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MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Making a Brighter Future for Foster Youth in York County, Maine

The Network Approach and Its Emerging Role in Improving Opportunity for Youth Transitioning from Foster Care

by Jennifer Boes

In a local community meeting room in York County, Maine, a group of men and women of all ages and walks of life sit together in a circle sharing food and drink. Their conversation is animated, open and sociable. These individuals have been brought together by a common cause – helping local youth in foster care successfully transition out of the child welfare system. In the group are local community members including a detective, a foster parent, a professional woman with no children, a number of youth currently or formerly in foster care, as well as adults who work on the front lines of the child welfare system. All are actively participating in the process.

When a difference of opinion arises, facilitated discussion enables everyone to take a step back and talk over both viewpoints. In due course, a consensus is amicably reached. As a result of training and thoughtful conversation, the group is well aware of the essentials in building trust: taking the time to get to know one another; talking through all viewpoints and perspectives; and listening carefully to those who have intimate “grass roots” knowledge of the community.

Research has confirmed the same deduction: “Going slow” in the beginning to build trust and inclusivity will generate real results and catalyze positive change that includes community-based, lasting involvement in working with youth to locate affordable, safe, quality housing; stable employment; and reliable transportation, as well as the removal of barriers to education

and job training. The intentional nature of this approach supports high impact outcomes and strong working relationships.

As the meeting wraps up, everyone leaves energized. Each brings a unique perspective of the local community and has agreed to research existing resources in York County and communicate with others who might support the initiative. Members look forward to returning in a few weeks to share their progress on building community-based connections.

A Network in Action

The scene depicted above characterizes the open communication and collaborative spirit of the York County Collaborative, a group of organizations and individuals using the network approach to make a positive, widespread impact on the foster care system – in York County and beyond.

The network approach being employed in York County harnesses the power of inclusivity, connections, relationships and trust to affect significant and sustainable change – a level of change that cannot be achieved by any one organization alone.

The long term goal of changing the community landscape for youth transitioning from foster care can only be achieved if the community and youth together own the process and the results, factoring in already-existing resources, relationships and challenges.

This collaborative approach is being used by business, academia and nonprofits across the nation and world to challenge deeply entrenched global issues, ranging from poverty and public health to economic sustainability and growth.

In a true network, no one entity has more decision making power than another. Individuals and organizations with shared goals come together as equals to achieve a common purpose. Guiding principles and practices create a solid path to effective decision making.

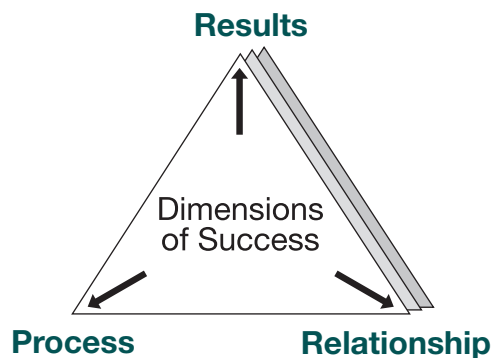
Networks are similar in structure to a spider web, with each intersecting point representing an entity within the network. Each connection point, whether it is an entity or individual contributor, brings value and resources to the network. Resources represent knowledge, financial support, wisdom, deep community connections or a passion for the cause that will help the network achieve its goal. Because networks are organized in a spider web fashion, the network will be highly responsive to emergent needs as relationships and commitment build over time. A need can be communicated quickly and the appropriate resources rapidly allocated with less emphasis on individual contribution and more focus on collective outcome. New connections are constantly being formed, and there is high tolerance for varying degrees of contribution among network members.

The network approach represents a shift from a linear driven way of getting things done to an inclusive, process-driven methodology, a significant change in the way we have historically worked toward reaching a desired outcome.

The network approach strives to transform communities from the inside out, placing equal measure on (1) the development of relationships within the network; (2) the creation of processes that establish how the

network will work together; and (3) the generation of sustainable results. The balanced nature of a network is often illustrated using an equilateral triangle. Without placing a parallel focus on relationships and process, the triangle will be thrown off balance and a network's ability to generate results will be adversely affected.

