

# SHIELDS FOR FAMILIES: LOS ANGELES, CA



## ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILE

**Executive Director:** Kathy Icenhower

**Location:** Los Angeles, CA

**Service Area:** South Central Los Angeles, inclusive of the Watts/Willowbrook and Compton communities

**Founded:** 1991

**Number of Staff:** 320 FTE

**Current Budget:** \$21 million

**Funding Sources:** 61% County; 30% Federal; 2% State; 2% Foundations; 2% Fees for Service; 2% Other; 1% Individual Donations

### Mission/Vision Statement:

**Mission:** To develop, deliver, and evaluate culturally sensitive, comprehensive service models that empower and advocate for high-risk families.

**Vision:** We believe in our families, that they can overcome whatever challenges they are facing...that they can build a foundation of hope and acquire the skills and support needed to accomplish their goals...and they can become productive members of the community, nurturing parents, and achieve all of their dreams.

### Programs:

- A full continuum of services for families impacted by the child welfare system—from child abuse prevention to adoption
- Comprehensive services for children and youth including a Healthy Start program aimed at reducing infant mortality and morbidity, Child Development Centers for children ages 0–5, and after-school programs for children ages 6–18
- Comprehensive mental health services (in English and Spanish) for children, youth, and families
- Substance abuse prevention, treatment, and recovery services for men, women and their families, and adolescents with co-occurring disorders
- Supportive services that meet clients' needs for housing, transportation, and food as well as vocational and educational services

**Client Demographics:** 50% Latino; 45% African American; 3% White; and 2% Other

## BACKGROUND

“Our idea was to help them get better right where they got worse and be stronger for it when they go back out.”

—SHIELDS Co-Founder  
Norma Mtume

In 1987, physicians at Martin Luther King Jr./Drew Medical Center delivered 1,200 infants prenatally exposed to drugs, an all-time annual high in Los Angeles and in U.S. history. At the time, Dr. Xylina Bean was the head of the neonatology unit at Martin Luther King Hospital, while Kathy Icenhower and Norma Mtume were working at the Los Angeles County Drug Abuse Office. All three women were witnessing the same disturbing trend—and they were determined to do something about it.

In response to this unprecedented situation, Los Angeles Congresswoman Diane Watson sponsored legislation that designated funding for four Los Angeles County hospitals, including Martin Luther King, to serve the growing number of mothers and children affected by substance abuse. In 1990, Kathy, Norma, and Xylina developed a program in partnership with Martin Luther King Hospital, which was launched as the Genesis Family Treatment Program in 1990. Genesis was a flagship program for substance abusing mothers with children under the age of five. As part of the program, mothers went to treatment six hours a day six days a week while they continued to live with their children, who received specialized child development services. This was a radical departure from traditional residential treatment programs where the person struggling with addiction is removed from her home environment. “In a way, treatment is a false atmosphere because you have to live in the world when you come out of there,” Norma says. “Our idea was to help them get better right where they got worse and be stronger for it when they go back out.”

Genesis, which still exists as a day treatment substance abuse program at SHIELDS for Families (SHIELDS), evolved and grew as its founders attempted to meet the complex and interrelated needs of the clients that it served. Initially geared toward moms with children under five, the program quickly expanded to include older siblings who needed the same child development services. Kathy, Norma, and Xylina also discovered that many of the women they were serving were homeless. In response, they were able to leverage available funding to purchase an 86-unit apartment complex where families could live while receiving treatment. The SHIELDS Exodus program, which houses up to 45 families in active treatment, continues to be the only program in the country that allows entire families to stay intact while receiving supportive services on site. Families can remain in their housing for up to a year after they complete treatment “allowing for adequate time to develop vocational, educational and/or supportive systems necessary for ongoing recovery and family maintenance.”<sup>33</sup>



Kathy Icenhower



Norma Mtume

## BELIEVING, BUILDING, BECOMING

What started as a small program run out of a trailer that served as a makeshift office for three staff members, SHIELDS has grown to become an organization that is recognized across the United States and around the world. With an annual budget of \$21 million, the group employs more than 320 full-time staff and serves over 5,000 families from south central Los Angeles per year. Today, SHIELDS operates 30 programs at 16 different sites that encompass child welfare, children and youth, mental health, substance abuse, and vocational and educational services. SHIELDS has an impressive track record in the service delivery arena including, for example, developing a family-centered

model for substance abuse treatment that has success rate of over 80 percent, nearly four times the national average. Kathy Icenhower serves as the group’s Executive Director, Norma Mtume is the Associate Director and Chief Financial Officer, and Xylina Bean is the current President of the Board of Directors.

