

# SGA LIFE

Improving the lives of Chicago's youth since 1911

News from SGA Youth & Family Services

Spring 2008



Photo by Susan McMillen

## Operation BIG Hug: New SGA Program Helps Families Cope with Autism

Early intervention helps at-risk children from birth to school age receive timely diagnosis and treatment for a variety of problems that can impact development and learning. This is especially important for children with autism, as the disorder can be difficult to identify, particularly for inexperienced teen parents.

Through a one-year United Way Venture Grant awarded in 2007, SGA developed an innovative program focused on early detection of autism among children of young, low-income parents.

Known as **Operation BIG Hug**, it provides screening and assessment, home-based support services, and community education and awareness about autism.

"This project is really an outgrowth of SGA's work with teenage parents," said SGA Executive Director Susana Marotta. "Our staff found that among young, low-income parents there is a lack of knowledge about autism, an absence of early detection, and limited support programs to help these families cope."

SGA also learned that there is a dearth of training about autism for both parents and early childhood professionals. Operation BIG Hug was created to help fill these critical gaps and help low-income children with autism access treatment as early as possible.

Jessica Barwinski is the SGA staff member who helped develop the program. Her title is Family Support Advocate, but she does much more than advocacy. She speaks to parents and community groups, holds training sessions, and conducts screenings. She is also a source of valuable information about the disorder for young parents, helping them understand how they can access vital services their children

Jessica Barwinski, Family Support Advocate for SGA's Operation BIG Hug, provides home-based support for preschool-age children and their parents.

with autism require, including education and support at home.

"Our goal is to make the parents the advocate for their child," she stated. "By training parents, we teach them to become the experts."

Operation BIG Hug is based on Chicago's west side, serving low-income families in the Logan Square, Humboldt Park, and West Town communities. It shares offices with SGA's teen parenting program, Healthy Families Illinois/Parents Too Soon.

*(continues on page 2)*



### Levenfeld Pearlstein Grants \$30,000 for 'BIG Hug'

In early 2008, Chicago-based law firm Levenfeld Pearlstein LLC presented a \$30,000 grant to SGA in support of the agency's autism program, Operation BIG Hug. SGA was one of two local organizations to receive funding through Levenfeld's recently launched contributions program. Pictured from left: John Goodman, SGA Board Vice President; Susana Marotta, SGA Executive Director; James Forhan, SGA Board President; Rob Romanoff, Levenfeld Pearlstein Asset Planning & Preservation Partner; Valerie Lustig, SGA Program Coordinator; Daniel Dever, SGA Director of Development; Angie Hickey, Levenfeld Pearlstein Executive Director; Phil Ruben, Levenfeld Pearlstein Corporate Practice Group Partner; Marianne Bamonte, SGA Board Member; Mark Pearlstein, Levenfeld Pearlstein Partner.

# “Wonderful, Wonderful!” Parents Applaud New Mentoring Program

The U.S. Department of Education recently awarded SGA Youth & Family Services a federal grant to launch a school-based mentoring program—**Kids Unlimited**—for 75 fourth, fifth, and sixth graders at Fiske and Wadsworth elementary schools in Chicago’s Woodlawn community.

Kids Unlimited matches community adult volunteers and undergraduate and graduate students from the University of Chicago and City Colleges with children to provide them with positive role models. Specifically, the program aims to improve students’ grades and school attendance through a mentoring relationship built on a developmental approach of shared experiences such as face-to-face meetings, field trips, e-mentoring, and attending skill building workshops.

SGA hosted the February workshop for other mentoring providers throughout the Midwest. At the workshop, Elsy Arévalo, trainer for the Mentoring Research Center, discussed the value of pre- and post-match mentor training and support. She also stressed that “social activities and using a developmental approach (outings, having fun together) is key to developing close and supportive relationships. It has been shown that 90 percent of the kids are with their mentor at the end of the year as opposed to a ‘prescriptive’ approach that focuses on tutoring and goal setting.” Studies demonstrate that youths matched 12 months or more show greater improvement in self worth, scholastic competence, and



Photo by Susan McMillen

Elsy Arévalo, trainer for the Mentoring Research Center, (U.S. Department of Education) conducting the regional workshop for 25 mentoring providers hosted by SGA

relationship with parents, and decreased drug abuse risk.

