

“Create CHANGE in the minds of both FUNDERS & the public regarding the value of the sector.”

Boards Together III

SOME BACKGROUND:

In November, 2009, the Association of Family Serving Agencies (AFSA) hosted a social service community forum to discuss the impacts of the current reality of funding on the social service sector. This would be the first of a series of meetings and forums that is seeing a group of concerned citizens move from discussion to action. Since that first November meeting AFSA has committed itself to developing a multi-layered coordinated community response to the government's withdrawal of contracts and funding from community social services. One of the layers of this response involves the commitment and passion of local board members.

It is the assumption of the AFSA steering group that if a collection of committed directors was assembled in one room, and presented with the broader issues, new and creative ideas would begin to emerge.

To that end AFSA, with the help of Board Voice, a provincial organization whose mandate it is to foster exactly this type of conversation, has hosted three forums inviting directors from family-serving agencies in the CRD together for an evening of discussion and collaboration with the goal of action.

All three forums have had strong support from the social services community. Each meeting has enjoyed both first-time and returning participants. The first two meetings focused mainly on presenting background information on the state of the sector, and then moved into surveying the groups to investigate where people felt that action was warranted, and where they felt that they could do the most good.

Informed by the meeting discussions and an on-line survey, four main areas of interest were identified as priorities:

- **ADVOCACY & AWARENESS**
- **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS**
- **BEST PRACTICES IN GOVERNANCE**
- **SERVICE & ADMINISTRATIVE**

It was determined by way of a vote at the end of the second meeting that the third meeting would focus solely on advocacy and awareness.

The third meeting, on June 23rd, saw the AFSA steering committee hand over the leadership and coordination of the Boards Together group to the board members themselves.

Advocacy & Awareness

The meeting was held at 7:00 pm at the Oaklands Community Centre on Belmont Avenue.

In attendance were 20 people from the sector, with four first-time participants and the majority being returning participants.

The evening was organized by **Board Voice** and **AFSA**, with facilitation by Jenelle Cooper of Board Voice and Paul Abra who serves on the board of Big Brothers Big Sisters.

The agenda was presented as follows:

- **Introductions**
- **Group work – Advocacy vignette**
- **Taking Action – Jody Paterson**
- **Communications strategy**

The evening opened with a quick review of the work that AFSA's Boards Together has done to date including a review of the impetus for creating the group – the funding cuts.



The participants introduced themselves including their connection to the issues at hand. There were a few participants that were new to the meeting series and a couple that were not in fact representing a board of directors but instead were/are concerned and informed members of the community at large and want to lend their support, knowledge and expertise to the work of the group.

After the introductions, the room was then presented with two questions that would be the framework around the discussion for the evening.



“Identify whatever it is that you can do and DO IT.”

“unity energy together positive proactive useful

POTENTIAL synergy collaborate STRATEGY hope”

THE GROUP USED THESE TWO QUESTIONS AS GUIDES:

1. What is advocacy – Strengths, barriers & strategies
2. What is MY role in advocacy?

The participants separated in two groups to discuss these two questions. Jenelle and Paul helped to facilitate the discussions. After approximately 15 minutes the groups switched questions and facilitators. Below are the results of those discussions.



WHAT IS ADVOCACY?
Strengths, barriers and strategies.

IDENTIFIED STRENGTHS:

- Numbers! Strength in numbers.
- The passion that board directors have for the work that their respective agencies do
- Strong ‘Canadian’ values to call upon
- Willingness to give a voice to those that don’t have one

PERCEIVED BARRIERS:

- Inability to access government
- Knowledge gap – who to talk to, the Lobbyists Registry
- Fear
- Possible repercussions
- Lack of connections
- Labelled as whiners
- Lack of access to power
- Hard to find the right door
- Competition for survival among the agencies

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES:

- Understanding where power and funding are and know how to access them
- Educating the public
- Make influential friends that can speak to the issues
- Grow the awareness around the impact of the cuts
- Create story banks for use in media and public awareness
- Gather statistical data around the current and future impact of the cuts
- Talk to people’s hearts; talk to people’s pocketbooks
- A weekly column in a local newspaper
- Pick your battles wisely
- Be collaborative
- Strategic communications
- Create change in the minds of both funders and the public regarding the value of the sector
- Create a website with stories, solutions, next steps
- Understand the government of the day

WHAT IS MY ROLE IN ADVOCACY?

