

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Way to Grow/School Readiness Program
Report to the Minnesota Legislature
January 15, 1993

The Way to Grow/School Readiness program (WTG) is intended "to promote intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development and school readiness of children prebirth to age six by coordinating and improving access to community-based and neighborhood-based services that support and assist all parents in meeting the health and developmental needs of their children at the earliest possible age" (Minnesota Statutes 1990, section 145.926).

The first Way to Grow program began in Minneapolis in 1989, the St. Paul-Frogtown and Columbia Heights programs began in 1990, and the St. Cloud and Winona programs began in 1991. The opportunity to experiment with the Way to Grow program concept in five diverse sites in urban, suburban, and rural areas of Minnesota has provided extensive insights as to how the program might be expanded statewide.

Program Characteristics

Way to Grow acts as a catalyst for local service providers to assess community needs and the efficiency of their delivery systems. Based on this assessment, neighborhood- or community-based strategies are designed to link young children and their parents to needed services, empowering them in the process. Way to Grow is a method of delivering services in a coordinated manner to the extent and intensity needed to meet identified child and family needs and promote school readiness. The attached diagram illustrates the kinds of linkages made between families and needed services by Way to Grow programs.

Core program strategies for children and parents include:

- Home visitors as links between families and needed services
- Neighborhood- or community-based family resource centers or interdisciplinary resource teams
- Teaming professionals and paraprofessionals

Program Evaluation Data

- **Participation of Parents and Children:** A total of 3,376 parents and children participated in the five WTG programs during F.Y. 1992.
- **Cooperation, Coordination, and Collaboration with Other Community Programs and Organizations:** Cooperation, coordination, and collaboration with other community programs and organizations have been central to all five of the WTG programs since they began. Partnerships have been established with the City of Minneapolis, Early Childhood Family Education in the public schools, city and county public health nurses, county social services, community mental health services, women's shelters, Head Start, Early Childhood Special Education, adult literacy and English as a second language classes to form family literacy programs, technical colleges, and the Minnesota Extension Service. Referrals, cooperative programming, and staff teaming frequently result from the coordinating efforts initiated by WTG; and community organization patterns have developed and changed because of cooperation and collaboration.

- **Leverage of Funds:** Leverage of other funds to expand WTG program funding and services has been one of the key outcomes of cooperative and collaborative efforts. For example, the Housing and Redevelopment Authority of Columbia Heights provided funds and staffing to purchase a neighborhood house which became the Way to Grow House in Columbia Heights. In Minneapolis WTG funds were invaluable in securing funding from Honeywell, General Mills, Medica, United Way, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Hennepin County, Minneapolis Public Schools, and increasing the level at which the City of Minneapolis funds WTG.
- **Children Ready to Begin School and Parent Involvement in Children's Learning and Education:** 97% of Frogtown parents indicated the center services benefitted their children, and 91% stated center services contributed to better preparing their children for school. In Winona during the second year of the WTG English as a Second Language (ESL) family literacy program, there was an increase in the number of Hmong families who attended parent-teacher conferences, appointments, and school programs at the Winona elementary schools.
- **Change in Parent Knowledge, Attitudes, Expectations, and Skills:** 99% of the parents participating in the St. Paul Frogtown Family Resource Center stated that the program was helpful to them as parents. Interviews with parents participating in the Columbia Heights WTG program indicated increased knowledge about children and parenting, increased self-confidence, and more positive parenting behaviors after program involvement and recognition of the need to rear children in a non-abusive environment.
- **Increase in Constructive Social Networks to Decrease Social Isolation:** Parents in the St. Cloud WTG program regularly attend parent support groups where information about community resources is made available to them. The most frequently stated "most important thing" parents said they got from Frogtown WTG was the opportunity for networking with other parents to develop natural support systems for families.
- **Increase in Health and Developmental Screening and Use of Appropriate Health Services:** Winona WTG works closely with the county public health nurses in promoting immunization updates and child/teen checkups. The Minneapolis Near North WTG program offers on-site immunization clinics in cooperation with a community center. Minneapolis WTG is also offering developmental screening services for all infant and toddler program participants. Of the 149 babies born to Phillips neighborhood WTG program participants, 137 had healthy birth weights. Since the Columbia Heights WTG House became a prime site for Early Childhood Screening, the number of children screened has increased each of the past three years it has been in existence--from 202 to 216 to 288.

Key Lessons Learned

1. Community cooperation, coordination, and collaboration that build on the strengths of existing programs and work toward creation of a seamless system of services is essential.
2. The mind set and beliefs underlying Way to Grow service delivery are very different from those of traditional service providers. Shifts in how to think about people, services, and service provision; the locus of problems; and power balance/imbalance issues need to happen and are happening in Way to Grow programs. Issues in these

areas are systemic and often related to racism and classism. Way to Grow alone cannot deal with these issues but can raise awareness of them in the process of implementing Way to Grow efforts.

