

CAAS NEWS

Volume 2 Issue 2

People achieving more
by working together

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Making a Home in Somerville With the CAAS Advocacy Program

Thomas St. Louis was in desperate shape. His landlord refused to make needed repairs to the apartment Thomas and his family were renting. It did not come close to meeting the housing codes. One “bedroom” was actually a back porch, enclosed, but not sealed tight against the wind. And still, the landlord was charging more than Thomas could afford.

A Christian minister, Thomas St. Louis had moved from his native Haiti looking for a place to make a living. In Michigan, he had worked in human services. Now, in Somerville, it seemed as if he and his family were in danger of becoming homeless themselves. He turned to CAAS for help.

It was twenty years ago that CAAS helped Thomas get rental assistance, emergency food stamps for his family, and advice on how to make his landlord obey the law. “That’s what has kept me here,” he says. Today, Thomas St. Louis is the senior member of the Housing and Benefits Advocacy Program at CAAS. He helps people avoid being evicted, find and keep housing, and support their families.



Advocates Thomas St. Louis and Sylvia Cardim discuss a client strategy.

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THE TEACHER COMES FOR A VISIT

BY MARGARITA ASHTON

Head Start teachers visit children at their homes twice a year: prior to the beginning of the school year and close to the end of the year. Home visits are designed to enhance the child/teacher and home/school relationships. They provide a wonderful opportunity to meet the parents in their own environment. As a teacher in the program, I treasure these special times. I use home visits as opportunities to try to empower families in their most important job, that of parenting.

I have collected some thoughts and information about home visits from both supervisors and colleagues. Question No. 1 elicited a flurry of enthusiastic responses.

1) How do you help families feel relaxed during home visits?

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Affordable for Whom?

a message from
Executive Director
Jack Hamilton

Over the past few years, the Somerville housing market has been booming. We have seen much higher home prices, a record-setting number of condo conversions and a lot of new construction. This has, of course, led to increased profits for sellers, realtors, banks and developers. This has been good for some sectors of the community.

The downside, however, is that many residents have been squeezed out of the homebuyer market, rents have skyrocketed and the number of rental units has diminished greatly. This is not good for those on the lower end of the economic ladder. It has been disastrous for the very low-income population, those at 20% or less of median income. (For a family of four, being "very low-income" means trying to live on \$16,537.50 a year, or less.)

"Any increase in income makes housing a little more affordable."

These very low-income families, many of them immigrant families, are paying a very high proportion of their income--sometimes well over 50%--for rental space that is often substandard. The admirable efforts by the Somerville Community Corporation to build affordable housing are vital and must continue, but as my colleague Danny LeBlanc tells me, they seldom reach the very poor in the community. Only when Section 8 certificates are available can the very poor qualify for "affordable housing," and the number of certificates has decreased over the past few years.

What is the remedy to this bad situation? It lies in increased efforts by the state and federal governments to grant more Section 8 certificates and increase other subsidies for the very low-income.

Any increase in the income of the poorest makes their housing a little more affordable. That is why it is important that we continue to call for the indexing of the minimum wage. "Indexing" keeps the buying power of the minimum wage steady even when there is inflation and prices rise. We almost achieved the indexing of the minimum wage last year. Neighbor to Neighbor is leading a statewide organizing effort to push for indexing this year. We should all join in that effort.

Peace!

The Teacher Comes for a Visit

Continued from page 1

Roberta McCluskey, Early Literacy and Disabilities Specialist at Head Start, advises teachers to sit next to family members and not far across from them during home visits. This immediately helps enhance the rapport between teachers and families.

Luisa Artone, a Head Start teacher, thinks that showing an interest in the family's culture is crucial in establishing a positive connection. Thus, she likes to ask families about their native foods and art. She also likes "to share with them something I like about their culture."

Another teacher, Aleyda Pizzuto, told me: "I like to treat parents as if they were my friends. I make sure I learn their names before the home visit, and I use their names during the visit."

2) How do you deal with language barriers?

Maureen Villa, Integrated Child Development Specialist, reminds me how lucky we are to have many bilingual teachers, and even some multilingual

staff. More than half the employees at CAAS speak at least two languages, including English, Spanish, Portuguese, French and Haitian Kreyol. In the cases where interpreters are needed, "I remind teachers to maintain eye contact with the family member, despite the language obstacles."

During in-service week, prior to the beginning of the year, Director of Children's Services Carol Nolan led teachers through an exercise designed to emphasize the importance of body language in communication. She paired up teachers and asked them to tell their



Melyane and Mesley Faris prepare soup during a Head Start visit.

A Home in Somerville

Continued from page 1

The staff of the CAAS Housing and Benefits Advocacy Program are equipped to serve Somerville residents who speak English, Spanish, Portuguese, or Haitian Creole. Sylvia Cardim, the Portuguese-speaking Advocate, says that the program helps people in three main ways.

