

Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families

Efficiency Report

November 2008

MISSION

The Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families works to strengthen member agencies and promotes attitudes, practices and conditions that contribute to quality services for vulnerable children and families. We achieve our mission by:

- ✓ Creating a network of agencies for information sharing, social policy development and advocating on behalf of service providers
- ✓ Working to resolve social policy issues in collaboration with various stakeholders
- ✓ Developing professional service excellence
- ✓ Representing the interests of member agencies on regional and provincial committees

Introduction

The *Administrative Efficiency Project Report* completed by Jim Taylor of Rolyat Corp. Ltd. (2008) presents some interesting recommendations, challenges and questions for the Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families (AASCF), its member agencies and for the Alberta Ministry of Child & Youth Services (ACYS). This AASCF report is a response to those recommendations. It helps us ask questions about the role(s) of AASCF and how we can assist with some of the efficiency and effectiveness challenges to create greater value in the non-profit sector and for government and especially the children and families we serve.

Literature Review

A review of the relevant literature was completed for the *Administrative Efficiency Project Report* (Taylor, 2008) by Wood's Homes' research department. That review focused on best practices in interagency collaboration specifically on reducing administrative costs. They then looked at other factors that are associated with reducing administrative costs for example cooperative approaches like insurance pools and other resource sharing ideas. The review considers activities that may impact the success or failure of collaboration. Looking at partnerships and their strengths and challenges is a significant area for further research. The literature review and the Report, point to the importance of not duplicating services, utilizing collaborative methods to secure funding, and improving services to clients and communication in order to create opportunities to reduce costs (Taylor, 2008, Pg C6).

Efficiencies or synergies that AASCF proposes to support it members

What can the AASCF do to assist member organizations with efficiencies and synergies?

Further research was conducted, a discussion at a membership meeting in September 2008

occurred and a survey was completed in October 2008 asking members about their ideas of how AASCF could assist with efficiencies. These consultations and additional research identified the following issues and possible solutions as priorities:

1. Wages / Staff recruitment and retention;
2. Strategic Restructuring including collaborations and partnerships;
3. Research for best practices, capacity building, sustainability strategies, training and professional development; and
4. Social Enterprise and Group Purchasing

1. Wages/ Staff recruitment and retention

According to our members, their overwhelming concern is funding levels. They express that over the past fifteen to twenty years there has been an increasing strain on agencies in the child and family services sector. The child and family intervention system has undergone massive changes in Alberta during this time. Underfunding, increased needs for services and rising costs all threaten to reduce quality service needed to sustain a vital social safety net for children and families. The agencies state that they are increasingly unable 'to do more with less'. This has created the need for more imagination and collaboration within the sector. The AASCF is in a position to provide support, guidance and information to sustain needed programs.

An area of significance is the wage and salary issue. Incompatible wages are leading to a significant turnover rate, inexperience in the field and potentially decreased quality of care. The efficiency issue here is that the staff retention and recruitment activities are time consuming for human resource personnel, managers and supervisors. The human resource activities including: advertising, screening and interviewing for potential staff is extremely time-consuming and costly. Furthermore the added training and supervision of these staff, once hired, adds to the burden. Agencies suggest that if wages are higher, the turnover rate would drop and the issues caused by staff turnover would decrease. AASCF continues to work on staff retention and recruitment issues in a number of ways.

AASCF can assist by:

- *Posting job opportunities on our website at no cost to members (included as membership privilege);*
- *Provide front line training at a low cost;*
- *Connect agencies with similar human resources issues to develop shared training and recruitment strategies;*
- *Encourage students to view job opportunities, and develop strategies to make sure students are aware of AASCF;*
- *Building relationships with colleges and universities;*
- *Participate on the HR subcommittee of the Alberta Non-profit and Voluntary Sector;*
- *Explore the viability of a provincial non-profit workforce council;*
- *Discuss, develop and research strategies for leaders to address chronic staffing shortages;*
- *Advocate for and discuss underfunding issues with the Ministry Child & Youth Services, businesses, politicians and the general public in a planned and strategic manner; and*
- *Continue to review and share literature, survey members to make sure we are targeting the correct issue.*

