THE ART OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

Case Studies from the *Family Therapy Networker*

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CASE STUDY

HUMANIZING THE IMPOSSIBLE CASE

ENGAGING THE POWER OF A FAMILY-LARGER SYSTEMS INTERVENTION

Jay Lappin and John VanDeusen

Mr. and Mrs. Peters, who were in their seventies, lived in a crowded, run-down row house along with their 12 sons and daughters and 21 grandchildren and great-grandchildren. To the dozen frustrated public agencies who had become involved with their case, the Peterses were simply and pessimistically known as "The Family."

The Peters's house was condemned two years ago by the city's fire, health, and building departments, but every time their case came to court, judges took pity on the elderly Peterses and either granted a delay or suspended the fine. The state office of Child Protective Services (CPS) also had investigated two of their daughters for child neglect, but no action had been taken. During a single month in the summer of 1992, police were called more than 50 times to investigate reports of assaults, gambling, drug dealing, noisy crowds, and a child in a wheelchair wandering the streets outside their house at 1 A.M. A drug raid netted 37 vials of crack and some heroin. Although police suspected one of the grandsons was the dealer, there were simply too many people living in the house to pin the charges on anyone, and no arrests were made.

At the Peters's house there were no boundaries. Police found 8 mattresses on the bedroom floors—the only sleeping accommodations for the 35 residents of the house. The furnace did not work; there were no smoke detectors; the refrigerator was turned off and filled with flies. Water taps were broken, and leaks dripped from one floor to the next, pooling in the basement. Human feces covered parts of the floor.

Although the Peters family did not have the funds necessary to make any repairs, they refused to leave their home and avoided all contact with city agencies. It was the sort of situation that often ends either in quiet tragedy or public disaster—police officers evicting crying children

and frail, elderly people in front of angry neighbors, while the local news media look on.

In July 1992, Sergeant Jim Nolan, a member of the city police department's community policing division, instituted a different approach to the Peters's case. Nolan, who has a master's degree in social psychology, but little experience with family therapy, decided to take a network approach to the case. Network interventions that bring together an extended family and the system of helpers connected with it seem to many clinicians like a quaint throwback to the 1960s. That's too bad, because larger-systems interventions can be efficient, effective, and inspiring, especially with cases that would otherwise be considered hopeless. Nolan made sure that the heads of several departments were involved, creating an unprecedented level of interagency cooperation and administrative clout.

The interagency task force soon discovered that they had their work cut out for them: Different agencies had conflicting information about the family, and there were huge gaps in their collective knowledge. Their discussions tended to reinforce stereotypes of the Peterses as a poor, multiproblem, African American family. The quality of follow-through on recommendations made in the interagency meetings was difficult to assess: Some agencies were felt to be dropping the ball, while others were judged as being too tough on the family. It appeared that their efforts to join forces in dealing with the Peterses was only creating greater difficulty.

As the task force participants struggled with these issues, Sgt. Nolan met a member of our consultation team at the city's police department and told him about his "crazy case." The team member asked Nolan to draw an ecomap to help clarify who was involved with the family. The ecomap is a basic graphic tool developed by family therapist Ann Hartman to aid social workers in the task of identifying the quality of a prospective adoptive family's social network. Just as a blueprint serves to illustrate the concept of a house, ecomapping reveals specific links between family members and persons and organizations in the larger environment. To appreciate the value of this method, just imagine trying to build a house solely from a written description!

