

Street Weapons Commission – London
Lydia Sorensen

CHATTER

Cherie Booth

Hello, Lydia.

Lydia Sorensen

Hello.

Cherie Booth

Lydia Sorensen, you work as a Senior Project Worker with NCH.

Lydia Sorensen

That's correct.

Cherie Booth

We've been hearing a lot today about families and...

Lydia Sorensen

Yeah.

Cherie Booth

...and the role of families in supporting and nurturing...

Lydia Sorensen

Yeah.

Cherie Booth

...our young people. I know you work with families, some of whom have troubled young people.

Lydia Sorenson

Mmm hmm.

Cherie Booth

Can you tell us a little bit about that work?

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah. That work consists of the Project Worker, like myself, going into the property, family home, and working up to nine hours each week. It can consist of practical support, but the reason why we're going in to the family home in the first place is because the family have been perceived as being antisocial. That may be drug dealing from the property, domestic violence

within that property, you know nuisance and gangs, congregation. So the Project Worker will go into that family home and ideally challenge and support that family, every individual within that family, to support them to have a happier lifestyle and to allow the community to live in a better way really.

Cherie Booth

And so what sort of things do you actually do with the families to achieve that?

Lydia Sorenson

Okay. Well it may be practical support. It may be just showing families another way of living. I mean it's all about choice, so it may be just showing them you know about routines, about a quality of life, how to live differently. It may be about providing them avenues and pathways to gain better support through mental health support to counselling. But it may be delivering

parenting, one-to-one classes, with the actual parent. It could look like the Project Worker going into that family home and sitting down and just being a mentor for the young person who's going through many difficulties within that time that nobody else maybe listening to. It can consist of many different things. It doesn't look like one thing.

Commissioner

There are of course many families who are not dysfunctional...

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Commissioner

...but whose children nevertheless are involved in violent street cultures and whatever.

Lydia Sorenson

Absolutely. Yeah. Absolutely.

Commissioner

Do you work with those?

Lydia Sorenson

Yes. We do. Yeah. We work with those families and it's, it's quite difficult because you can have a number of families where you know there a tug-of-war really. You know the parent believes that they've done everything that's possible to help these children, or you know extended family members that may live with them, but the young people don't necessarily see it like that.

They don't see that they've got you know the support that they want, the opportunities that they deserve. They may feel like nobody's listening to them so they build a community and a family outside of their own. And it's about getting in there and having a communication; people actually listening to each other instead of shouting at each other and yelling and not actually hearing

what each other are saying.

Commissioner

And do you get support from schools in supporting the same families that you work with?

Lydia Sorenson

Yes. Yes. Definitely.

Commissioner

How does that work?

Lydia Sorenson

It's about the Project Worker going to those educational facilities, cos it may not just be a school...

Commissioner

Yes.

Lydia Sorenson

...and going to those educational facilities and explaining really what's happening within the home, because nine times out of ten the teachers, those in the educational service, don't actually know what's happening. They get a feel of what probably what's likely to have happened, but they really don't know the full extent. And it's about the Project Worker going there and explaining what's happening and then providing a dialogue between the family, that's the parents and the young person, and the Project Worker and then education.

Cherie Booth

It's been fascinating actually cos today at the project we visited some of the kids were saying that actually schools often don't know that for example a child is caring for ... that there's a problem in the family and the child is caring.

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Cherie Booth

And you think, 'Well, how can the school have not picked that up?'

Lydia Sorenson

Because I think the young person's so good at maybe protecting their family or doing what they feel's necessary to protect their family and put the brave face on and just ... and do what they think is expected of them, which is to be one thing at home and something else when they're in school.

Commissioner

My experience this morning with the group I was talking to of...

Lydia Sorenson

Yes.

Commissioner

...11 and 12-year-olds I guess, was that many of them, a surprise to me, a surprising large number, were saying, "Well my parents don't understand me." Well, a lot of 11 and 12-year-olds say that anyway.

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Commissioner

But that was a problem for them.

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Commissioner

“And the school isn’t either.”

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Commissioner

“And so on the street or on the road,” as the terminology goes, “that’s the only place where I can really operate and I’m frightened there.”

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Commissioner

So they were in a three-way bind on that.

Lydia Sorenson

That's right. Yeah.

