

MAINE VOICES

Network meets need: Helping youths grow out of foster care

A York County endeavor is but one example of how to build partnerships to achieve common goals.

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PORTLAND — A movement to transform the way we approach problem solving is taking place in Maine. At the heart of the movement is Maine Network Partners, a collaborative of funding groups and nonprofits using the network approach to help organizations achieve greater impact.

Through the network approach, individuals and organizations with shared goals come together as equals to achieve a common purpose. This is different from other collaboration methods because it puts a strong focus on building relationships and developing processes.

Research supports the networkers' premise that investing time in building trust and inclusivity will generate sustainable results and positive change.

The York County Collaborative is one of several new Maine networks in the process of building a foundation for working together. This pilot network is exploring ways to better support youth transitioning from foster care in York County, which has Maine's largest foster care population.

If successful, it will serve as the model in establishing affiliate networks around the state with the potential to transform the way services are delivered to transitioning youth.

The York County Collaborative was created as a result of relationships initiated through the Maine Youth Transition Collaborative (MYTC), a partnership facilitated by the Muskie School for Public Service.

Organizations and individuals representing Maine's foster care system, nonprofits and businesses are all part of the network, working together to better understand and address a critical need.

About 156 Maine youths prepare to transition out of foster care each year. Their needs are many: education, job training, employment, health care, housing, transportation, financial literacy and community connections. There are services to aid them, but youth are often not able to navigate the system without guidance.

MYTC recognized changing the landscape for these youth could only be achieved if all stakeholders, including foster youths themselves, were involved in creating the process. The network approach provided the framework to make that happen.

A thorough analysis of the current foster care environment was conducted, ensuring existing resources, relationships and challenges were factored into the project. Public and private partners were then convened to begin laying the foundation for the pilot.

At the same time, a significant advancement in the application of network theory was taking shape. In summer 2008, an extensive training course in applying the theory was hosted by Common Good Ventures, a Maine Network Partner. The training was led by the Interaction Institute for Social Change, an international leader in collaborative strategies.

Network conveners and York County-based state Department of Health and Human Services staff went through the training together. Now armed with a solid understanding of how strong networks operate, conveners began assembling a broader planning team with coaching from Common Good Ventures.

A diverse group of stakeholders – law enforcement officials, foster parents, current or former foster care youths and those on the front lines of the child welfare system – was tapped to participate.

The network approach represents a shift to a process-driven way of getting things done, a significant change in how we have worked toward outcomes. For the approach to be successful, organizing the flow of information and resources as well as building trust between entities with diverse goals takes intentional design.

The network spent more than six months developing a process for working together. A vision and values were established. Rules of engagement were structured to encourage people to share openly. Steps for resolving conflicts and making decisions were put into place. Governing principles were also set forth: Since youths currently or formerly in foster care are the heart of the network, no meeting is convened without them.

Partners are now designing an action plan, a step that must be completed before work can begin. Additional community members who possess the knowledge, relationships and passion to pursue the network's vision have been invited to participate.

Endeavors of this scale are not achieved overnight, but investing time in the process gives us the power to drive positive change at a level many had not thought possible before. As the practice of the network approach progresses, it has the capacity to transform the way we work together.

To read more about the York County Collaborative, go to www.nonprofitmaine.org/networks_for_change.asp.

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