

Sonoma County's Lifelong Connections Program: **An Evaluation of the Consortium's Level of Collaboration**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines the Lifelong Connections (LLC) program for youth involved with the foster care system in Sonoma County. I conducted an evaluation of the level of collaboration between community partners of the LLC program, utilizing a survey instrument that asked respondents to judge the quality of collaboration, to describe ways in which the

partnership was working well and to suggest areas for improvement. Additionally, I conducted key stakeholder interviews and made observations of meeting dynamics. Among the conclusions which will be useful to Marin County are the need for leadership and ongoing and consistent communication when working with a large and diverse group of stakeholders.

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Overview

In Marin County, as is true in all social service agencies, it is necessary to work with a broad continuum of community partners and organizations in order to best meet the needs and promote the well-being of clients. In my particular area, Workforce Investment Act programs, we are actually required by our legislation to work with a long list of "mandatory partners," which includes the State Employment Development Department and Department of Rehabilitation, the local community college and adult literacy programs, the community action program in our area, Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funded programs and additional community-based organizations with the mission of workforce development. Similarly in foster care programs, a range of individuals and agencies play a part in the attempt to safeguard the well-being and promote the healthy development of youth in the system.

One such program in Sonoma County is the Lifelong Connections Program (LLC). The Lifelong Connections Program addresses the need for youth in foster care to establish a permanent relationship with an appropriate adult mentor, relative, guardian or adoptive parent. The goal is that every child who enters placement in Sonoma County has an early permanency plan developed, which includes the identification of at least one relative or significant other who will commit to maintaining a permanent parent like connection to the child. The county has developed a system and dedicated staff and resources to searching for the people identified as possible "lifelong connections" for the youth and brokering the development of possible relationships.

With the premise that successful collaboration will allow particular departments to meet the shared components of their missions, I have conducted an

evaluation of the level of collaboration among the Sonoma County LLC partner agencies. Bob Harper, Child Welfare Services Section Manager, also requested my assistance in this regard as he felt that the findings of such an evaluation would be useful to him in the continued administration of the program.

Description of Lifelong Connections Program

At any given time, approximately 520 to 550 youth are in the care of Sonoma County's foster care system. The county provides services in an attempt to improve the outcomes for these young people. The following is a vignette of one such youth who went through the Lifelong Connections Program:

Nate, age 15, has been in scare since he was 9 years old. During his time in care he was in 4 group homes. His mother who is addicted to methamphetamines severely abused and neglected him. At the time of removal from her care, Nate had severe mental health issues. Nate's father had divorced his mother and had very minimal contact with his son. This remains true today. The mother's whereabouts have been unknown since his removal from her care.

Despite Nate's mental health issues, he has much strength. When motivated he is an inquisitive young man who is a good student. He has a great sense of humor and is a very likeable person. His social worker was very concerned that Nate did not have any close adult connections. In 2007 Nate was referred by his social worker to the Lifelong Connections program. His group home was initially resistant to the referral feeling that it would upset Nate's ability to do well in their program by offering him "false hope." The LLC program conducted searches for his relatives and located a number of relatives throughout the country. The Lifelong Connections Social Worker, Karen McClure contacted Nate's paternal half sister, her mother and her stepfather. They live in Montana, and while they knew about Nate, they didn't know that he was in care. They said that they wanted to meet him.

Over time the half sister's parents began writing to Nate and eventually they came to California for a visit. They kept up their contact with Nate and he visited with the family in Montana. After several months of visiting back and forth Nate was able to move to Montana. He is doing well in his new home. He attends public school, plays drums in the school band and volunteers in after-school programs. Nate and his half-sister are living together and the parents are in the process of adoption.

The over-arching principles and goals of Sonoma County's Lifelong Connections (LLC) program are to ensure that:

- Every youth within the system has a permanent, lifelong connection.
- Every youth deserves and can have a family.
- Youth are involved as a participant or even as a leader, in the process of achieving their own permanency.

The program is also guided by the following definition of permanency which states that:

“Permanency is both a process and a result that includes involvement of the youth as a participant or leader in defining for himself or herself what permanency means, and in finding a permanent connection with at least one committed adult, who provides:

- *A safe, stable, and secure parent-like relationship,*
- *Unconditional commitment, and*
- *Lifelong support in the context of reunification, a legal adoption, or guardianship, where possible, and in which the youth has the opportunity to maintain contact with important people in his or her life.”*

Toward that end, Sonoma County collaborates with community partners to identify, locate, and assess potential lifelong connections for youth. They are preparing youth in foster care to pursue the development of lifelong relationships. They have dedicated a social worker position to this cause and have trained all of their placement social workers in permanency principles. The LLC Consortium of stakeholders includes county staff, social workers, local group home staff, County Counsel, Santa Rosa Junior College, foster parents, Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Foster Family Agencies (FFA), and other community-based organizations (CBOs).

Description of Evaluation

The evaluation of the LLC Program contained both qualitative and quantitative components. I attended a meeting of the LLC Consortium and observed the interactions among the participants. I also spoke with Sonoma County Human Services Department

staff and some of the community partners. Finally, I emailed a survey to nineteen stakeholders asking them a series of questions about their experience with the LLC program. I received back eleven responses, either via email or telephone interview.

The questions in the survey were:

- 1 What has been your role in the Lifelong Connections Program?
- 2 How long have you been involved with Lifelong Connections?
- 3 This is an evaluation of the level of collaboration between partners of the Lifelong Connections program. Would you say the level of collaboration has been: Poor, Fair, Good, Excellent
- 4 Please give me an example of a way in which you feel the collaboration between partners has gone well.
- 5 Please give me an example of a way in which you feel the collaboration between partners can be improved.
- 6 What has been surprising or unexpected about the collaborations that have occurred *vis-à-vis* the Lifelong Connections Program?
- 7 Regardless of whether you think the collaboration is currently going well or not, what are your suggestions for ways to further enhance the partnering between organizations?