Nolan's ecomap of the Peters family (Figure 4.1) indicated extensive contact with public sector agencies and few ties to other resources

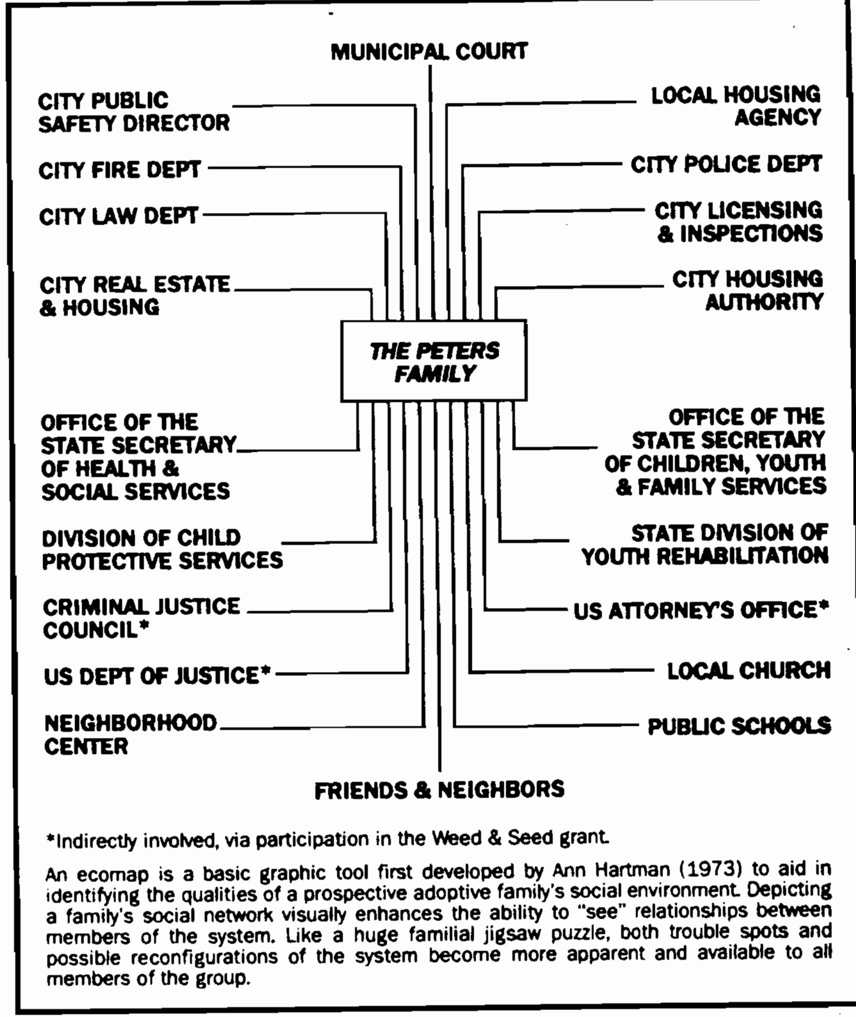

Figure 4.1 The Ecomap.

(friends, neighbors, employers, etc.). In reviewing the ecomap, task force members for the first time began to develop a shared picture of the family's complex involvement with multiple helping agencies.

By identifying the full array of social forces acting upon the family, the ecomapping exercise was a giant step toward mastering the complexities

of the Peters's case. But while the map provided us with a membership list for this social system, it did not reveal how the system actually performed, or how and where to effect useful changes. To get this missing piece of the puzzle, we advised Sgt. Nolan to throw a party and invite the Peters family to meet directly with the task force. One of the consultation team members volunteered to act as a facilitator for the meeting, in exchange for allowing our team and trainees to observe the process.

Sgt. Nolan was intrigued. Nothing like this had been tried before. He went to the Peters's house—out of uniform—and met several times with one of the sons, trying to get the family to agree to the meeting. At first, the family was dubious, but they finally consented.

Meanwhile, the task force finally brought a coordinated hammer down on the family, forcing a crisis. The fire marshal and building inspectors issued new notices requiring the family to vacate, while CPS workers informed the family that unless living conditions were changed dramatically, all of the children would be removed from the home. The workers then started helping the family make plans to place the children. Two of the Peters's daughters, each with seven children, were bumped to the top of the public housing waiting list, and two vacant apartments were made available.