Process Relationships Results¹



The Issue: Youth in Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood

In 2008, almost 2,000 children and youth were served by Maine's child welfare system. Significantly, 449 children and youth were served in York County alone and approximately 50 percent of those cases were between the ages of 12 to 18.

Research on the outcomes of youth who transition from foster care to adulthood shows that these youth are typically at a higher risk for unemployment, illness, incarceration, welfare dependency, and sexual and physical victimization than their peers.² National studies show that only half of these young adults graduate from high school and even fewer (one in eight) graduate from a four-year college. Only 38 percent are employed, more than a third

leaving care suffer emotional disturbances and behavioral problems, and many experience homelessness at least once after leaving foster care.³

Each year, an average of 200 young people across Maine prepare to transition out of foster care, facing serious challenges and lacking the supports and resources needed to overcome them. The transition needs of these young people are many: education, job training, employment, physical and mental health, recreational opportunities, housing, transportation, financial literacy, community connections, and most importantly, lasting relationships with caring adults.

For youth in foster care, the seemingly ordinary challenges of transitioning to adulthood can become extraordinarily difficult to overcome. As one young person articulated, "It's impossible. How can you save money to find good housing if you are unable to get a job and don't have anyone to support you?"

There are services in place to aid them, but youth are often not able to utilize the full breadth of assistance available without caring adults to guide them.

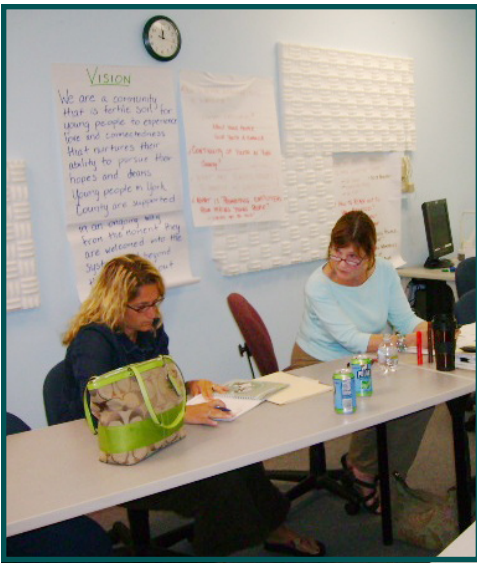
The York County Collaborative

In an effort to significantly improve the number of Maine youth formerly in care who enjoy stable, productive lives, a group of public and private partners – youth, community members, adoptive/foster parents, professionals from business, and organizations that work directly with at-risk

¹ "Dimensions of Success." *Interaction Institute for Social Change. Section 2: The Collaborative Social Change Agent. (Interaction Institute for Social Change, 2008)*

² Flanagan, C., Foster, M., Osgood, W., Ruth, G. *On Your Own Without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations (University of Chicago Press, 2006), available at http://www.transad.pop.upenn.edu/publications/woutnet_toc.htm*

³ Wertheimer, R., *Youth Who "Age Out" of Foster Care: Troubled Lives, Troubling Prospects (Washington, D.C.: Child Trends, 2002), available at <http://www.childtrends.org/PDF/FosterCareRB.pdf>*



Network members take the time to talk through all viewpoints and perspectives.

youth – has come together in York county to explore creative ways to support youth as they transition from foster care. Young people have a better chance of succeeding if they have strong support from their communities and if partners – both public and private – are informed of the needs of older youth in care by youth themselves. Thus, from the very beginning, it was critical to intentionally involve youth in how the work would be shaped.

Because the York County Collaborative is community-driven and community-focused, a number of the network partners knew each other from prior working relationships and were comfortable working together from the outset. As the network has progressed, the group has established a level of trust and rapport that supports openness and transparency, surmounting the natural predisposition to protect one’s own territory. They are able to put competitive tendencies aside and openly share individual abilities and knowledge for the greater good of the network.

