



Municipalities & Nonprofits Collaborating for Social Change

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Social innovation across sectors is becoming increasingly important as new ideas are needed to resolve the social, cultural, economic, and environmental challenges facing communities. Social innovation can shift systems, generate high community impact and create much-needed social change. Fostering effective partnerships

across sectors is integral to collaborating for social change. True collaboration between nonprofits and governments can go beyond simply addressing community needs to focusing on creating transformative system change.



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Traditionally, the municipal–nonprofit relationship has been hierarchical in nature. A prime example is the purchase of service or contract relationship, where a government designs the program or service to be delivered and contracts with the nonprofit sector to deliver that program or service. The power imbalance that results from this hierarchical relationship has “implications for the daily interactions and decisions on both sides of the relationship.”¹ With this existing model for relationships, “a great deal of the potential in Ontario’s non-profit sector remains untapped... due, in part, to missed opportunities by the government to recognize, accommodate and partner effectively with the sector... and... [in part,] to the sector’s difficulty in effectively positioning itself as a valued partner.”² The traditional hierarchal relationship can stifle innovation and collaboration.

Rather, we must leverage our collective strengths as municipalities and nonprofits to achieve our common goal of meeting the needs of the people in the community. Partners who are voluntarily engaged in a collaborative project and who are committed to the project’s objectives “will accomplish more with a non-hierarchical structure.”³ Intentional partnerships, founded on mutual respect and collaboration, lead to stronger relationships between and across sectors. Through a collaborative partnership approach, the sharing of skills, resources, and ideas strengthens the community as a whole and opens the door to innovation, change, and growth. A collaborative partnership is one in which agencies work together to create a project and expend resources to implement it with no one agency claiming full ownership.⁴ These in turn lead to better community outcomes. The purpose of this article is to share the experiences of London’s Child and Youth Network in establishing and growing a collaborative partnership of government and nonprofit agencies with the ambitious goal of making transformational system change and tackling the economic, social and health issues facing many families and children in the community.

I. LONDON’S CHILD AND YOUTH AGENDA: A CASE STUDY OF A COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP

In 2007, 150 individuals representing 50 community agencies, serving children, youth and families, and the City of London, came together to form London’s Child and Youth Network (CYN). The CYN is a large scale collaboration of nonprofits and government, partnering to break down silos, increase communication, create a shared community and neighbourhood development strategy, and collectively measure community impact. Over a number of months, the CYN developed a common vision: happy, healthy children and youth today...caring, creative, responsible adults tomorrow. Following this vision, the CYN collectively developed local priorities for action. These priorities are captured in London’s Child and Youth Agenda to 2015 (CYA).

The CYA is a concrete action plan guiding CYN agencies to focus their collective efforts on the key priority areas of poverty, literacy, healthy eating/healthy physical activity, and creating a family-centred service. Over a three-year period, this organized group of peo-

ple worked together to make decisions, develop projects and programs, and to change the way services are delivered for families and children. Although the CYA is a long-term strategy, this partnership project is already affecting change in the community. By the end of 2010, London’s CYN was made up of more than 350 members representing 140 agencies and local experts. Organizations report movement beyond mere awareness of each other’s programs and services to greater communication and cooperation.⁵ Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion funding of \$340,000 was secured for the community as a result of the collaboration of multiple community agencies that worked together to develop four After-School Strategy funding proposals in less than four days. A number of Network members have aligned their organizations’ priorities with those of the CYN. Families and residents in target neighbourhoods are becoming engaged in the implementation of neighbourhood plans and test strategies and initiatives.

II. FOSTERING A COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP

There are substantial challenges for the practical implementation of cross-sectoral partnerships. An examination of partnerships in the United Kingdom indicates that a lack of understanding of institutional norms, as well as difficulties in sharing information, finding appropriate joint decision-making mechanisms, and finding appropriate and mutually acceptable governance structures are the challenges identified most consistently by partners from all sectors.⁶ A number of sources reference trust as a fundamental ingredient for a successful partnership.⁷ A review of land trust partnerships in the United States identifies a shared mission or common goal, flexibility, understanding, balance of power, compatibility, open communication, and commitment as key factors of a successful partnership. According to the Montreal police department, conditions for a successful partnership include: working as a team; respect of each partner’s organizational mission, expectations and limits; shared power, risks and responsibilities; joint investment; and encouraging stakeholder commitment and permanency.⁸ Trust follows mutual understanding and that trust is an “essential prerequisite of successful cross-sectoral relationships.”⁹

The collaborative partnership of the CYN embodies a number of these elements. The partnership is rooted in the belief that intentional and collaborative relationships, where the power relationship is balanced, are necessary to affect transformative system change. Trust and mutual respect and understanding are foundational principles of this partnership. Building on these, a shared vision and common goal, a formal framework, shared leadership, formal commitment, good communication, and joint investment have resulted in multiple partnerships that have increased the community’s capacity to tackle the critical economic, education, and health issues that are affecting children and families in the community.

BUILDING TRUST AND MUTUAL RESPECT

“It seems that time invested at the early stage of partnership...

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could help to avert later disputes and mutual distrust.”¹⁰ The early days of the CYN included the development of the foundational plan. This foundational plan began to address some of the barriers and challenges associated with implementing a collaborative partnership and, in doing so, laid the groundwork for trust and respect. The foundational plan includes a rationale for the establishment of the partnership, membership principles, vision and goals of the CYN, and the proposed outcomes, as well as high level expectations of members of the network.

Ongoing trust and respect is supported by the communication structure. The CYN has a formal communication structure that includes regular Network meetings in which information is shared and issues and ideas are presented for consideration and discussion. Formal meetings are held by the various subgroups that are included within the broader CYN. In addition to these formal meetings, informal meetings occur. Out of respect for the volume of messages that partners receive on a daily basis, emails to the broader CYN are sent only when the issue or item for sharing cannot wait until the next meeting.