SHIELDS is unique in that it not only provides direct social services on a large scale, but it is also deeply engaged in a range of other activities aimed at building voice and power for the clients and communities it serves, which are among the most challenged in Los Angeles County, not to mention the country as a whole. According to current population estimates, the geographic area served by SHIELDS has the largest percentage of minorities as well as the highest rates of unemployment and overcrowded housing units in Los Angeles County. To compound these challenges, 95 percent of SHIELDS’s clients live below the federal poverty level. The group’s founders, who are still involved in its day-to-day operations nearly 20 years later, have never viewed the organization’s social change work as an ‘add-on’ to the direct services that it provides, but as an integral part of its mission, vision, and mandate. At a fundamental level, they believe that in order for clients’ lives to be transformed, the community must be similarly transformed.

Kathy doesn’t use complicated terminology to describe SHIELDS’s approach to social change. “‘Creating change’ is the phrase that I use the most,” says Kathy. She and the other staff also refer to the agency’s motto—“Believing, Building, Becoming”—to describe the impact that they hope to achieve through their work. “You have to decide that this [dual commitment to service and social change] is part of your mission and your vision,” says Kathy. “In social services, we tend to put a Band-Aid on something and let the person go.” However, that approach is not likely to lead to the kind of long-term, systemic change that SHIELDS wants to affect.

Kathy points out that, because our health care and social service systems are so “siloeed,” many organizations view clients’ problems in isolation and not as part of a larger system. “I’m going to treat you for your schizophrenia, but don’t tell me that you are homeless and that your kids were taken from you, because then I might have to take responsibility for that.” She goes on to say that “you don’t anticipate that your life is going to be filled with these problems. . . [but] until we are able to address why they happen, or why they shouldn’t happen, then we’re not going to make any difference.” This unequivocal approach to addressing the root causes of the issues affecting the group’s clients is widely shared among staff at all levels of the organization—and it informs all aspects of their work.

## A BROADER FORCE FOR CHANGE

SHIELDS is transforming lives and fighting for broader social change by developing the leadership, advocacy, and vocational skills of clients so they can serve as active change agents in their families, community, and society as a whole. In addition, SHIELDS takes an inclusive approach to its work with its organizational partners; it pursues collaborations that help develop the local economy and build the capacity of smaller, less established community groups.

There are four key areas in which SHIELDS is realizing its dual mission of providing direct services and affecting social change. These areas, which are described in detail below, include: 1) developing staff and client leadership, 2) building advocacy capacity, 3) pursuing strategic partnerships, and 4) deeply embedding mission and vision throughout the organization.

### 1. Tapping into the leadership potential of clients and staff to promote community engagement and civic participation.

Perhaps the most profound and lasting way in which SHIELDS is developing clients’ leadership potential—and impacting the community as a whole—is through internal structures that allow clients to assist with policy development and shape agency-wide programs and activities. Although SHIELDS has a legal Board of Directors that governs the organization, Kathy, Norma, and their managers lend considerable weight—and deference—to

the perspectives of the families whom they serve through their programs. There are two main bodies through which clients are able to exercise their leadership at SHIELDS: Client Councils and the Community Advisory Board.

Each one of SHIELDS's substance abuse treatment programs<sup>34</sup> operates a Client Council, a leadership board that represents a segment of clients and meets regularly to plan activities, raise funds (mainly for outings and social events), and address concerns that arise within each program. "The Client Council helps to build, shape, and formulate some of the program policies as they relate to daily client procedures, rules, and cultural sensitivity and responsiveness of the project," writes Kathy in an article published in the *International Journal of Therapeutic Communities*. "The major purpose of the collective body is to promote ownership and to enhance accountability of client participation in the program."

