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SOCIAL SERVICE COLLABORATION: MOVING TOWARDS INTEGRATION OF FORMS AND SERVICES

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Summary of Report. This report reviews considerations underlying efforts for collaboration and integration in the field of social services including models of engagement, integration frameworks and challenges to integration. Although moving towards integration can be difficult for service providers, inter-agency collaboration and integration can reduce frustrations and the chance of duplicated services for community members. Three local integrative initiatives are examined for lessons learned and best practices.



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INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH GOALS

This report examines frameworks for inter-agency collaboration and integration of forms and services, including barriers and facilitators to such initiatives. Programs with integrated forms and services are examined as potential models for best practices, and eligibility forms for some local organizations are reviewed to assess the potential for integration.

BACKGROUND

Partnerships to increase engagement among social service agencies have become commonplace nationally and provincially over the past decade. Inter-agency engagement in the social service sector is happening more often as traditional services are increasingly perceived as problematic by clients, due to duplicated and unresponsive services, unaccountable programs, and services revolving around the best interests of the professionals rather than the best interests of the clients (Konrad, 1996).

Both provincial and local public consultations on social assistance, with participants ranging from those with lived experiences to individuals working within the government to improve social assistance provincially, have recommended improved coordination of access to social services (Ellery, 2011).

A common frustration voiced by community members involves application and eligibility forms for social services, which currently requires applicants to repeatedly provide the same information across forms for different programs.

Therefore, the following paper explores the idea of engagement and collaboration between social service agencies as a foundation for the integration of eligibility and application forms. Local initiatives that apply collaboration and integration to provide a functional system with partnerships that meet the best interests of community members are examined for insight regarding best practice in undertaking an integrative approach to social services.

Key Terms:

- **Collaboration** occurs when two or more stakeholders work together to “address problems and seize opportunities through shared effort, contribution of resources, decision-making, and ownership of the final products or outcomes.” (Darisi, Chuong, Strohm & De Guzman, 2011, p. 3). Collaboration can be thought of as a midpoint on the continuum of engagement between organizations, ranging from simple information sharing to fully integrated service delivery (see Table 1 below).
- **Integration** of services is the most intense form of engagement between social service agencies. Although collaboration can lead to integration, integration is not necessary for



collaborations to be successful. Integration typically includes stronger organizational and structural changes, merging agencies or duplicated services into a single system. The goal of integration is to “increase the efficiency and effectiveness of systems through both infrastructural reform and direct service reform, leading to a more equitable distribution of services.” (Kagan, 1995, pg. 13)

METHODS

LITERATURE REVIEW/SCAN

Scholarly and grey literature was reviewed for frameworks applicable to collaboration and integration of services. There was little literature specific to integration of social service forms, and therefore certain models were adapted accordingly.

REVIEW OF LOCAL SOCIAL SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

Eligibility forms for the following six programs were selected for review and analysis of potential integration of forms: Centre Wellington Food Bank, Child Care, Guelph Food Bank, Housing, Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW). These forms were compared by reviewing mandates, the physical forms, as well as speaking to representatives from each agency.

These organizations were selected as they are larger, primary organizations in Guelph and Wellington. This research was scoped to review larger level collaborations and integration with the hopes that a better understanding of this could lead to the inclusion of smaller scale organizations.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT, COLLABORATION, AND INTEGRATION

Successful collaboration and integration of services between agencies and organizations requires a model for increased engagement and governance. The following frameworks describe ways of working together for partners moving towards collaboration and integration of services.

Continuum of Engagement

Konrad (1996) proposes a multidimensional framework of engagement that begins with simple information sharing and culminates in inter-agency integration (see Table 1). Konrad's multidimensional framework for collaboration is commonly used for not for profit and social



service collaborations (Konrad, 1996). Identifying the current stage of engagement of partner organizations can help facilitate movement towards collaboration and integration.

Table 1. Continuum of Engagement (adapted from Konrad, 1996)

Information Sharing and Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles of collaborative partners are loosely defined. • Agencies begin sharing generic information. • Irregular contact between agencies.
Cooperation and Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration continues to be informal. • Agencies gain a better understanding of the functionality of collaborative relationships. • Common goal is established.
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agencies formalize collaboration within this step. • Responsibilities are shared while partners maintain their autonomy in the collaborative relationship.
Consolidation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More intense information sharing and cross-program coordination. • Partners begin contributing their independent agency's resources, roles are assigned and leaders emerge.
Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group is fully comprehensive; each partner has a clear understanding of role and contributions. • Maintenance of roles.

Constellation Model

The Constellation Model is a model of organization for integrated services which was developed by a small group of Canadian non-governmental organizations (NGO's). The model was originally developed due to the lack of available frameworks for collaborative efforts regarding the issue of children's environmental health. This model allows for flexibility by focusing on the natural dynamics of the group yet also enforcing a minimal amount of governance and ensuring teams are action focused (Surman & Surman, 2008a).

