



YEAR TWO REPORT



CORA

COMMUNITY OVERCOMING
RELATIONSHIP ABUSE

Stanford | John W. Gardner Center for
Youth and Their Communities



Introduction

San Mateo County experiences roughly 2,000 domestic violence-related calls to law enforcement annually.ⁱ While a variety of resources exist to support adult victims of domestic violence, children who have witnessed this violence often do not receive or have access to comparable support (Reif et al., 2020). Notably, these children are at a higher risk of falling into similar patterns of violence in their future, either as victims or perpetrators (United States Department of Justice, 2020). San Mateo County aims to address this vulnerability through Shaping Positive And Resilient Kids (SPARK). The expectation is that through SPARK, every family that has police contact related to domestic violenceⁱⁱ is identified, the adult survivors and their child(ren) are offered and—pending parent consent—provided specialized mental health services needed to support their individual healing and disrupt intergenerational cycles of abuse.

Evaluation Framework

Recognizing the importance of building program capacity for data-centered learning, improvement, and evaluation, San Mateo County engaged the Gardner Center as a research and evaluation partner, to support the development of an evaluation framework for the SPARK Program that facilitates continuous learning, improvement, and impact. Grounded in the program's theory of change (TOC), this report includes attention to:

- **Implementation** SPARK is designed to expand the capacity of program partners to provide timely and coordinated identification, outreach, case management, legal services and mental health services to these families. Since implementation, the program has shown promising indicators of success. CORA has recorded a significant increase in response rates to outreach calls when calling survivors at 30- and 45-days post-incident. Case management support has proven to be an important pathway to accessing mental health support for survivors. Children are now routinely identified in police reports, even when they were not on-site when the incident occurred.
- **Outputs and Outcomes** Ultimately, SPARK aims to improve the health, safety, and wellbeing of San Mateo County's children, families and communities and in so doing end the cycle of abuse. As a result of SPARK, we have seen an increase in collaboration and the accurate reporting of children who are exposed to violence. In turn, our increased capacity to provide outreach has resulted in a significant increase in client engagement and access to services.

This report, based on the last 18 months of program implementation highlights SPARK's strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement and to inform and advance broader efforts to disrupt cycles of violence and advance public health and safety in San Mateo County.

Year Two Evaluation: Highlights

- Over the last 18 months, we have created organizational capacity to support program implementation of the program’s four core strategies:
 1. Establish pathways for children exposed to domestic violence to obtain mental health support. SPARK has contributed to a 62% increase in children engaging in mental health support.
 2. Systematically identify and refer domestic violence survivors with children to SPARK. We have identified multiple pathways for identifying SPARK-eligible families (law enforcement, VSD, and CORA). We learned that the majority (53%) of SPARK referrals have involved households with children who are aged 0-5.
 3. Conduct prompt outreach to contact and enroll families in SPARK. While 25% of SPARK referrals result in a successful contact during the first outreach attempt, the additional follow-up made possible through SPARK led to successful contact in 60% of all referrals.
 4. Expand case management services designed to encourage and sustain SPARK families’ utilization of services. The VSD SPARK Advocate has provided intensive case management to 241 adult survivors.
- Through the implementation of the four core strategies, SPARK is contributing to several outputs and outcomes observable at the county, program, and individual (child, family) level.
 1. County: Improved cross-sector collaboration and engagement, supporting program implementation.
 2. Program: With the Gardner Center’s expertise, created a Theory of Change, which serves to identify the benchmarks, outputs, and goals.
 3. Individual: Among SPARK children who have started and completed clinical services during calendar year 2024, we see a 78% reduction in trauma symptoms as measured by the Parent Report of Post Traumatic Stress Symptoms and the Children’s Report of Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms (PROPS and CROPS).

Bottom line: Through strategic partnerships, including strengthened collaboration between CORA and VSD, as well as engagement with Stanford’s Gardner Center, SPARK is, with additional funding from the County, in a position to continue building on the successes of the first 18 months.

