

 Blossom Inc.

Activity Report 2017

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***Activity Report
January 2017 to December 2017
Fiscal Year 2017***

This report highlights achievements and challenges experienced by Blossom Incorporated Children's Advocacy Centres located on the East Bank Demerara and Essequibo Coast for the year 2017. Blossom Inc. is a registered non-governmental organization (NGO) whose mission is to ⁽¹⁾ empower vulnerable children and families using effective, evidence-based programs and interventions and ⁽²⁾ support the work of the child protection system in Guyana.

Funding for 2017 was provided by the Ministry of Social Protection and UNICEF through the Childcare and Protection Agency and Guyana Goldfields Inc.

Introduction

2017 will be remembered as the year Blossom's long-term vision began to materialize. We made huge strides toward key strategic goals, including expanding access to our Children Advocacy Centres (CACs), leveraging key partnerships, leading collaborative efforts and improving outcomes for children and families. In 2017 we served over 240 children and their families!

Blossom Incorporated has developed from the initial provision of therapeutic intervention for vulnerable children into an innovative NGO that is making a difference in providing hope and recovery to children who have been sexually assaulted and abused. Now, however, is not the time to rest on our laurels; it is a time to be creative and innovative and to explore new ways of working to improve our effectiveness in reducing childhood sexual assault and abuse.

In the past year we have taken some risks to implement innovative practices and services to improve the lives of children and their families. This includes our Region 2 CAC with its multidisciplinary team capable of making team decisions for children and families referred to the centre, our community outreach service and our partnership with the sexual offences unit to use our discreet location to serve all special victims.

In 2017, we completed the following activities:

1. Conducted forensic interviews
2. Provided victim support services
3. Provided evidence-based trauma informed counseling
4. Facilitated group support for parents who were also victims of childhood rape
5. Coordinated multidisciplinary team meetings
6. Conducted child abuse prevention and outreach sessions
7. Advocate for children's rights
8. Facilitated key stakeholder engagement

In the coming years we aim to build on our successes. We believe that our willingness to innovate will be the main sustainable strategy for creating long-term value for the children and families we serve.

In 2018, we will continue the expansion of our CACs with new centres earmarked for Bartica and Linden. Linden will be Guyana's model centre and will provide a "one stop" approach where representatives from child protection, law enforcement, prosecution, mental health and victim advocacy will sit and work under one roof to conduct forensic interviews, make team decisions, provide case management and counsel children who have been sexually assaulted and abused. Our mission is to harness a multidisciplinary approach to investigate and prosecute perpetrators, as well as, provide evidence-based trauma informed counseling to victims.

At Blossom Inc. we have a collection of skills and assets that must continually be updated to find new ways of delivering improved service to children and families who have experienced trauma from abuse and we cannot achieve it without your continued support.

On behalf of our staff and the children and families who access our service, we offer a sincere thank you to our supporters for their continued loyalty and inspiration.

Ayo Dalgety-Dean

Managing Director

Highlights for 2017

Children Advocacy Centres

Forensic Interviews

For the reporting period, ninety-eight (98) Forensic Interviews were conducted with victims of sexual assault from regions 2, 4 and 7. Included in this number is an adult victim who requested the statement be taken via video recording.

After the conduct of each Interview, the complainant's statement was prepared along with the interviewer's statement and these were submitted to the respective police stations to be added to the client's file and submitted for advice on criminal proceeding. The actual interviewing process, per case, varied between twenty (20) minutes to sixty (60) minutes and was video recorded. A Child Protection Agency (CPA) caseworker, a police investigating rank and a parent or guardian observed all interviews in real time. Most of the interviewees were responsive and disclosures were made. However, there were a few instances where no disclosures were made.

To date, charges have been recommended in eleven (11) cases. Several cases that were submitted to the Police Stations are still pending and according to follow up checks, several cases that were sent to the Chambers of the Director of Public Prosecution for advice are pending recommendation.

Victim Support Services

Blossom Inc. provided Victim Support Services to all our clients and their extended family members. Twelve (12) children whose matters were being heard in the Magistrate Court or the High Court were supported during the court process. This service entailed preparing the victim and other family members on the witness list for the trial, providing information on the process, conducting mock trials and having a Victim's Support Advocate (VSA) present during the proceedings. Of the two cases we supported in the Special Sexual Offences Court, one ended in an acquittal and the other defendant was sentenced to a total of 65 years for three counts of rape. In the matter where there was a conviction, Blossom Inc.'s VSA presented an "impact statement" to the court on behalf of the complainant which is allowed

according to the Sexual Offences Act. An “impact statement” helps the judge to understand how the crime affected the victim and gives the victim a forum to express the emotional and psychological trauma experienced because of the crime. The Victim Impact Statement is a significant factor which the judge takes into consideration when deciding on the penalty for an offender.