Commissioner

But I wonder if I could ask you a question. So you're obviously dealing with families which on the whole are at the high-end of the problem range?

Lydia Sorenson

Yes.

Commissioner

And I wonder if there is any way that you could see, not necessarily for...maybe for you, to intervene earlier. Is there a mechanism where you could get in earlier before the damage has really been done when it becomes easier?

Lydia Sorenson

I think that...

Commissioner

Cos it's all turning on the family. If the family's good then presumably one doesn't get much of a problem, if at all.

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah, that's right.

Commissioner

The problem, the family starts becoming dysfunctional then the problems grow.

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah.

Commissioner

So how do we get back down that chain?

Lydia Sorenson

Well I think there's a big gap between when a project like NCH's Family Interventive Support Project gets involved and we're there at when nobody thinks there's a problem. And I think that the big difference is is that I think when professionals acknowledge that there may be something happening in that home or the young person needs a little bit more support than the other children, I think that's the key time to get involved. I think it's very important to acknowledge the small things that are happening, because they're the things that sort of get out of control, those are the things that ultimately we see as the bigger problems.

Commissioner

I mustn't hog this, but it seems to me that one of the answers which is simplicity itself...

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Commissioner

...is you've got to get to the parents and train the parents.

Lydia Sorenson

That's correct, yeah.

Commissioner

And the parents have lost it in their as it were training programme a generation before on some occasions. So I don't know whether you have an answer to this, how one gets to the parents of problem families so that they don't become a problem in the first place. Do you follow?

Lydia Sorenson

I think that we...our project deliver family support and we do that through a parenting training called, in Newham, called Triple P, which is Positive Parenting. And that really looks like you know really basic things you know...

Commissioner

Training the parents?

Lydia Sorenson

Training the parents to have family routines, to listen to your child when they're talking to you, not to scream and not to shout at them, you know to have an environment which is ... works for everybody in the family that can build upon relationships. Everybody's gonna have a different relationship within a family, but it's looking at the really basic things that are happening

within a family and trying to build upon what you've got that's good rather than looking at the negatives within that family.

Commissioner

Coming from Newham as you do...

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Commissioner

...you will know of the work of the East Side Young Leaders Academy?

Lydia Sorenson

I've heard of them.

Commissioner

You've heard of them?

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Commissioner

Do you know of their work in any detail?

Lydia Sorenson

Not much, no.

Commissioner

No.

Lydia Sorenson

Sorry.

Commissioner

Okay. Well I believe [INAUDIBLE]. One last question: how effective do you think it is working with individuals families, particularly given that some of them for all sorts of reasons might be very dysfunctional? To what extent are you able to work with a cluster of families...

Lydia Sorenson

Mmm.

Commissioner

...so that the young person could have some support from others who might be more stable?

Lydia Sorenson

I think it's really important to acknowledge that you know as a Project Worker I may have a caseload of five or six families at any one time. Now, each family will present different needs at any one time, so obviously it's very difficult for this one person. Sometimes you're seen as going to save this family you know when something happens. And I think it is quite difficult to give all of your time, professional time, at any one moment and be effective.

Commissioner

But as a model do you think we ought to be seeking ... you know that some projects such as the Origin Project in Lambeth...

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Commissioner

...run on the philosophy that we need to be building a village around the child and not just the family, individual family, unit.

Lydia Sorenson

I believe that that's probably correct.

Commissioner

Right.

Lydia Sorenson

I do think that's correct and I think that's what the Family Intervention Project does. I think that we are like the umbrella, you know. We expect that the family...the world of knowledge that the family have is so important, but being able to tap into those...I guess all that I'm doing is really being a facilitator at most times and tapping into those professionals around them, the family...

extended family around them; things that already work that the family don't see...

Commissioner

Okay.

Lydia Sorenson

...and ideally hoping that that family grasp, you know grasp and hold on to what is true and good for them.

Commissioner

Thank you.

Lydia Sorenson

That they know what the answers are.

Cherie Booth

Okay, Ian wanted to ask something?

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Ian Levy

In terms of the actual, your actual first contact with a family...

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Ian Levy

...I'm just wondering how receptive are the family towards your coming in in terms of not being, well seen to be a sort of knight in shining armour coming in to save this family?

Lydia Sorenson

Mmm.

Ian Levy

How receptive are the families to...

