

“We are now in a position that the community is losing services that are essential to maintaining the basic health of our community,”

Overview of Boards Together

The Association of Family Serving Agencies (AFSA) hosted an evening workshop entitled Board Together on April 7th at Queenswood retreat centre.

AFSA is committed to developing a coordinated community response to the government's withdrawal of contracts from community social services and recognizes the considerable collective expertise, experience and power that board members possess.

Invitations were sent out to over 85 agencies asking that a member of their board attend this event with the purpose of beginning the process of finding solutions to the funding issues facing the community social services sector. It was the assumption of the AFSA steering group that if a collection of committed directors were assembled in one room, and presented with the broader issues, new and creative ideas would begin to emerge.

The participants were briefed on the issues that are facing the social services sector through the distribution of a background sheet prior to the meeting and then through a series of speakers at the meeting.

- Brenda Wilson, ED, GV Citizens' Counselling Centre (MC)
- Jennifer Charlesworth, ED, Federation of Community Social Services
- Christina Peacock, Interim ED, Community Social Planning Council

Mike Sidhu, board vice-chair, Boys and Girls Club of Greater Victoria, and Jennelle Cooper, board chair of Mary Manning Centre, made presentations to the group on Board Voice – a provincial initiative that sees board members from across the province working together to speak to both government and their communities about the value of community social services. See www.fcscbc.ca/board-voice.php

Once the presentations concluded, the group, with the guidance of facilitator Brian Hill, ED of Child and Family Counselling Association, began the process of brainstorming solutions through the posing of two questions.

The group brainstormed and recorded ideas that we hope will take us to the next level. The attendees were also invited to take part in a short follow-up survey.

IN MORE DETAIL:

The Attendees:

There was a very good turn-out with 51 people from over 36 CRD-based community social service agencies attending the meeting.

The Issue:

The issue is plain but hardly simple – funding. The last two provincial government budgets significantly reduced funding to and/or terminated longstanding contracts with, community social services. Jennifer Charlesworth gave a historical over-view of the state of the social services starting with the 2002 provincial government's budget which played a large role in thinning the list of community agencies and/or services that were offered to the community. While the priority within the community social services sector is always given to the maintaining of service, the trimming of all non-essentials from the budgets of community agencies has left service delivery very vulnerable. And while some sectors enjoyed a financial



boom since the time of the 2002 budget cuts, this was not true for the social services sector. They have not recovered their earlier losses and therefore started 2009 very lean. With nothing left to trim, the cuts experienced in the last two budgets have resulted in great losses of services to the community.

Community agencies have worked hard to respond to budget cuts and to funders' requirements by increasing time in building partnerships and working collaboratively, by exploring opportunities to develop social enterprises, and to survive in an increasingly competitive environment.

We are now in a position that the community is losing services that are essential to maintaining the basic health of our community.



When asked for a single word to describe their feeling as the evening came to a close, the directors shared ...

“unity
energy
LEVERAGE
together
positive
proactive
useful
POTENTIAL
outward
looking
synergy
colaborate
STRATEGY
hope”

THE QUESTIONS POSED TO THE GROUP:

1. What can board members do collectively to support community social services in the Capital Region?
2. What would help make collective board action happen?

THE ANSWERS THAT CAME BACK:

The group offered a wide range of answers to both questions but most answers, if not all, pointed us in the same direction – board members working together, whether it was through an organization like Board Voice, or a less formal fashion with the help of AFSA.

All of the solutions were formed around communication, organization, and advocacy.

The three most popular responses to our questions were:

1. Meet on a regular basis to share concerns, get to know each other, and strategize on creating a coordinated approach to dealing with the issues.
2. Collaborate between agency boards to promote best practices, good governance and collective wisdom to work more efficiently and effectively.
3. Increase political advocacy safely and effectively. Know the players and inform them. Use Board Voice to say what charities cannot, involve politicians from all levels of government in your events, AGM, etc.



Brian Hill, ED of CAFCA, and AFSA steering group member, leads an eager group of directors through some idea-gathering exercises.

The Survey results in brief:

The AFSA Steering group sent out a brief follow-up survey to the event. Almost 50% of the attendees responded to the survey. What we learned from the survey was this:

All respondents agreed that they see the value of board members working together to support community social services.

They all reported that they now have a broader perspective of the challenges that are being faced and that they felt more confident speaking with their peers about these challenges, as a result of the workshop.

Most reported that they felt more connected to the sector, and inspired for the work as a result of the workshop and would like to continue meeting.

And, there is more work to be done.

The Emerging Vision:

Board directors working as a group to support the CRD's community social service sector through a collaborative effort centered around organizational efficiencies, communication efforts, and advocacy.

The Next Step:

There will be a follow-up meeting facilitated by AFSA for interested directors on: May 5th from 7-9pm.

The location will be determined shortly. The meeting's agenda will be built around the suggestions made at the first meeting and survey responses.

Formal notice of this next meeting will be sent to all the original 85 agencies and to those members who attended the meeting.