Program Implementation

Strategy 1: Systematic identification and referral of domestic violence survivors with children to SPARK.

Research indicates that children living in households experiencing violence face a higher risk for a wide variety of psychosocial and behavioral challenges, and yet these children often remain unseen and unheard in the aftermath of their households’ struggles (Hughes, 1988; Moylan et al., 2009; Sternberg et al., 2006; Wolfe et al., 2003). Identifying children who have witnessed domestic violence in their household is the first step in providing appropriate and timely support, and one of SPARK’s core

strategies.

SPARK cases are identified in two ways:

1. Emergency Response Protocol (ERP) referral made to CORA by law enforcement, and
2. VSD Victim Advocates review every criminal domestic violence case (both referred and not referred to the District Attorney's Office for criminal charges).

This built-in redundancy ensures that survivors are contacted at several points in time post-incident and are offered clinical and/or case management support.

Strategy 2: Prompt and extensive outreach to contact and enroll referred families in SPARK

Connecting with survivors and their families after a domestic violence incident is essential to ensuring they are aware of the programs and resources available to support their healing and recovery. SPARK's expansion of outreach capacity at CORA and VSD enables proactive and culturally responsive follow-up. This allows SPARK to support survivors through the often-non-linear process of engagement, enabling them to connect with services when ready.

- CORA will contact a survivor within 24 hours of the ERP referral. SPARK has added capacity to allow CORA to provide additional outreach attempts to survivors at 30 and 45 days. This expanded outreach capacity has resulted in 229 additional outreach attempts.
- In every case reviewed by the VSD, the Victim Advocate will ask if the survivor has minor children. This ensures that we are capturing additional cases that were not initially identified by law enforcement, or who did not respond to CORA's outreach attempts.
- When either program identifies a SPARK eligible family, special emphasis is placed on psycho-social education and the impact that exposure to intimate partner abuse can have on children.

Strategy 3: Create pathways for children exposed to domestic violence to obtain mental health support

Timely mental health support for children exposed to domestic violence is critical. Still, a multitude of barriers, including high costs, limited providers, fears of retaliation, and cultural concerns prevent children from receiving the support they need (Simmons et al., 2014). SPARK addresses this gap by facilitating a connection between CORA staff and domestic violence survivors with opportunities for referral to support, in addition to increased capacity to provide mental health services with little to no delay.

- In the last quarter, 63 children were actively receiving mental health services at CORA. This represents a 62% increase over the same period prior to the implementation of SPARK.
- Another 65 adult and child SPARK eligible survivors who received enhanced outreach have accessed specialty CORA programs like legal services and family engagement programs.

Strategy 4: Expanded case management services designed to encourage and sustain SPARK families' utilization of services

Survivors of interpersonal violence who access mental health services tend to discontinue early in treatment, yet most who complete treatment experience a reduction in post-traumatic stress disorder and depressive symptoms (Ghafoori et al., 2022). Thus, proactive, continual, and trauma-informed support is central to promoting sustained engagement in mental health treatment and ultimately, mitigating the long-term psychological and emotional impacts of trauma. SPARK monitors families' needs and engagement, reaching out periodically and adjusting as needed.

- SPARK clients are offered case management two ways:
 1. The VSD SPARK Advocate will offer case management along with the traditional menu of services.
 2. CORA can identify and connect the survivor to the VSD SPARK Advocate.
- The bilingual-bicultural VSD SPARK Advocate provides all services required under Ca PC 13835.5 and works with the survivor to develop a comprehensive case plan.
- The VSD SPARK Advocate works closely with the survivor to develop a case plan, identify and utilize stabilization services. Throughout this relationship, the VSD SPARK Advocate provides the survivor with psychosocial education, information about the emotional impact that witnessing intimate partner abuse may have on children, and common symptoms children may present with.
- The VSD SPARK Advocate has provided intensive case management to 241 adult survivors with children.
- The goal of SPARK case management is to support survivors in getting to a place where their lives have stabilized to the point that they can address some of their higher-level needs such as mental health services. Of the adults who received intensive case management from the VSD SPARK Advocate, 134 adult and child survivors who have stabilized have been referred from VSD to CORA for SPARK mental health services.