COMMON GOAL AND VISION

In successful partnerships, partners “have a shared mission or direction and are enthusiastic about the expected outcome...because

it is important to them.”¹¹ The CYN’s vision was developed by consensus with all the partners involved in the development of the foundational plan. In addition to this vision, the CYN partners agreed to work together to transform the existing child and youth system from its disjointed, complex, and fragmented state to an integrated system, a system in which agencies and organizations work together so that their individual roles become less important than their ability to integrate skills and share resources collectively. The Child and Youth Agenda, a further refinement of the foundational plan, is community-driven: the needs were identified by the community and the solutions come from the community; families, agencies, governments and the private sector, working together.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY, LEADERSHIP AND COMMITMENT

“Government and nonprofits are mutually dependent in delivering human services” and “in mutually dependent relationships, it is critical that the balance of power be approximately equal.”¹² To lay the groundwork for a partnership where power is balanced, the Child and Youth Agenda includes concrete action steps and timelines. These provide the accountability framework and governance structure for all of the CYN members. The CYN has the shared responsibility for overseeing and implementing the entire agenda. Each member of the CYN was asked for a letter endorsing the plan and confirming their commitment to participate in the plan and do



their part to put the vision into action. On an ongoing basis, the CYN has established mechanisms for encouraging a balance of power. Projects initiated within the framework of the CYA must be endorsed by the CYN. Issues are brought to the CYN meetings or communicated to members between meetings in order to ensure discussion, joint problem solving, and decision-making. All CYN endorsed documents are branded with the CYN logo that was created by the CYN membership.

JOINT INVESTMENT OF TIME AND RESOURCES

“Regardless of the intended outcome of collaboration—whether its purpose is to get more funding, pool resources, or increase the spectrum of services—collaboration is complex, and to be successful, consumes money, time and resources.”¹³ In 2010, over \$1 million of direct and indirect/in-kind contributions were made by agencies and organizations in support of the CYN. In 2008, Municipal Council committed almost \$1 million to the implementation of the CYA. Community development training sessions have been delivered to members. This training (Active Creative Engaged communities) was delivered by a third party facilitator from Alberta Recreation and Parks as the model has proven to be successful. From the model, a locally developed Integration Assessment Tool (IAT) has been provided to all members, along with training to maximize the use of this tool. The IAT includes a package of “how to” resources that guide CYN members in conflict resolution, collaborative decision-making, facilitation and planning effective meetings.

The CYN and its various subcommittees are supported by internal staff at the City of London, and the implementation teams comprise a community partner and staff member. Project managers have been hired by a community partner to support each of the priority implementation teams and to support the network as a whole. The support of the project managers is key in coordinating the many partners and projects, preventing teams from working in silos, and reducing the potential for stagnation of projects and initiatives that may take longer than anticipated to develop and implement.

RIGHT PEOPLE, RIGHT PARTNERS

Committed and skilled leadership from the right people and right partners within the local government and nonprofits will impact the success of the collaboration and its capacity to create deep systems change.¹⁴ In 2007, the CYN was in its infancy. The Network recognized that everyone who should be part of the CYN was not yet at the table. Over a period of months, the CYN reached out to anyone committed to children and youth from a variety of sectors to ensure that the Child and Youth Agenda is community-driven and reflects community priorities. By 2010, the CYN partners included front-line and senior level representatives from over 140 organizations and from various levels within the City of London, including senior administration, and the Community Services Department. The next phase is to implement a relational marketing campaign targeting the broader community to become involved. The tools and resources developed for the CYN have helped members to identify what other stakeholders need to be involved along the way, for what purpose and for how long.

FORMAL AGREEMENTS

Formal framework agreements bring stability to partnership relationships by identifying common areas of co-operation and dele-

gation.¹⁵ The foundational document and the Child and Youth Agenda can be considered formal agreements that guide the relationship among CYN members. Further to these, the Integrated Assessment Tool package includes a partnership agreement template which the various partners complete and sign for each new initiative or project that is introduced. Despite having these formal agreements, the relationships between and among partners remain flexible and open to change and redirection. “Where do we go next” meetings and questions are posed along the way as projects end or come to an end, as new information and opportunities arise, and as the political context changes. The CYN operates using a consensus model and, at key milestones of the project, partners are requested to commit in writing to their role in implementing the various components of the project.

III. CONCLUSION

As London’s Child and Youth Network model demonstrates, municipalities and nonprofits that choose to work in collaborative partnerships, and who commit and invest the time and resources to establish and nurture relationships that are not hierarchical, can expect to experience positive system changes. The tools and approaches used by the Network to establish and grow the cross-sectoral partnership provide practical examples of ways to implement the core elements of an effective partnership. Successful partnerships, which lead to positive system changes, lay the groundwork for a more engaged, inclusive, and vibrant community with increased capacity to provide the services needed by an increasingly diverse community.

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MICHELLE BALDWIN is the Executive Director of Pillar Nonprofit Network. In her role, Michelle ensures that Pillar supports local nonprofits to fulfill their missions in the community by providing leadership, advocacy and support through professional development, networking opportunities, information-sharing and promoting volunteerism. Michelle was previously the Communications & Development Officer for Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada, Coordinator of Volunteer Services for Thames Valley Children’s Centre, working on the Board for London and Area Association of Volunteer Administration, VIP Sponsorship Committee member for Canada 2001 Games, committee member for the Ontario Network for the Canadian Volunteerism Initiative and committee member for the LHSC President’s Award for Community Service. Michelle has recently completed her Masters in Educational Psychology at the University of Western Ontario focused on the enablers and barriers of community for service for youth with disabilities.

