



Responding to a call for help: co-ordinated case management in Papakura (A)

“Excuse me, but everyone in this room is talking crap. You don’t know what it’s like being one of us,” interrupted Margaret,¹ a young South Auckland woman. With this, the meeting discussing why three youngsters from her extended family had committed suicide in the last six months, ground to a halt.

For the past hour, doctors, teachers, and people from government departments and the community who had been dealing with Margaret’s family, had been debating where responsibility for the tragedy lay. Now, Margaret had had enough: she simply wanted her family to get whatever help was needed to stop any more of their young people killing themselves.

Danielle Rawhiti, then Manager of the Ministry of Social Development’s Work and Income Service Centre in Papakura, was at the November 2004 meeting. Her agency and most others present had a long-standing involvement with the Johnson whānau, Margaret’s extended family. Out of some 300 family members many were receiving some form of financial assistance. Unemployment was only one of many problems: family violence, truancy, high debt levels, drug and alcohol dependency, poor health and teen pregnancies were also present. Many family members were involved in or associated with gangs: Margaret herself had grown up in a second-generation gang household.

“Clearly, this was a whānau in crisis,” recalled Danielle Rawhiti. “After the meeting, I asked Margaret if she’d come and see me with a couple of family members, to talk. I knew Work

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¹ The names of all family members in this case have been altered

and Income wouldn't be able to fix all their problems, and certainly not on our own. But I felt we needed to do something to help this whānau have a better future, and whatever we had been doing in the past clearly hadn't worked."²

Why did a local office of the government agency that paid benefit entitlements and provided employment assistance offer to tackle multiple social problems of this severity and scale? And how could it make a difference to a family whose problems were so entrenched and complex?

The three suicide deaths in the last six months had devastated Papakura's Johnson whānau, and were potentially a sign of greater tragedy to come.

As a family spokesperson said later: "Our kids were saying 'there's a disease going around Papakura – a disease called suicide'... During the last Tangi [funeral], some of the young ones said to us, 'we need to do something.'"³ They included Margaret, who had been so frustrated by previous meetings with the agencies dealing with the family.

The next day, Margaret responded to an invitation to talk with Danielle Rawhiti, Service Centre Manager at the Papakura Work and Income office.

Margaret brought with her a group of female relatives also desperate to find a way of stopping the suicides. But the discussion with Rawhiti ranged far wider. They talked about the many problems facing the whānau, sometimes over successive generations – parents who were unemployed, children who had dropped out of school or been taken into care, youngsters getting into trouble with the police on a daily basis, poor relationships with government agencies, also gambling, addictions and enormous levels of debt. Many of the young people had no hope for the future. They hated themselves, hated their lives and who they were. They hated being poor, and hated the given path they could see themselves following.⁴

After this meeting, Rawhiti knew that the whānau's problems were too big for one social agency to tackle alone. Yet the family's separate dealings with various agencies were patently not working either. Rawhiti believed the only chance for change lay in a coordinated, multi-agency approach led by Work and Income – all the agencies working cooperatively on a single plan that reflected the whānau's own priorities.

A multi-agency response

She approached the challenge on two fronts. First, she continued to meet personally, often daily, with the family representatives; she wanted to change their mindset about government agencies, and show that they were prepared to listen. They formed a de facto governance group, and drew up a five-year "wish list" of priorities. Top of the list was "no more suicides". Other goals included getting all their young people into education, training or jobs; reducing domestic violence; reducing drug and alcohol dependency; and no more children placed in care.

² Interview with the author, 22 May 2007

³ These comments are from an in-house DVD about the initiative, made in 2006

⁴ Except where stated otherwise, comments by Danielle Rawhiti, Chrissy Denison, David Montgomery and Ann Harlow are from an interview with the author, recorded on 22 May 2007

At the same time, Danielle Rawhiti began talking with other government agencies in Papakura about how they might work together to address the whānau's problems. From the outset, she wanted commitment from the agencies' local managers. "I felt this was all about leadership. If you're willing to roll up your sleeves as a manager and engage directly, it will work." Within a short time, a core group of managers was on board – Chrissy Denison of the Ministry of Education, David Montgomery of New Zealand Police, Ann Harlow of Child, Youth and Family Services (CYF)⁵ and Judith Colebourne of Housing New Zealand.

CYF assigned Ann Harlow to work virtually exclusively for three months with the family, and she became their "on-the-spot" liaison person with the agencies. "For me, the bottom line was that regardless of which agency door the family walked through, they would be pointed in the right direction. It was never about which [agency] was more powerful – it was about getting things done," Harlow said.

