

# Navigating a Path to Success

An Interview with Bob Arnold, President and Chief Executive Officer;  
Leslie P. Sexer, LCSW, Chief Program Officer; Dennis Torres, Chief Health Officer;  
Bill Brucker, Chief Advancement Officer; Jim Vivier, Chief Operating Officer, Family Centers



Bob Arnold



Leslie P. Sexer



Dennis Torres



Bill Brucker



Jim Vivier

**EDITORS' NOTES** Bob Arnold, along with a team of dedicated professionals, volunteers, and board of directors, works with numerous community groups, businesses, foundations, and individuals whose philanthropic goals are met through the work of Family Centers. Over the past 40 years, he has facilitated Family Centers' continual growth and orchestrated numerous mergers which strengthened the organization. Arnold is a past chairman of the Connecticut Council of Family Service Agencies, a past president of the Greenwich Kiwanis Club, and has served on a variety of advisory boards and task forces. Additionally, he has been instrumental in numerous successful mergers resulting in a broad-based organization that assists over 23,000 children and adults each year. Arnold holds a master's degree from Columbia University and is a licensed social worker and marriage and family therapist.

Leslie Sexer oversees Family Centers' programs focused on education and human services, many of which utilize a two-generational approach toward closing the opportunity gap for families living in lower Fairfield County. In addition to her program work, Sexer works to foster community partnerships and facilitate initiatives with collective social impact results for low-income Stamford and Greenwich residents. Sexer joined Family Centers in 2006 as the agency's Director of Clinical Outreach Services and holds a master's degree from Hunter College School of Social Work.

Dennis Torres leads Family Centers' medical, dental, and mental health programs and services. Under his oversight, he has helped to create access to critical primary health, dental, and health education services for thousands of Fairfield

County residents. In 2016, Torres led the opening of Family Centers Healthcare – a Federally Qualified Health Center offering medical, dental, and mental health services to vulnerable children and families in Greenwich, Stamford, and Darien. He holds a bachelor's degree from Fredonia College, a JD from Pace University, and a master's degree in social work from Columbia University.

Bill Brucker drives Family Centers' development, marketing, communications, and strategic planning efforts. In addition to growing the agency's overall brand awareness through effective public relations, marketing, social media, and e-media tactics, Brucker was also instrumental in the development of Family Centers' strategic plan. He facilitated a comprehensive review of the agency's overall economic value along with the Harvard Business School – Community Partners. Brucker holds a bachelor's degree in mass communications and a master's degree in organizational leadership from Quinnipiac University.

Jim Vivier started with Family Centers in 1999 as the agency's first Marketing Director. After serving as Vice President of Development and Communications for 12 years, Vivier assumed the role of Chief Advancement Officer in November 2016. He assumed the role of Chief Operating Officer in 2021 and works closely with the Human Resources, Information Technology, and Administrative Services departments to improve employee and agency advancement. Vivier has been a member of the Greenwich Rotary Club since 2001, and was Club President from 2011-12. He is also a Board member of his church, Sacred Heart Parish in Greenwich. He holds a BA degree in psychology from Arizona State University and an MBA from Sacred Heart University.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** The mission of Family Centers ([familycenters.org](http://familycenters.org)) is to empower children, adults, families, and communities to realize their potential. Family Centers achieves this mission by offering a multi-disciplinary approach aimed to help Fairfield County residents obtain the tools needed to establish a strong educational foundation, overcome complex and critical problems, carry on healthy productive lives, and achieve personal improvement. Since its inception in 1891, Family Centers has grown to offer quality health, education, and human service programs that address the ever-changing challenges affecting residents of Stamford, Greenwich, Darien, and New Canaan, Connecticut. Through 28 programs and services, Family Centers serves more than 23,000 Fairfield County residents each year. Family Centers' programs include preschool and early care programs for young children; mental health, bereavement and family counseling services; primary medical and dental services; vocational and self-sufficiency support, English language, and basic literacy education, and much more.

