

BEHAVIORALHEALTHCARE

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Cover story

2009 Behavioral Health Champion: Elizabeth "Betsy" Pfromm, MS, MPA



Position: President and CEO

Organization: Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic

Location: Los Angeles (<http://www.lacgc.org>)

Service Area: South and Central Los Angeles

Services: Mental health treatment, early intervention, and prevention services for children, youth, and families delivered through outpatient, school-based, and home visitation programs.

Staff: 194

As a first-grade teacher, Betsy Pfromm saw that "there were at least five or six kids in my class who were really having problems-not able to pay attention, constantly disruptive, struggling to learn, even explosive. And back then, in the '70s, there was no special help available. I looked at those kids and I wanted to do things differently, to give them a better start in life."

Nineteen years later, as a newly minted Harvard MPA, she found her chance when a friend, Roy Marshall, asked her to "talk" to David Hirsch, board chairman at LA's Child Guidance Clinic. When Pfromm was reluctant to head west, even for an interview, Hirsch flew east to meet her. He convinced her to "come and see what we're doing." She jokes: "I did. And, I stayed."

Early on, Pfromm confronted a familiar problem: kids in trouble. But these kids, growing up in south and central LA, were typically older (14 to 16), already suspended or expelled from school, and often involved in the juvenile justice system. "While these young people needed and received a lot of Clinic services," says Pfromm, "sadly their prospects looked pretty dim." Worse, she and her board recognized that intensive services for a few, older children left the Clinic short of resources that could help reach high-risk children sooner to improve their future outcomes.

"If you talk to parents and caregivers who have a child in jail, the story is often the same: early conduct or emotional problems before age five, often 'triggered' by experiences of poverty, community violence, or abuse." Pfromm and her board of directors realized that these incarcerated youth were "set up" for academic, mental health, substance abuse, and criminal justice problems well before their school years began. Together, they made a strategic decision to invest more-more-in early intervention programs for very young children.

"In 1990, that was ahead of its time. There wasn't much funding available for children's mental health services," she recalls. But through two capital campaigns totaling \$16.5 million, a succession of philanthropic grants, and "an alignment of the stars" that opened up more public funding, the LA Child Guidance Clinic developed model early-childhood intervention programs throughout the 1990s. One Clinic program that garnered national recognition, "Building Blocks," placed behavioral health professionals into preschools to train teachers how to recognize and help preschoolers with early behavioral or emotional problems, then provide targeted interventions to 15 percent of enrolled students. Today the Clinic provides a full array of "0-5" services: a training institute for those who work with at-risk children, a "walk-in" clinic for immediate access to care, a multi-disciplinary assessment program for foster-care children, outpatient and day treatment services, and a training rotation for child psychiatry residents at USC's Keck School of Medicine.

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