The Peters family responded preemptively: Within 24 hours they had placed all 21 children with family and friends. Determined that the state would not take their children, they had, in effect, matched the state's power. The stage was now set for a crucial network meeting, to be held at a local community center.

The meeting was held in October 1992. Even before the Peterses arrived, there were more than 40 people present, including representatives from 10 agencies and the police department, and a dozen members of our own training group.

The task force members had agreed to hold this meeting only if we all met first, without the family present. Sgt. Nolan had introduced one of our team members, John VanDeusen, as the meeting's facilitator, and we began to discuss the purpose and agenda for the meeting. VanDeusen had hoped to arrive at some level of consensus before the family arrived, but the newness of the network approach, the size of the group, and the uncertainty about outcomes created sufficient role ambiguity and anxiety to keep some people firmly entrenched in their most official roles.

While one department head argued strenuously that the Peters's situation was intolerable and must be changed, another official came to the family's defense. Still another worried that the family would feel ganged up on in such a large meeting. VanDeusen challenged this last point, reminding us that only the family could judge its own comfort level, and he would ask them. This kind of polarization was unanticipated by us even though it frequently occurs in the early stages of a network meeting.

The family arrived in the hallway, and the bickering stopped. Like a classroom of kids suddenly on their best behavior when the teacher steps into the room, the members of the task force put their differences aside and adopted an uneasy wait-and-see attitude. Then, in walked six African American women, led by Leslie, the oldest daughter and matriarch-elect, a teacher who lived in another part of the city. As she and her sisters entered the room, the tension gave way to cautious hellos and smiles. Everyone spoke softly as the group attempted to come to terms with itself and the pain reflected in the family members' eyes. Pride, shame, sadness, hope, and anger all seemed to coexist—waiting to see which would win out.

VanDeusen greeted the family by asking if they were comfortable with the seating arrangements. As Leslie shook her head, "No," he asked her what rearrangement they'd like to make. "In one big circle," said Leslie. "It's more hopeful and it's friendlier." The agency representatives moved their chairs and the stage was set for the family to tell its own story; a story that had long been recorded in case files, but now would be given human voice and meaning.

Leslie, clutching reams of "official" papers, said the women were here to represent their parents. In order to set a positive, collaborative tone and deter negative finger pointing, VanDeusen asked which agencies had been most helpful. Leslie and her sisters named CPS and Sgt. Nolan. "I was skeptical at first because I've never seen the police reach out to anyone like Sgt. Nolan has to us," Leslie said. She went on to say that one of the biggest problems was getting appropriate care for her parents, who were both quite ill. Mr. Peters had suffered a stroke a few years earlier and now had difficulty speaking.

"We tried to get my parents into a high-rise apartment, but at this stage of their lives, they don't want it. That house is all they have. If they had to move now it would just kill them." She began to cry. "I visit

my mother and see her sitting around the house, wringing her hands because she's got so much on her mind—and that's not my mom," she said. "My mom was always so strong for us, she was a pillar."

Than another sister, who lived in the house with her seven children, spoke tearfully. "I just want to say the reason why the house was really overcrowded. My father was adopted when he was very little and he always had this thing that he would always have a home for his kids—no matter how many of them—and his grandkids and that if we were ever in need, there was always a home for us. And I guess . . ." Pausing, she looked down and then to her sisters, ". . . that we took advantage of it, you know what I mean? We could have done better. We could have gone out there and got homes. I guess it just backfired on us." For the skeptics in the room, that moment changed everything. The Peterses shifted from being "the problem" to being real people in need, a family whose love and loyalty had created bonds they could not break.

One of the most pressing problems was that, even though apartments had been found for the two daughters, they had no kitchenware or furniture. All of the task force members reassured the family that they were there to help. To make this pledge real, VanDeusen circulated a sign-up sheet. Voluntary offers of furniture, clothes, kitchenware, and time filled the empty page. By the time the paper got back to the family, it was clear to them that people were there to help, professionally and personally.

