

PROMOTING COLLABORATION

At a time when resources continue to dwindle, there has been an increased demand for mental health and alcohol and drug addiction treatment and prevention services, largely related to the complexities and stressors associated with daily life. The only certainty is that these complex challenges exceed the capabilities of any one system or agency to solve alone. At the same time, there is an increasing demand for state and local agencies to be more effective, produce measurable results, and demonstrate efficiency in the investment of public funds.

In Ohio, many behavioral health, education, health, and social service agencies are beginning to recognize that only by working together can they provide services that respond to an individual or family's need. To this end, they are reworking their organizational mission/vision, structure, practice and budgets to emphasize interagency cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. However, for agencies accustomed to competition, boundary protection, and categorical funding, recognizing the need to work together is much easier than actually practicing it.

Benefits of Collaboration

- Access to additional resources;
- Reduction of duplication of services;
- Increased knowledge about other systems;
- Ability to offer more comprehensive services;
- Improved case management;
- Wider range of services for clients; and
- Improved relationships.

Barriers to Collaboration

- Varied funding sources;
- Incompatible eligibility requirements;
- Inconsistent program definitions;
- Duplicative reporting requirements;
- Divergent performance measures;
- Incompatible management information systems;
- Confidentiality/information sharing concerns.

“Collaboration isn’t easy because it means giving up some control, but what is gained by the system of care more than makes up for the loss.”

*Jody Demo-Hodgins, Executive Director,
Crawford & Marion Counties ADAMH Board*

Political support for collaboration at the federal, state and local levels can go a long way toward influencing interagency collaboration. In fact, there are specific strategies that can be taken at all levels of government to facilitate collaboration. These strategies include:

- enhance coordination and communication among agencies;
- provide guidance, technical assistance, and training on interagency collaboration;
- support flexibility in funding;
- disseminate promising strategies and models;
- use contracts to promote coordination in the service delivery system; and
- promote partnerships that reflect local conditions and needs.

Incentivizing collaboration is often more effective than mandating it. When agencies can be convinced that their effort will result in a win-win situation - often through some form of a cost benefit analysis - then collaboration is much more likely to occur. A poor economy can also spur agencies to collaborate, especially when opportunities exist to leverage additional dollars by combining resources. It is important to remember that effective collaboration takes time, and agencies need to be allowed time for their systems to evolve.

FAST\$'05 - Setting the Collaboration Example

Last year, Governor Bob Taft directed the Family and Children First Cabinet Council members to develop a plan to improve children's behavioral health services. This effort has become known as the Access to Better Care (ABC) Initiative. In September 2004, the Administration announced that, as part of the ABC process, it was taking immediate action to begin addressing the issue of families' relinquishing custody to secure intensive behavioral health treatment for their children.

To this end, the Ohio Departments of Mental Health, Job and Family Services, Youth Services and Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services identified and pooled funds for this purpose. These funds have since been made available to local systems through the community Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Boards, Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services Boards, and Community Mental Health Boards.

A key aspect of this initiative known as FAST\$'05, includes the requirement that counties submit a plan of action that explains how local agencies will work together to use these funds to expand services and supports for children and families at highest risk.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the ABC Initiative is that it includes parents of children with behavioral health issues at the table. Their presence and valuable input helps the other members stay focused on solutions that will work for families. One of the most exciting components of FAST\$'05 is the requirement that families who are served with these funds will be provided with the opportunity to have a family advocate present at planning meetings in which services for their child are being discussed.

What Can Policy Makers, Local Officials, and Voters Do to Help Encourage Collaboration?

- √ Support efforts to eliminate barriers to collaboration such as coordination of program guidelines, simplification of funding requirements, lessening of restrictions on blended funding, and alignment of rules and regulations.
- √ Support adequate funding for mental health and substance abuse, prevention, and addiction treatment services.
- √ Support your local mental health and alcohol and drug addiction services levies which often provide community support services in addition to treatment programs that communities need to be healthy.

Sources:

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory
Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services
Ohio Department of Mental Health
Vroon VanDen Berg LLP, 2003
The Welfare Information Network

Keys to Effective Collaboration

Involve all key players to help ensure that decisions and activities will receive widespread support and recognition. Key players include parents, consumers and community residents.

Ensure that the leadership is visionary, willing to take risks, and facilitates change rather than directs it.

Establish a shared vision of how the process should progress and of the anticipated, measurable outcomes.

Build ownership at all levels so that change happens at all levels of participating agencies and among community members involved.

Establish communication and decision making processes that accept disagreement as part of the process and that address conflict.

Institutionalize change by encouraging member agencies to include collaborative goals in their organizational policies and procedures and to earmark funds to carry out collaborative activities.