



Are we Really Filling the Gaps? Using Social Network Analysis to Measure the Impact of Efforts to Integrate Systems Accessed by Families Experiencing Homelessness



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The Community Problem

Families experiencing homelessness are often involved in a number of service systems that operate in silos with limited cross-service knowledge and communication (Donlon et al., 2014). As a result, the burden of navigating housing, education, health, and other services is placed on families, who already face complex homelessness-related stressors (Haber & Toro, 2004). In the City of Chicago, several gaps in services caused by Chicago's fragmented systems exist. For example, some children are unable to start school or child-care because of outdated vaccine records, and homeless shelters operating under different policies and procedures.

The Community Solution: Systems Integration

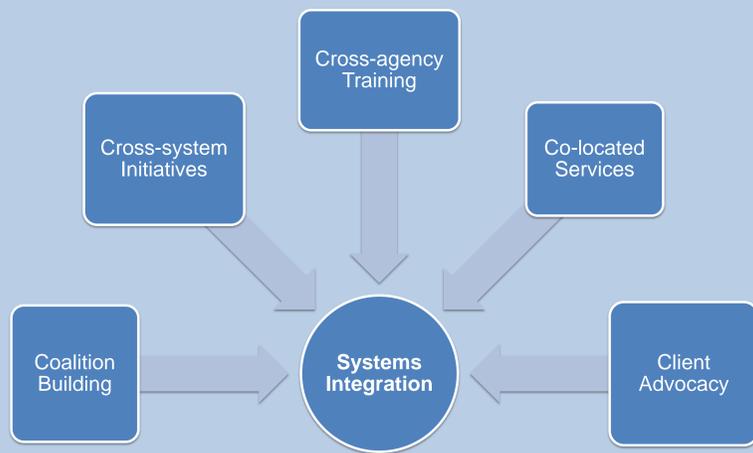
An effort to identify and remedy service gaps for homeless families was spearheaded in 2008 by stakeholders from two homelessness and behavioral health service agencies—Heartland Health Outreach (HHO) and Beacon Therapeutic. These organizations are implementing a Systems Integration (SI) approach to increase collaboration across service systems and reduce barriers to access among families (Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2010). The SI effort has involved creating a diverse coalition of stakeholders, and implementing five types of interventions to enhance communication and collaboration across systems.

The SI Coalition

70+ Non-profit and Governmental Agencies

- Social Services
- Charities
- Universities
- Police Departments
- Department of Family & Support Services
- Housing & Cash Assistance
- Supportive Housing Agencies
- Child Care and Development
- Public Schools
- Community Health Centers
- Circuit Courts
- Women's Shelters
- Shelters
- Consultation Firms
- Children's Mental Health Specialists
- Funding Foundations

Interventions



How do we know if SI is working?

The complexity of the SI creates a challenge for identifying its impact on child and family outcomes, particularly because each family access a unique constellation of services. Current approaches HHO and Beacon Therapeutic use to evaluate the effectiveness of SI include:

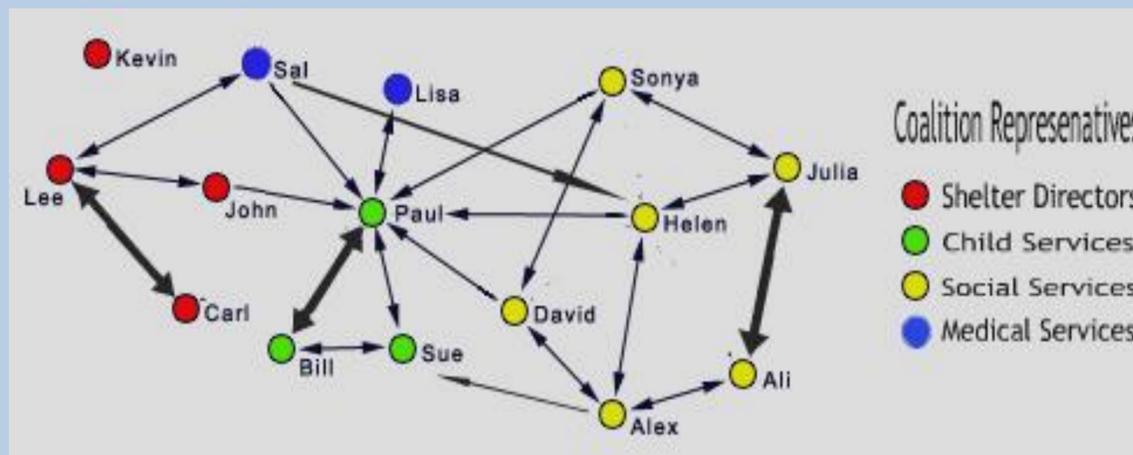
1. Anecdotal Evidence
2. Program Attendance Statistics
3. Client Outcomes

However, these metrics are only indirectly related to the SI interventions implemented with the coalition.

The Proposed Evaluation Tool: Social Network Analysis

One direct indicator of the impact of the SI would be to determine how well coalition members come to know and collaborate with each other over time. To this end, we propose social network analysis (SNA) as one technique to measure the impact of SI by evaluating the structures and processes of the network of interconnected individuals or organizations represented in the coalition (Scott, 2012). It is anticipated that if the SI methods are working, then coalition members will be a dense, highly interconnected network.

An Example of Social Network Analysis and Systems Integration



Questions SNA can Answer

1. Which coalition members know each other?
2. Is there one central agency that everyone knows about but that particular agency is less familiar with the surrounding agencies?
3. How did coalition members meet?
4. How well do coalition members understand the roles of the other members?
5. What systems are regularly communicating & about what?
6. Which systems are not communicating or infrequently communicating?
7. Highlight members of the coalition who are possibly being over-burdening or under-utilized.
8. Has the SI work created more communication & stronger bonds between organizations?
9. Which agencies have the most connections to other agencies? Are these relationships one-way or two-way path of services?
10. How do communication patterns change over time or after a SI intervention?
11. Where do introductions between possible collaborates need to be made?

Benefits and Drawbacks of SNA

Benefits

- SNA can track change in the network over time.
- SNA can compare networks before and after a system integration intervention.
- SNA can measure directional relationships (monetary or emotional support, communication or collaboration).
- SNA can measure and compare magnitude of relationships (frequency, quantity, or importance).
- There are no minimum or maximum sample sizes. Relationships can be measured between 2 people or 2000 people.
- Network maps are interactive and user friendly when giving presentations or reading a report.

Drawbacks

- Maps and figures cannot explain the context of the network.
- Data collection and data analysis can be time consuming.
- The data are only as reliable as your respondents responses.
- Data cannot be generalized to other similar populations.

Conclusions

If used properly, SNA has the ability to make SI efforts more targeted and efficient as well as provide a language in which to evaluate and guide system integration interventions success. We are currently undertaking an evaluation of the HHO and Beacon Therapeutic SI initiative using SNA. Results from our evaluation will be used to identify individual relationships or large groups that may benefit from closer attention from the System Integration team.

In addition to the SNA analysis, we will engage in a participatory process with stakeholders to identifying gaps in the network and areas for further SI intervention. These future interventions have the possibility of taking many shapes such as one-on-one introductions or planning cross-system trainings workshops.

References

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