

Human Services

Human services delivery systems are undergoing reform. Over the years, state and local human service agencies have grown compartmentalized, yet have overlapping roles and responsibilities. No single agency is able to serve the needs of the whole child, the whole family or the whole community. In recent years, states have tried various methods to reform their systems to achieve better outcomes for children, youth and families while improving cost effectiveness. Improving operations requires change—change in procedures, practices and performance. Achieving this kind of systems reform requires collaboration among state and local actors.

Here is an example of states making significant strides towards reforming their human services systems.

Building Consensus On Human Services Reform In Maryland

Problem

For more than a decade, Maryland struggled to find effective ways to deliver human services. From the Appalachian hills to urban Baltimore to farms on the Eastern Shore, each community in the state has a unique set of human service needs. Because of these diverse needs, boiler plate programs fashioned at the state level rarely turned out to be universally successful. So, while responsibility for services was being pushed from state to local governments, many policy and funding decisions were still made at the state level.

Back in 1988, a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation led to the creation of county-level Local Management Boards (LMBs) that brought together state and local government agencies, non-profits, businesses, service providers, advocacy groups, the faith-based community, and private citizens. These groups helped coordinate services at the local level, but did not exist in every county and were unable to achieve systems reform.

In 1996, the Governor's office created a Task Force for Children, Youth and Families Systems Reform to assess the effectiveness of services to children and families and the status of LMB efforts. The Task Force sought to eliminate

duplicate services, establish measurable results, and transfer decision-making authority to LMBs to ensure flexibility to meet local needs. They initiated a state-wide public involvement process to identify the outcome measures that the public wanted for children and families. Through the process they identified simple yet important outcomes, like 'Babies Born Healthy,' 'Children Enter School Ready to Learn,' and 'Stable and Economically Independent Families.'

Under the leadership of Lt. Governor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, the Maryland Partnership for Children, Youth and Families began working toward achieving these outcomes. This broad-based Partnership wanted to devise a system that was more responsive to local needs while also maintaining accountability for quality services. But how could the need for flexibility in addressing local problems be balanced with the state's need for accountability?

Process

Prior to the Partnership, the state had invited the LMBs to get involved in an outcome-based budgeting process. At first, the counties didn't respond. They feared the state might provide funding for just a few years, impose regulations, and then take away the funding. The state needed a way to sit down with the counties as partners, to establish trust and verbalize unexpressed expectations.

“Both sides thought the other had all the answers, but they weren’t sharing those answers,” reflects Colleen Mahoney, Partnership Coordinator. “The state kept looking to the locals and the locals kept looking to the state to make the first move. Neither side was accomplishing much on its own. It took working together on a level playing field to realize that we had to jointly develop the solutions.”

So with the help of the Casey Foundation, the state proposed to the counties that they sit down together to negotiate a state-county partnership agreement using an interest-based approach.

Five counties stepped forward to try the new approach. Each county prepared for the negotiations by outlining the critical concerns in their communities. Then, members of the state and county negotiating teams were selected who could address the specific issues. For example, if the community identified juvenile justice as an important area, the state would designate someone from the Department of Juvenile Justice to work on their team.

The teams attended a joint training session in interest-based negotiation. By the end of the training, teams had their workplans and were off and running. The actual negotiations consisted of each team identifying and sharing their interests. The state and county teams worked together to build agreement on desired outcomes, and the necessary budget and resources to achieve them. Then teams designed plans for implementing, managing, and monitoring the programs, giving special attention to ways that different groups could partner together to meet the outcome goals.

The culmination of each state-county negotiation was a Community Partnership Agreement—a legal document that serves as a Memorandum of Understanding between the county and the state. Because many of the state and local decision makers participated in the teams, gaining official approval of the agreement was a simple process.

Results

The Community Partnership Agreements have spawned several innovative programs at the local level. In Baltimore, they are creating cutting-edge after-school programs. In Montgomery County, they have designed a community-wide integrated strategy to stop juvenile violence. In Western Maryland, where unemployment is a significant concern, they are working with businesses and community colleges to give people the skills they need to find and keep jobs.

After strong successes in the first few counties, other counties have followed suit and are entering the negotiation process to reform their systems. And because of the good working relationships developed during the process, some of the initial counties are preparing to begin a second round of negotiations.

Lessons Learned

- Commitment from a state leader is essential to ensure that results from informal collaborative efforts get formal endorsement and support.
- State-local negotiations are especially effective when local entities are equal partners in setting the agenda. Locals are much closer to issues and problems and can best frame them.
- Joint training in interest-based negotiation enables both state and local negotiating teams to develop a solid framework for working collaboratively.

For more information on this case contact:

Mediation and Conflict Resolution Office for the State of Maryland
www.courts.state.md.us/adr.html
(410) 321-2398

For a training video that highlights this case and provides the details of how to run a collaborative process, contact PCI.



Kathleen Kennedy Townsend
Lieutenant Governor of Maryland

“Government, our non-profits, our businesses, our advocacy groups, and our private citizens have tremendous reserves of knowledge and energy. By bringing people together, we can make the most of what we know, and what resources we have, to help our families help themselves.”