Just as seeing the family made them real for the task force, seeing the members of the task force go beyond their official roles made the city's desire to help real for the Peterses. The meeting ended with a plan for the children to remain with family and friends until their mothers could move into the public housing apartments that had been found for them. Other agencies promised to do everything possible to find funds to repair the family home. For their part, the family agreed to vacate the house for repairs as soon as it could be safely boarded up. After the meeting, several task force members accompanied the family on a tour of the vacant apartment that one of the daughters would be moving into. Our team gave a videotape of the meeting and this tour to the daughters, to take home to their parents and the rest of the family. This videotape and the experience of those who had attended the meeting

were enough to finally convince the elder Peterses to move in temporarily with their daughter, Leslie. Their house was then boarded up while the city agencies applied for funds to renovate it.

One month later, the task force met again with the Peterses at a neighborhood church suggested by the family. This time, without mentioning names, some family members alluded to the fact that others had drug problems. At a third, smaller meeting four weeks later, the daughter with the drug problem was named and arrangements were made for her to enter a drug treatment program—a sister agreed to accompany her to ensure she would get there. Connections were made between CPS and mental-health agencies for counseling with various family groups, all coordinated with the schools. In all, five meetings were held with the family over a five-month period. During this time, calls to the police declined from 50 in June to 0 in December.

By the next spring, the Peters family had received a $50,000 grant to repair their home. A furnace was donated, and plans were begun to return to the house. The daughter who entered the drug treatment remained on methadone maintenance. Two other daughters and their children were living in public housing apartments, one successfully, and the other precariously close to being evicted for overcrowding (some of "the problem" at the Peters's old house had been transferred to the new apartment). A fourth daughter continued to work and her children are doing well in school. A fifth—one of the most capable—died unexpectedly of a brain aneurism, and one of her children died of pneumonia. Her other children went to live with an aunt. CPS soon closed its several cases involving the family. For the first time in generations the Peters family was on its way to self-sufficiency.

Large public institutions set up systems of uniform rules and procedures in order to keep from sinking into the very chaos they are supposed to remedy. But to the families knit together through emotional ties of love and need, the narrow role definitions; rigid chains of command; and the floating, interchangeable faces of the bureaucracy's personnel too often seem inhuman. Furthermore, large, established organizations seem to be subject to the same laws of inertia as ancient planets; the weight of internal politics, hidden agendas, and implicit social prejudices keep them moving in the same orbit forever unless shaken out of it by a very strong, opposing force.

Paradoxically, however, both clients and agency personnel share certain similarities. Families like the Peterses are stuck in very much the same kind of inertia as big, public institutions; they, too, are unable, somehow, to transcend their own self-perpetuating system of implicit rules, roles, lifelong attitudes and habits. Furthermore, both systems—family and institution—are equally determined to survive and recognize, however grudgingly, that they are necessary to each other. Needless to say, each system is often deeply ambivalent about the other, engaged in a kind of wrestling match alternating between anxious collaboration and mutual resentment.

And yet, the force that can knock each system *out* of its inertia also exists *within* each system. However impersonal and alien each side appears to the other as an abstraction—"those people," "them," "the system"—however different the languages spoken by each culture, individually, the members of each system bring whatever knowledge, understanding, and crude working tools he or she can muster to what everybody knows will be a difficult encounter. Banal as it sounds, what is required to interrupt the mutual inertia is not a cataclysm, but a strategic and well-directed nudge that awakens the capacity for empathy and goodwill in those involved.

Leslie's demand that the task force and the family sit in one big circle was symbolically right on target. In a circle, there is no obvious authority, no stratified rows to hide behind, no clear-cut separation between public organization and private family, no beginning or ending. Everybody in a circle looks out into the faces of everybody else and discovers that they are not really so different from themselves after all—mutual recognition, appreciation, trust, and optimism become possible. At that point, the system is transcended and a human community emerges.