Each Client Council elects an Executive Board and appoints representatives to an agency-wide Community Advisory Board, which meets with the executive director on a monthly basis to present updates from each of their programs, including upcoming activities, information on clients' progress, and any emergent concerns or barriers to clients' progress. Many individuals who participate in the group's substance abuse treatment programs live with their families on site at SHIELDS for up to two years, so the Community Advisory Board has to provide "a different kind of engagement process," says Kathy. "This is their program and these are their services, so they have a responsibility for investing in them, for helping to improve them, and for getting out of them everything that they need."

During a recent Community Advisory Board meeting, the level of importance that Kathy and her colleagues attach to the input provided by this group was clearly evident. The Community Advisory Board actively shapes the way in which SHIELDS operates. At this particular meeting, each member of the Community Advisory Board provided a report about his or her program and presented any issues or concerns that had arisen over the past month. In turn, Kathy updated the group on a range of substantive issues that related to the organization's operations as well as wider issues affecting the community. These included giving members a preview of SHIELDS's new website, an advance copy of their 2009-2010 annual report, and an update on the status of federal health care reform efforts.



SHIELDS Community Advisory Board Meeting

It is a moving experience to watch SHIELDS's Community Advisory Board in action and to witness the sense of empowerment that its members derive from exercising organizational leadership at such a high level. This client-centered, community-focused approach has been a core part of the organization's service delivery model from its inception; it tips the balance of power toward those who—for a variety of reasons—have often felt powerless. "Low self-esteem is an issue for folks who are using [drugs and alcohol]," says Kathy, "so it's transformative for them to learn that they can make change happen."

SHIELDS's clients are developing a newfound sense of confidence as well as an ability to advocate effectively for their families and in their communities. Kathy says that this experience signifies that "you are important, you matter, and you have a say. You have a right to speak up for what is yours."

In addition to the Client Councils and Community Advisory Board, there are other important ways in which SHIELDS

is developing community leadership. It should be noted that it is often difficult to separate the ‘internal’ ways in which SHIELDS approaches leadership development (staff, interns) from the ‘external’ targets for these activities (clients, community members) since there is a fairly porous boundary between the two. “We are the statistics in the community,” says Norma Mtume, “a lot of the people we hire are from here.” In fact, nearly 20 percent of the group’s staff members are also program alumni, many of whom have pursued further education and training as clients and/or as employees of the organization. For example, six alumni have become licensed therapists and they are all currently employed by SHIELDS or other local agencies. SHIELDS has also invited young nonprofit leaders from the community to take part in a Young Executives Mentoring and Coaching Institute, developed by Norma with the support of a Durfee Foundation Stanton Fellowship.



Recently, SHIELDS instituted an innovative new program with California State University, Dominguez Hills, to offer an accelerated on-site Masters in Social Work (MSW) program for its staff as well as employees at SHIELDS’s partner agencies. “A lot of our staff want to go back to school,” says Kathy, “but can’t afford to decrease their time at work or take the time to go back. This allows us to really build the capacity of our community.” The first cohort of MSW students graduated in May 2010 and they are already putting their new degrees into practice. In addition, SHIELDS brings on approximately 50 student interns at a time, focusing on ‘root cause’ issues as part of their training. Kathy hopes that

some of the students will return as SHIELDS employees, but even if they don’t, “we’re training them to look at issues in a different way.” For example, she says they want them to complete their internships with the understanding that “people aren’t poor because they want to be.”

## 2. Building client and staff capacity to advocate for necessary changes.

In 2009, Kathy received the James Irvine Foundation Leadership Award, which highlights and supports the work of individuals who are advancing innovative and effective solutions to significant state issues. Kathy elected to use part of her award from the Irvine Foundation to provide 80 hours of formal advocacy training for the staff at SHIELDS. She viewed this as an important opportunity to invest not only in their leadership skills while they are employees of SHIELDS, but also in their role as future directors and leaders at other community agencies. After the training, Kathy encouraged her staff to begin building their own relationships with local and state policymakers. “It can’t just be me [engaging policymakers],” Kathy says, particularly given the fact that policy advocacy is one of the primary ways in which SHIELDS seeks to create change in the communities it serves.

