

We are pleased to publish two articles from the Stronger Families Fund projects that explore the theme of working in collaboration with multiple agencies.

The challenge of working collaboratively

The City of Onkaparinga is the largest local government region in South Australia with an estimated 145,000 residents covering 518 square kilometres. Pockets of socio-economic disadvantage are scattered through the region with some suburbs having higher proportions of low-income families, one-parent families and Indigenous families. The Pathways Family Centre is located in such a suburb.

The *Pathways for Families* project started four years ago with a group of service providers discussing the needs and gaps that existed for families with high needs, recognising that mainstream services were often ineffective in reaching and maintaining working relationships with those families.

A multi-agency steering group was formed and community consultation undertaken to inform the development of the project. Subsequently a project proposal obtained Stronger Families Strategy funding. The steering group comprises representatives from collaborating agencies (see boxed inset) working together to deliver the project. Noarlunga Health Service auspices the project.

The primary target population for Pathways is families with at least one child aged 0-5 years living in the Onkaparinga region, and experiencing challenges that impact on child and family wellbeing. Some programs and activities will be open to families with older children.

Goals of the project

Pathways for Families has five goals: to enhance the physical, social and emotional development of children (0-5 years) living in families where multiple factors may impact on child development; to strengthen families – that is, to improve relationships and enhance skills for family living; to improve “life course” outcomes for parents; to increase the capacity of the community to support children and families with complex needs; and to

ALISON KING AND GILL WESTHORP explore the positive elements and the challenges of working collaboratively with multiple agencies in the context of the *Pathways for Families* project in the City of Onkaparinga region, South Australia.



The Pathways for Families steering committee meet in Noarlunga, SA.

establish and maintain a high quality, multi-agency program to meet the needs of children and families in the target group.

How these goals are being achieved

An unused kindergarten building is currently being renovated and is expected to open in early May 2004 as a Pathways Family Centre. This will be the hub of the project's activities.

The project steering group has developed the concept of an integrated program with multiple components. Ideas for the second term in 2004 are: welcome to Pathways sessions; a baby playgroup; supported playgroups for 1-4 year olds; open drop-in mornings; fathers' breakfast sessions;

lunchtime food sessions; parenting support sessions (topics yet to be selected); children's birthday parties; and family fun days.

Parents and carers may self-refer or be referred by an agency. Following an initial interview, participants will choose the aspects of the program that will support them to meet their own goals. Staff will support parents' and children's participation and develop coordinated referral pathways between agencies to enable individual needs to be met.

The opportunity for parents and community members to participate in the running of the Pathways project is an important part of the program. A Community Advisory Group will enable parents and community members to participate in the development and implementation of the project. A volunteering program will provide opportunities for participants to gain further skills and experience, and will involve the broader community. These opportunities may open pathways to further community involvement, training, education and employment later on.

In order to strengthen the local community in supporting families Pathways will support and facilitate community development projects with the local community.

AGENCIES IN COLLABORATION FOR PATHWAYS FOR FAMILIES

City of Onkaparinga
Noarlunga Health Service
Anglicare
Uniting-Care Wesley
Child and Youth Health
The Smith Family
Relationships Australia – SA
Family and Youth Services
Department of Education and
Children's Services
Child and Adolescent Mental
Health Service



Working in collaboration

The fifth of the Pathways Project's goals – to establish and maintain a high quality multi-agency program – requires the participating agencies to work collaboratively. So far the agencies have been working together to develop the project concept, incorporate community consultation and participation, develop the project proposal and develop the strategic plan and evaluation framework.

There have, of course, been strengths and difficulties in the work so far.

Strengths

The primary strengths of working collaboratively are:

- a shared commitment amongst all Steering Group members to work for the benefit of families and children, and to use a strengths-based approach;
- the scope of expertise, skills and experience that is available to the project from the different workers and agencies;
- a shared commitment to try new ways of working, and to find approaches which complement, rather than duplicate existing services;
- strong relationships based in genuine respect and mutual liking amongst participants in the Steering Group; and
- a willingness to work through challenges as they arise.

Even with all the good will in the world, working collaboratively isn't easy. There have been a number of challenges involved, as well.

Challenges

Use of language. The same words mean different things to different people – often without them even realising that's the case. To use just one example, the "community" in "community participation" might mean: any local resident or "members of the priority target group for the service only"; it might cover a geographically restricted area – or not; it might include or exclude service providers. "Participation" might mean using services, or contributing ideas, or being involved in decision making, or being totally responsible for decisions. Similar differences apply to many of the words that have been used in the planning process ("family", "community development", "strengths-based", "early intervention", "integrated service", and so on.)

Consequently, members of the Steering Group may think they've reached agreement, only to discover that they have "agreed to" quite different things. When members identify and try to sort out those "disagreements", some people find the process helpful; others find it frustrating and unnecessary.

Philosophical stance. Members of the Steering Group bring their own beliefs and values to the process. This is both natural and a "positive" when it's used well, but it carries the potential for fundamental disagreements. A number of members have commented individually on their perceptions of "a philosophical divide" in the group. The group as a whole has not yet discussed this or worked out whether that divide needs to be addressed, and if so, how to do it.

Building and maintaining community participation. The planning process has been a long one, and maintaining participation by community members who do not work for services has been challenging. Early consultation processes resulted in a couple of working groups, which took on, and successfully managed, some community events. The biggest of those have now been handed on to other community organisations and are ongoing, but the volunteers who worked on them have either "gone with the events" or have dropped out over the years. A small handful of community members have borne the brunt of participation in the Steering Group and it will be necessary to rebuild community participation in the work of Pathways over the next few months.

Decision-making. Inter-agency decision-making is complex. Some Steering Group members have the authority to commit their agencies to decisions; others have to check back with more senior staff and report back. That can slow down decision-making, and therefore impact on what is possible. For some agencies, decision-making can respond to local needs; for others, local decisions are required to fit in with "consistent service provision across the State". And then there are all the decisions about decision-making: Should decisions be made by consensus or by democracy? Is that the same for all decisions, or are there a few which are so important that consensus matters, while "majority rules" will do for others? Which decisions should be made by whom?

Practicalities. As we progress closer and closer to implementation we encounter more and more questions to consider. Collaboration is more than just co-location. Practical issues such as OH&S responsibilities, staff accountability, information management, data and record keeping have been a few to consider so far.

How do we manage these challenges?

Lengthy discussions are required to work through differences that arise. Many workshops have been held during the project's evolution. To help reduce the time demand at Steering Group meetings, working groups have been formed (for example, Programming Group, Implementation Group, Volunteering Group, and Evaluation Group) to work through specific issues and develop recommendations for the Steering Group.

A draft Governance Model identifies lines of accountability between the Project Team, Steering Group, Working Groups, Community Advisory Group, the auspicing agency, and the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services. Terms of reference are required to outline the purpose, membership and responsibilities of each group. The establishment of Service Level Agreements with each partner agency is another strategy that will be used to keep the lines of responsibility and commitment clear.

The development of the strategic plan has been a time for project members to be specific and define the target population, confirm aims, goals and objectives. The Strategic Plan becomes the map to keep us all together and heading in the same direction.

Conclusion

There is a general consensus that working collaboratively with a number of agencies at *Pathways for Families* is both an exciting and challenging project to be involved in. The aim of enhancing the wellbeing and development of children is the common thread that unites all the agencies to provide a new and effective service for children, families and the community.

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