

# Battered Agencies

by Diane F. Reed, J. Ronald Lally, and Douglas Quiett

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**T**HE INSIGHTS ABOUT THE PLIGHT OF “battered agencies” grew out of work on program design of Marin City Families First and ongoing evaluation conducted jointly by WestEd and Marin City, California community leaders. MCFF took a comprehensive, community-based approach to providing ongoing support for children and families living in high-risk environments, beginning in pregnancy and continuing until the children reached age three.

In its work with the agencies serving MCFF families, WestEd saw a remarkable similarity between the agencies and their clients, which led to this analysis and a set of recommendations to level the field among agencies and increase cultural competence. The following excerpt presents WestEd’s assessment of the problems facing the organizations, with implications far beyond Marin City.

“Battered agencies” is a term that can describe local or indigenous agencies striving to serve low-income communities that are hindered by the same types of risk factors facing

the families they seek to help:

- lack of economic stability,
- limited social support,
- crowded or impermanent housing,
- lack of respect from peers, and
- less-than-positive relationships with local

institutions (for example, schools, county and city government offices, funding agencies, and other social service agencies).

These conditions are particularly prevalent among social service agencies located in low-income communities, especially in communities of color, and are accentuated when the service agency is seen by outsiders as part of the community it serves and its culture. For those who work in these agencies, these conditions often lead to anger, frustration, hopelessness, depression, heightened sensitivity, and even physical illness.

When efforts are overlooked or ignored, as they often are when creating services for low-income communities, the result is that many of them flounder. Collaboration among local agencies in low-income communities and agencies and funders from the broader community are particularly vulnerable to failure when these issues are not addressed.

The term “battered agency” emerged from some striking parallels between the kinds of stressful issues faced by both the agencies and their client families. Families struggle with financial uncertainty, homelessness, substance abuse, parenting, family relationships, and lack of skills and employment. Agencies strive to

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**J. RONALD LALLY** is Co-Director of the Center for Child and Family Studies, WestEd, San Francisco, California, where **DOUGLAS QUIETT** is a Senior Research Associate. **DIANE F. REED** has 22 years’ experience providing services in planning and development, research, policy analysis, and grant writing to public and private agencies in California. This article is excerpted from the 2003 report “Battered Agencies: Supporting Those Who Serve Low-Income Communities,” available at [www.wested.org](http://www.wested.org).



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cope with funding uncertainty, burnout, anger, isolation, and lack of training and resources for staff development. Families and agencies both need a lot of practical and emotional support to deal with these conditions.

While the concept of a battered agency is new, the contributing factors apply to agencies working in impoverished communities everywhere:

- When an agency is understaffed, underfunded, and overworked, continually stressed staff, at all levels of the agency, may exhibit problems similar to the clients they serve, such as depression, denial, despair, withdrawal, and isolation.
- Cultural and class differences impede interactions and collaborations between local and outside social service agencies, as well as between agencies and the funding communities.
- While the local community and its agencies may be minimally involved in community-wide program planning, the suggestions of local providers and residents who know the community are often not valued or taken seriously.
- Community-based agencies' dependence on the changing policies of funders not only makes them financially vulnerable but can also contribute to dysfunctional relationships throughout the social service community.

### Challenges for Small Agencies Working In Low-Income Communities

Social service agencies working on the frontlines in low-income communities confront complex social, health, and economic crises among the families and individuals they serve on a daily basis. Many of these agencies also face multiple troubling internal and external conditions that, if not addressed, can threaten the health of the agency and its staff, and even its ultimate survival. These factors include:

- unpredictable and insufficient funding,
- inequitable ratio between depth of services needed and services offered,
- racial and class tensions with other agencies, partners, and/or funders,
- limited role in developing, implementing, and evaluating programs intended for their community,
- lack of support for organizational capacity building, staff training, and development, and
- the assumption that organizations can meet all of their funders' requirements without additional resources or capacity building.