Outputs and Outcomes

County Level: Law enforcement agencies (District Attorney, Sheriff, police departments) and CORA strengthen their collective capacity to systematically identify and refer domestic violence survivors and their children to SPARK.

- Since SPARK implementation began, there has been a change in practice that impacts ERP referrals. Prior to 2024, ERP referrals could be made in situations that involved domestic conflict cases which may or may not have included evidence of a penal code violation. In 2024, however, this changed, and ERP referrals are only completed in cases where there is a violation of the penal code. As a result of this policy, CORA has seen fewer ERP referrals. Thus, while ERPs are a key source of SPARK referrals, this policy change highlights the importance of secondary referral pathways- e.g., referrals from VSD.
- CORA and VSD have noticed a significant improvement in the number of ERP referrals and police reports where law enforcement includes children since the implementation of SPARK. The most notable change is that officers are now asking the adults involved if there are children who are part of the household- even if the children are not present during the call for service.
- A focus for the next year will be to engage in intensive outreach to those jurisdictions, and law enforcement in general.

The increased capacity SPARK brings to CORA and VSD enhances outreach efforts, improving successful contacts and engagement with mental health support. Even if families initially decline services, the expanded capacity ensures easier access if they are ready to participate later. With increased buy-in for officers to phone CORA from on scene even when a penal code violation hasn't occurred, there is opportunity to identify even more children in families facing high conflict, and even earlier in their escalation cycle.

Program Level: SPARK effectively facilitates families' prompt and sustained engagement with effective support, including case management, mental health services, and legal services.

- CORA has been able to expand their outreach efforts for SPARK eligible ERP referrals, which has proven to be an important and effective change in the way that outreach is provided. In the last 18 months, only about 25% of SPARK eligible survivors answered CORA's outreach call 24 hours after the incident/ERP referral. For those who do not answer the initial outreach call, the SPARK Family Navigator will make additional attempts to reach the survivor 30- and 45-days post incident/ERP referral. This additional outreach capacity has resulted in CORA ultimately connecting to and offering services to 60% of SPARK eligible survivors referred to them through ERP.
- Survivors who are interested in mental health support speak with the CORA Family Navigator for a mental health assessment within 5 days of expressing interest.
- 53% of SPARK referrals have families with children who are aged 0-5. This finding is significant for several reasons, not the least of which is that a survivor with children aged 0-5 likely has unique needs and priorities which could pose a challenge to engage in services.
- For the 77 children actively engaged in clinical services in CY2024, there are 15 children in this cohort aged five and under whose parent is engaged in child mental health services or other supportive services. The remaining children's ages are equally distributed from age 6 - 17.

Children and Family Level: SPARK families engaged in mental health services demonstrate measurable improvements in mental health, including increased sense of safety, expanded coping strategies and reduced levels of anxiety and depression.

- CORA clinicians are currently using two tools to measure data on child outcomes and are developing internal systems to track the results.
 - *Child Report of Post-Traumatic Symptoms* (CROPS) is a self-report measure for children and adolescents that assesses a broad range of post-traumatic symptoms and the *Parent Report of Post-Traumatic Symptoms* (PROPS) is a parent's report of a child's PTSD symptoms
- Of the SPARK children who have started and completed clinical services at CORA during calendar year 2024, we see a 78% reduction in trauma symptoms as measured by PROPS and CROPS.
- Outcomes for adults who received mental health support through SPARK have been encouraging; 95% of respondents reported learning two or more coping skills and 91% reported a decrease in feelings of isolation.