Parents are enthusiastic about the program. One Woodlawn single mother of ten has enrolled three of her children,

one in each grade, saying “there are good people in this program and this kind of support is so wonderful, wonderful, wonderful!”

Through the parent orientation sessions she gained a better understanding of the value of mentoring relationships, and she is encouraged that the mentoring support will result in her children feeling better about themselves and improving their grades.

SGA employs passionate and committed staff, key to successful programming. Carrie Bergen, LSW, Program Coordinator remarks, “The training, experience, and dedication of our staff—Bernard Clark, AA, and Nicole Plourde, BSW—ensure successful outcomes for the kids the program will serve.”

Interested in becoming a mentor? Visit [www.sga-youth.org](http://www.sga-youth.org) and click Employment/Volunteer Opportunities.

## Operation BIG Hug (continued)

This is an ideal location, as the two programs naturally complement each other by assisting teen parents who might not otherwise recognize autistic symptoms.

Without early intervention, children at risk for autism may have difficulty with communication, both in terms of language and relationship development. Social skills can be impaired and need to be addressed in order for these kids to learn to connect in a healthy way with family and friends. Without social support, these children may develop behavior issues and exhibit great frustration as they grow. Learning can be significantly impaired, and therefore, it is critical to address these issues as early as possible.

Operation BIG Hug was initially funded as a pilot program. Thanks to a recent generous grant from the Chicago law firm of Levenfeld Pearlstein, LLC, as well as SGA general operating funds, Operation BIG Hug will continue to serve Chicago area parents in dealing with issues regarding young children and autism.

## From the Executive Director, Susana Marotta



Photo by Susan McMillen

Welcome to the premier issue of our new publication, **SGA LIFE**. The goal is to give our supporters and friends greater insight into the challenges faced by young people today and how SGA Youth & Family Services is making a difference. We have included articles about our

two newest initiatives—the autism and mentoring projects—as well as updates on three ongoing programs that focus on substance abuse prevention, juvenile justice and art therapy. If you have questions about any of our services or feedback about the newsletter, please e-mail us: [admin@sga-youth.org](mailto:admin@sga-youth.org)

**Thank you for your continued support!**

## More About Autism

**Autism is the most common of several conditions within Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs). This group of developmental disabilities is defined by significant impairments in social interaction and communication and the presence of unusual behaviors and interests. Many people with autism also have unusual ways of learning, paying attention, or reacting to different sensations. The thinking and learning abilities of people with autism can vary—from gifted to severely challenged.**

**The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention state that autism is the fastest growing childhood illness, increasing at the rate of 17 percent per year. According to estimates from the National Institutes of Health, half of autistic children are not diagnosed before they reach kindergarten age, and even fewer are diagnosed under the age of three. The medical community has now recognized the benefits of early detection. In October 2007, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued new recommendations that all children be screened for autism twice before age two.**

**There currently is no medical test to diagnose autism. The best method of detection is observation and assessment by a trained social worker or alert parent who is educated on the disorder.**

**Autism Awareness—know the early warning signs:**

- Not responding to name
- Does not point, follow a point or wave
- Language delay
- Avoids eye contact
- Repetitive play

**For a more extensive list of the earliest most reliable signs of ASD by developmental age, visit [www.theautismprogram.org](http://www.theautismprogram.org)**

# Diversion: Reducing the Likelihood of Future Criminality

Most juveniles do not commit crime. Of those who do, a small number of chronic offenders—those who regularly relapse into criminal behavior—are responsible for a large portion of juvenile crime.

Research shows that repeat offenders commit their first offense at an early age (usually at 11 years), and even at this age, they display a host of risk factors:

- Low socioeconomic status
- Failure in school, such as poor academic performance or poor attendance
- Family problems, including physical and sexual abuse and a parental history of criminal activity
- Substance abuse
- Pattern behaviors, such as chronic stealing or running away
- Gang membership
- Gun possession

While having these risk factors does not guarantee criminal behavior, it increases the likelihood. Young offenders who display multiple risk factors are at high risk for becoming chronic recidivists or “career criminals.”