Lydia Sorenson

Not very.

Ian Levy

And how do you get around this?

Lydia Sorenson

Okay. That's about true commitment and that's about going back time and time and time and time again and showing your face and saying you're not going anywhere. I think families are so used to professionals coming, knocking on the door, the families give some abuse, the professional walks away and says, "I can't work with that family anymore." You know and I think

the family test Project Workers like myself. So what we do is we're consistent. So we go back. And we may take the verbal but we'll come back and we'll explain our position. The thing with the family project is that we provide a voluntary basis; this is...we're not throwing this support at the family and we explain to them in very simple terms that, "We're here to support you.

However, if you don't want that support then that's your choice. But the consequence for you not taking this support and the way that you're going, it's going to lead you in a place that you may not want to be for your children and for yourself." So I think it's about being really real and telling them how you see things, but saying it's about a choice: "You make this choice. I'm not

forcing you, I'm not statutory service I'm not forcing this upon you. This is all about what you decide and what you choose." And you'll be surprised how many people actually find that quite empowering really to say, "Okay this is my choice. This is not somebody else forcing this. This is not saying they're gonna take my kids away if I don't agree to do this. They're not gonna take

my home away." But in real respect what I'm saying is is these things are very likely to happen and I'm being very honest with them. But I go back time and time and time again. And that's what they see and eventually it's about building that relationship with them that they see that I'm not just this one minute wonder that will come and promise them all these

things and then
leave them.

Ian Levy

And what is the Exit Strategy?

Lydia Sorenson

The Exit Strategy is to make sure that they understand that they are doing this for themselves. You know when we get to a point where they're ... we can see – I mean we've got short-term goals – and when we can see that they're actually reaching those goals we decide that ... we show them 'This is what you're doing'. We had these monthly meetings where the family are able to have a look at their progress if you like and we're saying, "This is what you're doing. Now this is what you need to be doing by yourself. You don't need us anymore. And we'll be here if you need us as a safety net, however..." And they become more confident in their own abilities, so...

Commissioner

How often do they come back once you've as it were walked away and saying, "Actually..."

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Commissioner

This is where the trust bit comes in in a respect, doesn't it?

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah. This is it, yeah.

Commissioner

“Can you come back because we’re still a little bit fragile,” or words to that effect.

Lydia Sorenson

Okay.

Commissioner

And how often do you find that happens, because that’s a real test of success, isn’t it?

Lydia Sorenson

Okay. It is and in fairness our project’s very new, so to have any families come back at present it would be unfair for me to say, “Well it doesn’t happen at all,” and give a measure on that because I haven’t had families who have completely finished with our intervention at present. So, I don’t think it’s fair for me to answer that in terms of what we’re doing.

Commissioner

[INAUDIBLE]

Lydia Sorenson

But I’m hoping, absolutely.

Commissioner

[INAUDIBLE]

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah, I'm hoping...

Commissioner

Yeah.

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah. Definitely.

Commissioner

What progression for the family after you've taken them as far as you can take them?

Lydia Sorenson

Yeah.

Commissioner

Is there a sort of natural progression or does a family take over from themselves?

Lydia Sorenson

The families take over themselves but they're not left alone. You know they know that they've got support networks. So it may be that at the end of the agreed time of working with the family they will have other support networks you know that they can tap into; that they no longer need the hard-end intervention.

Commissioner

What sort of support and give us some examples?

Lydia Sorenson

Okay a support may look like extended family members who the relationship's built back to a level that is workable, that can you know can help with childcare, that may be able to help with any form of child issues or support when things get to a place where it starts to escalate the behaviour, negative behaviour. You know that third member in the family that we all have within

our family that can come and calm situations down. They may be able to tap in there. But it may be like professional units such as a mentoring system. You know, having a young person decide that they've got a better relationship with somebody from a youth centre that they're able to talk to when things are getting a little bit ropey at home or out on the street or wherever. So it's about

identifying where those support networks are and then tapping into those and making sure that they have an avenue for themselves individually within that family. Yeah.

Cherie Booth

Lydia, thank you so much for that.

Lydia Sorenson

Thank you.

Cherie Booth

And thank you for the work you do.

Commissioner

Thanks.

Lydia Sorenson

Thank you. Thanks.

Commissioner

Thank you.

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