Specialized Trauma Informed Therapeutic Support (Clinical intervention)

During the period January 2017 - December 2017, sixty-six (66) new clients were referred from the Childcare and Protection Agency to Blossom Inc. Child Advocacy Centres located on the East Bank Demerara and Essequibo Coast for trauma informed therapeutic support. Eleven (11) cases were brought forward from 2016 and these clients continued the therapeutic process. The children ranged between the ages of 4 years to 16 years old and they reside within the demarcated catchment areas for the Centres.

All clients benefited from the evidence-based Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (TF- CBT) sessions. These clients’ attended sessions weekly; some with their parents and some came by themselves. The initial session with each client was conducted as a conjoint parent/child session where they were introduced to the trauma focused therapy. In these sessions, the parents were evaluated using the “Index of Family Relationships Scale: Thinking about Family Relationship” to gain an overall assessment of their perception of their family. The children were asked to write about themselves and their family members. This provided a guide for the therapist to assess the dynamics of the family life, family structure and the environment in which the child is exposed to daily. Alternate checks were made with the parents who did not accompany the child to the sessions for updates on the child’s progress in the home and other social environments.

Each client was screened before therapy commenced and those who graduated were post therapy screened for Child Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD) and either Depression or Self-esteem according to their ages. The scores varied from mild to severe in relation to the CPTSD. There was evidence of depression and cases of low self-esteem in the children. A common occurrence among many of the older children was even though many were found to have mild to severe CPTSD symptoms, their self-esteem was found to be within the normal range. This suggests a population of “functionally depressed” children – i.e. children who experience consistent symptoms of depression for a sustained

period but continue to complete the activities necessary to lead *functional* lives. Along with the effects of sexual abuse, a large majority of our clients were also dealing with multiple traumatic exposures resulting in further emotional and psychological distress, especially feelings of abandonment. Physical or verbal abuse was prevalent in most cases. In those instances, reports were made to the caseworker at the Childcare and Protection Agency. In other cases, clients appeared to be focused on prevailing situations in the home rather than the issue of sexual abuse. As such, counselors dealt with these issues first before providing sexual abuse therapeutic intervention

The younger children or those who have challenges reading or writing benefited from Art Therapy with a component of the TF-CBT. The clients who are gifted in terms of poetry/song writing had their talents incorporated as part of the therapy. Three (3) clients, who were too young to complete the full TF-CBT treatment, have completed therapy using age appropriate elements of the treatment. One client was transferred to Probation. There are clients who have been attending sparsely due to financial constraints, changes in their home situation or examination preparation. There are a few clients who still need to commence therapy; the Counsellor and Caseworker are working towards moving their status from inactive clients to active clients.

Guyana Goldfield Inc., who sponsored eleven (11) children for therapeutic support, visited and met with the children and their parents. The purpose of the visit was to gather feedback from those clients as to how they were helped. At the end of December 2017, there were thirty-seven (37) active cases and fourteen (14) cases were closed.

Specialized Intervention for Adult Victims / Survivors of Sexual Abuse

Based on feedback from counseling sessions with clients, Blossom Inc. discovered that sexual abuse truly is a generational occurrence. Thus, a support group for sexually abused parents of sexually abused children was formed. These were conducted at the centre to help parents deal with their experience of childhood sexual abuse as they care for their child who had been through the same circumstance. Parents participated in nine (9) sessions.

Prevention and Advocacy

Child Abuse Prevention and Outreach Sessions

Blossom Inc. held Sexual Abuse Prevention Sessions in several communities in Regions 2, 4 and 9: Bethany, Capoey, Akawini, Yarrowkabra, St Ignatius, Annai and surrounding villages. Also, the organization met with the Toashos of Region 2. These communities were selected based on the number of cases that were referred for Children Advocacy Centre services and based on information received from community members. We engaged and oriented key stakeholders about the establishment of a One Stop Model, known as a Children Advocacy Centre, for child sexual abuse response. Our sessions focused on child abuse reporting procedures, child protection laws, sexual offences, the rights & responsibilities of adults and the appropriate steps required to perform child rights advocacy work in the community (i.e. to intervene when required and to coordinate with members in reporting incidents and making referrals for medical, legal or psycho-social services). The communities were also engaged on how they can mobilize to ensure their response is effective. Our contact information was shared with community members for future reference. All the outreaches were collaboratively done with the Childcare and Protection Agency and Ministry of Indigenous People's Affairs. While in Regions 2 and 9 the team made courtesy calls on officials from the RDC, Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Education.

