

# **The Virtual Front Porch**

## **Creating a Sheltering Structure for Cross-System Collaboration**

by Patricia Miles and John Franz

### **Post-prandial profundity**

Six or seven of us were at a leisurely dinner after a day of workshops on cross-system integration. After the dinner dishes were removed and we were making small talk over desert and coffee, a friend of ours named Laura, who manages a private agency in a rural county, slapped the table and said, "I've figured it out. The biggest barrier to interagency collaboration is architecture."

Steadying his coffee cup, the gentleman to her left politely asked what she meant.

"No front porches," she said with conviction.

We nodded sagely, but stared back at her with blank expressions.

"Really," she said, "think about it. Forty or fifty years ago houses were built close together with front porches opening up onto the sidewalk. Now most houses are built with 8 foot privacy fences hiding their back yards."

"So?" several of us asked simultaneously.

"It's the same for us. Nice agencies, good people, but there is no way for anyone to be neighborly without going to a lot of trouble. We don't have any front porches."

To help with her explanation, she arranged dishes and cups into a simulation of a small city block. The silverware was the sidewalks.

"Think about when everyone had a front porch," she continued, "You could see what was happening up and down the block. You could holler across to anyone you needed to talk to. It was easy to keep an eye on the kids. Now, with everyone in their caged back yards, all you can do is leave a message on your neighbor's voice mail. And the kids can disappear in a minute - you have no idea where they've gone. We need to put front porches on our systems so we can have an easier time getting along with each other and keep better track of the children."

As we retrieved our desserts, some of us made fun of Laura's extended metaphor, but the image she suggested has stuck with us. We do need to find a way to support a sense of openness among our human service organizations. In this article we will describe how a system with front porches might operate, and offer 7 guide lines to help a community build a virtual front porch neighborhood to both shelter and encourage increased collaboration among service providers, consumers, government agencies and citizen stakeholders..

### **Running faster, and going ...?**

Sometimes it seems like we're working too hard at inter-system collaboration. In many counties there are dozens of interagency groups, struggling to find ways to work together. But

despite our efforts at cooperation, too often individuals, children and families who have complex needs still find themselves in the midst of interagency conflicts.

If it is this difficult, maybe we're going about it the wrong way.

One reason we found Laura's concept of the front porch so attractive was that it offered a different sort of metaphor for the help we provide. Generally, we draw our images for collaborative arrangements from either the world of sports or politics. We build community "teams" or interagency "committees". Perhaps our continuing dilemmas in sustaining effective cooperation can be linked to our symbols. Sports and politics are both enterprises which thrive on discord and competition.

If we want to bring harmony to our human service systems, we should find a friendlier way to envision them. Imagine that each agency in a system of care has a front porch, and that everyone can communicate from their front porch to everyone else's. The porch isn't the whole agency, but it is a flexible vestibule that combines openness with a little shelter. A place to start when a citizen, a consumer or a representative from another agency is feeling tentative, and a place for folks to come together to work things out informally. When something needs to be done, everyone in the neighborhood can see it, so they gather and get it done. Basically, we replace our interagency committees with block parties and our multi-disciplinary teams with barn-raising.

The question is, how can we combine the spirit of a barn raising with the practical demands of running an effective organization that is accountable to its customers, its funders and its employees?

### **Balancing structure and soul**

Successful initiatives are sustained by a creative tension between two opposing forces: structure, representing the demand for organization and reliability, and soul, symbolizing the need for vitality and creativity. Neither is sufficient by itself. Structure without soul leaves an enterprise lifeless and stultifying. Soul without structure invites chaos. Too much emphasis on structure in an interagency group and people stop coming to the meetings. Too much soul and the participants burn out.

In balance, both provide benefits. Structure provides a feeling of security and stability. Soul offers a sense of belonging and purpose. But achieving that combination is difficult. Pressure toward increased structure can come from researchers and regulators who want something tangible they can evaluate. This causes soul to be treated as ephemeral, ignored because it can't be counted. On the other hand, some inspirational leaders can get everyone so fired up that the housework is ignored. Reports don't get filed, budgets are inaccurate and the auditors get testy.

In fact, the spirit of an interorganizational effort is more than a will o' the wisp. You can see it at the end of a multi-agency meeting when a parent and an administrator come out talking animatedly with one another, still spinning off new ideas. And structure doesn't have to be a straight jacket. Think of the energy and staying power exhibited by staff who are part of a well-run, well-defined enterprise.

We can move toward an equilibrium by making sure that some of our structures are specifically designed to shelter the soul of an effort. An example is Laura's virtual front porch. We aren't proposing that you build an entire neighborhood with nothing but front porches. That would be like a Hollywood set with its false-front buildings. But we do believe that this

additional structure, joined with the existing edifices of our systems of care, can make it easier to maintain the critical spirit of informal sharing, that sense of hospitality, that is an essential ingredient of an effective collaborative effort.

### **It's the relationships, Bozo**

People make neighborhoods happen. The kernel for the growth of a neighborhood is usually a few folks who decide to act in a neighborly way. Gradually, simple hospitality becomes the order of the day for the larger group. We ignore at our peril the need to establish a forum in which positive relationships can emerge and be sustained.

