

CONTRACTING AND COLLABORATION TO SERVE THE COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

Integral to the success of a community is the degree to which its needs are met by collaboration with various systems and resources. This paper discusses the importance of collaboration in order to best address the needs of the community and will illustrate the contracting process, as it complements collaboration.

The term “contract” is not exciting or mysterious, and perhaps for some readers is not the least bit interesting. The word itself might conjure up images of words droning on in a never-ending document written in legal terms that most people do not understand and even less people care about. Agreed, the contract itself is a written document that usually includes dozens of pages of terms and definitions, however the process of contracting, is actually very complex and challenging, taking several months from conceptualization to implementation, and involves a number of players.

GOVERNMENT INSTITUTION OR COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION?

Communities have different needs. And strengths. And resources. Frequently, various groups within a community have different perceptions about the needs of their communities.

Institutions, governed by civil service, legislation, unions, voters, politicians, and community members are expected to provide for a variety of community

needs. Often, members of the institution itself might not be aware of the needs of a community as defined by the particular community.

How can an institution effectively and respectfully work with the communities which it serves to provide the resources identified by that community in a manner in which is appropriate and efficient? Specifically, how does the institution provide these services at a culturally appropriate and cost-effective manner, open to those that need the services? One way is by the institution admitting that it can not directly provide the best services, and instead to support a community-based organization (CBO) in providing this service. Commonly, the concrete example of such support is to contract for the service. The point at which the institution, the community, and the service providers intersect is a prime opportunity for collaboration through the contracting process.

An important reason for going through this seemingly cumbersome process of contracting is to be sure that the services needed by the community are provided by organizations based in the community, because they know the community the best and can tailor services and staffing to best address the needs. Frequently, the services provided by a CBO can be delivered in a more culturally relevant and appropriate manner than the way in which an institution could provide.

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DEFINITION OF “COMMUNITY”

What is the community to which we are referring? Who is part of that community? Who is responsible for maintaining and serving the community? For purposes of this paper, the community is defined generally as a geographic municipality, usually a county, and further as the people and groups of people that live within those geographic boundaries. Frequently, the larger community is broken down into neighborhood or other geographical areas, as well as cultural, ethnic and other groups. All of the groups and sub-groups comprise the larger community for which an institution has regulated requirements and responsibilities.

THE NEED FOR COLLABORATION

An individual client—a child, family group, parent or single adult, is the client of possibly many groups and sub-groups. Because of this overlap, it is important that collaboration occur between these groups in order to prevent duplication of services, and insure that all of the services needed are being provided by someone.

An additional reason for collaboration is to safeguard against diminishing resources which can occur when services are duplicated. If three different agencies are supporting three different infrastructures to provide one similar service to the community, resources are being diverted to support the infrastructures rather than direct services. The client, and therefore the community as a whole is deprived of the maximum direct service resource.

An initial step in good collaboration is cross-training. Cross-training is teaching each other what services it is that they provide. This can include an overview of an intake process, a description of ser-

vices provided, a clarification of service eligibility requirements, or an illustration of how one service complements another program’s service for the client.

Frequently, service providers should begin familiarizing themselves with the services in the community by educating their own staff on what it is that their own agency or institution provides! This internal education assists staff in becoming familiar with these services, which allows them to become more fluent in referring clients to them.

An additional level of collaboration is that of collaboration between and among groups. This provides each with a baseline knowledge of all of the different types of resources in the community. In essence, the referral base expands to the network of CBOs, as each CBO recognizes the strengths and scope of each others’ services. This perception of strength is then passed on to a client seeking specific services by a group that already holds that client’s trust. CBOs can also work to strengthen services that they provide by focusing on those things that they do well already, and deferring and referring to other providers for other services.

COLLABORATIVE MODEL: CBO-CBO

A unique model of collaboration between the CBOs is in Napa County. The Coalition of Non-Profit Agencies developed several years ago when some of the Executive Directors of some of the non-profits initiated a discussion among themselves to determine how they might be able to get support from one another. Initially, the support was specifically for emotional support for the Executive Directors.

Eventually, the group of 5-6 grew into a group of nearly thirty, with a focus expanding to how each

CBO could work best with each other for the betterment of the whole community. The coalition, representing various health, social, mental health and education concerns formed an on-going group to assess the needs of the general community. In this process, they have informed and trained each other on the current services in the county, and established a broad referral base for each other.

The coalition has three sub-groups focusing on specialty service areas, and is currently exploring the possibility of formalizing its group to have its own Executive Director. Another item to note is that the County attends these meetings to be able to work with the community directly through its CBOs at the coalition table, and frequently to update the CBOs about new directions within the institution.

Additionally, the coalition has taken a broader ownership of Napa County by discussing ways to address new problems or concerns. In this process, the group develops plans to access resources to prevent a duplication of services, to support providers that do well in a particular service delivery area, and above all, regard the needs of the community as more important than the needs of the individual or collective CBOs. One example of this is when a county-wide fundraising event was held, and the coalition's responsibility was to determine how to divide the funds among the service providers. At the discussion table, one CBO declined funding, explaining that another CBO needed the funds more—to deliver those particular services to the community.