**How do you define Family Centers' mission and will you highlight the services Family Centers provides to the children, families and individuals of lower Fairfield County, Connecticut?**

*Arnold:* The overall mission of Family Centers is all about those we serve. We exist to help families and individuals, especially the ones that are financially challenged, navigate a path to success. Recognizing that it's often multiple obstacles that get in the way of achieving one's goals, we offer a solution-oriented, holistic approach that wraps around families with a



wide range of supportive services, mental health and primary care. Ultimately, we would like to see every child and adult we assist gain the tools they need to reach their full potential. To accomplish this, we help remove barriers to education, employment, healthcare, and so much more. Our multi-disciplinary approach helps to level the playing field for people struggling with poverty and its many effects.

With a team that includes medical and nursing professionals, social workers, educators, community health workers, job trainers, literacy tutors, and a wide variety of specialists, we can gain a clear overview of a client's life and their unique set of challenges. Our professionals establish a deep level of trust with our clients whether someone enters through our health clinics, employment preparation, early education programs or our myriad supportive services. This enables us to connect people to multiple programs that will support them in achieving their goals.

**Since its inception, Family Centers has had a reputation as a leader in education and human services. How do these programs ensure the long-term success of the community's residents?**

*Sexer:* Our professionals that facilitate our education and human service programs help families stabilize and thrive. Everything we do focuses on closing the opportunity and achievement gaps that prevent students and their families from attaining academic success and positive life outcomes. From educating our youngest clients in our Early Care and Education program, to supporting our aging population with home visits, we strive to provide targeted, meaningful interventions that have a positive impact on our clients' lives.

A key component of our service delivery is a wraparound approach that allows our team to partner with clients to problem-solve and get them access to the resources – both internally and within the community – that best suit their needs. Our professionals are trained to



listen, assess, validate, and work collaboratively to create achievable goals that lead to great outcomes. We consider the whole client system during our assessment, whether family members, friends, or community partners that might be helpful in supporting clients on their

journey toward self-sufficiency and life satisfaction. At Family Centers, we understand that the key to a strong community is that its residents are healthy – whether that be emotionally, socially or physically.

**Family Centers has also established itself as a formidable provider of healthcare services. Will you describe the synergy between your existing human service programs and how adding healthcare has benefitted the community you serve?**

*Torres:* For more than 45 years, Family Centers has been a community provider of healthcare services and has experienced organic and strategic growth in response to identified needs. Since 1987, our Stamford CARES program has coordinated medical treatment, prevention, education, and human services for people living with HIV. Through our School Based Health Centers (SBHC), we've provided medical, mental health and dental services to thousands of students attending Stamford Public Schools who otherwise couldn't access them. In response to the growing mental health crisis, additional mental health professionals were added to the SBHC team in recent years.

Seeing a real need for primary and oral healthcare, especially among income constrained populations, we opened a federally qualified health center (FQHC) in 2017 that is



*Family Centers offers support for family members from the youngest through adults*



embedded within Greenwich Public Housing. Since then, the FQHC has grown to include our mental health/psychiatric sites and now our SBHC's, with a combined total of 12 distinct sites in Stamford and Greenwich.

Having a "no-wrong-door" policy, clients and patients who seek services from any Family Centers location are assessed for general and specific individual and family needs. These needs assessments are the basis for both internal and external referrals. Internally, we have access to many programs that can directly address social determinants of health including housing, income/employment, literacy, parenting, school readiness, grief and loss, early childhood education, two-generation programming (parent/child), outreach and in-home supports to seniors, and assistance to victims of crime in Connecticut. All these programs work to wrap around clients in supportive and productive ways to overcome obstacles and help them achieve their goals.

### **What have been the keys to Family Centers' growth?**

*Brucker:* Over the past few decades, Family Centers has been on a steady trajectory of organic growth that is largely dictated by the evolving needs of the communities we serve. Whether considering a merger, program expansion, or adding a new service to our continuum of care, the deciding factor is always centered around how the client experience can be improved. For example, when we opened our FQHC in 2017, it was done with the intent to both expand access to important healthcare services and create synergies between the education and human service support Family Centers has always been known for. As a result, we created a holistic approach to care that treats the whole client and provides direct access to a myriad of services all under one roof.

