

Building The Caring Enterprise

Part Three: The Agency Model of Service Integration

By John Franz

A call from Crenshaw County

Apollina Smith was sitting at her desk, a rare event for her, watching a blue heron glide over the swamp behind her office at Lake County Human Services, when the phone rang. It was Brad Tillis, the child welfare director in Crenshaw County. Crenshaw was a populous county in a neighboring state. It had one large urban center and several others that were growing rapidly. Brad and Apollina had known each other for years and ran into one another regularly at conferences.

“Hi Brad,” Apollina said, “Great to hear from you. But what’s that noise in the background?”

“That, Apollina, is dueling cab drivers charging past one another on a double-parked side street. Just one of the sounds of spring around here.”

“I do so miss life in the city, Brad. What’s up?”

“I have a small emergency, and I’m hoping I can peel you away from Lake County for a couple of days to help me figure out how to save my job.”

Brad’s dilemma

This was Brad’s situation: The county executive had called Brad’s boss, the director of human services, in for a meeting. The budget was coming up for review by the county council and human services had exceeded its allocation for residential treatment by over a million dollars. This wasn’t the only over-run, but it was clear that this one was going to get special attention. And Brad’s division was going to be the point of focus. In Crenshaw’s system, four of the human services divisions could initiate placements: probation, mental health, county special education in cooperation with a school district and child welfare. However, management of the residential treatment contracts was housed in Brad’s office in the division of child welfare. The county executive wanted the problem fixed immediately, or else. So the human services director tossed the hot potato to Brad, with the suggestion that if he didn’t take care of it, someone else would be brought in who would.

“My problem, as you can probably guess, Apollina, is that my unit doesn’t control admissions, we just work on the contracts and licensing and such. If anything, our job has been to make sure there are enough placement options available to meet the demand generated by the four divisions. Most are made by probation and child welfare, and those are up to the judges. Mental health and special education have only sponsored a few voluntary placements in past years, but their numbers have been going up. Nothing’s going to change unless we can offer them a reliable alternative. I know those wraparound systems you set up in Kenyon and Lake have reduced the number of kids in institutional placement. Is there any way you could come over and help me get one set up here?”

“First, we didn’t stop using residential placements, we just started using them differently. And second, Brad, you need to remember that getting wraparound set up in Kenyon cost me my job. So if you are doing this to save yours, it might not be the greatest tactic. You’d be better off trying to put someone else on the hot seat.”

“I know. That was my first inclination. But some remnant of idealism reared its ugly head. This could be a chance to turn around the ‘ship-em-and forget-em’ attitude that’s developed here.”

Desperate times

Apollina agreed to help. She was able to arrange for some time off the next week and drove over to Crenshaw County where she joined Brad and the managers from the county’s probation, mental health and special education divisions for a planning session. Apollina started by listening to see where the other managers were coming from. Probation felt that using residential treatment was their best option, not because it was so great, but because it was the only way to keep the judges from sending more kids to corrections. “We know it’s largely a containment strategy, but at least this way they’ve got a chance.”

Mental health found residential treatment necessary because “there’s no place else for these kids to go. They’ve burned out their families, no foster home will take them, and we’ve only got about 10 child and adolescent psychiatric beds for the whole county.”

County special education described the enormous backpressure they were getting. “The schools don’t want these kids. They keep telling the parents, ‘the only chance for your child is residential care.’ The parents are starting due process actions to force us to provide residential options.”

Brad’s story was similar. “I know our child welfare placements are young, Apollina, but we have no idea what else to do with them. They are just off the charts. Sometimes I have to beg the treatment centers to take them.”

What does your community need most?

“This is interesting.” Apollina commented. “When I moved to Lake County the biggest issue was the ongoing battles among probation, child welfare, mental health and special education. It took a lot of work to get folks to simply sit around a table and talk, let alone start working together and sharing resources. But the four of you seem to get along pretty well.”

The mental health manager nodded. “We could always do a better job of collaboration, but I don’t think that’s our biggest issue.”

The probation manager said, “They’re all our kids. We just don’t know what to do with them.”

Then the county special education manager spoke up. “If we had something that worked for these kids, we wouldn’t feel like we needed residential treatment in the first place. But we’ve

tried intensive in-home, and various kinds of therapies and programs, and while they've helped some of the time, a lot of these kids and families have lives that are just too complicated. Six months of even the best therapy just won't cover all the bases."

"I agree," Brad said. "It's like there's always a piece missing from the puzzle. One agency can do one thing we need pretty well. Some other agency can do something else. But no one will just own the child and family and work on the whole picture for as long as it takes to turn things around. Even the residential programs won't stick with our tough kids. We're always scrambling to find new placements after kids get kicked out. In fact, I bet my staff spend more time shopping referral packets of unwanted children to reluctant providers than anything else."