### Funding

Within the past two decades, community-based nonprofit service agencies have had to adjust to a profoundly changed fiscal climate (Reed & Collins, 1994), including sudden, negative changes in funding and increased complexity due to multiple funding sources with different fiscal cycles, institutional expectations, and reporting requirements (Mulroy, 1997). Community-based agencies, traditionally dependent on public funding and relatively protected from the outside free market environment, were suddenly told that to survive, they would need to become more self-reliant—even entrepreneurial. Typically staffed and administered by practitioners (e.g., nurses, social workers) rather than managers trained in private sector methods, direct service organizations tend to put their clients first—often at the expense of their agency (Posey, McIntosh, and Parke, 1987). Unprepared for the loss of revenue and lacking substantive guidance to cope with funding changes, many of these agencies were thrust into unfamiliar territory that created considerable stress and instability.

The recent shift in funding requirements from demonstrating need and delivering community-based services to demonstrating outcome in the form of community benchmarks or report cards has also put new pressures on community-based agencies (Stokley, 1996). As a condition of continued funding, many agencies are now required to show evidence of meeting outcome expectations by increasing their evaluation and reporting efforts, with little or no additional support for these activities.

At the same time, public and private funding sources are increasingly interested in the concept of interagency collaboration as a more efficient and comprehensive approach to address the complex social and economic problems common to low-income communities. Scores of initiatives have been funded nationally to coordinate neighborhood job creation efforts, promote the development of new business enterprises, prepare residents for work and self-sufficiency, and help them gain access to support services (Pitt, 1998). These initiatives provide incentives for community-based agencies, anxious about inadequate funding and uncertain future funding, to participate in collaborative efforts (Mulroy, 1998).



In addition to being chronically underfunded, many community-based agencies face uncertainty about continued funding over time. An evaluation of 47 Oakland, California, agencies receiving community development block grant funding found that nearly two-thirds experienced funding uncertainties. Of those, 44 percent reported that funding uncertainties lowered both staff morale and functioning “a lot” or “quite a lot.”

### **Race, Class, Power, and Cultural Competence**

As fundamental as race and class issues are to the outcome of neighborhood-based initiatives, their relative absence as topics in the literature reflects Americans’ ongoing reluctance to face and deal with these major national concerns. The importance of providing culturally competent services in multiethnic client populations is becoming more widely accepted among health and social service providers (Legault, 1996) and is nearly always expected by funders. Yet culture, race, class, and power differences among agencies, funders, and community members can be serious barriers to effectively working together.

More than two decades ago, Jenkins (1980) noted that the growth of ethnic agencies providing unique and effective services in low-income communities of color had become much more than a political response to movements for minority rights. Indigenous agencies tend to take a more integrated approach in responding to the complex needs of their clients, with particular emphasis on culturally competent service delivery. This approach clearly has greater potential for success than traditional mainstream service-delivery methods that often alienate clients of color by missing subtle cultural cues, inadvertently communicating disrespect, and making clients feel “talked down to.”

Racism can be manifested in very subtle ways and may more likely be expressed through decision-making processes, institutional practices, body language, and tones of voice than through blatant behavior (Scott et al., 1994). On an interpersonal level, racist behavior, language, and attitudes are not only emotionally debilitating but can create an environment of defeat in communities of color; at a structural level, racism recreates and enforces power elites, economic disparity, and persistent poverty (Stone & Butler, 2000). Having witnessed interactions between outside agencies and Marin City providers that

demonstrated how interpersonal dynamics and people’s individual discomfort make it nearly impossible to talk through problems at a structural level, one key informant observed, “The cultural competency issue was a major factor. Outside agencies would get involved, but they wouldn’t realize they were being offensive or that they weren’t being effective.”