Child Protection Week 2017

Blossom Inc. supported the Childcare and Protection Agency's Child Protection Week of activities in Regions 2 and 4. This year's theme was "Partnering with families and communities for positive outcomes for children". The team accompanied and collaborated with the officers during their field activities and conducted child abuse related sessions with children and adults that were in keeping with the theme at Public Health facilities on the East Bank Demerara, Cheddi Jagan International Airport, the New Opportunity Corp and two schools along the East Bank Demerara. These sessions were interactive and informative and at the end of each session, brochures and tokens were distributed.

Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) Meetings

In 2017 four (4) MDT meetings were held with professionals who are involved in the investigation, treatment and management of sexual assault cases. The objective of these meetings was to conduct reviews on the reported cases. Each organization reported on their involvement in cases to date and, where necessary, sought clarity.

Key Stakeholder Engagement

The staff of Blossom Inc. were engaged in several stakeholder's meetings in 2017. Notable was the engagement with members of the judiciary on the length of time sexual offence matters take before they are heard in the court, the trauma of victims and the need for victim support services. Following these engagements, the first Sexual Offence Court in the country and the Caribbean was established.

The organization also participated in monthly Multi-Disciplinary Meetings hosted by the Director of Public Prosecutions. These meetings were attending by stakeholders who are critical to the investigation, management, treatment and prosecution of sexual assault against children.

Additional Stakeholder Support

Families served by Blossom Inc., throughout the year 2017, received several forms of donations from private and public organizations and citizens. Most of the support received were clothing and shoes. These items were sourced from the local Food for the Poor office, friends of the organization, and some private companies. The Childcare and Protection Agency also contributed to this drive through the donation of school supplies for six (6) children. The Region 2 Regional Democratic Council also supported the organization by equipping the Centre with indoor plumbing, constructing a wall for the observation room, cleaning of the Centre's compound and changing of door locks. The organization was able to garner the support of the Core Team from the Ministry of Public Infrastructure who has undertaken the responsibility to upkeep the compound of the Centre monthly.

Reunification Project

Review of Children in Care Project

The Childcare and Protection Agency engaged Blossom Inc. and funded the Reunification Project which sought to review the files of all children who have been living for longer than six months in Children's Homes and Orphanages in Regions 3 & 4. Research shows that children have better outcomes living with their families or in a family setting and hence the aim of this project was to recommend reunification with family, where possible.

The organization reviewed the files for children in eight (8) of the fourteen (14) home in the two regions. Several children were reintegrated with parents, placed in foster care with relatives, recommended for adoption and some were transferred to the Hugo Chavez Centre and the Halfway Home for semi-independent living. The remaining six (6) homes are due for completion in the first quarter of 2018.

Challenges

Below are some challenges encountered by Blossom Inc.'s staff in 2017:

- Parents with a misconception of therapy expressed concern that bringing a child to therapy may not be the best remedy since, in their opinion, the child will be reliving the experience if they talk about it frequently.
- Parents who are still in contact with or in a relationship with the perpetrator are reluctant to bring the child to therapy for fear of the outcome.
- Some parents experience financial difficulties sending their child consistently to counselling.
- The investigation of matters after a forensic interview and preparation of files for advice is still being delayed beyond the stipulated 90 days period.
- Sustained funding is also a major obstacle. While the management team at Blossom was successful in mobilizing resources through the Ministry of Social Protection, the use of a “bare bone” budget is not sufficient to effectively execute the work of the organization. In that regard, sustained funding is needed to employ additional skilled professionals who will be equipped to provide evidence-based specialized services to traumatized children and their non-offending family members. Also, funding is needed to finance travel to remote areas in Region 2 and other locations to conduct child abuse prevention sessions.

Projections for 2018!

In 2018 the organization will continue to provide programmes that focus on prevention, intervention and advocacy to vulnerable children and families.

Prevention

- Community mobilization for effective child abuse response in Wakapoa and Capoey.
- Create greater awareness about the effects of child sexual abuse and the proper channels for reporting abuse through “bottom house” gatherings, the television and print media.
- Facilitate child abuse prevention sessions for parents and teachers at 2 schools on the East Bank.