For such young people, early intervention that addresses the problems that they face can make a difference in their lives today as well as where their lives go in the future.

Directed at reducing the rate of recidivism, **SGA's Diversion Program** is targeted to first-time offenders with multiple risk factors. The program serves 75 participants ages 10 to 17 years within Chicago Police Area One, which includes the impoverished Lawndale and Austin communities. Currently, most clients are African-American males. Most clients committed serious crimes, such as possession of a controlled substance, theft, vehicle theft, and possession of a firearm. (The program does not work with violent offenders.)

For 4 to 6 months, a case manager and a counselor provide individual counseling and group therapy on a weekly basis to teach youth to direct their energies and frustrations into more positive behavior. They also learn to evaluate the consequences of their actions and to take responsibility for the outcome.

Finding a strong support system and learning to face consequences combines in a powerful manner. Clients realize that they are responsible not only to themselves, but to the counselor and group. For many, their time in the program is the closest experience to family as they have ever had. “They always tell me how much they want to stay,” says Calvin Bonds, case manager.

Approximately 15 percent of Diversion clients recidivate, compared to a 47 percent juvenile recidivism rate in Illinois. The low recidivism rate of Diversion clients testifies to the strong support that clients receive from the program and its dedicated staff.



## SGA Expands Services to New Communities

● SGA received a **School Mental Health Grant** from the Chicago Public Schools for the provision of mental health services to five new schools: Holmes Elementary School, Von Humboldt Elementary School, Sherman Elementary School, John Hope College Preparatory High School, and Tilden Career Academy High School. SGA will work with students and their families to address mental health barriers to learning by providing problem-solving methods, training, and treatment on an as-needed basis.

● The U.S. Department of Education through the Chicago Public Schools awarded SGA a grant under the **Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative**. This funding will allow SGA to expand its services in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago. SGA's School-Based staff will meet with students individually

and in group settings. They will provide mental health services, including classroom/behavioral management, anger management, conflict resolution training, and intervention to five new schools. The program will take place at Enrico Fermi Elementary School, James Madison Elementary School, Isabelle O'Keefe Elementary School, Parkside Elementary Community Academy, and Adam Clayton Powell Community Academy.

● SGA is collaborating with the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC) on the **Safety Net Works Initiative** funded through the Illinois Department of Human Services. This initiative will provide more than 150 students with violence prevention and intervention services throughout the Brighton Park community.

# SGA Youth & Family Services Donors—Fiscal Year To Date

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### Special Acknowledgement

SGA gratefully acknowledges a \$50,000 grant from the Joseph Pedott Perpetual Endowment Trust, received in 2007. This grant will be applied to the Madelaine Foreman Fund within SGA's endowment. Annual earnings from the endowment help support SGA's programs.

## Studley Golf Tournament to Benefit SGA



SGA Youth & Family Services has been named the charity recipient of the third annual Studley Landlord Golf Challenge, to be held September 8 at the Oak Park Country Club.

Organized by commercial real estate services firm Studley, the one-day event challenges 36 teams of golfers from Chicago's landlord community to raise funds for a worthy cause, while competing for trophies and bragging rights.

"This unique event plays upon the natural competition landlords face in the business arena and takes that onto the golf course, for the benefit of a

worthwhile cause," said John Goodman, Executive Vice President/Branch Manager of the Studley Chicago office and a Vice-president of the SGA Board of Directors.

A portion of the 2008 proceeds will be earmarked to support Operation BIG Hug, SGA's new initiative promoting early detection of autism in preschool age children born to young, low-income parents.

The Studley Landlord Golf Challenge has previously raised funds for Jane Addams Hull House Association (2006) and Catalyst Schools (2007), with net proceeds totaling \$120,000 and \$140,000, respectively.