Although the networking meetings with the Peterses got off to a powerful start in the fall, we did not realize how thoroughly progress would be set back by elections in November. A new mayor entered office, staffs were reshuffled and, by January, nearly all of the members of the original task force had been replaced by people not present at the network meetings. While the original participants had gotten to know the Peterses, and had been deeply touched by their plight and attached to them as human beings, the newcomers did not know them at all. They were yet another anonymous, difficult, time-consuming case; an

individual family had once again become part of an uncounted number of "them." Inertia once more set in.

Communities can regenerate, of course, and the strong, working coalition between the Peterses and the task force can be reestablished. But it will take time. Organizational development practitioners find that larger systems take longer to transform than do most families—two to four years on average. Faces and roles change continually, and there is no inherent appeal to ties of love or blood. As before, it will take the consolidated and determined efforts of individuals from within the separate systems to make it work. And, as before, a real conversation has to be initiated, a uniquely human talent for personal encounter, not successfully undertaken by either machines or organizations—or even people en masse. Systems don't talk to systems—only people talk to one another.

CASE COMMENTARY 1

BY EVAN IMBER-BLACK

This case is a testimony to the power of a family-larger systems intervention in a seemingly intractable situation. What the authors describe as a network meeting enabled *news of a difference* to be experienced, both by the Peters family and by all of the agencies working with it. Prior to the meeting, the family and the larger systems were locked in an unending struggle. The Peters family had no reason to believe that anything good would result from involvement with public agencies, since they had never experienced any follow-through, even from social control systems. In fact, as is typical in such cases, a set of triangles involving the various helping agencies and the family served to block any progress. Given the enormous inertia in the macrosystem, how can we understand what happened here that resulted, initially, in so much positive change?

The first step was Sgt. Nolan's decision to begin organizing the larger systems. By intervening at the level of heads of departments, he was able to gather sufficient clout within each system to make the network meeting happen. Clearly, *where* one intervenes in larger systems is crucial to producing the necessary leverage change requires.

Creating the ecomap functioned to overcome the rigid boundaries between the various agencies, enabling them to begin to view themselves in a new way, as connected members of a macrosystem that included the family. Frequently, this shift in focus from "the family" to "we're all in this together" is a critical step that facilitates all that follows.

A number of decisions contributed to the success of the network meeting. It was crucial to honor the various helpers' requests to meet together first without the family. In my experience, helpers often feel quite vulnerable to criticism and judgment, and a preliminary meeting can reassure them that the facilitator will show them respect. The gathering of the helpers also gives the facilitator important clues regarding interactional patterns and core beliefs that may be attended to during the family-larger system meeting.

Honoring the family's request to sit in a circle served to temporarily break down the hierarchical divisions between family and helpers. The facilitator showed that he would be responsive to requests from the helpers and the family, setting the stage for the birth of trust and mutuality. My own hunch is that had the family's request to sit in a circle been disallowed, the meeting would have quickly disintegrated with no real dialogue or movement toward change. Beginning a meeting of this sort with all participants sitting in a circle is a metaphorical communication that there is now a functioning macrosystem (or at least a willingness to struggle toward one).

Instead of succumbing to the typical pitfall of highlighting differences, the network meeting made maximum use of the similarities between the family and the helpers. Perhaps as a result, two critical departures from business-as-usual occurred: The helpers were able to fully listen to the family's story, and the family was able to experience the helpers as effective allies.

Reading and reflecting on this case, I was struck by the many issues that I struggle with daily in my own work in the Bronx. The change process seemed to get underway because one person, Sgt. Nolan, was determined to try something different. We need to know more about what made this possible, both in the personal qualities of Sgt. Nolan and in his own working system. On a concrete level, how did he get the family to agree to come to the network meeting? The authors seem to imply that the threat to remove the children was critical, but given the larger systems' lack of follow-through, this family had no reason to believe anything its representatives said. We are not told how the helpers in this case got beyond the various constraints inherent in all larger systems. How, for instance, were they able to obtain new housing, house repairs, and a $50,000 grant for the family? What exactly made possible the follow-through after the meeting?