Sharing credit and responsibility maintains trust, keeping excitement in the network alive. Partners remain engaged and ac-

tive because they feel they are part of the process and genuinely enjoy working together. They no longer see themselves as “I” but as “we.”

If successful, the York County Collaborative pilot will be used as a model to establish a series of community-level affiliate networks throughout Maine. It would have national relevance, transforming the way services are delivered to youth in transition from foster care throughout the United States.

Learning by Experience

Many new endeavors, particularly those that are highly creative, do not succeed the first time around, and what is initially perceived as a setback can often form the stepping stones to success.

The concept of the York-based network arose from an earlier effort to aid youth transitioning out of foster care in another Maine community of similar size. The effort served as an important hands-on learning experience from which many constructive lessons can be drawn, even though the attempt to convene a community network was ultimately not successful due to a limited understanding of the networks for social change approach.

In 2006, five organizations representing Maine’s foster care system, community-based and non-profit organizations, and business institutions, known collectively as the Maine Youth Transition Collaborative (MYTC), came together to create a community network.

Networking was a way of working together that represented a complete departure from all past collaborations. Though well intended, the group did not understand how to build a network nor did they have access to necessary training and facilitation to aid them in implementing the approach.

Falling back to a linear approach to collaboration, MYTC focused on generating results before establishing a common vision or process for working together, communicating, and making decisions. As the network attempted to move forward, this made it difficult to reach consensus and maintain productive working relationships within the group.

MYTC also did not seek involvement in structuring the network from the community it sought to assist. Having no frame of reference for initiating an inclusive approach, MYTC did not recognize this as a critical piece in building an effective network.

Those living and working in the community’s foster care system – individuals who would ultimately “own” the network – were not brought into the planning process. There was also little face-to-face contact with community stakeholders because all but one of the network partners were based more than two hours away in southern Maine. Finally, state-wide data was used to determine the direction of the network although state-wide trends did not reflect what was going on in that local community. As a result, MYTC had little knowledge of the local foster population and issues involving those youth currently or formerly in foster care.

Partners remain engaged and active because they feel they are part of the process and genuinely enjoy working together. They no longer see themselves as “I” but as “we.”

When it came time to present the network concept to locally-based stakeholders, the overture was met with confusion and wariness. With no grassroots involvement, the



York County Collaborative members review the guiding principles and practices of the network at every meeting.

local enthusiasm MYTC had hoped to generate had not taken hold.

Determined to address an important need, several of the MYTC organizations decided to use what they learned in their first community-based effort to set up a second network pilot in York County. This time, the group conducted an extensive external scan of the York County foster care youth population and its issues before moving forward.

As the region of Maine with the largest population of youth in foster care, York County was the site where a pilot network could make the greatest impact. In addition, York County possessed a highly engaged, progressive community involved in the foster care system that desired change and was ready to fully embrace a new way of tackling its issues.

Establishing a Knowledge Base

As groundwork for the second network pilot began, a significant advancement in the application of network theory within Maine was taking shape.

In summer 2008, Common Good Ventures, a Maine-based philanthropic organization that helps nonprofits become more productive, sponsored an extensive

training course in understanding and applying network theory. Nonprofit leaders and philanthropists from throughout the state were invited to participate. Common Good Ventures hoped that, through knowledge transfer, networks could help Maine organizations achieve more sustainable solutions to social and economic issues. The training was led by the Interaction Institute for Social Change, an international leader in applying collaborative strategies to affect social change.

Through the training, participants found a model that provided a clear pathway for applying the network approach as well as language that enabled them to discuss it clearly.

The York County Collaborative conveners saw this as an ideal opportunity to glean the know-how they needed to bring the network together and build relationships with experienced network practitioners who could help guide them through the process.

The conveners then approached Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) staff working in the local com-

munity – individuals who had face-to-face contact with York County youth in foster care and their families – and invited the local DHHS team to go through the training with them.