Cultural competency is also a pertinent issue for funders who have little or no direct experience working with low-income communities and communities of color. Some funders seek to become more involved as partners with low-income communities through the initiatives they fund. These efforts, however, can be complicated by the obvious power imbalance and racial differences between the wealthy (and predominantly white) foundation and the community of underfunded institutions and predominantly poor residents of color (Stone & Butler, 2000). A Marin City Project board member commented that, as happens in the broader society, funders tend not to “deal with their own personal stuff, and no one is there to influence them. That results in funders having inaccurate visions and false expectations due to their lack of understanding about how the community actually works.”

Agencies of color often have trouble trying to effectively function, do business, and converse in the vastly different worlds of clients, mainstream agencies, and funders. Staff often complain that organizations outside their communities do not understand the dynamics of working in low-income communities. A Marin City Project staff member found the lack of cultural competence on the part of outside agency staff made her feel that they really didn’t know what her agency was doing or understand how, to a great extent, the culture of a community drives the way services are provided. According to one key informant, the choice by staff of outside agencies to stay uninformed keeps Marin City programs marginalized and perceived as not worth the effort, as hopeless. “Outside agencies are okay letting ethnic agencies work with their own, with ‘those’ people. We are allowed to function not because of any positive evaluation of our competency as an agency but because of who we serve.”

The critical issue here is that to be successful, providers—whether from a local agency or an outside agency—must be competent in the relevant content area and able to provide serv-

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ices or support in a way that honors the cultural traditions of the community they are serving. Equally important, to be fully effective, funders themselves must develop cultural competence about the community being served and its indigenous service providers.

### **The Myth of Community Involvement**

Many funders now require evidence that the community is involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating programs intended to serve it. Yet, in practice, community participation tends to be more superficial than meaningful. Noting the poor success rate of social service agencies' past efforts to include community residents in program planning and policymaking, Cohen (1976) argues that these failures stemmed in part from the residents' distrust and their belief that the agencies and their programs were not relevant to the problems and needs of the community. "Since the downtown bureaucrats are viewed as distant from the community, both physically and emotionally, area residents may give up [participating in a planning process]. As a result, the people and the experts who serve them muddle on as usual in their separate worlds" (page 357).

Thus, the possibility of working effectively within low-income communities is remote when:

- the climate does not promote trust,
- there is no process to promote good communication, problem solving, and conflict resolution, and
- those doing the work are not culturally competent.

### **Burnout, Low Morale, and Depression**

Competition for resources, lack of capacity building, poor communication, lack of a process to settle differences, and lack of training for boards and staff all take their toll on agencies serving low-income and minority communities. Like poor families living from one check to the next with no extra money to help advance their children educationally, agencies struggling from payment to payment lack the training resources to help staff hone and develop new skills. And like welfare agencies that have the power to hold up benefits checks if recipients fail to meet certain requirements, funders at times also use punitive tactics, such as delaying payment, to control programs.

Funding uncertainty and job insecurity

create tension among program staff who, like the clients they serve, worry about how they will pay their bills, rent, and child care. The more insecure the funding, the more agencies feel a loss of status and influence among other agencies with whom they work and partner. Not surprisingly, staff living with such uncertainty and rapid change experience higher than normal job-related stress and poor health (Friesen & Frey, 1983). Lawton and Magarelli (1980) found that up to two-thirds of child welfare caseworkers reported stress-related health problems. One Marin City Project program director observed that "what has happened over the years has been more and more bad health. I have never seen so much illness in service providers."

Certain institutional stressors can overwhelm and demoralize caregiving professionals:

- unpredictable and constantly changing policies and procedures,
- low salary,
- insecure funding,
- inadequate resources to meet clients' needs,
- accommodating new administrative officials and supervisors,
- increased pace of work required,
- changes in staff,
- lack of organizational support for workers,
- poor peer relationships,
- excessive workload, and
- overtime and long shifts.

