



NCOSS Conference Paper

Working Together for Mental Health

Place Management - A Partnership Approach

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If we believe that no one person, program or agency can achieve the best outcomes on their own, then we will recognise the importance and value of partnerships. Working collaboratively makes good sense. An environment that promotes partnerships can influence the likelihood of positive outcomes for a community. The framework of partnering is bigger than the interests of the individual partners and the process of partnering is greater than the words. Whilst partnerships may be organic in nature, the focus is on better, more effective delivery of services to a community. Partnerships can play a key role in the external delivery of services and the internal functioning of the service system.

I would like to share with you my operational experience of working in the Shoalhaven and the importance of 'place' in influencing social problems and human wellbeing. Priority Regional Communities Project is an initiative of the Human Services CEOs Group. There are two PRC projects in New South Wales – Nowra and Mt Druitt. Both projects commenced on location in August last year. The Department of Housing is the lead agency and whilst I work in the Shoalhaven, I am part of Community Regeneration in Housing Systems. The PRC initiatives in Nowra and Mt Druitt sits along side the Community Solutions and Crime Prevention Strategy. Both strategies focus on addressing priority issues in socially excluded locations. The PRC focus identifies systemic issues and emerging challenges in the locations. Both initiatives provide the opportunity to bend and reshape local service delivery.

Working in communities is a journey of discovery: of identifying key processes that include communities and engage agencies in service delivery. Place management enables a strong and sustained focus on a particular location with an emphasis on the closeness of decision-making. One of the important functions is to provide coordination in one form or another. There has been a layering of Government initiatives that has required coordination and integration of the layers cross Government and cross sectors. We often expect too much too soon without always taking into consideration the infrastructure of the service system. However, coordination and integration has been possible through cross government and cross sector partnerships. It must be acknowledged that a level of partnering between

agencies already existed with variability in the history and the nature of relationships across different program areas and service sectors.

Whilst there may be no unique models of successful partnerships, the creation of an environment that promotes a willingness to explore other options for service delivery, is vital. Partnering can occur around responses to a particular social issue, in this case, people with a range of mental health problems. However, simply setting up new partnerships is no recipe for success. There needs to be rigorous thinking about the nature, form and terms of cross-agency cooperation and careful consideration to the creation of a successful collaborative process.

There are a number of practical tools that promote a sustained approach to addressing long term problems. An emphasis on developing networks, building trust and establishing informal and formal relationships may lead to the creation of something new and valuable – a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The combination of skills, knowledge and resources can promote productive interactions. Partnerships may think and act in ways that go beyond the capacities of individual agencies.

An environment for partnering may require change for some agencies. It will require a way of thinking and planning: a mind-set not just about structures. It may require the undoing of a culture of separate management and organisational boundary maintenance. Ownership and governance may change. The Nowra Coordinated Case Management Project funded under the Community Solutions and Crime Prevention Strategy is a location based team comprised of three State Government agencies. The partnering process has required considerable effort to establish a new service delivery model. The bringing together of three agency cultures with unique protocols and decision-making processes; some agencies with statutory requirements; the merging of expectations of what the project can achieve, has been an ongoing process. It has required a willingness to examine existing service delivery: to recognise the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities. It has been vital to focus on the anticipated results of the project - that there is the potential to increase positive outcomes for families and the community. That linkages across Government and across sectors can be strengthened and the internal structures that determine local service delivery can be influenced.

In the Shoalhaven, a number of partnerships have been developed to address service delivery to people with a range of mental health problems. An important element in the partnering process has been the creation of a shared vision and direction, both horizontal and vertical. When there are different expectations of the role and responsibility of 'specialist health agencies' and cross sector mainstream services, there may be tension. If there is an established collaborative process, for example, a local Forum, the issue can be explored and solutions developed. This requires a mutual trust and respect for each other's views and is an important factor that can influence the ability of agency workers to think of a better way to achieve the shared vision and goal. Another factor is the willingness to further develop and strengthen the relationship and partnering process, to foster enduring outcomes for the community. The framework of partnering is bigger than the interests of individual partners.

There have been a number of local initiatives implemented to improve practice and service responses to people with a mental illness. The initiatives are both informal and formal arrangements. They are about reducing the stigma and ignorance that surrounds mental illness and improving service responses that maximise the wellbeing the people with a mental illness. Formal arrangements exist between the Mental Health Service and a number of State Government agencies including, Department of Housing, Department of Community Services, Police Service, Ambulance Service and the Emergency Department at the local hospital. Partnerships have been strengthened and improved with Local Courts, Local Government, Community Housing, Vocational agencies, St. Vincent de Paul Society, Aboriginal community, Youth Aged, Early Childhood Services and Maternity Services. The partnering process has required a consistent and persistent way of working together that focussed on improved outcomes for people with a mental illness, to live in and be part of the community.

There are lessons to be learnt around partnering:

1. Respect an organisation's knowledge and expertise.
2. Understand the culture of an organisation when considering partnering.
3. Recognise that the playing field isn't always level or equal.
4. There may be reluctance to the process of partnering, if the key elements of trust and relationship building are missing.
5. Understand that the process of engagement should occur early and has value.

6. Front-end investment in partnering is as important as the maintenance of the partnerships.
7. Partnerships can be fragile and tensions should be kept at manageable levels.

Partnerships should not stand alone. The partnering process cross Government and cross sectors needs to be embedded in the broader service system. Partnerships that exist for the life of a project may not impact on the service system and different ways of working may soon be replaced with entrenched ways of operating and relating as partners. If partnerships are seen as 'ad ons' then core business may always take precedence and new service delivery methods may not be sustained. Partnerships are about longer-term relationships based on teamwork and mutual trust. Partnerships that promote a coordinated approach to integrated service planning and delivery may increase the likelihood of enduring outcomes for the community.

In conclusion, by working together we can better support families and communities. Partnerships are valuable because the collaborative process brings different agencies together who can accomplish more than on their own. However, the challenge is for the partnering process to become a 'way of working' and part of the broader service system. It can provide the means of lasting outcomes for the community.

If we always do, what we always did,
Then we always get what we always had.

Adapted Kenneth W Jenkins
President, Yonkers NY NAACP