A key factor to Family Centers' growth is our program leadership's creative and nimble approach to service delivery. We're constantly monitoring client and community trends, which have led to new initiatives aimed to improve job readiness and self-sufficiency, close academic gaps, and increase access to healthcare. Collaboration is also woven into the DNA at Family Centers. As multi-faceted as we are, we understand that no one organization can address complex societal issues on its own. By engaging in community collaborations and forming strategic partnerships with other like-minded providers, we've been able to further bolster our own reach while creating a coordinated, community-wide response to our area's most pressing challenges.

### **How important are metrics to measure the impact of Family Centers' programs and efforts?**

*Vivier:* Every student, client, and patient who walks through our doors does so with the intention of eventually leaving our organization better for the experience. By evaluating the outcomes of those who turn to us for help, we can ensure that our customers achieve measurable progress toward their goals, identify opportunities for improvement within our service

delivery network, and optimize the broad range of services we offer to the community.

At the beginning of each school year, baseline data is collected on our preschoolers' cognitive, social/emotional, physical, and language capacity so that we can measure educational improvement throughout the year. Similarly, clients in our vocational programs are tracked as they secure jobs, increase their level of employment, or develop skills to improve their employability. Screening tools even enable us to follow our healthcare patients as they address immediate needs and learn skills to better manage their overall well-being. The metrics we gather not only validate our efforts, but also offer insight into the value we bring to the community.

For each preschooler who leaves our program better equipped to succeed in kindergarten, there is less of a drain on public school resources. For each vocational client who secures a job, the dependence on public assistance drops and individual income increases. And for each healthcare patient who takes control of their health, the risk of absenteeism from work or even hospitalization decreases. Ultimately, our work creates true economic value to the community, which tells our funders that an investment in Family Centers yields great returns.

### **Will you shine a light on the talent and expertise of Family Centers' executive team?**

*Arnold:* Leadership at Family Centers is key to organizational success. From our executive team, which includes our highly-skilled chiefs on down, we practice a collaborative leadership model that is built on mutual respect and values the input of everyone. The entire management team weighs in on decisions that go beyond their area of direct oversight. Having professionals from different disciplines participate in expanded decision-making enhances creativity, broadens perspectives, and results in more comprehensive and user-friendly outcomes. Encouraging managers to think about how their area of operation fits into the whole expands their views and competencies.

The collaborative leadership process creates a vibrant pipeline of rising leaders. To recognize the importance of leadership development, we created a special recognition – the Janet Hennessey Dilenschneider Excellence in Leadership Award. The award provides an annual opportunity to come together and affirm our organizational commitment to foster and grow leaders while recognizing outstanding accomplishments in leadership. It's a clear example of practicing what we preach.

### **How valuable has it been for Family Centers to have such an engaged and dedicated board of directors?**

*Brucker:* We are fortunate to have a governing body that not only shares in the values of the organization, but also stands alongside our professional team to provide the support they need to meet the needs of those we serve. In addition to ensuring the agency is mission-driven, outcome-focused, and fiscally



*A dental professional at a Family Centers facility*

sound, our Board is always willing to roll up its sleeves to provide programmatic guidance, run our annual fundraisers, and act as ambassadors for the organization among their social and professional circles. You can also routinely find our Board members volunteering in our programs to gain a deeper appreciation of our staff and the clients they serve.

Our Board has always been strategically minded and, in recent years, took on a lead role in furthering our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) work. Family Centers has always been an organization that believes that opportunity should be attainable to all – regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic background. Together with our executive team and staff-led Diversity, Racial Equity and Inclusion (DREI) Committee, the Board played a pivotal role in creating Family Centers' first strategic goal focused on DEI advancement.

### **You have served as CEO of Family Centers for more than 45 years and have led an organization that has made a major impact on countless lives. What do you consider to be the organization's greatest accomplishments during your tenure?**

*Arnold:* I believe the greatest accomplishments during my tenure are tied directly to our client-centered focus. The constantly evolving range of services we offer is determined by the needs of the people we exist to serve. This involves a deep understanding of the challenges our clients face in their everyday lives. Creating solutions that help them to overcome challenges while anticipating future needs has shaped our organization. It has led us through decades of organic growth accompanied by seven mergers and acquisitions. These activities have left us with a more efficient delivery system to provide our clients with the services they need to succeed. ●