



the Australia and New Zealand

School of Government

CASE PROGRAM

2007-36.2

Responding to a call for help: co-ordinated case management in Papakura (B- Epilogue)

Two years on from the start of the Papakura coordinated case management initiative, the Johnson whānau had transformed itself. Quite simply, said the Ministry of Education’s Chrissy Denison, the initiative had “given them a new future.” All the children were in school, and some preschoolers were attending local early childhood centres. Twenty-five young people were now in education, training or work. Eighteen adults had found jobs, and 21 were in training. Family members were seeking help for gambling, drug and alcohol addictions; they had reduced their debt levels; and three separated couples had reconciled. For David Montgomery of New Zealand Police, the whānau was now “off the police radar.”

There had been no more successful suicide bids. In late 2005, a suicide pact was uncovered: this time the relatives who found out sought help straight away. This more proactive attitude was seen in other areas – family members would phone the Child Youth and Family Service to voice concerns if they suspected a child was at risk from domestic violence, parents would front up at school if their child was in trouble. But perhaps the most important outcome for the family was also the least tangible: a rise in self-esteem, trust and resourcefulness, apparent to all who worked with them. As David Montgomery said, “this family no longer feels like the dregs of society.”

For Work and Income, the fact that some members of the whānau were still receiving financial assistance through benefits was irrelevant. “This was never about targets, or

This epilogue was written by Margot Schwass, Australia and New Zealand School of Government, to accompany the case 2007-72.1 and 2007-36.1 for teaching purposes. The generous assistance and support of the Ministry of Social Development is gratefully acknowledged.

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reducing benefits. The outcome was always about this family creating a better future for themselves,” former Service Centre manager Danielle Rawhiti said.

The success of the initiative also changed the way many of the agencies worked, individually and collectively. Chrissy Denison said the “collegial” approach – “the idea that you couldn’t let each other down, and that you always had the support of these other people” – was a source of strength. It encouraged them to work together on other initiatives, such as a successful campaign to stop domestic violence over Christmas 2006 that targeted some of the area’s most at-risk families. In mid-2007, managers from all the Papakura social agencies still met monthly to discuss mutual issues and clients. The Papakura experience also influenced the Ministry of Social Development’s 2006 decision to appoint Intensive Case Management co-ordinators nationwide to work intensively with more vulnerable families that dealt with multiple government agencies.

Danielle Rawhiti said she learned some important lessons in change management and shared leadership – the need to allow clients to determine their own priorities, to focus only on what could be changed (for instance, she decided early on that she would not challenge family members about their gang affiliations, in order to retain their trust), and never to give promises that could not be delivered. “When you help people to climb up out of a hole, it closes up behind them. They can’t go back there.”

The lessons for Work and Income, and the wider Ministry of Social Development, were many – the value of inter-agency collaboration, the importance of strong hands-on leadership, the merits of working intensively with clients with complex needs, and the importance of focusing on broad, long-term social outcomes rather than quick fixes.

MSD cites the Papakura coordinated case management initiative as a demonstration of how far the Ministry has come in its understanding of social development and its commitment to better outcomes for New Zealanders, no matter how complex or entrenched their problems. Five years ago, the Ministry would have struggled to know what to do in such a situation. The success of the Papakura initiative shows the agency can be confident in applying a similar approach to working with other at-risk families.