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Developing Interagency Agreements: Four Questions to Consider

by John Butterworth, Susan Foley, and Deborah Metzger

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration between state agencies is a significant emphasis of recent legislation including the Workforce Investment Act, the Rehabilitation Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. State agencies are expected to improve coordination of services, maximize resources, and increase the effectiveness of employment and transition efforts. In common usage the term collaboration is used casually to mean any time people work together to achieve a goal (Winer and Ray, 1994). A more outcome-oriented analysis, as reflected in the definition provided by Mattesich and Monsey, makes it clear that effective collaboration requires substantial alignment of goals, priorities, and resources.

An interagency agreement is one tool that can assist collaboration between two state agencies. Interagency agreements, also known as memorandums of understanding (or MOUs), are required under the Workforce Investment Act and the Rehabilitation Act. Interagency agreements can be highly formalized written documents signed by senior administrators of participating agencies. Agreements can also be developed at an operational or local level and be much less formal in nature. Good interagency agreements promote actions that directly or indirectly improve personal outcomes for those receiving services and promote systems change.

This Institute Brief is based in part on work conducted as part of the Supported Employment Consortium, based at Virginia Commonwealth University. The primary source is conversations with stakeholders in six interagency agreements that were nominated as effective in promoting access to integrated employment, and particularly supported employment. State agency staff quoted were either involved in the development of the agreement or were key implementers of the agreement. Additional perspectives are drawn from a national survey of supported employment program managers in state vocational rehabilitation agencies that examined the use of state level interagency agreements and their impact on supported employment.

HOW DO YOU DEVELOP A GOOD AGREEMENT?

CONSIDER FOUR IMPORTANT QUESTIONS.

- 1) What is the purpose of the collaboration?
- 2) Who owns the agreement?
- 3) Who are the allies?
- 4) Will this agreement lead to action?

1 WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE COLLABORATION?

"You really have to look at outcomes, accountability, and investment."

Is the purpose of the interagency agreement to create an event, ensure continuation of an activity or relationship, or to do something new? Is it clear to everyone what the agreement is trying to accomplish?

- ◆ **CREATE AN EVENT:** Interagency agreements that create an event are one-time only agreements. These agreements may set the stage for a large systems initiative or bring together relevant parties to lay the groundwork for subsequent interagency collaboration. The purpose may be more political than service delivery enhancement. **West Virginia** used the development of the West Virginia Supported Employment Partnership agreement to build a coalition around supported employment. As a consortium agreement that involved several state agencies, the agreement served as a public opportunity to raise awareness. Long term activities include an annual supported employment symposium.

◆ **ENSURE CONTINUATION OF AN ACTIVITY OR RELATIONSHIP:** These agreements protect the status quo and spell out the procedures for a more mature interagency collaboration, one that has been in place over an extended period of time. Renewals of time tested interagency agreements may fit into this category.

The **Indiana Memorandum of Understanding for Supported Employment** (MOUSE) maintains a clear transfer of funds between the state mental health (MH) agency (The Division of Mental Health) and the state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency (the Division of Disability and Rehabilitation Services).

The MOUSE provides for a transfer of MH funds to serve as a match for federal VR funds to provide job development and placement supports to individuals with mental illness. The project has provided establishment grants for supported employment programs and funding for the Supported Employment

Consultation and Training Program. The MOUSE formalized this activity, and provided a structure for its long term continuation.

◆ **DO SOMETHING NEW:** Interagency agreements can be an effective tools that enable two or more agencies to accomplish a specific goal. Doing something could include:

- » Accomplishing a specific task or set of tasks
- » Improving the situation of a specific population of people
- » Improving service delivery and/or coordination
- » Promoting systems change

The **Minnesota Interagency Cooperative Agreement** between the Mental Health Program Division (Department of Human Services) and the Rehabilitation Services Branch (Department of Economic Security) had a clear purpose to increase the number

and percent of persons with serious mental illness who are supported in employment. The core activities include a transfer of MH funds to Rehabilitation Services to match federal VR funds. These state and federal dollars fund supported employment demonstration grants statewide. The project maintains a wide range of related cooperative activities including quarterly meetings, clearly designated liaisons in each agency, jointly sponsored training, conferences, and research projects. The project maintains specific outcome data, and respondents report that between 1985 and 1997 the percent of individuals with serious

mental illness receiving supported employment services rose from 15% to 25%, and that VR case expenditures for persons with serious mental illness have quadrupled. The project reports facilitating 1064 job placements since 1992.