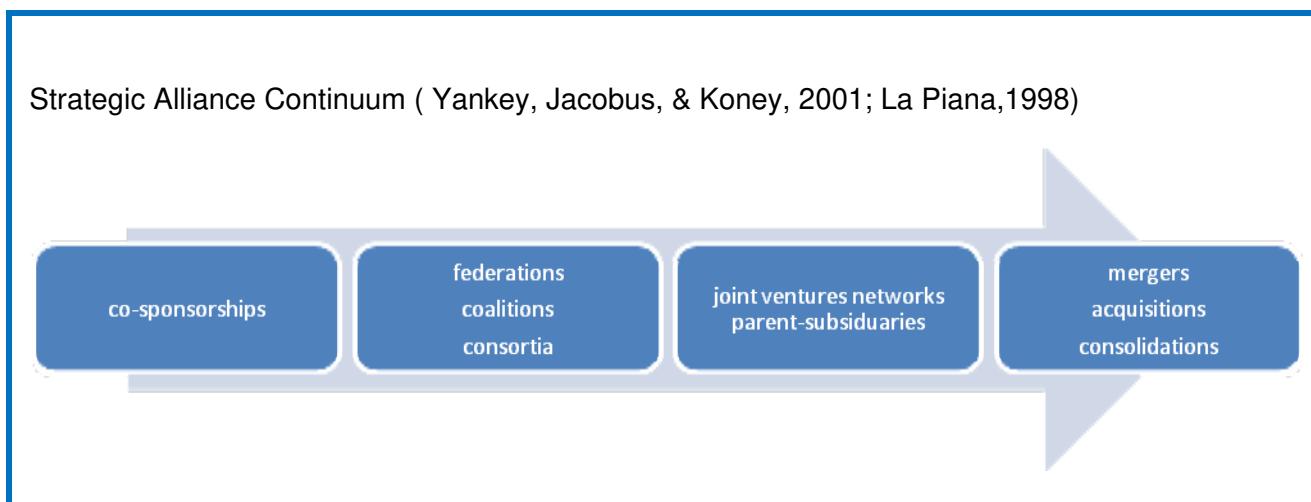
Action: The AASCF have initiated many of these activities. In order to increase our effectiveness we would require resources to dedicate a staff person (1FTE) to achieve these functions.

2. Strategic Restructuring

A merger is a combination of two companies into one larger company. There is distaste on the part of the organizations for mergers, as they are not seen as an efficiency measure in fact they are often seen as costly activities. It is prudent however to consider the concepts of Strategic Restructuring or Alliances. Unlike collaboration where decision-making power remains with individual organizations, strategic restructuring involves shared decision making or a change to corporate structure, including creation and/or dissolution of one or more organizations. Ultimately, strategic restructuring should better position the organizations to advance their missions (LaPiana, 1998). LaPiana states that the nonprofit sector needs a keen market focus and an ethic of responsibility to the mission over organizational self-preservation. By integrating organizations into fewer, stronger, more flexible and effective structures, resources and focus can be redirected to strengthening and advancing missions that improve community outcomes.

The child and family services sector is highly interdependent. They form shared purchasing clubs and insurance or human resources cooperatives. There is a web of interrelationships throughout the sector and this web is where organizations gain information, economic and political power, and personal or professional support. Therefore, the close working relationships, partnerships, and in some cases joint ventures between organizations is a fairly natural occurrence.

Strategic Alliances have many forms. The type of alliances organizations enter into depends on the overall goal for these partnerships and the degree of loss of autonomy that each is prepared to accept. The range of Strategic Alliances ranges from low levels of risk or levels of autonomy relinquished to high levels.



There are a number of factors that are critical to the success of a Strategic Alliance and they include:

1. Organizations must assess the situation to make sure there is a good mission fit that will ultimately better serve their clients and community. The most common success factor is that the activities are initiated by a key staff or board member. Funders cannot drive the process.
2. Get to know your partner. Trust is an essential aspect to inter-organizational change. The degree of trust between the organizations leaders is key, when considering, planning and making a move.
3. Communication must be transparent. When organizations come together it is important that difficult issues are addressed.
4. Planning well for any transition.
5. Ensure that your mission will continue, the goal is to better serve the clients and enhance the outcomes to them and the community.

6. Funders need to sustain through proper resourcing. (United Way of Milwaukee 1994; Yankey, Jacobus, & Koney, 2001; LaPiana, 1998; Blickstead, Lester, Shapcott ,2008)

A concurrent area that members have expressed interest in is strategies, tools and research to assist with collaboration and partnership for the purposes of reducing administrative costs. Both the literature review and the interviews of the members generated a list of activities that are necessary for good collaborations/partnerships and identified some cautionary areas as well. Jane Matheson (2000), CEO of Woods Homes, and others, examines the efficacy of collaborations, partnership, alliances and other activities as an encouragement for collective responsibility, value-based decision-making, front line clarity and guidance and a way of the future. Matheson points out that since 1994; partnerships have been part of the redesign of the authorities, ministries, community processes, and other structures. In her presentation she also points out that

"Authentic partnership occurs when there is true need for the service and real benefits to all parties" and "A Partnership is not just a nice idea. It is a legal relationship; one that requires careful consideration of a multitude of responsibilities."(2000, p. 10)

Woods Homes and other organizations and projects have developed guidelines and policy regarding risk assessments, and steps to take when entering into a partnership.