### SGA Youth & Family Services Fiscal Year 2008

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### Retirement

*Sylvia Mann has retired from the SGA Board of Directors after 36 years of dedicated service. Sylvia joined the Board of Scholarship & Guidance Association (as SGA was formerly known) in 1971. Thank you, Sylvia, for your many contributions and your personal commitment to the youth of Chicago!*

### In Memoriam

*Arnold Wolff, former SGA Board Member passed away in March at age 89. Arnie served on SGA's Board of Directors from 1985 to 1996, holding the office of Vice President for most of that period. He later joined our Advisory Board.*

### SGA Youth & Family Services

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### Go Green

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## SGA Mission

*Our mission is to support the emotional and social development of Chicago area adolescents and young adults by providing therapy, prevention and other support services for individuals and families.*

## Art Work: A Sketch of SGA Youth & Family Services' Art Therapy Programs

*Telpochcalli* means “House of Youth” in Nahuatl, an indigenous language of Mexico, but a visitor to Telpochcalli Community Arts School in Chicago’s Lower West Side neighborhood needs no translation as its mural-lined halls brim with the energy of elementary school children. Here, Martha Ponzio, SGA art therapist, works to address the emotional problems of students and their families who face the many challenges of living in a low-income community. She also provides art therapy services at James Shields Elementary School in the nearby Brighton Park community.

“Children don’t talk too much about their issues,” says Martha who received her training in art therapy at the Art Institute of Chicago.

She explains that art offers children a medium for expressing difficult emotions or relaying information about traumatic experiences that they cannot talk about. With this expression comes healing and liberation. Teachers refer to Martha those children who’s success in the classroom is undermined by lack of focus, interest, and motivation—indicators of underlying troubles.

Tragedy brought an entire family to the Bellas Artes art therapy program at Shields school. Martha recalls a mother, son, and daughter who witnessed a little boy in the mother’s care dash into the street and get fatally struck by a truck. Through a year of therapy Martha helped the family work through the emotional fallout from this event. With time, the family’s drawings of the accident gave way to more positive images, like the mother’s drawing of a flower, which she handed to Martha and said, “This is for you.” The mother went on to earn her GED certificate and the daughter graduated first in her eighth-grade class last year, while the boy continues to do well in school too.



A client proudly displays her art work at a program event.

Photo by Susan McMillen

Although the child is identified as the client, Martha also works separately with parent groups (most often mothers) in a holistic approach to the children’s therapy. Parents become engaged in their children’s treatment and develop their own sense of possibilities for improvement through a range of creative activities from painting to jewelry making.

“We use a lot of metaphors in art therapy,” says Martha, alluding to the light-giving quality of the brightly colored outdoor lanterns in her hand—another parents’ group project. Brilliant.

## Avenues Lead to Substance Abuse Prevention

Substance abuse is a major public health problem that puts millions of adolescents at increased risk for alcohol-related and drug-related traffic accidents, risky sexual practices, poor academic performance, delinquency, and developmental problems.

While most teens may feel pressure to experiment with alcohol and drugs, some are at greater risk than others for abusing substances or becoming addicted.

The aim of the **Avenues for Success** program is to identify young teens that are at higher risk for substance abuse and provide “avenues” to help them avoid the use of alcohol and drugs.

This school-based initiative utilizes a questionnaire to determine risk factors among the targeted age group—ninth grade students.

“Once we’ve identified these higher risk teens, the first goal is prevention—helping them avoid starting the use of alcohol and drugs,” said Vince Murphy, Prevention Specialist and one of four SGA staff members who work in the program.



Avenues for Success staff, Louretha Hawkins, Vince Murphy, Kori McMillion, Dionne Gavin

Photo by Susan McMillen

Besides the comprehensive student assessment, the program includes prevention education, group and individual counseling, adventure-based education, and referral and follow-up.

“Through our assessment, we also find that a significant number of freshmen students are already abusing...so our goal in these cases is get them linked to appropriate treatment,” Vince stated.

He said that building trust and rapport with students is the key to helping them make better decisions.

SGA Youth & Family Services operates the Avenues for Success program at four Chicago Public Schools: Kelly High School (Brighton Park), Prologue Learning Center: Charles Hamilton Houston (Chatham), Manley High School (North Lawndale), and Tilden High School (New City).