In their ongoing commitment to keeping root cause issues front and center in the organization’s day-to-day work as well as its efforts to impact broader policy changes, Kathy and Norma also brought all of the managers at SHIELDS to a two and a half day Undoing Racism Workshop offered by the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond. The training provides human service practitioners and educators with an opportunity to move beyond the symptoms of racism to an understanding of what racism is, where it comes from, how it functions, why it persists, and how it can be undone.<sup>35</sup> Kathy hopes to be able to provide the same training to all SHIELDS staff members in the near future. “I want them to see the larger picture,” she says.

In addition to its staff, SHIELDS involves clients meaningfully in public policy efforts by providing them with the skills and training to become effective advocates. “It’s not a requirement of substance abuse treatment that you teach your families advocacy and leadership development, but we’re going to do it anyway,” says Kathy. “My goal

is to build individual skills and empower people in the community to actively speak up for themselves,” she adds. A number of the organization’s clients have participated in “Crossing the River,” a leadership and advocacy training offered by the Rebecca Project for Human Rights. “Crossing the River” provides an opportunity for low-income people—particularly those struggling with addiction—to “claim their space, come into voice, and emerge as community leaders and advocates.”<sup>36</sup> Participants are encouraged to join the project’s Sacred Authority chapters, a leadership network that focuses on bridging the divide between the public, policymakers, and vulnerable families with substance abuse issues through advocacy.<sup>37</sup>

SHIELDS’s clients, including a number of Community Advisory Board members, have testified at legislative hearings in Sacramento, California, and Washington, D.C. “All our clients know how to write letters to policymakers,” says Kathy. Through the group’s advocacy training, clients are able to analyze not only how specific legislation may impact their families and communities, but they are also able to develop a greater understanding of how it affects SHIELDS’s ability to deliver programs and services. Staff member Audrey Tousant points out that this is particularly important in the event that SHIELDS has to make the difficult decision to cut or scale back a specific program in response to a policy change or, for example, the current state budget crisis. “That way the community doesn’t feel like we are abandoning them,” says Tousant.

SHIELDS provides other opportunities for clients that are leading to greater civic participation. For example, SHIELDS clients have served as poll workers during elections, which—for many—was their first experience with electoral politics. “It’s important for our clients to know the history of gaining the right to vote. We have folks who died for that right,” says Norma Mtume, “and we have to continue to stand on their shoulders.” More recently, SHIELDS has been engaged in 2010 Census activities. The organization brought in 250 residents to complete testing for census employment and it was the training site for those who were hired as census workers. It also served as place where community members could complete their census forms if they did not fill them out at home. The group’s clients also served as part of a “Street Team” that went door-to-door educating residents about

## ASK, SEEK, KNOCK (ASK)

In 2008, SHIELDS implemented Ask, Seek, Knock (ASK), a collaborative effort to help prevent child abuse and neglect before it occurs, in partnership with the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services and eight partner organizations.

The program operates at four locations in south Los Angeles known as ASK Centers. Families can drop by an ASK Center or be referred by another organization and get help from bilingual (English-Spanish) “navigators” with housing, food, legal services, counseling, education, or employment needs. “The ASK Centers were designed to present an alternative to case management so that clients are able to have a say in what they need and what services would have the most impact on their families. ASK Center staff become partners with families in achieving outcomes and they follow up with them to see if they have encountered any barriers or need additional resources.” (Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project [PIDP] Year One Evaluation Summary Report, 2009)

At the ASK Centers, parents can join support groups, receive vocational training, and participate in other activities that target social isolation such as community resource fairs, book clubs, parenting workshops, scrapbooking, stress management programs, women’s empowerment groups, and many others. The program, which has served over 5,822 families in south Los Angeles since 2008, is having a profound impact on the lives of parents and children at risk for child abuse and neglect.

“I feel like we are making a difference because I get to see it on the ground level with clients,” says ASK Program Manager, Audrey Tousant. “I’ve had families that come in the door ‘broken.’ They don’t even know that there are resources [to help them] and that they are in the community. They just need education so they can empower themselves to make a better situation for their families.”

the role and the importance of participating in the census, particularly in terms of how state and federal resources are allocated at the local level.

As in other aspects of its work, SHIELDS frequently collaborates with partner organizations when engaging in policy advocacy on issues that range from economic development and TANF<sup>38</sup> reauthorization, to health care and child welfare. Many of its organizational partners offer specific public policy expertise, such as the Community Coalition of South Los Angeles, a frequent collaborator with SHIELDS. In turn, SHIELDS is able to activate its large base of clients, program alumni, and community members to lend support to such efforts by writing letters, attending rallies, meeting with policymakers, and generally bringing their ‘real life’ experience to bear in public forums.