Action: AASCF can assist by

- *Developing a shared network or virtual 'centre for leadership in collaboration', based on other programs with similar focus;*
- *Review literature and models regarding partnerships and/or strategic alliances, and encourage others to talk about their experiences and policy and procedures.*
- *Develop an information bank of templates and tools that are useful when engaging in these activities, including providing workshops in this area*
- *Designate a staff person to work with other organizations, like CCVO and ECVO, who are actively involved in this work*
- *Participate in a provincial HR initiative*
- *Develop a consultant list for agencies of people who are doing working in this area*

Resources required include a researcher, and a program developer

3. Research for Best Practice, Capacity Building, Sustainability Strategies, Training and Professional Development

Best Practice is a concept that asserts that there is a technique, method, process, activity, incentive or reward that is most effective at delivering particular outcomes. The idea is that with proper processes, checks, and testing, a desired outcome can be delivered with fewer missteps and unforeseen complications. Best practices can also be defined as the most efficient and effective way of accomplishing a task, based on research and test of time procedures that have proven themselves.

Capacity building is defined as the "process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in the fast-changing world." (Philbin, 1996) Capacity building is the elements that give fluidity, flexibility and functionality of an organization to adapt to changing needs of the population to be served. For organizations, capacity building may relate to almost any aspect of its work: improved governance, leadership, mission and strategy, administration (including human resources, financial management, and legal matters), program development and implementation, fundraising and income generation, diversity, partnerships and collaboration, evaluation, advocacy and policy change, marketing, positioning, planning, etc. For individuals, capacity building may relate to leadership development, advocacy skills, training/speaking abilities, technical skills, organizing skills and other areas of personal and professional development.

Professional development opportunities can range from a single workshop to a semester-long academic course, to services offered by a medley of different professional development providers. Some examples of approaches to professional development suggested by members and in literature (Philbin, 1996) are:

- **Consultation** - to assist an individual or group of individuals to clarify and address immediate concerns by following a systematic problem-solving process.
- **Coaching** - to enhance a person's competencies in a specific skill area by providing a process of observation, reflection, and action.

- **Communities of Practice** - to improve professional practice by engaging in shared inquiry and learning with people who have a common goal. An example may be Executive Learning to develop the up and coming executive management cohort in the field.
- **Mentoring** - to promote an individual's awareness and refinement of his or her own professional development by providing and recommending structured opportunities for reflection and observation.
- **Technical Assistance** - to assist individuals and their organization to improve by offering resources and information, supporting networking and change efforts.
- **Train the Trainer** – to assist organizations with the ongoing costs of securing trainers, especially in areas that are mandatory training.
- **Capacity Building** - Human resource development, the process of equipping individuals with the understanding, skills and access to information, knowledge and training that enables them to perform effectively.
- **Organizational development** - the elaboration of management structures, processes and procedures, not only within organizations but also the management of relationships between the different organizations and sectors (public, private and community).

Providing this training and development work can be in a variety of manners including virtual operations, classroom and workshop formats.

Action: AASCF can assist members by

- *Seeking and securing grants for research projects which are of interest to members and address sector needs*
- *Engage members with Master's and Doctoral credentials who would be interested in participating in this type of research projects.*
- *Develop quarterly periodical showcasing recent practice developments, best practice and published research.*
- *Explore possibilities to work with the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research either in doing research and understanding if there is data that is available to AASCF through the data laboratory that they have developed.*
- *Explore with the Child Welfare League of Canada the work that they are doing and how they have developed their Centre for Excellence and where there may be room for partnership or complementary work.*

- *Continue developing a Learning and research centre (centre of excellence) which can encompass the above*
- *Continue with the current training program, and expand to meet the needs and priorities of members*
- *Facilitate annual conference*

Resources required include dedicated staff to research and develop programs to ensure that we do not duplicate services already provided elsewhere, to source and submit for research grants, and to work with the membership.

4. Social Enterprise and Group Purchasing

Other areas that require further research and thought include areas of social enterprise and group purchasing. These are areas that members have talked about and the Association can and will consider how efficiencies can be attained in these areas.

Conclusion

Where to from here? The administrative efficiency study has reflected issues and recommendations that the AASCF has reviewed. We have selected areas that are feasible actions for the AASCF to support new directions toward improved efficiencies. Of paramount importance will be solutions towards compensation that we will continue to problem solve with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. Strategic restructuring, research and development and group purchasing are areas of ongoing support that the AASCF will pursue relative to the need for additional manpower resources to achieve these actions.

Resources

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