

The Creative Battlefield

Moving from Conflict to Creativity in Collaborative Systems of Care

By John Franz

Phone conversation:

Jane: "Hi, John, I was wondering if you could help me out."

John: "Gee, Jane, I'd like to help you move to your new office, but I've got a bad back."

Jane: "You're in luck, John, I wasn't calling you about that. In fact what I'm talking about doesn't involve any heavy lifting."

John: "Oh no, you don't mean ..."

Jane: "Yes, I'm afraid so."

John: "I refuse to be on another committee."

Jane: "This one is different."

John: "That's what they all say. How about this: the heck with my back, I'll come help you move. I'll even clean the windows - anything but another committee."

This month's article is about one of the secret challenges to developing effective integrated services systems establishing and maintaining the coordinating committees (also called community teams) which form the basic administrative structures for new projects.

Sometimes no single agency can meet all of a child and family's needs. Effective support requires that a number of agencies cooperate in a combined treatment program. Sometimes this cooperation takes place informally. But other times a more structured approach is needed. Wisconsin's Children Come First Act, s.46.56, which has been described in a number of previous articles in the Journal, establishes a specific format for counties who wish to improve interagency collaboration. Fifteen counties in Wisconsin have either established Children Come First programs or are in the process of doing so.

The Act requires that if a county wishes to start a project, the county board must appoint a coordinating committee to oversee the development of the project. It then goes on to describe the powers and duties of the committee and its basic relationship to the rest of the project.

What the Act doesn't do is explain how the committee is to be assembled and operated. This article will examine some of the nuts and bolts problems faced by staff who have been given the task of recruiting committee members and supporting the ongoing efforts of the group. It will also discuss the relationship of the committee to the wraparound services being offered by the Children Come First projects administered under the auspices of the committee.

Why have a coordinating committee?

Staffing and supporting a committee can be time consuming and frustrating. Why not forget about it altogether and just run the project? Mary Grealish, a featured speaker at our Fourth Annual Children Come First Conference last month, indicates that many communities have tried just that. She reports that while “individual families can be helped by projects that lack the foundation of a coordinating committee, what’s often missing is staying power and community support.”

Further, the lack of the committee becomes apparent when things go wrong. “Without a community team, there’s no place for people to work things out.”

Mary is a national pioneer in the development of wraparound systems of care. With John VanDenBerg, she has helped groups in dozens of states establish community teams that act as foundations for the intensive work with individual families that is necessary to provide integrated, family-specific services.

Mary says that coordinating committees are “creative battlefields.” “To be honest,” she states, “close collaboration between agencies is really an unnatural act.”

She points out that “For the past decade and a half, the human service and educational agencies in most of our communities has had to battle tooth and nail just to survive. On the one hand the demand for services has escalated, while on the other the willingness to provide even minimal funding has plummeted.”

When the focus is services for children with severe emotional disorders, the struggle over turf and resources is especially intense. School districts have difficulty obtaining board or voter approval for high cost programs that serve students often perceived as obnoxious, dangerous and disruptive. Social services agencies are embarrassed by huge budget overruns when youth are placed in expensive residential treatment centers. The courts and law enforcement agencies are deluged by complaints and prosecutions flowing from the out of control behavior of these children. Mental health programs find themselves creating year-long waiting lists.

In order to survive in this harsh environment, each agency tends to create a wall around whatever resources it has managed to gather. Mary observes that in the heat of the struggle to protect what they have, agencies are likely to show resistance to initiatives which might result in “one of their kids draining our services.”

Still, when they are able to take a step back, most administrators will admit that their communities would be better served, and probably their own resources could be stretched farther, if everyone responsible for assisting a child and family took an equal share of the burden and worked together. But the problem is how to get started. Coordinating committees are designed to provide a way out of this impasse. They are a forum in which all of the stakeholders can work out their differences in an arena of limited risk.

Who should be on the coordinating committee?