The constellations themselves are the action teams that self-organize and function within a broader strategic vision of the partnership. While there is still an effort to develop core partnerships and management, the constellations are said to be outwardly focused on creating value for those in the external environment. The Constellation Model speaks specifically to the impact on the external environment or the surrounding community. This is an important aspect



of integration as it is integral to consider the impact of integration on the ecosystem of organisational collaboration (Surman & Surman, 2008b).

Carver Model

The Carver Model was developed as an integrated board leadership paradigm (Oliver, 2002) and due to its success often appears in the literature with modifications to allow for different applications, such as to social service initiatives.

According to this model, collaboration revolves around the definition and maintenance of clear roles for participating agencies. In order to ensure a successful collaboration, role definition is very important, which allows for the mutual agreement of tasks as well as the clear establishment of goals (Carver, 2006). Ideally, careful role definition maximizes resources to allow participants to focus on larger issues, facilitates task assignment, and creates a framework for evaluation of collaborative efforts.

This model is particularly useful as it suggests specific strategies for partnerships between stakeholders with different backgrounds. Some of these suggestions include managing “the owners” (including moral ownership), as opposed to “operational staff”, and taking into consideration the breadth of factors influencing parties that are involved in the integration (Carver, 2006).

COLLABORATIVE AND INTEGRATION CONSIDERATIONS

The frameworks for engagement described above provide some strategies for governance that should be considered by organizations considering collaboration and integration of services. Moreover, Konrad’s (1996) review of collaborative initiatives suggests that consideration of the following collaborative dimensions is crucial to such undertakings in the social service sector:

1. Partners

There are numerous factors that need to be considered in relation to partnerships for collaboration and integration of services, including:

- What is the relationship of these agencies in the community?
- Have they collaborated on projects before?
- In which sectors do they operate?
- Are they able to collaborate with the other involved agencies?

Initial research as well as a scan of the community should be completed to ensure that no key participants are excluded. In addition, it is important to consider the voice of the community. Within the collaboration, are the participating agencies capable of including and ensuring that



the community's voice is heard? If not, social service agencies may wish to consider a way to directly include the community as a partner.

2. Targeted Population

Clarity is required regarding stakeholders for whom collaborative and integrative initiatives will be beneficial and how the outcomes of these initiatives may intentionally or unintentionally impact stakeholders. Partner agencies should consider at what level the population will be supported by this project. For example, is the initiative expected to make an impact at a community level, family level or is the initiative hoping to meet the needs of individuals independently? Once the level is selected, collaborating agencies need to consider the potential impacts on other levels of the community.

3. Policy and Governance

The participating social service agencies may have different mandates and policies, and may have different agendas for the proposed integration. Also there will be power dynamics and leadership roles that need to be considered. In order to negate some of these issues clear internal guidelines are essential. The Constellation and Carver models described above may provide useful governance frameworks for inter-agency collaboration and integration of services.

4. Outcomes and Accountability

Participating organizations need to be prepared to take responsibility for the outcomes of the project, and should consider how this is going to be handled. Moreover, evaluation of both the process of the collaboration and outcomes for clients should be considered when planning such initiatives.

CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATION AND INTEGRATION OF SERVICES

Collaboration and integration of services is not a simple undertaking. Considering potential barriers and challenges before planning for new inter-agency initiatives can help improve outcomes for partner agencies and clients.

From the wide range of barriers and challenges acknowledged in the literature relevant to collaboration and integration of services, the following barriers have been selected and modified for relevance to a social service perspective (Brinkerhoof, 2002; Darisi et al., 2011; Howarth & Morrison, 2007; Huxham & Vangen, 1996; Osbourne & Murray, 2000).

1. Loss of Organizational Identity

When forging a new partnership, each agency contributing to the collaboration has capacities that are unique. Within collaborations, as agencies begin to pursue common goals, they may



lose sight of their autonomy. Agencies then begin to lose their organizational identity and become hesitant or wary of the collaboration, which can lead to the diminished capacity of a partner to contribute or have a rationale for contributing to the collaboration. The loss of organizational identity typically stems from a lack of clarity regarding the sustainable qualities and contributions of each participating agency.

2. Lack of Trust or Communication

There are many forms of communication within organizational partnerships, but they can generally be considered at three different levels: communication between the partnership members, between the partnership and independent organizations, and lastly between the partnership and the wider community. Within these three different levels there is ample room for a lack of communication, which in turn may perpetuate low levels of trust. Creating clear and concise expectations regarding communication from the beginning of the partnership can mitigate these issues. Failure to prioritize communication and trust within partnerships trying to integrate services can lead to unsustainable relationships and outcomes.

