

Fragmentation in Social Services *An Interactive Exercise*

Thomas A. Bryer, PhD
Director, Center for Public and Nonprofit Management
School of Public Administration
University of Central Florida
thomas.bryer@ucf.edu

Introduction

Gaining access to an array of social services needed to regain self-sufficiency can be challenging, depending on where the individual or family in need of service initiates their search. Presenting a request for goods or services at a small faith-based organization, food bank, or job training center may result in a very different set of outcomes than if a request is first presented at a local government agency, local United Way, or mental health facility. The primary factor that will lead to differential outcomes is the variation in referral relationships between agencies. That is, one agency—a local government social services agency, for instance—might have a comprehensive list of service providers and may even provide case management to assist the individual or family in need secure the required services from the appropriate agencies. On the other hand, a small faith-based organization may be able to provide for immediate food or clothing needs but may not have other community relationships necessary to provide for shelter, job training, mental health, child education, or substance abuse issues.

One means to understand the complexity and difficulty of accessing required services is to examine the *referral network*. That is, who is referring clients to whom and for what kinds of service. As an example, in 2011, I conducted an analysis of referral relationships among government, nonprofit, and faith-based agencies in a Central Florida county. To put the relationships in context, I provided a short scenario to survey respondents:

An in-tact family with two children (aged 5 female and aged 12 male) lost their home to foreclosure. They have been living week-to-week in a motel but are out of money and can no longer stay. The husband lost his job but has been working 30 hours/week as a parking attendant at a private parking garage, earning the minimum wage. They do not have health insurance; currently the wife has diabetes and has not seen a doctor since the husband lost his job. She needs follow up care.

In the survey, respondents were asked to identify first what services they offered to assist this family, and second to identify the agencies to whom they would refer this family for additional service. The result, as anticipated, was a visual demonstration of a referral network that was not cohesive and fragmented. The implication: for a family seeking services, it was largely a matter of chance as to whether they entered the service delivery network at the “right place” to gain access to all they needed to become self-sufficient and to escape homelessness.

Networking Exercise for Homeless Services

This exercise is intended as an interactive experience for twelve to twenty people (broken into groups of three to five). More participants are possible, though adding participants would require additional supplies. Supplies required are:

- A room of adequate size for twelve-plus people to walk around, place string on the ground or affixed to furniture. The room does not need to be empty; desks and tables can be placed throughout the room without design.
- Four colors of yarn or string (more if additional teams are created beyond four).
- A roll of scotch tape for each team
- One copy of the scenario (below) for each team
- Four copies (if four teams) of each “agency instruction sheet” (below) to be placed at each agency station
- Agency name sheets on white paper, taped randomly to the wall around the room.
- Cover sheets numbered 1 through 13. Note use colored paper to cover over and conceal the agency name sheets. Do this setup before participants enter the room so they do not see the agency name sheets underneath the cover sheets.

Instructions

Distribute the scenario and instruction sheet to each team. Give teams 10-15 minutes to respond to the question, which is intended to facilitate participant thinking regarding the complexity of needs and services required by the family portrayed in the scenario.

After the exercise is completed (up to 30 minutes after the initial 10-15 minutes to respond to the question), lead a discussion with the following suggested questions:

1. What service needs on your list were not met?
2. Did you find services that you needed that were not on your list?
3. From your user/client perspective, how seamless/smooth was it as you moved from place to place?
4. Look at the pattern of strings on the floor. What are your observations?
5. If you could start again knowing what you do, which agency would you go to first? Why?
6. How do you strengthen this network?

The visual outcome of the exercise will be jumbled and intersecting strings, running the length of the room, and moving back and forth, side to side across the room. Some teams will very quickly, by chance, find the one agency that provides case management. For those less fortunate, they will experience a tremendous amount of moving around with few of their needs met. Sample pictures are on the next two pages, followed by the required instruction sheets to use in the exercise.





Exercise Scenario and Instructions

An in-tact family with two children (aged 5 female and aged 12 male) lost their home to foreclosure. They have been living week-to-week in a motel but are out of money and can no longer stay. The husband lost his job but has been working 30 hours/week as a parking attendant at a private parking garage, earning the minimum wage. They do not have health insurance; currently the wife has diabetes and has not seen a doctor since the husband lost his job. She needs follow up care.