The probation manager shrugged her shoulders and looked at Apollina. "Brad's hit the nail on the head. But is this something your wraparound process can help us with, or not?"

Apollina shook her head. "I'm not sure. As Brad said, it's important to have a planning process that addresses the full range of a child and family's needs. And you have to stick with it until you find an option that works. But as you're pointing out, all the planning in the world won't help if you don't have a way to put those plans into action. Wraparound systems always have three essential components – a planning process, an operational structure and a resource pool, but there are a variety of ways of putting those elements together, depending on what a community needs most."

Which model is best for Crenshaw County?

Apollina described the three basic designs used for wraparound systems: the alliance, network and agency models. Brad listened as she laid them out and then said, "It seems like the alliance and network models take a lot of time and work to put together."

"Yes, they do," Apollina answered. "But they can have big payoffs when they are done right. The alliance model can increase collaboration and cooperative effort among service systems and a good network model can cut the operational overhead way down in larger systems of care."

"But what if you have 215 kids in residential treatment, you're supposed to bring that down to a hundred or less, you've been given a year to do it, and at the moment no one has any idea how to get the job done?" Brad asked with some frustration.

"Then you are probably looking at using some variation of the agency model."

Apollina explained that one of the advantages of the agency model was its relatively short start up time. Another was that it could be used to shore things up when a community is missing key service resources. Essentially, their four divisions could jointly contract with one or more private agencies to develop truly comprehensive circles of support for children and families with complex needs. "This is different from purchasing a specific service – such as intensive in-home treatment, mentoring, outpatient therapy or treatment foster care. In the agency model, you contract with these folks to develop and sustain effective community placements for children. They can use whatever options seem make the most sense for each child and family. But you

pay them for results, not for services. Once they form a relationship with a child and family, they stick with it. The options they use may change, but they agree to stay in it for the long haul until they find a combination that works.”

“And there are agencies that will do this?” the special education director asked.

Challenges when using the agency model

“A few. Kaleidoscope in Chicago pioneered the concept. Several others around the country have picked up on it and are doing well. It’s not an easy way for an agency to do business, but I think more and more are trying it out. But that will be your first challenge if you decide to use an agency model – finding an agency that can do the job.”

Apollina went on to outline some of the challenges of using the agency model to provide wraparound support for families. Here are some of the factors she thought they would have to consider:

- You need one or more agencies that are willing to change from fee for service to outcome-based or at least case-rate contracting, and that have the capacity to provide the kind of comprehensive support you’re looking for.
- The staff from each of your divisions and your court personnel will have to be in on the system design process or they won’t trust the new option and will keep using residential care.
- It can be harder for agencies doing all-in-one wraparound to include informal options in family wrap plans.
- You’ll need a creative reimbursement model that supports innovation and results, but still insures accountability and efficiency.
- Getting family buy-in and participation in managing the system can be difficult, because many private agencies don’t want outsiders, especially parents, telling them what to do.
- You will have to find a way to pay for increased expenses while you still have kids in residential care and are rolling out the new model.
- The agencies that are comfortable with the old way of doing business will try to undermine the agencies that use the new approach.
- Finally, you’ll have to work extra hard on inter-system collaboration. Remember, the kids will still have to go to school, be part of their communities, meet their probation requirements, access some types of mental health services, and, if you’re in the child welfare system, the parents will have to comply with their court orders. For things to move smoothly, the contracted agency will need folks from those systems to be part of each child and family team. Team members from the other systems are going to resist that participation. From their point of view this new agency is being paid to get the job done, why should they have to spend time in the effort?

The probation director shook her head. “But other than that, no problem, huh?”

“My point exactly,” Apollina said, and got her first smiles from the group. “The rest is just details.”

Using the core technologies in the agency model

To help the Crenshaw team think about the details, Apollina explained that even if they used an agency model for service integration, they would still need to find ways to implement the core technologies of the wraparound approach. “The agency will need procedures for helping teams develop and implement their plans. You’ll need an infrastructure for managing the contract and linking the wraparound process the agency uses with the other aspects of human service operation. You’ll need a system to manage the flow of information both within the contracted agency and between the agency and the larger system.”

Table 1 offers some additional questions to consider when developing an agency-based model for wraparound.