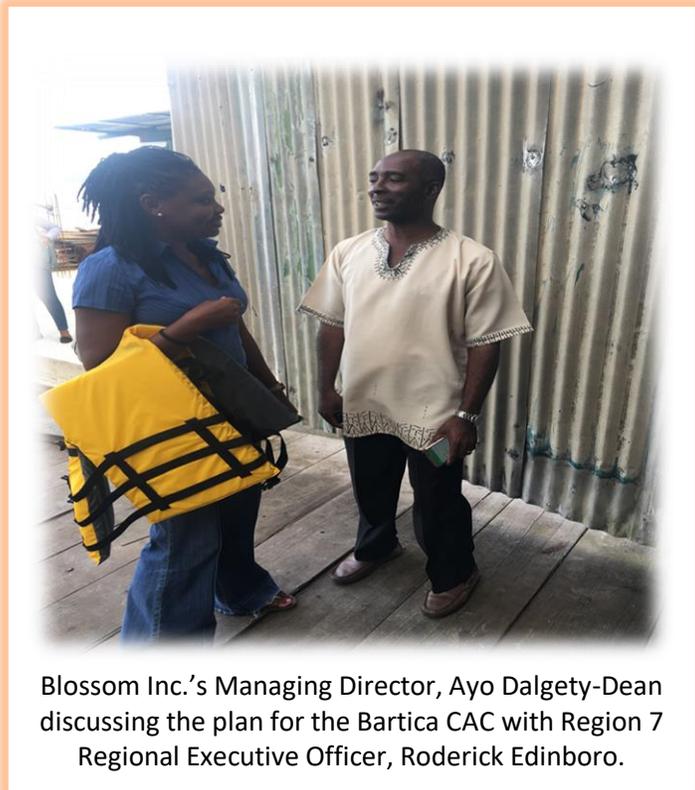
Intervention

- Provide evidence-based counseling to 200 children and families affected by trauma.
- Strengthen our Victim support services and advocacy for child victims of sexual assault.
- Facilitate parenting education training for 80 parents/caregivers.
- Conduct forensic interviews.
- Open CAC in Bartica in first half of the year.
- Open model CAC in Linden in second half of the year.

Advocacy

- Engage the public and private sectors and international organization for support to provide services for vulnerable children and families.

2017 Photo Highlights!



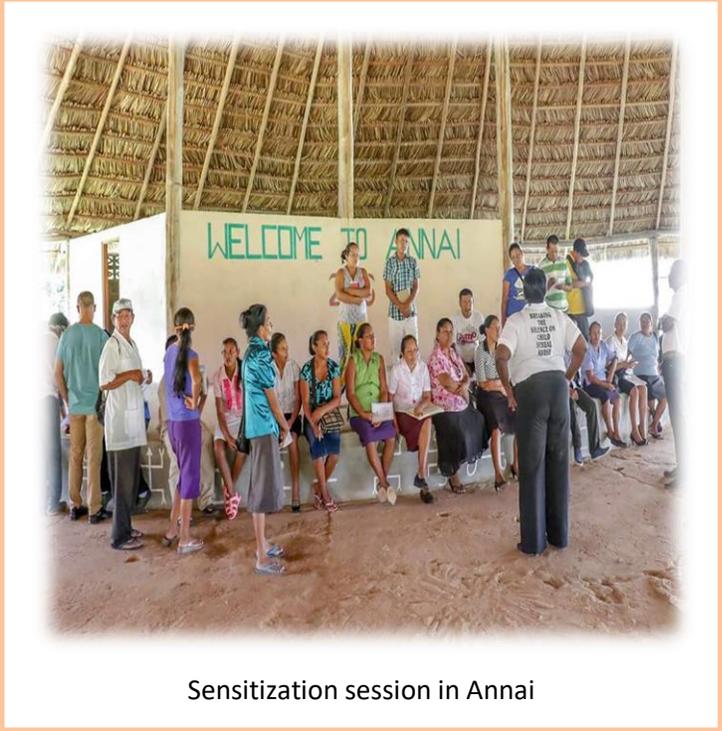
Blossom Inc.'s Managing Director, Ayo Dalgety-Dean discussing the plan for the Bartica CAC with Region 7 Regional Executive Officer, Roderick Edinboro.



Discussing the Sexual Abuse Awareness Session at Lake Top, Capoey.



On route to Bethany for Outreach session



Sensitization session in Annai



Mrs. Dalgety-Dean discussing the establishment of Region 7 CAC with Ms. Edwards, Senior Probation and Child Protection Officer



MDT Team in Bethany



Blossom Inc.'s Forensic Interviewer, Ms. Shaundell Shipley conducting an interview.



MDT Team observing a forensic interview



Blossom Inc.'s staff, Ms Leanna Thompson reviewing files for the reunification project.