A **Rhode Island Cooperative Agreement** between the state VR agency (Department of Human Services) and the state Education agency established a broad interagency initiative

designed to improve transition from school to adult life. The agreement is unique in that it commits VR funds prior to graduation to support career planning and job exploration. The resources allocated through the agreement have principally been used to establish five career discovery centers that provide vocational assessment, career exploration, and community work experiences for young adults. Agency staff reported a variety of outcomes including concrete measurable ones (student work experiences, center contact with employers), anecdotal reports of students staying in school to pursue career opportunities, and improved relationships between school and vocational rehabilitation staff.

Both the Minnesota and Rhode Island agreements have clear mechanisms for maintaining collaborative work including regularly scheduled meetings of partners and ongoing measurement and reporting of outcomes.

Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals.

The relationship includes a commitment to: a definition of mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability; and sharing of resources and rewards.

Mattesich and Monsey, 1992

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WHO ARE YOUR ALLIES?

“She gets in places nobody else can get into, she demands money, and she has gotten it for us.”

There is a strong message that effective agreements involve strong and committed partnerships internally among agency staff and externally with community advocates and other stakeholders. “It’s built on relationships,” was a common theme. Effective agreements also were typically grounded in larger agency objectives, ensuring both continuity of purpose and the cooperation of key leaders.

ALLIES CAN COME FROM MANY SOURCES:

INTERNAL ALLIES: Think of people who are supporters and facilitators within your agency. This is an important group of allies who can help you negotiate internally across separate divisions or initiatives and who can share the work. Ask:

- » Who in your agency supports this effort?
- » Who is in a position to advocate on behalf of the collaboration?
- » Who can provide access to different branches of the agency?

EXTERNAL ALLIES: Think of these allies as advocates who can keep an issue like supported employment visible, rally in support of funding, protect the collaboration politically, and garner support from other constituents.

- » Who outside of the partnership supports this effort?
- » What type of political support is necessary?

SYSTEM ALLIES: Think of these allies as champions of the cause across the divide. These allies can advocate within the partnering agency and can keep the purpose of the collaboration alive in the partnering agency.

- » Who in the partnering agencies is committed to this effort?
- » Who is in a position to advocate on behalf of the collaboration?
- » Who can facilitate access to key leaders within state government?

In Minnesota the two managers who lead implementation of the agreement have also invested in sustaining a broad network of other partners and advocates including a community activist who has been instrumental in outreach to the legislature for funding.

The **Rhode Island agreement** is also supported by strong internal champions and by a clear commitment to shared goals at a senior administrative level in both agencies. Several circumstances supported development of the initiative: (1) As in other agreements, the opportunity for this agreement is grounded in RI’s VR program returning unused federal funds to the Rehabilitation Service Administration. Advocates identified this problem, and served as one catalyst for the development of the initiative. Special education funds were used to match the untapped federal VR funding. (2) Agency staff introduction to a similar collaborative project in Oregon served as a model for the agreement’s developers. (3) Finally, the agreement developed at the same time that federally funded systems change projects on transition and supported employment, providing a broad context of related activity for the agreement.

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT COLLABORATION

(Adapted from Friend, 2000)

MYTHS

- ◆ Everyone is doing it
- ◆ More is better
- ◆ It’s about feeling good and liking others
- ◆ It comes naturally

FACTS

- ◆ Collaboration takes skill and time to sustain. need to set priorities
- ◆ successful collaboration is about respect and outcomes
- ◆ It takes professional development and effort

Friend, M. (2000). “Myths and misunderstandings about professional collaboration.” Remedial and Special Education 21(3): 130-132.

3 WHO OWNS THE AGREEMENT?

Allies are not necessarily owners.

Owners are in the nitty gritty of implementation and have a commitment to getting things done. Owners of the agreement provide oversight and vision, lead implementation, and monitor the need for renewal. Operational relationships were identified as important to the success of an agreement: “You need to maintain relationships at the worker bee level.” When planning an agreement consider:

- » Who can monitor implementation at the other agency?
- » Who can do the day-to-day implementation work and oversight?
- » Who has access to the local constituents involved in the service delivery aspects of the collaboration?
- » Who at the local sites is involved in the collaborative efforts?

In general, successful agreements have clear champions at an implementation level in the state agencies. In both Minnesota and Rhode Island, for example, there were specific people that respondents identified as promoting and sustaining the collaborative activity.

In Minnesota the agreement had two committed internal champions who have maintained a strong functional interagency agreement. As middle managers they have assumed responsibility both for implementation of the agreement, and for promoting and sustaining the commitment of their respective agencies.

Partners across the agency divide can become a powerful team if they have the opportunity, time, and flexibility to develop relationships that support the collaboration. Respondents developed a variety of mechanisms including regular meetings, annual conferences, and periodic formal review and renewal of the agreement in order to maintain communication and manage implementation.

4 WILL THIS AGREEMENT LEAD TO ACTION?

“The agreement brings everyone in the room together and we talk about how those dollars are going to be drawn from next quarter.”