Neighborhoods grow through ceremonies of welcoming. When new people arrive, those already present stop by to say hello. These greetings are frequently accompanied by a gift of a pie or loaf of bread. In addition, the common rituals of the neighborhood are explained. "There's usually someone home at our place. If you need anything, just stop over." Somehow it is easier to have these initial chats in the semi-public, semi-private space a front porch provides.

Hospitality can also help us select strategies for supporting cross system integration. A small group might begin the process by forming the core relationships. But instead of making their connections in a closed way, they open things up and establish protected, transitional spaces where tentative interactions can occur while trust builds. Here they welcome new members to the collaborative while explaining the group's purposes and practices. When those participating in a collaborative come from a wide range of backgrounds, such as family members, service providers, volunteers, community leaders, consumers, government officials, and others, the need increases for a highly flexible environment that can accommodate a wide range of styles and perspectives.

What often happens in unsuccessful collaborative efforts is that we try to compel the participants to cooperate without opening up the current framework of privacy fences between our organizations. People get double messages. Overtly they are told to be a part of an interdependent cross-system group, but covertly their agenda is to protect their organization's independence and isolation. As a result, these frustrating ventures tend to spin complex webs of apparent interagency structures whose true function is to hide a fundamental lack of trust. In order to build an effective front porch environment, we must remember that the point of the effort is the relationships that are formed and sustained.

### **Getting started: basic principles for building a virtual front porch neighborhood**

Although an effective interagency system requires a variety of protocols and structures for managing functions like joint intake and planning, flexible access to resources and shared accountability, none of these can provide the unique benefits offered by a congenial front porch environment. There gifts are shared, friendships are restored, essential yet unofficial communications are delivered and colleagues can work out the rough edges that threaten to dissolve the coalition. Yet too often we put all of our energy into the business aspects of collaboration, and leave the human element to chance.

Listed below are 7 principles for building a virtual neighborhood. They are drawn from the experiences of a successful, community-wide collaborative that developed in Stark County, Ohio, called the Family Council. Beth Dague, one of the founders of the Family Council, and its first executive director, uses these concepts to help other localities design their own structures to sustain effective relationships across organizational, disciplinary and participant role boundaries.

Her suggestions offer useful hints for cross-system strategies to balance form and substance, efficiency and hospitality.

1. *Remember to play to your system's strengths.*

Most reform efforts are reactions to problems and therefore based more on what's gone wrong than what's right in a community. In a front porch environment, each system's gifts, capacities and skills are considered, recognized and used as the foundation for the effort. Neighbors are aware of each others' skills and interests as well as their foibles and failings. In building an effective collaborative infrastructure, each system has to know what the other systems are good at and provide the flexibility to allow individual members to concentrate on doing the things which they do best so that everyone can contribute as much as possible to the success of the enterprise.

2. *You can be too inclusive. You can be too exclusive.*

Frequently, participants in a collaborative err by assuming that they have to hold off until all of the key players are in the room before they can begin working together. Some communities that started interagency efforts years ago are still waiting to get all the right people to come to their meetings. The neighborhood starts with whomever is willing to come out on their porches and say hello. The first group may be small, but often this is the most efficient way to get started. But for the neighborhood to grow, that nucleus of system integrators must maintain an inclusive agenda which welcomes and creates meaningful opportunities for participation by all the members of the community, including administrators, managers, line staff, customers, family members and citizen stakeholders.

3. *You have to learn to trust one another in order to take risks together.*

In order to be effective, collaborative structures generally must find ways to share money and power. But that is like saying that in a given neighborhood we all share Fred's hot tub. Fred probably doesn't want to share his hot tub with neighbors he doesn't know and trust. One mistake we often make in creating cross-system structures is to move to the last chapter before we know one another well enough to be comfortable taking a risk together. In order to share money and power (and hot tubs), interagency efforts must begin by building trust. This happens on a personal as well as a system level. Those who are designing or facilitating cross-system ventures must create time and space for the participants to work through the small trust transactions on which deeper relationships can be built. Ask yourself, "Do I know the names of the children of my counterpart from the other system?" If the answer is no, you may have some work to do before you are at the point where you can to share the uncertainty of intensive collaboration with one another.

4. *Walk a mile in each other's shoes.*

Trust each system and person's reality. One key ingredient for creating a neighborly collaborative is accepting the fact that each person and system's perception is real to them. Part of setting up the front porch environment is carving out sufficient common space for us to begin to create a collective reality. But it takes time. Second guessing the other guy is not helpful and does not contribute to the collective good. Trust that your partners at the table are speaking the truth as they know it and dealing with reality as they see it, even if it appears to contradict your

own. One way to put this principle into effect is to simply spend a day shadowing someone from another system, or walking through a system encounter with a consumer or family member.