This model is an excellent illustration of collaboration within the community, as well as with the county institution.

COLLABORATIVE MODEL: CONTRACTING

Another example of effective collaboration is one in which the relationship between the institution and a CBO is formalized by a contract. The CBO contracted to provide services is monitored on a regular basis by its awarding institution by reporting and/or site visits. Contracted terms include deliverable items which are to be reported or counted. An effective contracts manager will work closely with the CBO to insure that the services that are needed by the community, that are paid for by the institution, are actually provided by the CBO.

Part of effectively working with the CBO means assisting them in setting up an infrastructure to gather necessary data, as well as modifying expectations to help them direct most of their time and energy at providing direct services to clients rather than for responding to superfluous reporting requirements to the institution. Certainly, it is important for the CBO to establish a record of responsible service delivery and reporting, but the monitoring institution should understand the complexities involved in the CBO to produce reports, especially if the CBO has received a contract from more than one grantor, which have unique reporting requirements, as well as understand the need for the service provided to the community.

Real collaboration between the institution and the CBO begins with the contract negotiation, but ideally continues throughout the term of the contract, to modify it if the needs of the community change. Flexibility and realistic expectations are key to making this relationship work on behalf of the clients that need these services. The institution should work closely with the CBO to assist them in being successful. Technical assistance, regular supervision, feedback regarding the perceived

reception of services are instrumental in developing and maintaining that relationship—which can truly allow for the partnership with not only the CBO, but with the community as a whole.

The CBOs interviewed during this process identified that a key player within the linked relationships is the contract manager from the institution. Suggestions were made that this individual have a broad understanding of: 1) the needs of the community; 2) the ways in which the institution makes decisions and implement policies; 3) the complexities in working with a non-profit CBO, governed by a Board of Directors with their own particular interests of the community; and 4) the formula in which a CBO weighs whether or not the requirements are worth the funding for the amount of time and energy expended to provide these services.

STEPS IN THE CONTRACTING PROCESS

Although different municipalities have different forms, administration methods, and monitoring tools, the similarities far outweigh the differences. Processes for the City of Berkeley, the Counties of Alameda, San Francisco and Napa were reviewed.

The general steps for the contracting process by a government institution are as follows:

1. Identification of Funding Sources
2. Identification of Needed Services
3. Development of a Request for Proposal of Services
4. Solicitation of Proposals from the Community
5. Evaluation of Proposals
6. Presentation of Proposal to Governing Body
7. Awarding Contract
8. Negotiating Terms of Contract
9. Implementation of Services

10. Monitoring of Contracted Service Objectives and Outcomes
11. Modification of Terms or Services
12. Terminating or Renewing the Contract

These steps vary in terms of time and frequency, and are authorized and administered slightly different in each county.

WIN-WIN GOAL OF PARTNERSHIP

True collaboration is successful for the community. Clients receive services. The services are provided by the community through a CBO. The CBO receives funding through a contract. The institution is successful in carrying out its mandate. The result is that everyone wins!

The institution through its contract manager, through the working relationship with the CBO, through the direct service delivery relationship to the client, becomes a helping partner with the community. This successful collaboration can assist the institution in becoming part of the community rather than being perceived as separate and apart from it. In return, the community can slowly begin to take ownership of the institution, and regard it as serving a beneficial purpose within the community.

If any part of this linked relationship is perceived as insincere, disrespectful or wasteful, the link between the institution and the community can become damaged.

IMPLICATIONS FOR APPLICATIONS

The need for the institution to be successful within the community for the community and with the community are essential. Some of the interventions or systems observed over the past few months have

seemed to be so obviously necessary, that implementation has already occurred. Some are in the process of being implemented. The status of some of the highlights include the following:

1. Internal education of staff regarding the 31 services for which the San Francisco County contracts has just been completed. The result has been that staff are aware of more of the services, and are using these services more. Additionally, staff have identified concerns with some of the contracted services which will be discussed with the CBOs within the next two months.
2. An informal discussion has begun between the contracts manager and some of the current contractors regarding regular group meetings with all of the contractors. Initial reactions have been overwhelmingly receptive. The beginning stages of establishing conversation between providers has begun, and the institution will be hosting and facilitating this network among providers within the next two months.
3. Site reviews are being conducted to determine if resources are being used in the ways most effective to provide the best services to clients. In some situations, this has resulted in modifying contracts with respect to reporting requirements, the responsibility of the institution In promoting referrals, and even specific service deliverables.

happening in various local areas already. This paper challenges communities to consider adding additional components for a more successful community.

SUMMARY

It is obvious that collaboration is necessary in order for a community to receive the services it requires, in a manner in which is relevant and respectful. Two collaborative models were presented which can be used in tandem to best serve the community. Components of each of these models have been