“I won’t sign an agreement without a dollars transfer.”

Good agreements, respondents believe, are concrete and action oriented. In particular, they have clear, unambiguous goals, and specific action plans. Effective agreements avoid broad terms like “coordinate,” “facilitate,” or “provide access to.” Rather, they assign staff, establish budgets, award demonstration grants, or establish transition centers. Action-oriented agreements have:

- » **SPECIFIC, CONCRETE ACTIONS:** Tasks are defined and action plans are clear. Agreements that rely on broad terms like “coordinate” or “facilitate” do not provide a clear vision or direction for implementation.
- » **CLEAR AND UNAMBIGUOUS** outcome measures.
- » **MONEY OR RESOURCES COMMITTED:** Dollars or staff time back up the agreement.

THE INTERAGENCY AGREEMENT PLANNING CHECKLIST

Interagency collaboration can be a powerful tool in expanding the ability of state systems to provide effective supports that lead to real change for individual citizens. The enclosed checklist provides a summary of the four questions and related criteria from this brief. It also includes two key provisions suggested by reviewers that address organizational values and effective communication. The checklist is designed as a self-assessment, and can be used either as a planning tool during the development of an agreement or as part of a periodic review of an agreement’s role and effectiveness.

INTERAGENCY AGREEMENT PLANNING CHECKLIST

THE AGREEMENT HAS A CLEARLY DEFINED PURPOSE

	IN PLACE	PARTIAL	NEEDED	COMMENTS
<p><i>Outcomes have been defined:</i> Outcome measures emphasize quality of life changes on an individual level for agency consumers.</p>				
<p><i>Outcomes are being measured:</i> A data collection system is in place, and outcome summaries are provided to key stakeholders on a regular basis.</p>				

THE AGREEMENT IS WELL SUPPORTED BY INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ALLIES

	IN PLACE	PARTIAL	NEEDED	COMMENTS
<p><i>Internal allies are in place:</i> Allies from within the partner agencies have been identified who support the agreement. Stakeholders are involved in planning and implementation.</p>				
<p><i>External advocates are involved and committed:</i> Support from allies outside of the partnership is in place to ensure political support for the agreement.</p>				
<p><i>Part of a greater whole:</i> The partners share a common interest and mutually defined goal that the agreement serves.</p>				

OWNERSHIP OF THE AGREEMENT IS CLEARLY DEFINED

	IN PLACE	PARTIAL	NEEDED	COMMENTS
<p><i>Ownership is clear:</i> An individual is clearly identified in each participating agency who is responsible for implementation and oversight of the agreement.</p>				
<p><i>Linkages/ relationships at an operational level:</i> Mechanisms are in place to support ongoing communication among agency personnel who are involved in implementation.</p>				

INTERAGENCY AGREEMENT PLANNING CHECKLIST

THE AGREEMENT IS ACTION ORIENTED

	IN PLACE	PARTIAL	NEEDED	COMMENTS
<i>Specific action plans are in place:</i> Tasks are well defined. Agreements use action-oriented terms.				
<i>Money or resources are committed:</i> Funds, staff time, or other resources have been committed to the agreement by participating agencies.				

MECHANISMS FOR COMMUNICATING VALUES AND RESOLVING DIFFERENCES ARE INCLUDED

	IN PLACE	PARTIAL	NEEDED	COMMENTS
<i>Nonnegotiable organizational values have been identified and addressed.</i>				
<i>Value:</i> All partners provide accessible and welcoming services to customers with disabilities				
<i>Value:</i>				
<i>Value:</i>				
<i>A mechanism for resolving agency differences or disagreements during implementation of the agreement is defined.</i>				

RESOURCES

INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY INCLUSION

Timmons, J., Schuster, J., Hamner, D., & Bose, J. (2001). Characteristics of effective employment services: The consumer's perspective.

Hamner, D., Bose, J., & Timmons, J. (May, 2001). Effective Customer Service in Employment Support: Finding a Common Ground between Guided and Self-Directed Service Delivery (Research-to-Practice Brief).

Hoff, D. (December, 2000). WIA and One-Stop Centers: Opportunities and Issues for the Disability Community (Institute Brief).

Fesko, S., Hoff, D., Jordan, M. Fichera, K. & Thomas, C. (November, 2000). One-Stop Centers: A Guide for Job Seekers with Disabilities (Tools for Inclusion).

Additional resources and a complete publications catalog are available online at:

www.childrenshospital.org/ici

WILDER FOUNDATION

Mattessich, P. and B. Monsey (1992). Collaboration: What Makes It Work. Saint Paul, MN, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

Winer, M. and K. Ray (1994). Collaboration Handbook: Creating, Sustaining, and Enjoying the Journey. Saint Paul, MN, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

www.wilder.org

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