Marin City Project staff were exposed to all these organizational pressures, as well as to divisive issues related to culture and race. For directors of small agencies who are both service providers and administrators, it can seem overwhelming to constantly handle funding problems and other pressures. "It wears you out because you're constantly thinking about that at the same time you're trying to provide a service," observed one program director. "It means that your days and weeks are extraordinarily long because you're so busy going to meetings and trying to help pull things together, but yet you've got services to run." The lack of clarity around funding and program design issues undermined the ability of Marin City agencies to function, inevitably causing resentment, anger, and burnout. "It was hard, it was demeaning," said one Marin City provider. "I'm still learning to deal with my anger. I haven't mastered that yet." "It burns you out, frustrates

you,” reported another. “And if you’re not careful, you begin to be critical of yourself.”

Some researchers see burnout as an occupational problem that says more about organizational dysfunction and the environment in which employees work than about the employees themselves (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Bramhall & Ezell, 1981). Instead of viewing burnout as an individual response to job-related stress, they suggest examining the particular organizational conditions in which caregiving professionals are either emotionally supported or drained (Kahn, 1993).

Other researchers suggest that organizational problems are, like a hologram, reflected in the people as well as in the system (Schaeff & Fassel, 1988). Maslach and Leiter (1997) maintain that burnout is best addressed at the organizational, rather than the individual, level and recommends that the search for the causes of burnout be directed away from blaming the individual and toward uncovering the operational and structural characteristics that create a difficult work environment. This perspective can well be applied to battered agencies whose observed organizational dysfunction might say more about the environment in which the agency exists than about the organization itself.

The damaging effects of institutional racism, while difficult to quantify, also need to be factored into the pressure people of color experience when working in already stressed community-based organizations. A former Marin City Project staff member found that encountering both racism and a dysfunctional workplace created distractions that made it difficult to stay focused on the needs of the clients and community.

In the face of these stresses, the organization itself can act in self-defeating ways. The experience of operating in a community where, over the years, many agencies have been unsuccessful can cause agency staff to be pessimistic or otherwise negative, and unwilling to try new approaches. New staff with different skills can seem particularly threatening to more senior staff members who are invested in their own established way of operating in the community despite little success.

Unacceptable behavior and incompetence can be perpetuated, tolerated, and normalized when staff and management have been laboring under stress and do not receive adequate support, supervision, or training. This can be a particularly complex dynamic in agencies of

color in low-income communities. According to one program director, “Tolerating incompetence is among the vestiges of internalized oppression where there is an inadequate evaluation system created for employees, and no one is really willing to fire someone unless they do something outrageous because of the reluctance to fire another person of color.”

When they have a job opening, agencies serving low-income, job-scarce communities of color often feel the need to hire a local resident. An agency may be moved in part by a legitimate desire to hire someone who understands the community and who also comes with established connections that can contribute to an agency’s effectiveness with a given population. But it may also be pressured to some degree by the community itself, which naturally wants more local jobs. When an agency finds a well-qualified resident, the decision to hire locally can suit everyone’s needs. It’s when the qualifications of local applicants are questionable or when a local hire does not pan out as well as expected that an agency can find itself having to make difficult or unpopular decisions: fire a local resident who is not performing adequately and hire a more qualified person, either within the community or from outside, or take no action, which may compromise the quality of services provided to client families.

Organizational reactions to stressful pressures, researchers note, are not unlike characteristics of a dysfunctional family system (Friesen & Frey, 1983; Behn, 1980). Staff working in underfunded, understaffed programs with a highly demanding client pool and limited resources are prone to mirror the dynamics of an addictive family system, characterized by blurred personal boundaries, denial, blaming, defensiveness, and/or confused communication (Sayre, 1992).

These and other stressors mentioned earlier can quickly multiply when community-based organizations try to work with other agencies to provide social, health, or economic development services in a community.

But we cannot afford to have individual agencies or networks of these agencies fail. They need to be recognized as the facilitators of vital community voices, with valuable experience, knowledge, and skills.

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