Bringing It All Together: The Goal of the Theory–Based Approach

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The Goal of the Theory–based Approach

The process of developing a system of care for the purpose of improving services for children and families is both supported and sustained by the development of a unified and well-articulated theory of change. The goal of the theory-based approach is to create a single widely-held theory of change across all levels of a systems of care. The process of articulating a theory of change facilitates communication and collaboration among stakeholders. The careful thinking required to develop a theory-based framework places system of care stakeholders and advocates in a strong position to defend the expenditure of resources. A complete theory-based framework can become a guidepost that helps keep program strategies on the desired course. It is easier to know what has changed if the plan was clear at the beginning. In this manner, the theory-based approach takes into account the slippage that usually occurs over time as strategies are implemented and acts as a stabilizer and anchor. Being able to compare who was served, what services were provided, and what results were achieved with what was planned allows stakeholders to better understand the effectiveness of the strategies they have put in place. As a result the theory-based approach helps to make evaluation efforts more focused, thereby facilitating efficient use of evaluation resources. Overall, the process of articulating a theory-based framework can build a sense of clarity and consensus among systems of care collaborators.

The process of developing and articulating a theory of change is not without challenges. Articulating a theory of change can be difficult because program management and direct services staff have not always examined their underlying assumptions regarding the services they provide (Hernandez & Hodges, 2001; Weiss, 1995). Building consensus among people involved in the framework development process is a crucial aspect of developing a theory-based framework but is one of the most challenging as well. Establishing strategies collaboratively can strain existing leadership styles. Furthermore, the loss of ambiguity that comes from articulating previously unstated assumptions might create conflict among stakeholders. This may be exacerbated by anxiety about performance due to the clarification of previously vague objectives and goals. Finally, evaluation information can provide crucial feedback that may indicate that it is necessary for stakeholders to revise their theory of change. Willingness to make these adaptations is part of the challenge to local communities when they have a clear system of care theory of change (Hernandez & Hodges, 2001).

The vision for children's mental health services that is implicit in systems of care philosophy includes the development of well-integrated arrays of community-based services and supports that are planned, implemented, and sustained through the input of multiple stakeholders and are accountable to those stakeholders for the results of their efforts. The expectation is that systems of care reflecting the strengths and needs of local communities can be developed in order to serve children with serious emotional disturbance and their families. To accomplish this, community stakeholders need an approach that will help them organize the activities of multiple agencies and community organizations that provide services and supports into holistic and collaborative systems of care.

The benefits associated with using a theory-based approach to systems of care development are many, but the most significant and essential goal of this method is to bring the ideas and dreams of multiple stakeholders to reality through a clearly stated and widely held approach to systems of care development. The theory-based approach helps ensure that intentions, expectations, and actions of the community come together for the benefit of children and families.