Laying the Framework

Through the training, participants found a model that provided a clear pathway for applying the network approach as well as language that enabled them to discuss it clearly. Armed with a much greater understanding of how strong networks operate, the conveners and the York County-based DHHS began assembling a planning team.

Thanks in part to the local DHHS's connectivity with the community, a broad and varied group of stakeholders were assembled, and participants began to see how the model could work. Passion and excitement began to build.

With the planning team in place, the York County Collaborative then spent more than six months developing a process for working together:

- A clear vision and values were established. Conveners collectively addressed:
 - Where are we?
 - Where do we want to be?
 - How do we get there from here?
 - How will success be measured?

The vision and values are reviewed at every meeting so that the intent and purpose of the network remains fresh and clear in every partner's mind.

- Governing principles were also set forth. Since youth in foster care are at the heart of the network, partners have agreed that no meeting will be convened without youth currently or formerly in foster care being present. Although this is often

a challenge because of work and school commitments, the network has unfailingly adhered to the rule, meeting at non-traditional times, working around youth commitments, and providing transportation when necessary.

- Communication “rules of engagement” were structured to encourage a culture where people are comfortable sharing their thoughts. Everyone’s input is valued and taken seriously. Regardless of their age or rank outside the network, partners can feel confident they will be heard. If someone is unclear about an issue being discussed, he or she can stop the conversation and the topic will be revisited until all feel clarification has been reached. The network is also committed to total transparency. Everything is discussed openly with the entire network having an opportunity to contribute.

- Steps for resolving conflict and making decisions were put in place to protect group trust, the glue that holds the network together, and to help partners reach consensus fairly and equitably. When a conflict arises, partners talk it out until it is resolved, no matter how long that takes. Consensus is reached when 80 percent approve a decision and the remaining partners agree they can live with that decision. Similarly, decisions are reached through group discussion and no decision, no matter how small, is ever made outside of the group.

Now that time has been taken to generate understanding about its vision and develop a process for working together, the York County Collaborative is systematically convening larger groups of stakeholders into the network to design an action plan.

After thoughtful planning, invitations were recently issued to additional community members who possess the knowledge, relationships and/or pas-

The network approach is very different from other methods of collaboration because it puts a strong focus on building relationships and developing processes, even as it expands to include a broad array of stakeholders. Many collaborative efforts start with great promise, but that initial energy often ends up fizzling out because of dependence on one entity to move things forward.

sion to address the issues that matter most to the Collaborative. Most accepted the opportunity to join the network, expanding the input, resources and commitment necessary to achieve lasting results. Additionally, the York County Collaborative recently joined with the only other York County-based community network to create and fund a paid position to support the work of both networks. This role, appropriately titled a Weaver, provides dedicated support to build the community awareness, relationships and commitment essential to achieve lasting results.

In time, the state-wide organizations that convened the network hope to pass the torch to community-level individuals and groups. They will then continue their vision of establishing other networks focused on assisting youth in foster care throughout the state, using York County as a model.

Closing Thoughts

The network approach is very different from other methods of collaboration because it puts a strong focus on building relationships and developing processes, even as it expands to include a broad array of stakeholders. Many collaborative efforts start with great promise, but that initial energy often ends up fizzling out because of dependence on one entity to move things forward. In a network, there is no central point of control. Many individuals hold the

key so if one individual drops out, someone can step in and fill void.

The network approach is an extraordinary way to reassert the value of relationships and re-build close-knit communities. As the understanding and practice of the network approach continues to grow, it has the capacity to transform the way all of us work together in every facet and every field. It can drive a more holistic approach to problem solving, empower us to think more creatively about how to maximize resources, and give us the power to drive widespread positive change at a level many had not thought possible before. ■

This article was sponsored by Maine Network Partners and Common Good Ventures. For further information about the Maine Youth Transition Collaborative, contact Maggie Vishneau, the Muskie School of Public Service, at vishneau@usm.maine.edu.

About the Author

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