Break into teams of 3-5 people.

Question

1. List the services the family should access to become self-sufficient and to create opportunities for self-advancement.

Activity

Each team will be assigned a color. As a team, walk to one of the stations placed around the room (numbered 1-13). Once there, wait for the instructor to uncover the name of the place you chose. Pick up one of the instruction sheets for that place, and follow the directions received there. As you walk, use the string you are given to mark your path; use tape provided to secure the string at each stop you make.

Agency Instruction Sheets

(Note: Reproduce each set of instructions on full sheets of paper, or on smaller sheets. There should be one copy for the number of teams participating, as the teams will take the instruction sheet if/when they visit that location. The Mega-Church will have two instruction sheets).

SCHOOL DISTRICT

- Your children are educated about a federal law that permits them to stay in the same school and not move to a new location.
- You are given some emergency food and a change of clothes for the children.
- You are given the contact information for a homeless shelter in the community

Action: Proceed to the homeless shelter.

HOMELESS SHELTER

- Good news! The shelter has space available. However, your family needs to be split up. The male child is too old to stay with his mother and sister and must go to a men's shelter with his father. The family splits apart for the night.
- You are provided a meal.
- You are told the rules of the shelter:
 - You can only stay for 30 days
 - No drinking or drugs are permitted
 - There is a strict curfew, unless you have a job that requires your being out over night.
- You are given a list of resources. Choose where you want to go, and go to that location:
 - Nonprofit specializing in job training
 - School district to learn about assistance for your kids

COUNTY OR CITY GOVERNMENT ELECTED OFFICIAL

- The elected official cannot provide anything to you directly. You are directed to the county or city human services office. Proceed there.

MEGA-CHURCH IN THE COMMUNITY 1

- You are given food and a change of clothes.
- You are referred to a homeless shelter and told to come back to the mega-church the next day after you rest. Go to the shelter and return, or choose not to return.

MEGA-CHURCH IN THE COMMUNITY 2

- You had a good rest.
- Now you are referred to a nonprofit specializing in job training, a free medical clinic, and the United Way to learn about other services that might be of benefit. Go to each of these places, and return to the Mega-Church after each visit. They have volunteers who are keeping track of your progress and will make sure you stay on track. Be sure to follow the leads from each of the agencies you visit as well.

SMALL CHURCH IN THE COMMUNITY

- You are given food and a place to rest.
- The church has no other place to send you. You decide to go to a local park to seek food and money from passers-by.

FOOD PANTRY

- You are given food. There is no other assistance for you. You choose to appeal to a friend or family member for assistance.

NONPROFIT SPECIALIZING IN JOB TRAINING

- The father is given access to job training services and assistance for job placement. This might take a while, though.
- You are referred to the local food pantry for food.

POLICE

- You are given a card with phone numbers for a homeless shelter, the county or city human services office, and a food pantry. Choose one place to go.

UNITED WAY

- You are given a card with address and phone number information for a homeless shelter, a job training facility, and a free medical clinic. You are urged to go to the homeless shelter, but the medical clinic is important for you. Choose where to go.

FREE MEDICAL CLINIC

- The mother is treated and given medication for her condition. You need to return here after you visit the next place you go for follow-up care.
- You are told to visit the United Way for further assistance.

COUNTY OR CITY HUMAN SERVICES OFFICE

- You are assigned a case worker who will walk you to the following locations:
 - Homeless shelter
 - Free medical clinic
 - School district
- You can choose to leave the case worker at any time as you travel with her. If you leave the case worker for any reason, you can return to the county or city human services office to get back on track.

LOCAL PARK TO SEEK FOOD AND MONEY FROM PASSERS-BY

- You are given a few dollars and a meal for everyone in the family.
- The police approach you and demand that you accompany them to the police office.

FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER

- You are given food and a change of clothes, and a place to sleep for a couple of nights. But there is not enough room for your family.
- You go to a local park to seek food and money from passers-by.