While, as a reader, I thought something magical had occurred, as one who works at the family-larger system interface, I know it wasn't magic and wanted more reflections from the authors regarding what they think happened *after* the network meetings. We are told the race of the family, but no information is given about the racial makeup of the helpers' group. I was left wondering about the impact of race, racial difference, and racism on both the earlier situation and the change in the macrosystem.

Finally, the end of this case, with the new elections, the new workers, the starting all over, left me wondering, yet again, about change at the macrosystems level. When I first began thinking and writing about families and larger systems in the late 1970s, I worried that the family therapy field might invent methods that would work on a case-by-case basis, thereby obscuring the need for real change at higher organizational levels in larger systems. While effective family-larger systems interventions may spring one family at a time, they do not seem to do much to change public agencies and helping systems, which are, of course, embedded in our wider sociopolitical system. While it's perhaps grandiose to imagine that the family therapy field can do anything to create significant change at the larger systems level, this case is a poignant reminder that we can and should keep working on it.

CASE COMMENTARY 2

BY LEONARD SHARBER

Having provided services to families on Chicago's Westside for the past 18 years, I am quite familiar with the paralyzing feeling of sorting through the myriad "helpers," pseudohelpers, friends, families,

and bystanders typically involved in cases like this. My experience has taught me that whenever you think you have a fairly inclusive genogram or ecomap, that is your cue to look for another missing piece.

It was crucial that Sgt. Nolan had the time and support to pursue network therapy. This kind of networking is not easy, and it is very time consuming; however, it is worth the effort. Anyone who decides to take this kind of approach must be sure to have the time to carry it through. In addition, the authors write that, at first, the interagency task force "tended to reinforce stereotypes." Clearly, the success of this kind of intervention depends on avoiding old thinking and developing a new way for seeing the family.

Initially, the lack of an experienced supervisor appears to have led the team to spin its wheels longer than necessary. I wonder how long they struggled based on the conflicting and incomplete information they had before the first intervention the consultation team suggested—an ecomap. I've always found graphic descriptions helpful, especially with complex cases like this. The other benefit of an ecomap is that it tends to make all the players feel they are on the same team, reducing the feeling that some agencies are irresponsibly dropping the ball.

Even though this is where interventions like this live or die, the write-up contains no information about what, exactly, Sgt. Nolan did to get the Peters family to agree to attend the network session. Omitting a discussion of what it took to get the family to the meeting certainly heightened the drama of the daughters' entrance in the case description, but it leaves the readers without some key information.

The writers imply that the coordinated hammer of seeking placement for the children in the Peters household was an intentional intervention. But generating that kind of crisis might have backfired, making the family even more inaccessible and harder to help. Had I been involved with the team, I would have been concerned about balancing the messages to the family, combining the show of force with an equally strong message of "we want you to come to this meeting because you're important."

This case has much to tell us about the untold strengths in seemingly dysfunctional and helpless families. Who would have believed

that the Peters family could place 21 kids in alternative homes in less than 24 hours? As I keep trying to tell those who downplay therapeutic interventions and insist that what the poor need most is concrete services, we must not discount the power of family rules and scripts. Once it was revealed that Mr. Peters had vowed never to leave one of his progeny at the mercy of the child welfare system, the task force was able to see this case in a different light. It then became possible for it to ally with the Peters family and its goals.

Finally, wouldn't it be great if we could develop helping communities of professionals committed to the poor for the long haul, and not be replacing members every few months? This case reminds us of what can be accomplished when we learn to walk arm in arm, like the Peters's daughters, ready to face and support each other no matter what.

