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Solutions for Better Living (SBL)’s mission is to develop and implement innovative programming that integrates health and education services by providing a holistic approach to address the needs of children and families living in poverty. iServe, one of the programs of SBL, is a community based academic enrichment, behavioral health, health education, and community service program for at-risk, school aged children. The vision is to significantly improve academic performance and influence the pursuit for higher education.

Solutions for Better Living (SBL) grew out of a Houston-based community development and health and wellness program started in 2002 by the Dreyfus Health Foundation (DHF). DHF is a division of The Rogosin Institute, a leading not-for-profit medical care and research facility affiliated with New York-Presbyterian Hospital and Weill Medical College of Cornell University. The program was based on a simple methodology, emphasizing individual and group responsibility, new ideas, and action while focusing on the optimal use of already existing resources. iServe was developed in 2010 by Texas Southern University (TSU) students, who were participants in a problem solving initiative focused on increasing civic engagement activities in Houston’s Third Ward community. Initially implemented in the Cuney Homes community, iServe was designed to offer enhanced after school programming for children, ages 5-12, who live in and around that public housing development. Currently the program is organized and led by student volunteers from other colleges and universities in the Greater Houston area. In 2011, Solutions for Better Living (SBL) launched a pilot of the iServe model in a second location in Fifth Ward on site at the Kelly Village apartment complex.

Solutions for Better Living’s iServe program has four main components that include academic enrichment, behavioral health, health and wellness, and community engagement:

*Academic Achievement*

Students from area colleges and universities serve as volunteers who provide tutorials, homework assistance, subject-specific and technology activities and test preparatory skills. We place particular focus on teaching basic fundamentals of reading, writing, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) curriculum. We also utilize project-based learning activities, and enhanced learning opportunities that provide valuable educational experiences, which are key to student academic success (Gordon, Bridglall, & Meroe, 2005; Harvard Family Research Project, 2005a; Rebell & Wolff, 2009; Rothstein, 2004; Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2008; Wilder, Allgood, & Rothstein, 2008). We believe academic enrichment, as well as the opportunity to then practically apply that knowledge through what they learn from their mentors, tutors and the professionals, who serve as volunteers for the program, can help bridge the gap between how they live and how they learn.

*Behavioral Health*

Children who live in urban neighborhoods similar to Kelly Village with high levels of blight, poverty and violence exhibit a wide range of dysfunctional behaviors, including emotional instability, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, academic failure, and school disengagement (Gibbs 1984; Lorion et al. 1999; Myers et al. 1992; Osofsky et al. 1993; Singer et al. 1995). According to a 2006 study conducted by The National Center for Children in Poverty, 21% of low-income children ages 6 to 17 have mental health problems. Of these children, 57% live in households at or below the federal poverty line (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006).

Master’s level psychology student interns conduct group sessions four times per week that are designed to help children in high-risk settings identify and begin to resolve difficulties that impair their growth, happiness, and ability to function within both the family unit and the

community. The interns utilize empirically based behavioral health curriculum to teach the psycho-education topics. The goal is to help develop the decision-making skills necessary to grow toward a healthier future. The interns conduct individual therapeutic support sessions.

### *Health and Wellness*

Children of families living in poverty have decreased opportunities for exposure to good health promoting behaviors because of a lack of access to good schools, healthy foods and recreational spaces (Benzeval M. Taylor J. Judge K. 2000). Most of the chronic illnesses and disease experienced in adulthood are the result of human behavior (cigarette smoking, dietary intake, obesity, sedentary lifestyle, and alcohol consumption) uninformed by adequate education. However the achievement gap that exists between lower and higher income students is rarely seen as a compelling or significant public health issue.

The purpose of our health and wellness program is to instill good health behaviors in the children to promote their adoption of healthy lifestyles and positively influence their life choices. Based on this idea, iServe students participate in healthy eating, wellness and exercise activities at least one day during the week.

### *Family Focused Community Involvement - Service Learning Program*

Current research suggests that a lack of family involvement may be one of the most important factors in the lack of academic achievement among children living in high poverty areas. Through our partnership with Houston Housing Authority, we have been able to provide ongoing opportunities to include the parents of the children we serve in activities that will increase their role in their child's education and civic development. iServe youth, their parents and their college tutors participate in community service projects (health fairs, voter registration, recycling and Christmas gift drives etc.), as well as leadership development, conflict management, and financial literacy workshops to sharpen their problem solving skills and develop the ability to apply learned knowledge in an entrepreneurial setting.

The service-learning program currently has a pool of over 300 college student volunteers who attend area colleges and universities including Houston Community College, Lone Star College, Prairie View A & M University, Rice University, University of St. Thomas, University of Houston and Houston Baptist University. All volunteers participate in orientation and training before they work with the children. If they would like to volunteer on an ongoing basis, they are required to undergo a criminal background check. At the conclusion of each semester, volunteers complete a Volunteer Survey and Program Evaluation Form.

Perhaps the most significant achievement for this program is in regards to the increase in number of participants in the program and in the behavior health internship program. Three years ago, there were 12-15 participants attending the program daily. Currently, we have over 100 children enrolled in the program, with an average of 32 participants attending daily. Three years ago, there were two Master Level interns assigned to each site. Currently we have total of 20 interns, 10 different therapeutic groups offered each semester, and at least 4 interns at each site daily. The addition of a third community site, Clayton Homes, is a recent achievement. Houston Housing Authority has expressed wishes to have Solutions for Better Living and the iServe program at all of the public housing properties. This is a long-term goal for the program that will necessitate additional volunteers, community support and funding.