3. Conflicting Capacities and Understanding

Most social services agencies have severe constraints on staff time. Often, agencies do not consider engagement with other organizations as they cannot afford to invest more time on a new project, which can lead to other ongoing projects having to be postponed. The lack of understanding regarding integration in social service sectors contributes to the notion that integration is too time consuming, and requires massive restructuring of services. Considered over the long term, integration can reduce time constraints not only for service providers but also for clients directly.

4. Lack of Assessment

As collaborations and integration become more common within the social service sector there is a need for evaluations of these efforts. Evaluation is essential in order to assess the successes or determine solutions to possible barriers of integration evaluation. However, due to time and resource constraints, there are often few resources allocated to evaluation and a lack of time taken to evaluate outcomes and processes. Planning for regular evaluation of process and outcomes would allow for the replication and improvement of integration processes, leading to more effective transitions into integrated services.

FINDINGS FROM LOCAL SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES

To examine the context for potential collaboration and integration of services among local agencies, eligibility and intake forms were examined from a sample of organizations.



Similarities of Eligibility and Intake Forms

Eligibility forms for Centre Wellington Food Bank, Child Care, Guelph Food Bank, Housing, Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW) were examined for similarities and differences, as a first step to considering form integration for these or similar programs.

As shown below, although each program eventually customizes their forms, the initial generic information has the potential to be condensed into a common form.

Similarities

- Demographic information
- Age requirement
- Financial background
- Mandate to aid individuals with “financial hardship”

Differences

- Specific eligibility criteria
- Support available for filling out forms
- Online or in person

Lessons Learned and Best Practices from Local Partnerships

Based on suggestions from the Research, Learning and Evaluation sub-committee of the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination, as well as the results of a local scan, interviews, and a review of the available grey literature, the following three partnerships were selected to exemplify lessons learned and best practices related to collaboration and integration of services.

Growing Great Kids Service Partnership

The goal of this partnership is the collaboration and integration of organizations within the area of Guelph and Wellington to provide the most suitable and accessible services to children ranging from prenatal to age six. There are a total of eleven agencies involved, supporting families to access appropriate support for their children (L. Brooks, personal communication, November, 2011).

Ontario 211

The mission of this corporation is to develop, sustain, and make improvements to an integrated system. The focus of this directory is to make information regarding social, health, government and community easily accessible (Ontario 211 Services Corporation Annual Report, 2011).





The Waterloo, Wellington and Dufferin Regional Crisis Services Program

The Crisis Services is a coalition of child, adolescent, and adult mental health crisis services in the Waterloo, Wellington and Dufferin Region (J. Newberry, personal communication, November, 2011). This is a partnership between ten localized agencies that work together to ensure that “a person in crisis will have access to a respectful and prevention oriented, holistic service, integrated with their chosen community and support networks, when they need it, where they need it, and how they want it” (Harder, Obergan & Nandlel, 2009).

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

Lessons Learned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow for more planning time than originally expected. • Ensure “buy in” from not only partners involved but the community. • A thorough review of similar local initiatives and smaller scale integrations must occur before formal planning stages. • Consider implications on other services in the community, determine how best to navigate these implications.
Best Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One point of contact allows for consistency in service delivery and reduces community frustration (e.g., the “Kids Line” for Growing Great Kids Service Partnership). • Involve the community. • Ensure maintenance of this integration is possible (funding, partnerships and resources). • Other integrated programs may not be accurately generalized, replicable or successful locally - ensure local influences on these factors are considered.

In summary, the Growing Great Kids Service Partnership, Ontario 211, the Waterloo, Wellington and Dufferin Regional Crisis Services program are all local examples of successful collaborative partnerships within the social service field. These agencies were able to combine efforts and resources, while respecting and maintaining independent mandates/policies, to provide services to best meet the needs of the community.





CONCLUSIONS

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, although social service collaboration and integration can be a successful strategy for providing more accessible services for the community, there are numerous considerations in moving forward with these initiatives. Possible frameworks and models, as well as barriers and best practices, should be reviewed and considered by stakeholder organizations working towards collaboration and integration of services. Thorough planning and research is necessary for successful and sustainable partnerships.

→ **Brief summary of results and interpretations.** Agencies and organizations looking to increase collaborative efforts and integration of services should consider stakeholder attributes, including partner roles, organizational identity, building communication and shared understanding, and evaluation of both process and outcomes. Research into the specific needs of the community and social service agencies is necessary before considering increased collaboration or integration of forms or services.

→ **Broad Conclusions.** Collaboration and integration can lead to more accessible and more easily navigated social services for the community. These initiatives over the long term can reduce frustrations for community members and reduce wasted resources for agencies involved. To gain the benefits of collaboration and integration of services, careful planning is needed to build engagement among partner organizations.

LIMITATIONS OF THE REPORT

This report is based on a scan of the relevant literature and local organizations, rather than a comprehensive review. Findings from local organizations and partnerships may not be fully representative of the local context.



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