While the agency managers shared Danielle Rawhiti's determination to assist the Johnson whānau, the same was not always true of agency staff who had dealt with them over the years. The family had a reputation as uncooperative and intimidating. As a whānau representative later said: "We turned our back on the system a long time ago. It was just there for us to use and abuse."⁶ Some frontline staff resented the fact that, as they perceived it, this family was now to receive "privileged treatment".

Chrissy Denison said it was important to keep in mind that the purpose of this initiative was to improve outcomes for the children: "The child is at the centre," she insisted. Danielle Rawhiti sent a similar message to her staff. "Being a manager at Work and Income, you have the opportunity to support change which improves children's lives; think about re-education; think about change. And you have to recognise that Work and Income's services are able to support changing the future for those children." She also led by example, either dealing directly with the family herself or always being on hand to support her staff ("if clients came in wanting to argue, they'd have to have the discussion with me.")

For David Montgomery, convincing his staff that they should deal differently with this whānau, members of which they were encountering daily, was a challenge. "The Police are there to stop offending. Our role is prosecutorial, not welfare," he explained. Because of the regular offending of some family members – which ranged from vandalism to traffic offences, drug abuse, burglary and more serious crimes – the Police had a zero tolerance attitude towards them. "I had to convince my officers, who were used to arresting them, that this new approach was worth trying because the long-term outcomes would be better."

None of the agencies, including Work and Income as the lead agency, had to seek authority or extra funding to work with the whānau in this intensive way. Agency staff were however supported to use this approach by their senior managers. There was no business plan or special reporting requirements. "This was simply doing our job," said Danielle Rawhiti. "It wasn't a special project or a clip-on – it was core business. It was doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, for the right reason."

⁵ Since 2006 CYF has been part of the Ministry of Social Development

⁶ In-house DVD, 2006

Taking action

The coordinated case management initiative had several components – some quite modest in scope, others more ambitious. A breakfast club was set up where family members could meet at Work and Income, review the day’s job vacancies together and share breakfast (food was donated by local businesses). Work and Income offered an informal “amnesty” enabling family members to sort out their benefit entitlements to make sure they were getting their true and correct benefit entitlements.

Some family members acknowledged that they had previously withheld information in order to claim certain financial assistance. In nearly every case, they found they were better off financially by declaring all of the information and by being honest and upfront about their circumstances. Families were then able to take part in setting up an appropriate repayment strategy.

One initiative for young people was a marae-based⁷ driving programme where they could gain their driving licences. Many were being regularly ticketed by the police for driving without licences, and were accumulating big debts through unpaid fines. David Montgomery convinced his officers to back off while the youngsters worked towards their licences, and in time was delighted to see “their pride in having a piece of paper that said they’d actually achieved something.”

Literally hundreds of driving courses are available in South Auckland. Danielle Rawhiti’s choice of one based at a local marae was deliberate, part of a strategy to give the family opportunities to connect with some of the positive aspects of society. After years living in the city, the whānau had lost any affiliation with their traditional cultural roots.

More than forty family members attended a 12-week personal development mentoring programme, also at the marae. Known as E Tipu e Rea, it had been developed to allow Māori families with high and complex needs to review the past together, confront problems, and move forward while at the same time gaining a better understanding of their culture.

While Danielle Rawhiti initially saw the programme as a chance to hold the family’s attention and enthusiasm over the stressful Christmas period – when more suicides might occur – she later felt it was a turning point that enabled the whānau to start doing things for themselves. To allow parents to take part on their own, Work and Income provided those eligible with funding so that their preschoolers could attend a local early childhood education centre, many for the first time.

Another “circuit-breaker” decision was to introduce the whānau’s young people to the very different environment of a gym. A renowned performer and artist was contracted to run a 6-week programme incorporating dance, music, gym training and healthy eating: it aimed to build the self-esteem and positive attitudes needed to attain work. Sixteen youngsters attended on the first day; ultimately, more than 70 took part. Most had dropped out of school and many were already involved in gangs.

Danielle Rawhiti said an important factor in the programme’s success was a local gang leader “giving it his blessing.” Delighted to discover during a visit to the gym that the young people

⁷ The marae is the traditional meeting place for members of a Māori hapū or iwi (sub-tribe or tribe).

were “eating carrots and declaring they would give up smoking”, she saw this as another new and positive affiliation that she hoped would endure.