The Children Come First Act requires that certain organizations be represented on the committee and makes participation by several other organizations optional. It also states that at least two parents of children with severe disabilities be part of the committee.

While the statute identifies the origins of the people to be recruited for membership, it doesn’t help staff or administrators decide on the particular people to be selected. Nor does it

describe the nature and extent of the portfolio each agency's ambassador will carry to the negotiations.

For a project to be effective and viable, the delegates to the committee must bring with them a sense of ownership and authority. Ownership means that they believe in the basic goals of the program. Authority means that they have been given sufficient power by their organizations to undertake or underwrite a reasonable portion of the work of the project.

A few groups designated under the statute have limited day to day contact with troubled youth. Organizations such as the voc tech district and the public health agency may wonder how meaningful their participation would be. They might be reminded that their fresh view points may be just what the committee needs. In addition, as problems with youth increase in our communities, few organizations and agencies remain untouched by the needs of these children and their families.

Some states look beyond the formal membership described in the Children Come First Act when developing local wraparound programs. They have found that input from clergy, neighborhood and cultural leaders, family advocacy organizations, business leaders and the agencies that administer public assistance and public housing have been extremely beneficial. What's more, as these auxiliary or associate members become better informed about the meaning and impact of integrated services, they become important emissaries to the greater community.*

Committee members need TLC

To be effective, all committee members need orientation, training and support. Some of the essentials include:

- *An introduction to the current array of services for children and families in the county.* Many of the people at the table will know about parts of what is going on, but there may be no one who knows everything, including how things are connected (or the barriers to connectivity). This is more information than can be delivered in one meeting. Staff to the committee might devote a portion of each meeting for the first few months to a systems overview.
- *An understanding of the strengths and needs of the children and families in the county.* This understanding requires both objective and subjective information. On the objective side, staff may want to assemble a report on the demographics of human services and educational needs in the community. How many kids are there all together in the county? How many are currently in special education programs at each age level? How many are in alternative care settings? How many are being hospitalized with mental health problems? What is the current rate of reports of suspected abuse and neglect being received by the county? What are the juvenile arrest rates and patterns? On the subjective side, the committee should hear from parents and children. What are the activities and programs that seem to be working? Where are their frustrations coming from?
- *An overview of the procedures for interagency collaboration, such as wraparound planning.* The goal of a Children Come First project is to improve our ability to help families with exceptional children stay together and to help the children of those families have a reasonable opportunity for success in their communities. The committee needs to learn about the specific services and techniques the project staff are using and the outcomes they are achieving.

* The committee may have to establish procedures to protect the confidentiality of families being served by the project when these additional support persons attend committee meetings.

- *A description of the requirements of the Children Come First legislation.* Since the committee will be integral to the implementation of the legislation in the county, it only makes sense that the members be provided with a detailed description of the procedures created by the statute and the roles and responsibilities assigned to the committee and other project components.
- *A thorough sense of the value and importance of equal family participation in service planning.* In many traditional programs, the role of the family in service planning and delivery was reduced. Wraparound planning starts with the strengths and needs of the child and family and then gathers the resources necessary to help them address their unmet needs. The elevation of family members to the forefront of the planning process often meets resistance. For this reason, the effort to give families voice, access and ownership in the project has to start with the coordinating committee.

The statute requires that parents be included on the committee, but it is up to the rest of the committee members and the committee's staff to insure participation by these parents. A variety of strategies may be used to accomplish this goal. First, the parents may need extra support, encouragement and instruction to feel comfortable with their role as full participants in the committee. Second, appropriate accommodations to parent involvement should also be made. Mary Grealish points out that parents are often the only members of community teams whose participation is not an aspect of their employment. In order to assure the participation of parents on teams, many projects are paying those parents an honorarium to help cover the cost of child care and transportation as well as to recognize the importance of their involvement. Teams also need to take the parents' schedules into account, just as they do those of the other members. Finally, committee members need to create an atmosphere of collegiality and respect that fosters participation. This is not the place for comments of the "we're the professionals, trust us, we know best" variety.*

Committees need meaningful work to do

The Children Come First Act requires the coordinating committee to prepare the interagency agreement, to make sure that the CCF project works in conjunction with and doesn't duplicate activities of other service coordination programs in the county and to review disagreements arising out of the delivery of services by the project. The Act also permits the committee to act as a funding consortium if the project wants to develop a managed system for funding, and to identify the target group for the project.