As individuals, board members and/or as part of a collective such as Board Voice.

As a collective:

- We are better able to protect ourselves as individuals and the agencies that we serve from the possible repercussions of speaking out
- We have back-up – a community to draw strength and resources from
- Know what buttons to press on decision makers

As a board member:

- We may be more convincing than paid employees of an agency
- Communication between agencies
- Sharing accurate info
- Individual strengths

**“TRACK
the cuts
•
GATHER
the stories
•
ACT”**



TAKING ACTION – JODY PATERSON

Jody made a dynamic presentation on how it is that we as a group get the clear message out to the public that community social services matter and the lack of funding effects us all.

Jody spoke to the need to build greater public support for the sector.

TO DO THIS WE NEED TO:

- A) **Create awareness** around what benefits community social services provide to the community,
- B) **Connect people** in a very real way to those services, and
- C) **Get the public to understand** that these services are in real jeopardy.

Suggested strategies include:

- #1 – **TRACK THE CUTS.** No one to her knowledge has a complete understanding of the depth and breadth of the cuts.
- #2 – **GATHER THE STORIES.** Find real stories of how community social services have touched the lives of people in our communities. Find stories that people can relate to at some level. Jody acknowledged the challenges in finding these stories as they are personal and many are unwilling to share them. And she stressed the great value of these individual stories in conveying the importance of the entire sector to the public, and the funders.
- #3 – **ACT.** Identify whatever it is that you can do and do it. Whether it is speaking with your local politician, writing letters to the editor, or simply talking to your friends, co-workers and neighbours about the value of the sector, just do it.

Jody stressed that the government does respond to “blow-back”. When there is a public response, public outrage, the government will take note, and will shift gears, at least some. She identified times that are most effective in producing change as: budget times, with opportunities for public consultation, and election times. She suggested that the next budget is perhaps too soon to expect to be organized for, but the 2012 budget is not, and of course there is an election in 2013. Get organized!

Commit to writing letters, real letters. Watch the comments section of the TC and the regional news and jump on every opportunity to voice your support for the sector with positive stories and your objection to the cuts.

PLANNING A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

(handout from Jody Paterson)

What are you trying to say?

- Key messages
- Stories/strategies that build on those key messages
- Prioritizing - what needs to be talked about first?

Who are you trying to say it to?

Who is your intended audience?

- Might be government, policy makers, funders, your clients, their family members, other agencies, the broad public, people in your sphere of influence
- A different audience requires a different approach

What do they need to know? Want to know? Ought to know? When is the right time to say it?

- Build on opportunities - e.g. STV (Stopping the Violence) funding cuts come out (and are ultimately reversed) as Oak Bay domestic murders in headlines
- Piggyback on other people’s comments to build the debate, get your points in
- Hedge bets with “slow news days,” slow times of year
- Strategic timing

How will you say it?

- TV, print, letters, face-to-face, social media, blogging, Web sites, “word of mouth,” service-club presentations, standing committee, etc
- Pick forms that suit the audience you’re looking to draw

Why should anybody listen?

- Shape strong arguments that cover different aspects (e.g. the economic argument, social justice, prevention, collaboration)
- Be clear, and remember that people outside your world won’t know what you’re talking about
- Bring it home - personal stories, self-interest of your audience, health of community, etc
- Use research and statistics to help make your case - if you can, use the arguments of your opponents

What do you want people to do with the information you’re giving them?

Always make the “ask” - what action do you want people to take?

What can they do RIGHT NOW in response to your information?

NEXT STEP

Building Relationships

Wed Oct 13th, 2010

Oaklands
Community Centre

More details to come

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