FYCA staff but also includes staff from other agencies, law enforcement officials, and attorneys. In 2008, Julia Beatty, program officer of the 21st Century Foundation, was the keynote speaker. Allison DeFelice, who conducts forensic mental health evaluations of children and provides court testimony nationwide, was also featured as a speaker at the conference.