

# Writing the Book on Culturally Sensitive Care

## The Investment Partner

Finding mental health services to cope with the pain of loss, the trouble with adjusting to a new place, or dealing with a family crisis is hard enough for native English speakers. For new Americans who don't speak English well or not at all and have survived mental and physical torture in their home countries, getting the right help was extremely difficult—until the creation of the Center for Multicultural Human Services (CMHS).

Founded in 1992 by psychologist Dr. Dennis Hunt, CMHS's original programmatic focus was foster care for orphaned refugee children. Since its founding, immigrant populations have grown dramatically in Northern Virginia with a corresponding increase in the demand for culturally sensitive mental health and social services. As a result, CMHS expanded its program to offer a wide range of services in more than 30 languages. These services included multicultural mental health treatment and evaluation services, programs for survivors of torture and trauma, and clinical training for building the cultural competence of the U.S. mental health workforce in order to increase access to quality health-care for non-native English speakers.

From its humble beginnings, CMHS grew to serve 6,000 children and families annually with a budget of \$4 million and was widely recognized as “writing the book” on delivering mental health care for critically underserved, culturally, and linguistically diverse populations.

## The Investment Opportunity

With support from VPP, CMHS undertook a business planning process facilitated by an outside consultant.

Through this process, CMHS articulated its vision, which was to be recognized locally, nationally, and internationally as a leader in helping at-risk multi-cultural children and families from low-income and diverse backgrounds overcome obstacles that prevent them from achieving healthy functioning. The \$235 thousand business planning process defined the following goals for growth:

- To expand CMHS' services to benefit significantly more children and families;
- To refine its model for services to at-risk children from multicultural backgrounds to achieve greater effectiveness and impact; and

- Provide consultation and training services to help to adapt and replicate their model regionally, nationally and internationally.

In 2002, VPP entered into a four-and-a-half year investment agreement totaling \$2.75 million to help CMHS reach its five-year goals as identified below:

- Develop replicable, evidence-based interventions to produce a significant, measurable improvement in the lives of 6,800 children;
- Ensure that more than 28,000 children and adults in the metropolitan Washington area will have been able to access critically needed, culturally appropriate mental health, educational, and social services;
- Train more than 4,500 individuals to apply evidence-based, culturally appropriate intervention strategies to more effectively serve vulnerable, ethnically diverse children and families; and
- Develop the organizational capacity for CMHS to function as an established, cost-effective, well managed organization, with sustainable funding and positioning for future growth and improved services for children and individuals served.

In addition to capital, VPP agreed to provide CMHS with strategic assistance, including board development, access to potential funders, talent recruitment, advisory help, and building stakeholder support for its expansion into the region.

## Action and Results

With VPP support, CHMS was able to make progress toward achieving its goals. During the four-and-a-half year investment period, CMHS' accomplishments included:

- Serving 35,204 individuals in the metropolitan area, more than 125 percent of the goal of 28,000;
- Training 8,739 professionals, almost double the 4,500 five-year goal, to provide more effective services to culturally diverse children and youth;
- Installing a state-of-the-art information management system to track client billing, demographics and outcome measurement;
- Hiring and integrating a bilingual COO with extensive clinical and administrative experience in the mental health delivery system;
- Partnering with Covenant House in the District of Columbia to adapt CMHS' proven and suc-

cessful models of helping survivors of trauma to provide critical mental health services to local runaway and homeless youth;

- Codifying its effective multicultural mental health services model, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), to help other nonprofit organizations locally, nationally, and internationally respond more effectively to the human service and mental health needs of immigrants and refugees. CMHS also provided on-going consultation to RWJF in the area of service delivery to immigrants and refugees;
- Implementing evidenced-based treatment models in schools and agencies where 87.9% of children showed stability or improvement in academic performance and 90.9% showed stability or improvement in mental health functioning;
- Refining the Functional Assessment of Self Sufficiency Scale (FASS) into a sophisticated rating measurement tool (named CAFI-XC-Current Adaptive Functioning Index Cross Cultural Version) designed to produce more accurate and comprehensive information about treatment progress, including the clients cultural adaptation;

- Establishing its own, federally approved on-site Institutional Review Board; and
- Working to codify its approach in *Multicultural Services for Immigrants & Refugees: A Hands On Guide for Counselors & Case Workers*.

Despite these positive achievements, CMHS was challenged by an on-going fiscal crisis related to the lack of unrestricted funding to support the organization's initiatives and programs. The majority of CMHS funding came from government sources. The original strategic plan did not foresee the dramatic shifts in government funding that led to lower rates of reimbursement. CMHS was continually in the position of delivering services for which it was not adequately reimbursed, creating a budget shortfall. The organization was not able to put in place a development function to grow and diversify its revenue stream quickly enough. In 2008, as a result of strategic management support from the Fairfax County government, CMHS was acquired by Northern Virginia Family Services, a large multi-service organization, which enables CMHS critical programs and services to continue in the community.



1201 15th Street, NW ■ Suite 420 ■ Washington, DC 20005

Tel: 202.955.8085 ■ Fax: 202.955.8087

info@vppartners.org ■ www.vppartners.org