Results of Evaluation

As stated, eleven partners responded to the survey. Overall, the group seems to believe that collaboration among LLC partners is going well. Respondents ranged from champions of the program who helped to develop and implement it to foster parents, agency representatives and clinicians who have referred clients to the program. Four of the respondents had been involved with LLC since its inception, five for approximately 1–2 years, and two for less than a year. Interestingly, the LLC Program came to Sonoma County partly through a former BASSC participant, Fred Jones, Social Services Supervisor, who did his case study on the Lifelong Connections Program in Stanislaus County.

In response to the question asking for a rating of the level of collaboration along a continuum from poor to excellent, the responses were as follows:

Response	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
# of respondents	0	0	3	5

One respondent said “Good to Excellent,” and two did not answer the question. When asked for specific examples of the ways in which the collaboration has gone well, several respondents mentioned a brochure that had been developed collaboratively by the group. One said, “Everyone had input—it was a true collaboration. A partner came up with the original draft, but others contributed photos and the printing.” Others commented that they appreciated the county taking the leadership role as well as their communication style with the CBOs. Said one CBO representative: “There is constant effort from the county to be inclusive of community partners. For partners who have been reluctant to get on board, the county has reached out to them by offering trainings on-site to try to educate them about the LLC program.” Another community partner said, “We have found that Sonoma County staff has been willing to listen to our views about the clinical work we have done on a case and respects our opinions about the timing of interventions and the need to work closely together in order to keep fragile cases stable.”

When asked what could be improved about the level of collaboration, several respondents said “nothing.” Among the other responses were more outreach to out-of-county group homes for them to understand the purpose of the LLC Program, more ownership by the community partners in taking on relative searches themselves, and joint funding opportunities to keep the collaborative going. One clinician identified a potentially serious incident where a visiting social worker informed the client prematurely and without the consent of the primary social worker about locating the client’s parent.

When asked what was surprising or unexpected about the collaborations that have occurred, the vast majority of respondents answered that they were gratified by the ways in which both the community

partners and the county have stepped up and participated. One person expressed relief that the program was operating and giving foster youth options. Another person said she was surprised by how much better she feels about her work as a social worker using the perspective of the LLC program.

Finally, with regards to the request for suggestions on ways to further enhance the collaboration between organizations, responses fell into two general categories—ongoing communication and greater community partner leadership or ownership of the program. Several people would like to see the community partners start to conduct relative searches themselves, as well as co-chair the consortium meetings. One person suggested that each community organization commit to conducting one relative search for a client. Several suggested the need for continued training and communication for all levels of involved organizations to ensure that line staff are also on board. Finally, someone suggested that more education and training be provided for the lifelong connection family members and others who are found and agree to establish a relationship with the youth to give them support and strengthen their commitment to the youth.

Although these results are based on a very small sample, observing a consortium meeting and speaking with participants in person reinforced the survey findings, with responses and ways of interacting reflecting a high level of collaboration and comfort at expressing opinions, even in disagreement with another member of the consortium. One caveat, however, is that six individuals who had stopped participating were contacted in an attempt to understand why they had done so, and not one responded to the survey.

Action Plan

Overall, my recommendation to Sonoma County’s LLC Program is to continue in the same spirit in which they have been operating. While county leadership has been critical to building the momentum that they have gained thus far, Sonoma may wish to consider finding formal ways to allow partners to

take more ownership of the LLC and to institutionalize its long-term sustainability. While it is always a delicate balance of the “requirements” one can place on organizations that are at the table as volunteers, it appears that enough goodwill exists among the LLC agencies that Human Services may be able to guide the group to the next level. For example, as one respondent suggested, county staff may propose that each agency that has not already done so commit to conduct one relative search for an existing client within the next six months, and then plan for a meeting where all the organizations can debrief about the experience. This report may serve as a useful tool to open that conversation. The cost should be minimal although it will involve several hours of staff time. To fully assess the outcome of these efforts, it may be necessary to conduct a follow-up survey of the participants in a year’s time.

In Marin County, Social Services is not looking to expand its LLC program to the level of operation seen in Sonoma County, primarily because the number of Marin County foster youth is a small fraction of the number in Sonoma County. Should we do so, however, we may wish to look at dedicating a staff person to the project as Sonoma County has done. Another possibility is to partner with another county to gain some economies of scale. As stated in the outset, however, the intention was to learn from the ways in which collaboration among an array of agencies has worked or not worked for the LLC program.

Conclusion

It is apparent that leadership and communication are key components to establishing a successful collaboration across a broad group of players. Although several expressed that they were happy that the program was operating, or that they found this approach to be

much more positive than previous ways of thinking about foster youth, it took the leadership of Sonoma County Human Services to establish the collaborative. Nothing is inherently difficult about the concepts or the tasks involved with family searches, but it did require the county to step forward in a leadership role to initiate some momentum. It will be a test of Human Services staff to take their leadership to the next level by working with the community partners so that they take more ownership of the continued operation and development of the LLC program.

Ongoing and respectful communication is also critical to a successful collaboration. By showing the partners that they were sincere in the desire to work together, the county was able to set a tone that made people want to continue to work together to improve the outcomes for these foster youth. As one partner said it best, “It really does feel like a partnership as opposed to the county just telling the community partners what to do. The partners feel heard. It has also promoted fruitful discussions among the providers and increased awareness of the struggles that each of us have. There is a greater appreciation for all of the work that we do in the name of providing services to children and families.” These two critical elements—leadership and effective communication—should be considered in all attempts in Marin County to work across a range of partners and stakeholders.

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