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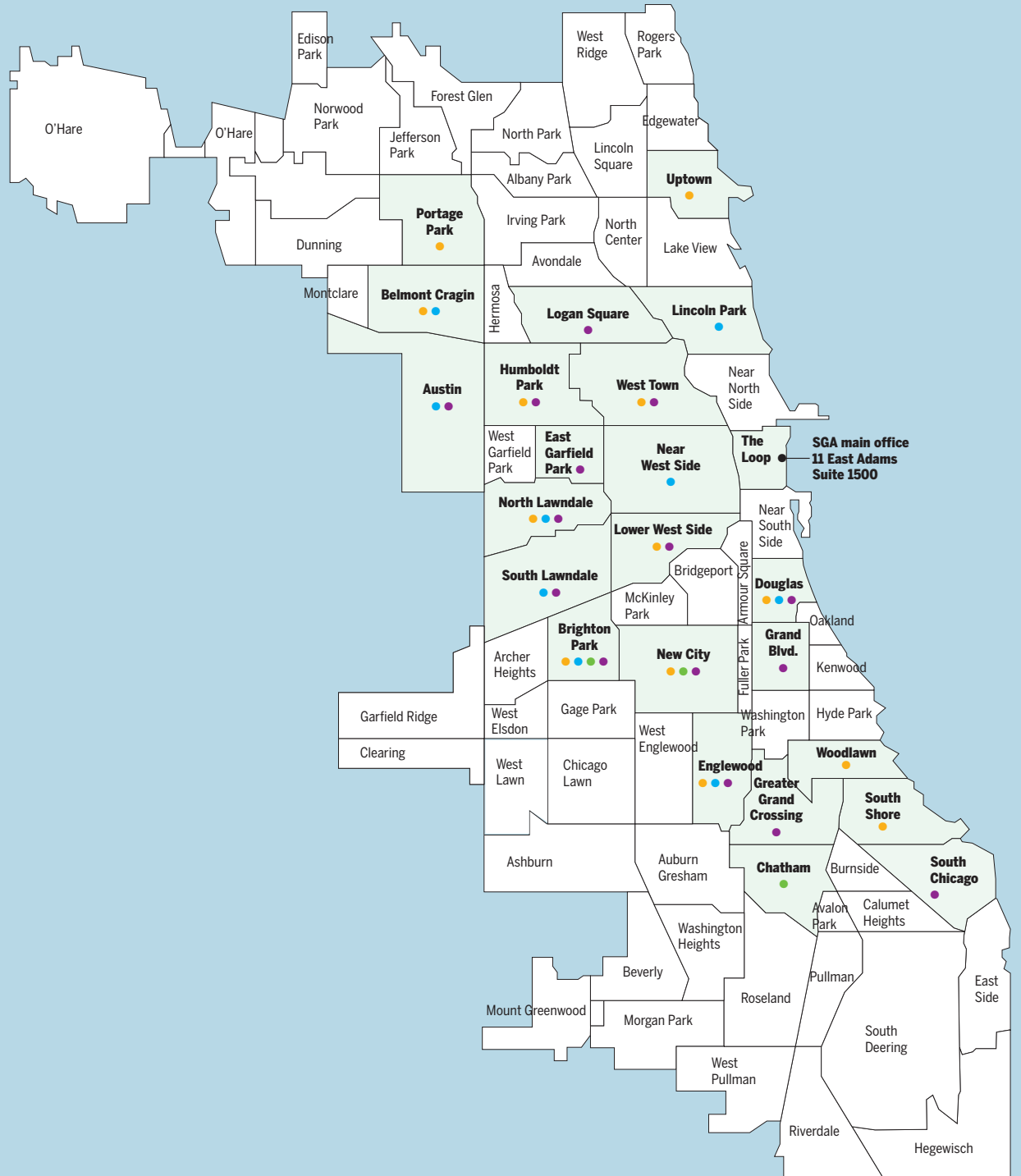
# SGA Site Locations Fiscal Year 2008

## City of Chicago Community Areas

### Site Locations by Service Group

- School-Based Services
- Juvenile Justice Services
- Substance Abuse Prevention Services
- Family Life & Teen Parenting Services

Formerly known as Scholarship and Guidance Association, SGA Youth & Family Services has been dedicated to improving the lives of Chicago youth since its founding in 1911. SGA specializes in mental health, case management and prevention programs to help young people avoid risks and overcome obstacles so they can reach their fullest potential. Our services strengthen families, improve communities and help children grow to become contributing members of society.



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