The Value of Systems Thinking in Complex Community Change

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Purpose of Today's Presentation

- Illustrate how Systems Thinking tools can help us increase the value and impact of our community change efforts.
  - Soft-Systems Methodology
  - Systems Dynamics Modeling
  - Complex Adaptive Systems
  - Chaos Theory
- System - a collection of parts that, through their interactions, function as a whole *(Ackoff & Rovin, 2003; Maani, & Cavana, 2000).*
  - Family,
  - Organization,
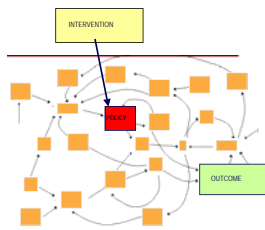 - A school district
  - Mental health system

While some important wins have been achieved, many efforts designed to address complex community issues have failed to achieve what they promised.

Typical Approach to Community Change
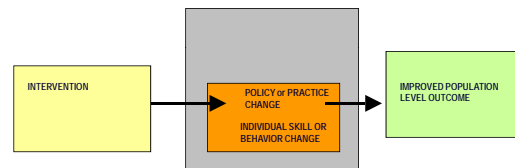
Why Traditional Approach Often Fails to Achieve Desired Outcomes
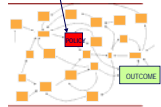

Foster-Fishman, et al., 2007

Proposal: Treat Community Change efforts as Systems Change

- *System Change is an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting and realigning the form and function of a target system (Foster-Fishman, et al., 2007).*

- Because systems change efforts are intended to *change systems* – need to have tools and frameworks for understanding and changing the systems that contain targeted problems and solutions.

Drawing from Systems Thinking Literature:

Systems Change requires (Foster-Fishman, et al., 2007):

- Clarify the **purpose** of the systems change
- Define the **system** to change
- Understand **Critical System Characteristics**
- Identify **levers** to change the system

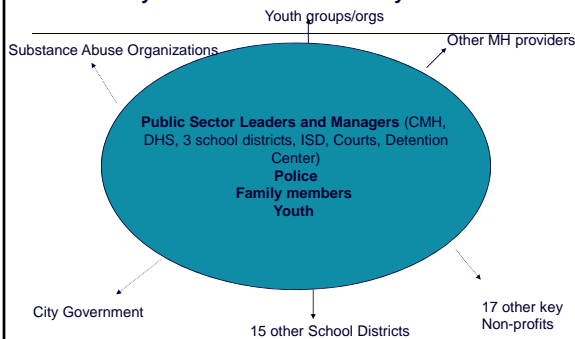## Clarifying the purpose of the System Change Effort

- The purpose shapes:
  - **Who** is included in the systems change effort
  - What **intervention tools and methods** are chosen
- Clarifying the purpose involves:
  - Determining the **boundaries of the system**
    DYNAMIC
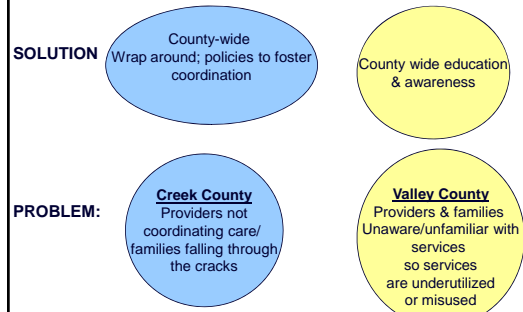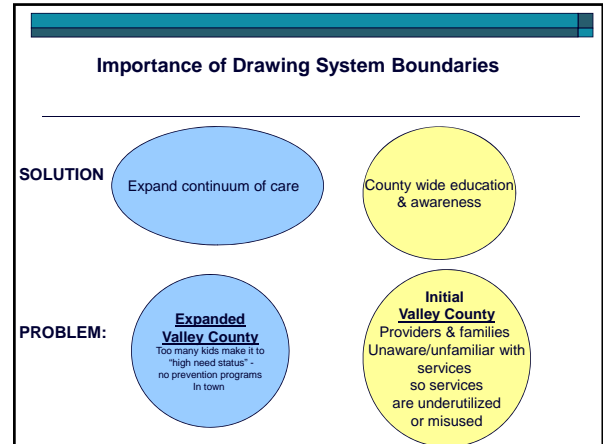 - Defining the **targeted problem**

Defining System Boundaries

- Perhaps most important step in a systems change effort.
- Determines whose perspective is considered or ignored
- Determines who may benefit or suffer from systems interventions
- Determines what resources are available for systems change efforts

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Initial System Boundaries in one System of Care

Youth groups/orgs

Substance Abuse Organizations

Other MH providers

Public Sector Leaders and Managers (CMH, DHS, 3 school districts, ISD, Courts, Detention Center)
Police
Family members
Youth

City Government

15 other School Districts

17 other key Non-profits

Importance of Initial Problem Definition

SOLUTION

County-wide Wrap around; policies to foster coordination

County wide education & awareness

PROBLEM:

Creek County
Providers not coordinating care/ families falling through the cracks

Valley County
Providers & families Unaware/unfamiliar with services so services are underutilized or misused

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Importance of Drawing System Boundaries

SOLUTION

Expand continuum of care

County wide education & awareness

PROBLEM:

Expanded Valley County
Too many kids make it to "high need status" -
no prevention programs
In town

Initial Valley County
Providers & families
Unaware/unfamiliar with services
so services
are underutilized
or misused

Defining the System to Target

- ☐ Is systems change an effort to <u>change an existing, well-defined system</u> or an effort to <u>create a new system of out currently disorganized parts</u> (Behrens & Foster-Fishman, 2007).
  - ■ Existing system – connections exist; shared goals or shared purpose
  - ■ New system – few connections; no shared goals or purpose connecting work across different organizations
    - ☐ First build the system – by developing shared goals, purpose, values, etc.

- ☐ Creek County – Existing system
  - ■ 5 year history of working together with shared goals, values, mission, etc.
  - ■ Purpose of SOC effort – shift system characteristics and outcomes
- ☐ Valley County – no system
  - ■ Long history of distrust, few connections
  - ■ Initial purpose of SOC – build system (e.g., identify players, develop shared goals & outcomes, develop connections)

Now that you have your system defined….
What should you change or build?

Assessing System Characteristics

- ☐ System Norms
- ☐ Systems Resources
- ☐ System Regulations
- ☐ System Power Operations
- ☐ System Interdependencies

- ☐ Gain insight into system operations (WHY) and patterns.
- ☐ Identify critical levers to change
- ☐ Provides framework for future research

Assessing **System Norms**

- What assumptions explain why things are done as they are?
- What are the values guiding current programs, policies, and practices within the system?
- *To what extent do the above exacerbate the current problem?*
- *To what extent are these compatible with the targeted solution?*

Valley Court
- Families don't want to be engaged and don't follow-through.
- Other providers don't do their jobs well.

Assessing **System Resources**

Human Resources
- How will setting members be expected to behave? Do system members have these skills and knowledge sets now?

Social Resources :
- How will relationships need to shift in order for the proposed initiative to be successful?

Economic Resources & Opportunities
- How does the system need to use its resources differently to support the goals of the initiative? Who might perceive this reallocation as a loss?

Valley Court
- Providers do not know how to effectively engage families.
- Little trust across organizations.
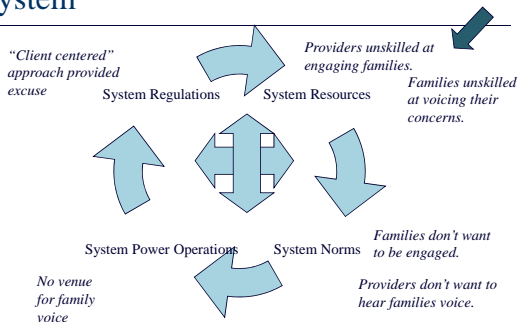- Currently no money to expand continuum of care.

Assessing **System Regulations**

- What current policies, practices and procedures are incompatible with the change?
- What new policies, practices, & procedures are needed?

Valley Court
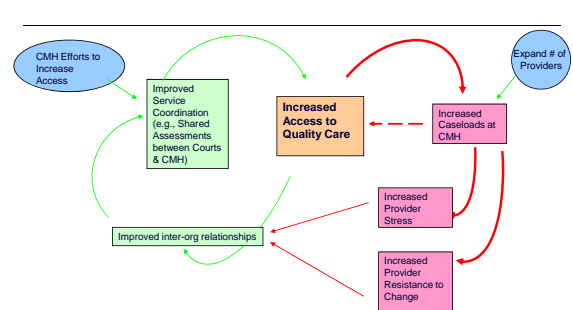- No shared consent form.
- No follow-up procedures with referring providers.

Assessing **System Power Operations**

- How does the systems change effort challenge the existing power and decision-making structures?
- What new power bases or decision-making structures will need to be developed to support the goals of the initiative?

Valley Court
- No venue for family voice.

The Interdependencies within the System

"Client centered" approach provided excuse

System Regulations System Resources

Providers unskilled at engaging families.

Families unskilled at voicing their concerns.

System Power Operations System Norms

No venue for family voice

Families don't want to be engaged.

Providers don't want to hear families voice.

One set of Causal Loops in a System of Care Effort

Identifying Leverage Points

- System purpose
- Critical System Parts
  - **System Norms,** Resources, Regulations, Power/decision-making
  - Cross level influences
- Feedback loops/interdependencies
  - Anticipating feedback, reducing delay in feedback or providing feedback where it did not exist before.

A cautionary note

- It can be difficult to get others to adopt a systems orientation to this work.
  - Funders
  - Community members
  - Researchers
- It takes time to develop system thinking skills.
- Impossible to know everything about the system at the beginning of the project. As understanding unfolds – need to have flexibility to change. Difficult when grants have been made; reputations at stake.
- Best levers of change difficult to locate.

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