3. Home visitation is a cost effective way of facilitating the process of bringing people together; home visitors can support families with young children in their efforts to connect with other people versus systems. Home visitation also contributes to violence prevention and reduction through provision of information and support to families, another cost-effective service of WTG.
4. Emphasis needs to be placed on building caring communities and natural support systems for families that focus on healthy interconnectedness, connecting people to people versus people to systems.
5. Poverty is a major overarching issue currently affecting many Way to Grow participants and limiting the potential of what can be done by Way to Grow programs.
6. Interventions with families need to be designed in such a way that they last long enough for families to internalize new beliefs and feel empowered, but not of a duration likely to create dependency.
7. Paraprofessional and professional staff can work together as equals/as a team, learning from one another in the process. The paraprofessional is a significant, essential link between families and resources.
8. Sensitivity to the culture of neighborhood families is central to the success of WTG. It is particularly important to hire staff reflecting the community in which they work.
9. Funds allocated for the Way to Grow program concept can be used very effectively to leverage other funds for needed services for young children and their families.
10. Specific parent and early childhood education provided in appropriate formats at appropriate times need to be an integral part of Way to Grow services.

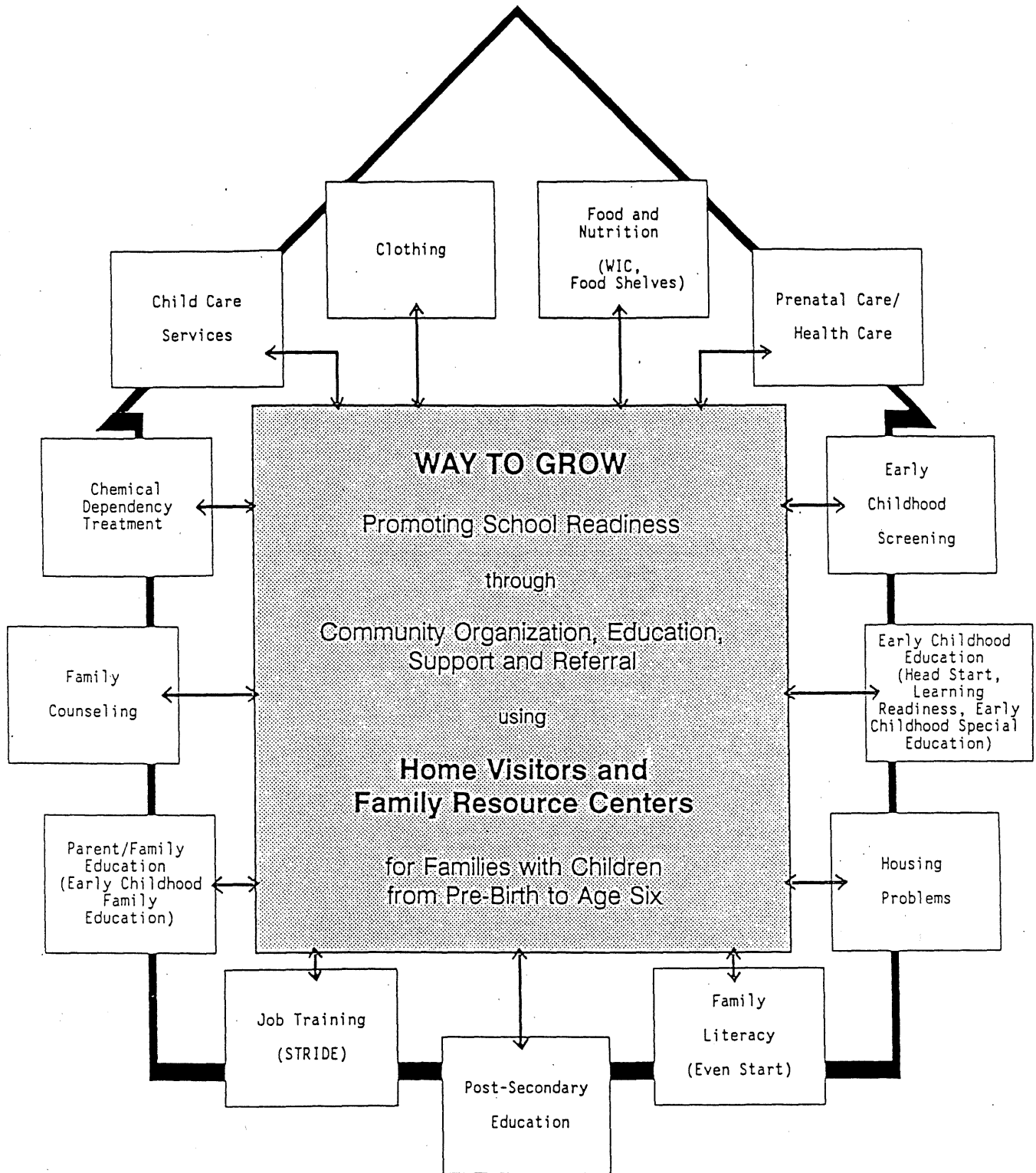
Key Recommendations for Program Expansion and Future Funding

1. Maintain the Way to Grow concept; it has worked well. Include funding for training and evaluation to study and maintain the concept.
2. Provide a stable funding base for Way to Grow.
3. Consider combining the funding streams for Way to Grow, Learning Readiness, and Early Childhood Screening and make the combined funds available to serve all children and their families, prenatal to age six to meet specified outcomes.
4. Provide for flexibility in use of funding across boundaries of neighborhoods, school districts, cities, and counties because different services have different boundaries.
5. Require collaboration, building on all existing relevant resources within and outside schools.

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