5. *Relationships based on fun will get you through the tough times.*

In a front porch neighborhood, a balance exists between the need to have a good time and the need to come together to get a job done. Similarly, in the virtual neighborhood of system integration, we often overlook the need to have fun with one another. In order to build this capacity in the collaborative world, members of inter-system efforts must take the time to create opportunities for the participants to relax together. This might be a barbecue in the park, a dip in Fred's hot tub (assuming you have taken care to build the necessary trust), or a dinner with Laura. It would also include celebrating community mileposts in a more formal way. We always set time aside for work; we should also make room for play.

6. *Every community has it's non-believers: you have to learn to love yours.*

In real and virtual neighborhoods, not everyone will buy into the rituals of neighborliness. Some individuals will be less than enthusiastic about the collective process. In the pressure to establish collaborative structures, we can become judgmental and blaming toward individuals and agencies who initially chose not to join, or who don't jump in with both feet. This does little to help the non-believer eventually become more comfortable with the collective process. Accepting people and organizations where they are and leaving the welcome mat out is probably a better strategy. Consider this lesson from a neighborhood experience: if the kids want to play baseball in the one perfect yard in the neighborhood, they won't convince the owner of the yard to let them in by throwing eggs at her house. They have a better chance of securing her cooperation if they take the time to learn what she needs and how they can help her get it.

7. *Flexibility is an essential ingredient: find yours and build on it.*

Recognize critical moments in your developing relationships with other systems and capitalize on them. Inter-organizational associations, like friendships, don't follow rigid schedules. Our response to crises and other unexpected opportunities has a great deal to do with shaping the nature of a partnership. At the core, what holds us together is a common mission to meet the critical needs of the people in our community. While there are many ways to accomplish this mission, we have to be ready to move when the occasion arises.

Every individual, organization and system has flexibility, whether they acknowledge it or not. We improve our chances of successfully reacting to fortuitous contingencies if we take time in advance to identify where each of us is harboring some versatility and to bring it to the table. The question is, what else can we do, besides the obvious. The catalog won't be complete and we are always surprised when hidden strengths are revealed in ourselves and in our neighbors, but it provides a foundation. Sorting out the puzzle of the random gifts we all have to offer provides the first hint of the emerging whole which will surpass the sum of the parts we are contributing.

### **Moving metaphors and redesigning structures**

A cascade of implications flows from a decision to change our metaphor for help. On the practice level, we learn to approach individuals and families from the perspective of their strengths rather than through the litany of their vulnerabilities. This helps them reconnect with their

potential and begin to express it in new forms and settings, reframed contexts which have been established in part through a partnership with service providers.

On an organizational level, our changed perspective leads us to think in new ways about bridging the gap between the roles of help givers and help receivers in a community. If we are neighbors, sometimes we give help and sometimes we get it. To shift the metaphor of help, we have to go the next step and alter the way we perceive our service structures and systems. No longer are those identified as service providers doing something *for*, or *to* their clients, they are discovering ways of working *with* them to achieve positive goals, formed cooperatively.

At the administrative and inter-organizational level, if we adopt a different understanding of the connotation of help, we may also have to rethink what it means to manage services for the public good. Whether we are employed to deliver help, whether we do so as a volunteer or a friend of a person in need, or whether at the moment we are the person in need, each of us will do better in environments where our strengths are recognized and used more effectively and where we have the opportunity to develop and sustain effective relationships. And one way to establish that kind of atmosphere is to use the lessons of the front porch neighborhood to create structures which foster hospitality and trust both within and between organizations and between service providers and their direct and indirect customers.

Consider these propositions:

- Staff who are help givers will find it more difficult to create a sense of community for a child and family with complex needs if those staff do not themselves experience a sense of community in the environments in which they work and live.
- Helping staff cannot authentically witness and record a family's strengths unless they are given an opportunity to have their own strengths and assets witnessed in their daily lives.
- Help givers are far more likely to be able to share joy with a family they are serving if they are also able to experience the joy and tragedy which comes from being a part of a caring community.

### **Picking up the pieces**

Effective collaborative structures serve the essential purpose of supporting a virtual, inclusive neighborhood that not only gathers together but also enhances the strengths of all of its members, regardless of their roles. But for this climate of hospitality to emerge, the participants need to experience a sense of interconnectedness and mutual support.

We are suggesting that a first step toward this goal is to build front porches on each of our agencies and organizations. Then on a warm Sunday afternoon, maybe we can all get together at Fred's place, and, before we jump in his hot tub, sip a little lemonade, pull out the old six string and join in a ragged chorus.

Why, even now we can hear Laura's strong voice carrying the melody of an old Poco tune, waiting for the rest of us to add a little of that high country harmony:

“...we're bringing you back down home where folks are happy, sittin' pickin' and a-grinnin', casually, you and me, we'll pick up the pieces. ...Picnic lunches of yesterday should still have a place in your heart today. So think it over, because we'll all be going home so soon.

If you had the time to stay, would you sit yourself down and play country music, singing songs that we both knew? Oh Lord, I know that the day will come, when the both of us'll sit down and strum on our guitars. And you'll see I really am a lot like you."

"Pickin up the Pieces" by Richie Furay

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