

## Pioneering government-NGO partnership to manage juvenile homes

Vidya Shankar, chairperson of the State Juvenile Welfare Board and founder-director of the NGO Relief Foundation, has pioneered Chennai's first government-NGO partnership for the management of juvenile homes

The setting seems to reflect in the eyes of the players. A long room with no relief. There's no furniture, the room is poorly ventilated and, for the 100-odd children, there is only one toilet at each end. By way of décor, there's a long plastic rope running along the structure on the outside. On it hang a pathetic assortment of uniforms, the only change of clothes for the inmates. This is the government-run Children's Home for Boys in Royapuram, Chennai city, home to children who, at least for now, have nowhere else to go.

In a nearby building, children in a classroom clamour for the attention of their visitor. They shake hands with her and ply her with urgent requests to send them back home. The visitor is Vidya Shankar, chairperson of the State Juvenile Welfare Board and founder-director of the non-governmental organisation, Relief Foundation.

Shankar plays a dual role in Tamil Nadu's juvenile justice system. She is a presiding officer of the court and pioneer of the first-of-its-kind government-NGO partnership involving the co-management of juvenile homes in the city.

Shankar recalls: "It all started nearly four years ago when our NGO was still formulating its evolving goals. We asked to be allowed to hold a free medical camp for the children of a juvenile home run by the government. Permission was granted. The sight that awaited us was shocking. Children were cramped into a facility that was clearly not coping with the job of caring for its occupants. The toilets were anything but usable. Children were wearing unwashed clothes and an overwhelming number of them were infected with scabies -- a disease that is supposedly not seen much anymore. The living conditions were obviously unhygienic. Various other problems also came to light, including nutrition issues and problems with schooling. We knew then that this was not something we could turn away from."

She continues: "It must be said that the government system was stretched beyond imagination. In a building meant to house around 200-250 children, they had over 850. Their funding and resource allocation, however, remained the same. One thing was clear: even though they were enduring the most terrible conditions, these children were still safer in a juvenile home than on the streets. They had food, shelter and protection. We found the officer-in-charge proactive and willing to help. We decided it would be best to work with the system; the challenge was to use its advantages in a constructive way and to overcome the obstacles it posed."

At any point of time, there are 250 children at the Children's Home for Boys, Royapuram, 275 girls at the Children's Home for Girls in Kellys and 60 boys and girls at the Government Observation Home also in Kellys. Besides this, there is an inflow and outflow of 100 children in all three homes together.

With the support and initiative of the then presiding officer of the juvenile home in Royapuram, Relief Foundation began a series of interventions to help improve the lives of the children who lived there. Funds were raised to repair the existing toilets and build new ones. Another drive brought in clothes for the children. Sponsors were found to provide money for a healthy change in diet twice a week -- pongal on one day and idli on another. The existing budget allowed only for ragi conji, with very little variation in a predominantly rice-based diet. A doctor volunteered his services and medical treatment was secured. Things improved. Along the way, there was some bad press about the administration that almost derailed the project. But, following consultations, better sense prevailed. Permission was sought and secured to extend the services to the other two juvenile homes in Chennai, both in Kellys.

Says Shankar: "Our objective was to provide children in the juvenile justice system access to a better quality of life, education and to rehabilitate and integrate them successfully into society. For this we focused on augmenting education programmes, counselling and psychological intervention, restoration of children to their families, health and hygiene, vocational training, rehab and referrals, sports and extra-curricular activities, and the involvement of the community in all of this."

The target group was the approximately 1,200 children entering the juvenile justice system annually from all over the country.

Relief Foundation's co-management efforts have been focused on working within the juvenile justice system, inside government homes and classrooms. Bridge courses using alternative learning kits, computer literacy and tuition for girls from Class VII to X, basic literacy for children at the reception centre and observation home, story-telling sessions and library usage. The children also need reassurance and counselling. Above all, the runaway issue had to be addressed; this was done by explaining the need to stay in a home. Documentation of case histories happened simultaneously. The need for spirituality, behaviour modification and family relationships was addressed. Finally, the children were prepared for their return to their families, whenever possible.

Restoration was a demanding and complex task. It required home visits, letters, phone calls, telegrams and the mobilisation of a network of contacts all over India. Once rehabilitated, follow-up was essential. Some children have been admitted in local schools with referrals, others sent to NGOs for job-based training. Vocational training in soap and phenyl manufacture, carpentry, tailoring, banner painting, embroidery, etc, was tried with promising degrees of success.

Health and hygiene was promoted through weekly medical examinations, instructions on personal hygiene habits like hand-washing and toilet maintenance. Mentors were identified for those children who had no claimants or relatives. Regular mentor visits yielded positive results.

Shankar explains: "It is important to prevent children from becoming anti-social and/or unproductive. Better understanding of the procedure and limitations of governmental services and the role of civil society in adding value to the existing services cannot be stressed enough."

The co-management effort has resulted in a decline in medical ailments among the children, a change in staff attitude and, significantly, a reduction in the number of children actually institutionalised, thanks to parent and guardian counselling.

So, what are the challenges and rewards of attempting to duplicate the co-management model? Shankar believes it requires a patient understanding of the system. She says: "It is the synergy between the kinetic energy of a voluntary organisation and the potential energy of the government system. Learning to keep a low profile and directing our efforts in mutually-agreed areas of value-added services -- all done with no effort to publicise other than what is officially done by the government -- go a long way in allowing us to work together. Raising funds in spite of this low profile is another aspect we have to keep in mind. And, equally important, there is the agreement to be evaluated and criticised even though there is no funding from government sources."

She adds: "We need partnerships in development -- between the government, the NGO sector and the community. Often the government is blamed for not providing for the maintenance of a facility, be it a school, a public health centre or a juvenile home. We have to consider -- if not the government, who and what? The trend in other parts of the world is to invite partnerships for sustainable change and development. We must try it too. It works."

**Lalitha Sridhar**

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