Table 1 Implementing the core technologies when using the agency model

Core Technology	Questions to consider in implementing this technology
A flexible infrastructure for process management and resource access	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What community needs are you hoping to meet using this model? What isn't happening now that you would like to see happen? What are the extent and immediacy of the needs? 2. How would an agency best go about meeting the identified community needs? What resources will be needed? Will one agency or multiple agencies be used? 3. How will the agency's efforts be funded? 4. Who will be able to make referrals? What procedures and criteria will be used? Who will review the referrals? 5. Who will manage the contract with the private agency or agencies? How will the perspectives of all of the participating public agencies be included in the contract management process? 6. How will the perspective of families and youth be included in the design and management of the project?
Policies, contracts and agreements to insure comprehensive, integrated assistance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which public entities will join in contracting for comprehensive services through the agency model? Will they issue a joint request for proposals, or operate through one lead representative? Will there be a formal agreement among the sponsoring entities defining the level of participation, fiscal and other resource commitments, dispute resolution and any criteria and procedures for withdrawing from the consortium? 2. What will the standards be for the contract with the implementing agency or agencies? How will the standards be established and enforced? 3. Where will the funds for the contract come from? Who will control them? What fiscal management procedure will be used?
Consistent staff development, support and supervision	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What staffing pattern will the contracted agency use? How will staff be trained and supervised? What qualifications will staff be expected to have? How will staff qualifications support the values of the project and the tasks staff are expected to undertake? 2. How will the delivery of strength-based, comprehensive care fit in

	<p>with other activities the contracted agency is already providing? Are there potential overt or covert conflicts of interest? Will there be differences in organizational culture and values between the unit implementing the contract and other units in the agency?</p>
<p>Unified strength-based planning and action process</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What specific process will staff use to develop comprehensive, goal-oriented, strength-based plans of care with families who have been enrolled in the system of care? Who will be responsible for gathering and facilitating the child and family team? How will family voice and choice in the process be assured? 2. How will the plans of care be translated into concrete actions? How will teams access internal and external resources? 3. Who will facilitate the child and family teams? How will they be trained and supported in strength-based facilitation? Will staff who facilitate teams be different from those who provide other services? Will all services be provided by the agency selected to implement the model, or will it in turn subcontract for some services? 4. How will the agency insure that a single plan of care will be sufficient to address the criteria and expectations of any of the systems in which families may be involved? 5. How will the agency insure that family's plans of care will have an appropriate balance of formal and informal assistance and support?
<p>Value-driven information management system for billing and documentation</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What format will staff use to record the plans of care the agency develops with families? Will additional documentation be needed for the requirements of other systems and the courts? 2. What documentation will be needed for the agency to be reimbursed for its services? Will all of the agency's reimbursement come through the contract, or will it also be able to bill for third party reimbursement? 3. How will the documentation format insure that the core values of the project will be expressed, supported and reinforced? 4. How will the documentation format insure that a clear and accurate picture of each family's strengths, needs and goals will be recorded, as well as the specific actions and resources that the team will use to help the family reach its goals and the outcome indicators that will be used to measure progress toward those goals? How will the ongoing reviews and updates of the plans be recorded? 5. How will those supervising the contract collect, aggregate and analyze the documentation from individual family plans?
<p>Quality assurance and improvement system for increasing performance and alignment with the values of the system of care</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the core values that will underlie the project? How can they best be articulated in the contract with the agency or agencies putting the project into action? 2. How will key measures such as client satisfaction, participation and outcomes, fiscal balance, and compliance with contract procedures and criteria be measured? What benchmarks will be set for agency performance? 3. How will information about performance and outcomes be fed back

	<p>to direct service staff? How will information be fed up to those who are supervising the contract as well as to other community stakeholders?</p> <p>4. What provisions will be made for changing the contract to improve performance and outcomes?</p>
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The adventure begins

Several months later, Apollina received another call from Brad. In the intervening time she had helped him and the other division directors assemble an advisory committee, develop a vision for the comprehensive care project, issue an initial request for qualifications and a subsequent request for proposals, and helped design the tool the review panel used for screening proposals. Outside her window fall was coming. The cattail blossoms were starting to unravel. The blackbirds were no longer so vocal in defending their territories and the heron hadn't been around for a while. Brad was nervous.

“We have so much riding on this, and I’m not sure the new agency will be able to pull it off.”

“They’ll do fine. They’ll need your support, but they are young and enthusiastic and they will do whatever it takes to make it work for your kids and their families.”

“One of the agencies that didn’t get the contract is threatening to sue the county.”

“Of course they are. That’s how it works. They’re probably just negotiating for a make up contract, but even so, the county’s been sued before. In this startup phase you have to concentrate on building a creative, get-the-job-done atmosphere. That’s why you went to all this trouble. Just work on it one child and family at a time and help that new agency build its sense of itself around what works. For a while, more may go wrong than goes right, but it will get better.

“And if not?”

“And if not, there’s always room for one more former human services entrepreneur up here in the swamp.”

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Possible quote pulls:

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What community needs are you hoping to meet using this model? What isn't happening now that you would like to see happen? What are the extent and immediacy of the needs?