Luz, a recent immigrant from the Dominican Republic, didn’t feel like she had the right skills to help her daughter Mirabel with her homework. Struggling to learn English, Luz was having many battles with Mirabel and felt lost—she wasn’t confident in her ability to help Mirabel succeed with homework and in school. Thousands of families across the country struggle with similar experiences. Families who are immigrants, like Luz, or who are homeless or face domestic violence don’t have the support they need to create strong family relationships.

That’s where Families First comes in. A nonprofit based in Cambridge, MA, Families First Parenting Programs partners with more than 90 organizations in eastern Massachusetts to provide parenting and educational workshops which help families build parenting and nurturing skills. “Families First is based on the belief that if there is a strong parent-child relationship, children will be successful. We help parents be the best parents they can be,” said Liz Cohen, Executive Director of Families First.

But even Families First faces challenges managing all of its clients and organizing their workshops. “Working with more than 90 partners, our scheduling process can get very complicated, as we try to schedule sites for workshops and identify the appropriate trainers,” said Liz. “We found the logistical challenges associated with scheduling were significantly impeding our productivity.”

That’s why they were thrilled when they were chosen by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts (BCBSMA) to receive pro bono support. In early 2013, BCBSMA matched a team of three of its associates from different business units to work with Families First to help improve its operational management. Over the course of four months, each volunteer spent about 70 hours to assess how Families First operated and then made recommendations to streamline and improve its processes.

“The team helped us think through the best way to organize the flow of our business—from the moment a partner contacts us to the last follow-up email, we now have a formal process to make our work much more efficient,” said Liz.
“The Blue Cross team also helped us develop a list of requirements for a new database. In the end, this is going to completely revolutionize the way we schedule workshops and track the impact of our work. We’ll also be able to free up a lot of our talent that was previously focused on scheduling and logistics.”

But the value of the pro bono effort wasn’t just realized by Families First. “The most rewarding thing for me was to go through the process with Families First coordinators. It’s hard for them, sometimes, when they’re bogged down with so many small issues to feel as if they aren’t making a difference. But showing them how broad their roles really are was so satisfying,” said Lindsay Russo, a Training and Documentation Consultant for BCBSMA. Using skills from her day job, Lindsay mapped and analyzed processes that the Families First team was using to engage their clients so she could suggest ways they could increase efficiency.

“It was very rewarding to have a partner as introspective and proactive as Families First,” said Griffin Jones, a Strategic Services Consultant. “This whole experience was a great opportunity to meet different folks from Blue Cross and to apply our professional skills to help the community.”

Designing Pro Bono for Success

BCBSMA launched its skills-based program in 2012 as a collaboration between its Corporate Citizenship and HR departments to deepen the company’s support of its community partners by lending the skills and expertise of its associates. This year, the company completed 11 projects with 35 associates, each matched to a nonprofit by BCBSMA’s Leadership Team, which also takes an active role in scoping pro bono projects for success.

The company’s HR department especially values the program because it sees it as a vehicle for professional development and skill-building, as well as a way to promote employee engagement and networking within the business.

“It has been extremely rewarding to see our associates contribute their valuable knowledge and skills to our nonprofit partners in a way that makes a significant impact to the organization’s business results,” said Stephanie Franklin, Vice President, Talent and Integrated HR Solutions. “The skills-based volunteer program gives us an innovative way to address the pressing business needs of our community partners. It also gives associates an opportunity to showcase their skills and give back in a meaningful way while strengthening our overall commitment to the community.”

Pro bono also plays an important role in contributing to the company’s culture. “This program is an essential part of our commitment to fostering a high-performance culture,” said Lucy Darragh, the Director of Corporate Citizenship for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts. “Our culture is one that emphasizes leadership development, opportunities to showcase associate talent, and ongoing professional development no matter your career stage.”

Best of all, with BCBSMA’s skilled volunteer support, Families First will be able to organize even higher-quality parenting workshops that will help more families like Luz and Mirabel. In fact, at Luz’s second session, she told the group that she was making progress with Mirabel. Even though Luz is still learning English, the workshops helped her establish some basic routines around homework, and made her feel more confident that she can create a climate at home that will support Mirabel’s success.