- ◆ CAAS helps prevent low-income people from being evicted. The Advocates offer paralegal assistance and refer clients to legal services. They translate documents and interpret court proceedings. They help tenants develop payment plans for back rent, and they find emergency assistance for tenants who have fallen behind.
- ◆ CAAS helps people access benefits, from food stamps to housing vouchers, which make it easier for them to survive on a low income.
- ◆ CAAS helps resolve landlord-tenant disputes. For instance: state law requires that each apartment have a separate gas and electric meter. CAAS helps tenants avoid having to pay the bills for common areas that are the owner's responsibility.



In three out of four cases, CAAS staff like Thomas and Sylvia succeed, either in helping people keep their current housing, or in finding something else they are better able to afford, according to Advocacy Program Director

“Our priority is to keep our clients housed,” says Advocate Sylvia Cardim

Melissa McWhinney. “Our priority is to keep our clients housed,” says Sylvia. “They come here first to talk about housing, and then we talk with them about everything else. It’s like counseling. We are able to sort their problems and go through them step by step. A lot of things they can do themselves, and it’s better if they do. I am just a guide.”

The long term goal of the CAAS Housing and Benefits Advocacy Program is for the families it serves to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Thomas remembers one family he met more than ten years ago. “She was a single mother with four children. The constable came to put her belongings in storage. She was on the street, homeless, in a shelter or moving from one friend’s apartment to another. She had to split her kids up to find places for them all.” Thomas helped this family apply for and obtain a Section 8 rental voucher for a four-bedroom apartment in Somerville.

Today, all four children of the formerly homeless family have graduated college. The mother has saved and invested, and now she is a homeowner herself, having bought a three-family house in Somerville. Recently, she stopped by the CAAS office to bring Thomas a box of Chinese herbal tea. “I want you to stay healthy,” she told him, “so you can keep doing what you’re doing for other people!”

Teacher Visit

from preceding page

partners something about themselves without using any words in a few minutes time. Afterwards, she asked us to translate our partner’s body language into words. Some people’s whole life stories were accurately conveyed in only a few gestures! The exercise reminded us that when we visit parents in their homes, we can show attentiveness, respect, and care whether we share a common language or not.

A little story told to me by Zenilda Bastone, Family Advocate, illustrates the profound impact a home visit can have on a child. A student in one of the classes Zenilda serves showed somewhat aggressive, unfocused behavior in class. He could not listen to teachers’ directions nor establish sustained eye contact with them. The day after the home visit, after seeing his parents trusting and relating well with the teachers, that same child came running in to give his teacher a hug. Throughout the year, he continued reminiscing about that magical day in which his teachers came to his house for a visit.

“I like to treat parents as if they were my friends,” says teacher Aleyda Pizzuto.

**Community Action Agency
of Somerville, Inc.**

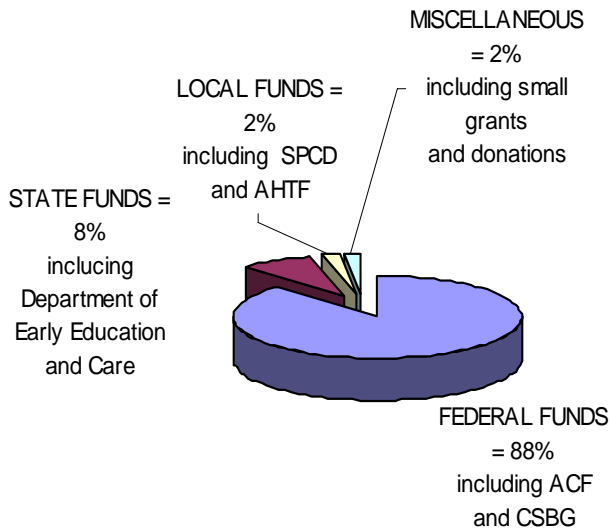
66-70 Union Square
Somerville, MA 02143

For more information
email: dfischman@caasomerville.org



*People Achieving More
By Working Together*

CAAS FUNDING SOURCES



Head Start is the largest CAAS program. The funds for Head Start come from Administration for Children and Families (Federal), from Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (State) and for recent specific needs from donations.

The Advocacy Program receives funding from Community Service Block Grants which are Federal funds passed through the State. This program also receives City funds from the Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development and the Affordable Housing Trust Fund.

The Latino Youth Program is currently supported in whole by private grants. At one time, this program was substantially larger and supported by State and Federal funds. It has diminished in size but not in enthusiasm!

Administrative costs are received through an Indirect Cost Rate negotiated with our largest Federal funder. Currently administrative costs are 14.9% of the overall budget.

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