Case Examples

Meet Luisa, who engaged in SPARK services immediately after the incident

Luisa's ex-partner came to her home where she was with her two children, in violation of an active restraining order. He began vandalizing her car and when she went outside to try to stop him, he assaulted her. Luisa's 12-year-old saw this and called the police. Officers responded to the scene and arrested the suspect. They submitted an Emergency Response Protocol (ERP) referral to CORA noting that two minors (1-year-old and a 12-year-old) were present and witnessed the incident. CORA's Crisis Intervention team called Luisa the next morning. Luisa requested help with shelter, legal services, and mental health. The CORA Crisis Intervention Specialist began the process for Luisa and her children to get into the shelter and sent Luisa's information to the SPARK Family Navigator. Once Luisa and her children settled into the shelter the SPARK Family Navigator assisted Luisa with completing their mental health intakes and scheduled them for their first mental health sessions. The SPARK Family Navigator contacted the VSD SPARK Advocate to ensure that Luisa was connected to her VSD Advocate for support during her ex-partner's criminal case. Several weeks after the incident, Luisa spoke with the SPARK Family Navigator and shared that her 12-year-old is less anxious and is sleeping better. Luisa has been receiving individual therapy which she said has helped her to learn better communication skills and feel less isolated. She is working with a family law attorney and CORA is assisting her with securing new transitional housing.

Luisa found an important bridge to services in the SPARK Family Navigator.

Meet Janelle, who utilized case management support before accessing SPARK mental health services

Police were called to a local motel after the manager reported hearing a loud argument. Officers met with the suspect, the victim Janelle, and their four children. After an investigation, the suspect was arrested. The officers offered to connect Janelle to CORA while on scene, but she said that she wasn't interested. The officers submitted an ERP referral to CORA. CORA's Crisis Intervention Specialist attempted to reach Janelle the following morning, but she did not answer. About three days after the incident, the VSD SPARK Advocate received a copy of the criminal case referral and contacted Janelle. She shared that her most

pressing concern was that she wouldn't be able to pay for the motel and get food for her children without her partner. Janelle also shared that she did not have access to transportation. The SPARK Advocate met Janelle near the motel so that they could work on developing a case plan. During the meeting, Janelle and the SPARK Advocate developed a safety plan and discussed the impact that witnessing violence can have on children. Janelle said that she understood that her situation was not healthy for her children and said that she wanted to do whatever she could to improve their situation. When asked if she would like to get her children in counseling she declined. The SPARK Advocate instead focused on helping Janelle identify and meet her basic needs. The SPARK Advocate brought Janelle a Clipper Card (for public transportation) so that she could travel where she needed to go. She also received a small amount of emergency funding from VSD to help purchase food and essential supplies. During the first few weeks, Janelle received assistance from local agencies for food, emergency cash, and other needs. The SPARK Advocate spoke with Janelle every other day for two weeks to monitor her progress and help her navigate challenges. As Janelle stabilized, they began speaking weekly. During one of those calls, the SPARK Advocate asked Janelle how the children were doing. Janelle shared that they had been a little more difficult lately. The SPARK Advocate shared some of the changes in behavior that children often exhibit after stressful or traumatic events. Identifying several of the behavior changes in her children, Janelle later shared with the SPARK Advocate that she knew she needed to get her children help. The SPARK Advocate connected Janelle directly to CORA's SPARK Family Navigator who immediately began the mental health screening process. Several weeks later when the SPARK Advocate contacted Janelle to follow-up on the case plan, Janelle reported that she and her children had each received three sessions of therapy and that the children were improving at communicating their feelings. Because two of her children were under 5, they participated in Child Watch while she received therapy. She shared that she is also excited to access some of CORA's Family Enrichment Services.

Janelle received intensive case management which helped the SPARK Advocate build trust and rapport with Janelle. The stabilization support and the trust that Janelle received from her SPARK Advocate encouraged her to continue utilizing services including mental health support. Perhaps most importantly, due to the increased capacity that SPARK creates for the CORA mental health program, CORA was able to immediately deliver mental health support to Janelle and her children.