AUTHORS' RESPONSE

BY JAY LAPPIN & JOHN VANDEUSEN

Len Sharber and Evan Imber-Black, both veterans of larger-systems struggles, get right to the heart of the matter: What made this intervention work? Magic? Sgt. Nolan? And what about the risks of putting pressure on the Peters family by using the threat of housing summonses and the removal of their children? All these questions illuminate the central themes in the case: trust, negotiating bureaucracy, and the use of power.

The best way to describe what made the Peters family agree to attend the network meeting is to tell a little more of the story of this case.

At the time the Peters case came to a head, Sgt. Nolan was in charge of a new community policing unit. His boss at the time, the city's director of Public Safety, Karen Johnson, oversaw the development of an interagency task force as a part of a grant from "Weed and Seed," a Reagan-era program designed to crack down on the drug trade in inner-city neighborhoods by combining beefed-up law enforcement and community aid. During the 1980s, the lion's share of the grant monies had gone toward "weeding" (i.e., vice-squad

activities). Johnson and Nolan were well aware that while a get-tough approach appealed to a frightened electorate wanting quick solutions to the problems of drugs, it was ultimately ineffective. They believed that with the right kinds of support, the community could do much to police itself. Other task force officials were also increasingly aware of the failure of the weeding strategy and were now open to trying something different.

The first step in making the intervention with the Peterses possible was Johnson's decision to give Nolan the time needed to build trust with the family and coordinate the task force's involvement. Early on, Nolan learned that one of the task force members knew the oldest son in the Peters family. That member was able to convince the son to attend a meeting with Nolan, and soon a kind of shuttle diplomacy evolved, with the son serving as a go-between, linking the family and Sgt. Nolan. Eventually, however, the case stalemated as it became apparent that the oldest son did not possess the necessary leverage with other family members to get them to take any action. Seeing this, the task force members, who had begun by giving the new approach the benefit of the doubt, grew increasingly impatient.

Nolan described the stalemated case to a family therapist friend, John VanDeusen, who immediately suggested that Nolan might get better results by contacting the other family members directly. Nolan's subsequent home visits gave the family their first sustained contact with any representative of the city bureaucracy, opening up the possibility of true dialogue and a mutual search for solutions.

As for the hammer, which had already been implemented by task force members prior to our input, we agree that it could have backfired. But we had to respect it as a part of the existing situation we were entering. The hammer was based on the familiar good cop-bad cop strategy. The message was that, if the family attended the meeting, the police would intercede with the city agencies that had issued all the summonses against the senior Mrs. Peters. But things got out of control when CPS jumped ahead of the other agencies, demanding that the Peters kids immediately be removed from the home. At this point, two CPS workers whose obvious concern for the Peters children impressed the family, successfully helped them to place all of the children. The family's demonstration that it could

mobilize around a genuine crisis was the first sign of hope and family strength.

The willingness of both professional helpers and family members to take personal risks eventually made the difference in this case. In effect, what developed was a chain of trust starting with Karen Johnson's trust of Sgt. Nolan and running through his relationship with the Peters's eldest son and eventually in the connection he developed with the entire Peters family that inspired hope and positive action.

We agree with the commentators about the need for family therapists to move beyond only thinking of one family at a time. In this case, we made sure to include our own trainees as participants in the first two task force meetings as our way of seeding the notions of embracing diversity, collaboration, and searching for strengths as the core values in this kind of work.

It may be hard for family therapists to appreciate how radical the idea of talking to family members was for the police. Commenting on the task force's willingness to try a new approach, Nolan laughed, saying, "We felt like we were doing God's work." But, clearly, missionary zeal by itself is not enough and cases like this are important because they show us what is possible when we take our ideas and our expertise out of our offices and into arenas where new approaches are desperately needed. ■

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Based on this case, what do you think were the strengths and weaknesses of a network approach to systems change?
2. How was the ecomap used in this case, and for what other kinds of cases might it be useful?
3. In your opinion, was it wrong of the team to use the threat of placing the children outside the home as leverage to get family members to come to the meeting? What might have been some alternatives?