In addition to these basic duties, a coordinating committee can perform other important tasks. Its members can provide political advocacy. Often the people being served by the project are the ones least favored when resources are being divided up. A strong committee can be an important voice at school and county board meetings. The members can also help in creative resource development. Individual child and family teams may find themselves stuck when trying to come up with a workable plan of care. With the family's permission, case coordinators can bring the quandary to the committee. The members may have ideas about accessing additional resources or developing new kinds of services. Finally, the committee can be a tremendous source of encouragement for the staff and families involved in the project. Wraparound is hard

* Our state's parents support organization, Wisconsin Family Ties, provides training on supporting parent participation in coordinating committees and other community organizations. For information, contact Maggie Mezzera or Sherri Mahaffey at 608-267-6888.

work and every success needs to be celebrated. Sometimes the committee can do its best work just by throwing a party at the right time.

The more the committee is empowered, the more enthusiastic and involved its members will become.

Selection of the target group is a key committee function

One of the most important tasks available to coordinating committees under the Children Come First Act is the designation of the target group to be served by the collaborative care program. In defining this group, the members of the committee explicitly chooses how much exposure the project is willing to assume. This decision is based on an assessment of the strengths and needs of the community, but it will also depend on how much mutual trust exists among the participants in the project and the resources each has available.

Selection of the target group means more than identifying the children and families who need help the most, it also means choosing the people all of the members of the committee are willing to work together to assist. This process illustrates two of the key functions of the coordinating committee: choice and commitment.

Other important activities

Mary Grealish and John VanDenBerg have prepared a list of other early activities a community team might undertake. Besides setting priorities for service by choosing a target group, they include:

- *Create a structure for the meetings*, including how often they are scheduled, where they occur, who facilitates, how the agenda is set, etc.
- *Establish a communication plan* for insuring that all members and other involved parties know about the committee's proceedings and decisions. This might include the procedure for taking minutes, the development of a phone chain for getting out quick notices and a decision about a project newsletter.
- *Set up procedures for decision-making*. Will the committee decide by consensus, majority vote or some other standard? How will emergency decisions be made when there isn't time for a meeting?
- *Begin working on public relations strategies*. The community as a whole will have questions about the new project as will line staff and clients of the various child and family serving agencies in the county.
- *Determine what data will be collected and how*. An ongoing task of the committee will be reviewing outcome data from the project. Choices have to be made early on about what information to gather and what to do with it.
- *Assess possible barriers* to implementation of the project. The committee is in a unique position to predict upcoming problems the project may face as it develops. The skills and connections of the members should be tapped to prepare strategies for overcoming these problems.
- *Find ways to make unconditional care a reality*. Wraparound services operate on a no reject basis. The children and families who come to Children Come First projects have often been dropped from many other programs in the past because of their special needs. The

committee needs to work through what unconditional care means within the reality of the fabric of the community in which the project will be operating.

- *Develop a map of the county's service network.* Who do existing programs serve? Where is there duplication, where are the gaps? Where are the best places for establishing administrative agencies?

Wisconsin's counties are a treasure of diversity. The coordinating committees for our Children Come First projects are likely to be as unique as the communities they serve. Yet there are essential components that each committee will need in order to succeed. Two of the most important are honesty and flexibility. These are not times to gloss over the difficult problems we face as we work to meet the needs of children and families. Only through an open admission of our differences made in the context of a willingness to build bridges across them can the creative battlefields of our coordinating committees become the idea factories of the next century's systems of care.

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