### **3. Building organizational capacity—and that of your partners—through strategic collaborations.**

SHIELDS has been particularly effective in increasing the impact of its work and achieving broader social change goals through collaboration and partnership. “We collaborate with everybody under the sun,” says Kathy. “I’m a firm believer [in partnering with other groups],” she adds. “I’m not going to pay for something that somebody already does; I’m not doing to waste resources like that.” And SHIELDS is strategic about the types of engagements that it pursues with other groups, which Kathy describes as ‘authentic partnerships.’ For example, SHIELDS works closely with the Institute for Maximum Human Potential (IMHP), which is also located in south central Los Angeles, among many other organizational partners at the local, state, and national level.

IMHP is a human service agency that seeks to enhance the well-being of individuals, families, and neighborhoods by addressing human rights issues in the community. “Our visions are aligned and we try to move collectively to try and have some kind of systemic change for communities,” says Delores Brown, IMHP’s Executive Director. Recently, IMHP, SHIELDS, and several other partner agencies have been working together to analyze the financial benefits of owning their own buildings. They determined that, by tapping into special financing for nonprofits, SHIELDS could save \$100,000 annually by owning their own administrative office. SHIELDS eventually purchased a 23,000 square foot building on 1.8 acres of land, an asset not only provides financial security for the organization, but also serves as an investment in the community’s economic growth and development.

SHIELDS also continues to reach out to less established groups in order to further the broader interests of the community. As described previously, they have opened up training and leadership development opportunities—including their on-site MSW program—to staff from other community organizations. “Because we have been lucky enough to start an organization and sustain it at a certain level,” says Norma, “we have reached out to younger, smaller organizations in an attempt to help strengthen them and to help with their capacity building so they can stabilize and continue to grow. We know that we can’t do it all.”

### **4. Embedding your mission and vision at all levels of the organization.**

Since the inception of SHIELDS, its founders have always had a clear vision of the role that the organization could play in delivering direct services while pursuing broader social change goals. SHIELDS staff and clients are afforded frequent opportunities to build and strengthen their leadership and advocacy skills, but always with an eye to ameliorating the root causes of the issues affecting the community. As Kathy is quick to point out, “no one chooses to be poor or an addict,” and the group’s approach to service delivery takes this reality into account. Kathy also stresses that, as the executive director of the organization, all of the decisions that she makes have to be tied into the SHIELDS mission and vision, including “what funding you go after, what kind of programming [you pursue], how you approach your programming.”



ASK Program Manager Audrey Tousant (left), Executive Director Kathy Icenhower, and a graduate of SHIELDS' fiber optics training course (right).

SHIELDS's mission has not changed since it was founded, but its capacity has expanded dramatically. "My thinking has always remained the same," says Kathy. "I'm a social worker and I believe you have to work at all levels of the system. I can do that more effectively now because of our size and our capacity." The challenge, Kathy admits, is staying true to your mission and vision the larger you get. However, SHIELDS has been successful in doing just that; it has maintained its commitment to providing direct services while advocating for larger systemic changes. Kathy, Norma, and other members of the organization's leadership are continually reinforcing the organization's mission and vision during staff meetings, retreats, and trainings by connecting every aspect of their work back to the broader goals the group wants to achieve.

Perhaps the most direct way in which Kathy, Norma and other senior management ensure that SHIELDS's mission and vision are shared in the same way throughout the organization is through the staffing decisions that they make. "I have a set of managers that think like I do," says Kathy. "We believe in the same things." In fact, all five SHIELDS program directors have been with the organization for 18 years or more, each carrying with them a significant amount of institutional memory. According to Norma, they pay close attention to not just the skill set, but the philosophical background of candidates for staff positions by asking, "Is there a good match with the organization's mission and vision?" For example, Audrey Tousant, a masters level social worker who directs the Ask, Seek, Knock program [see sidebar on page 37], was drawn to SHIELDS because of their reputation for empowering clients through their programs and services. Tousant, who is from the local community, says "I feel the mission of SHIELDS every day when I am doing the work."