Meet Anna who answered CORA's 30-day follow-up call

Anna and her two children were referred to CORA by law enforcement after her partner verbally and physically abused her. The officers included the children in the report even though they were not on scene during this incident. CORA's Crisis Intervention team called Anna the day after the police responded, and she did not answer. The SPARK Family Navigator called Anna 30 days after the incident, and she answered. The initial focus of the call was to assess Anna's needs and help her identify a safety plan. As part of that process, the CORA SPARK Family Navigator identified CORA's various programs, including SPARK. When asked how her children were doing, Anna shared that she is concerned about her 7-year-old son who has been complaining of stomachaches and has missed a considerable amount of school over the last few months. The SPARK Family Navigator began the mental health intake process. A few days later, Anna's 7-year-old began receiving individual psychotherapy and has completed several sessions to date. His therapist used play therapy paired with parent coaching to reinforce coping/relaxation techniques because he was experiencing severe anxiety. Anna reported that after several sessions of child centered play therapy, her son's anxiety has decreased and many of his other unhealthy self-soothing behaviors have stopped. Anna's 11-year-old also received individual sessions paired with parent coaching and Anna has reported that her daughter has been able to communicate her feelings more effectively than before. Anna is invested in their treatment and has learned soothing techniques and activities that could better support her children. The SPARK Family Navigator connected Anna to her VSD Advocate who was able to provide Anna with information about the filing decision made

by the District Attorney's Office and safety plan.

Prior to the implementation of SPARK, the children in this case may not have been identified or added to the police report and ERP referral. Further, they may not have been able to connect as quickly to mental health services prior to SPARK.

These stories illustrate three themes we observe in our implementation of SPARK, namely that adult readiness for support varies, thus staff capacity to skillfully follow up and to meet their most pressing needs is often a critical first step to connecting the children with mental health support. SPARK is uniquely designed to do this foundational work.

Next Steps

The long-term goal of SPARK is to ensure that in San Mateo County, children exposed to domestic violence engage with the mental health support needed to prevent future cycles of abuse and/or victimization. In the first 18 months of SPARK's implementation, progress has been made in creating the organizational capacity (infrastructure, staffing, systems, processes) to support program implementation and contribute to improved output and outcomes. This report has highlighted progress in each of these areas. Most importantly, this report has highlighted the value of expanded organizational capacity to provide multiple outreach attempts, case management support, and mental health services- all made possible through SPARK.

With that said, SPARK is poised to continue to build on the foundational successes that we have accomplished and for the next phase of the project which will include a focus on key opportunities for improvement. We look forward to focusing our attention on a few key priorities in the year ahead:

1. Expanding educational efforts to improve law enforcement and community members' awareness of SPARK- both its goals and its impact.
2. Reporting and evaluating the outcomes of mental health support offered through SPARK for children.
3. Expanding our vision to include referrals from Family Court services. Many families choose to engage with Family Court rather than involving law enforcement, and this is another avenue where we can connect families to meaningful services.

The last 18 months have proven that expanded program capacity has had a positive effect on survivors' access and utilization of services. We are proud of the significant increase (62%) in children accessing mental health services because of SPARK, and the successful connection between the delivery of case management services (241 adults) and referral to CORA for mental health services (134 adults and children) post stabilization. We look forward to continuing the impactful work of SPARK and further interrupting intergenerational cycles of abuse in San Mateo County.

ⁱ CORA program documents reference this estimate of 2,000 domestic violence-related police calls per year in San Mateo County. It is important to note that this estimate, drawn from policy agency data, includes only those incidences that rise to the level of misdemeanor or felony as defined by California's Penal Code, most notably, 243(e)(1) and 273.5, and does not include other situations such as "domestic disputes" or conflicts that do not meet the criteria described in the penal code.

ⁱⁱ SPARK is designed to identify and support families that have police contact related to domestic violence that rises to the level of misdemeanor or felony and has a clear aggressor/victim. For the purposes of this discussion, we will use the phrase "domestic violence," however, it is important to note that we are using this as a descriptive term to refer to an array of situations and not as a legal or clinical term referring to a situation that meets specific criteria.