## THE ROAD AHEAD

There is clear evidence that SHIELDS is having a positive impact on clients' lives through the direct services that it provides. Clients are conquering substance abuse and finding a second chance in new careers, their families are staying intact, and their children are experiencing less abuse and more success in school. Specifically, since 1996, more than 450 SHIELDS participants have received high school diplomas, over 800 were provided with computer classes, and over 700 individuals have found employment in jobs paying above minimum wage. In the past year, more than 93 percent of children who participated in SHIELDS's Therapeutic Nursery<sup>39</sup> have been able to transition to regular school settings, and in the last five years, more than 83 percent of participants completed all phases of its family-centered substance abuse treatment program, nearly four times the national average. Taken at face value, these statistics are noteworthy, but they are also a reflection of SHIELDS's commitment to pursuing systemic change at the community level in conjunction with support for individual transformation.

"Having people who complete their treatment programs stay in the community is also making an investment," says Kathy. SHIELDS alumni are using their newly acquired skills and training to gain stable employment and serve as role models for their children. "They are buying homes here and working here. Their children are with them and going on to college because of what they have learned about the value of education." And there are other benefits to having more residents who are civically engaged. For example, it used to take six months to get an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students with special needs in the Compton Unified School District. With sustained advocacy from a cohort of parents, including a cadre of SHIELDS clients and alumni, that timeframe has been reduced to two months. Kathy says that every client who participates in one of SHIELDS's programs develops a greater understanding of their own rights as well as their children's—and they are speaking up for those rights in greater numbers.



There are still more signs that bigger changes in the community have occurred as a result of the group's efforts. "Our purchasing of housing [for clients to live in while in treatment] is a conscious part of our social change effort," says Kathy. "At Keith Village, which is our largest facility, if you'd have seen it in 1993 before we purchased it—there were drugs everywhere, no businesses. And to see it now where the businesses are all the way around the place, things have really dramatically changed." Purchasing their own building to house their administrative offices has also galvanized the organization's leadership. "We want to do more economic development in the community. That's how I see the future," says Kathy.

SHIELDS has tapped into a number of different entry points for creating social change, but for many of their clients, the process of claiming their 'voice' as advocates begins as Client Council and the Community Advisory Board members—a totally new experience for most participants. In fact, among the 24 current Community Advisory Board members, only three have ever been part of a similar governing or decision making body before. The goal, says Norma Mtume, is to "help to build folks up as much as you can and help them to be able to maneuver out there in the world to help further social change."

The goal of building clients' confidence and skills is evident here. During a recent Community Advisory Board meeting, participants eagerly answered questions about what the experience means to them.

### Reflections by SHIELDS Community Advisory Board Members

*"When I walk into this room I feel very special. . . to me it's very exciting and I feel like I'm doing something or making a difference."*

*"It makes me feel like I am somebody, like I have a certain level of importance that I haven't had before."*

*"I'm a part of something. Back then, I was never a part of something. I know I made a big change and I know I'm doing something right when I got here. It makes me feel very proud of myself."*

*"[Being part of Client Council and the Community Advisory Board] teaches me a lot of patience. It's a positive thing for me to see [people] change and grow as we are growing with them by them knowing that we do have a certain amount of power. . . we're not just some people off the street. They do believe in us. For me being here, it is a test of patience, and I appreciate that."*

*"It gives me a responsibility. . . it keeps me humble and it keeps me doing something besides treatment. . . when things don't get resolved in Client Council we know we can take it back to the board and bring it to Ms. Icenhower. It's a good experience for me."*

*"It's a chance for all of our voices to be heard. It's something to take back to Client Council—everything that we said here is being heard there and things are going to happen."*

Although she has been steeped in this work every day for the past twenty years, Kathy was visibly moved by these responses. "It's not often that I stop and ask those kinds of questions," she says. Indeed, Kathy, Norma, and their colleagues are steadfast in their efforts to help clients become change agents not only at SHIELDS, but also in their families, communities, and society as a whole. It is this authentic commitment to combining direct services and social change activities that keeps them focused on the road ahead.

**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SHIELDS FOR FAMILIES AND THEIR WORK, VISIT:**

**[HTTP://WWW.SHIELDSFORFAMILIES.ORG](http://www.shieldsforfamilies.org)**