2009

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Increasing Referrals for Services through Collaboration with Community Agencies

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Introduction

-Family Focus is a non-profit agency providing individualized care plans for youth and families throughout Minnesota. The agency provides a range of professional home-based services as well as respite, foster care and adoption licensing, placement, and support.

-These services are needed in southeast Minnesota. A Minnesota Department of Human Services report (n.d.) shows that 5,464 children in the area studied (see map) needed mental health services in 2007. There were 753 youth referred to Children’s Therapeutic Services and Supports (CTSS) during that period. The DHS website reports that in 2007 there were 10,200 children in foster care (DHS, 2009) and as of 2005 there were 564 youth waiting to be adopted.

-Family Focus has the capacity to serve more clients effectively. The agency has received only 8 referrals for services from southern counties between January 2009 and June 2009. They currently have licensed homes available for respite and foster care placements, as well as families preparing to adopt.

-How can Family Focus help bridge the gap between the need for services and their capacity to serve?

Literature Review

-Social workers relate marketing with promoting goods for the sake of profit (Long, Tice, & Morrison, 2006), but marketing principles can and should be applied in social service agencies to meet the needs of communities and individuals.

-Marketing professionals recognize that consumer behavior must be understood in social forces that go well beyond dollars and products (Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 1983).

-One avenue for social workers to extend their influence is through building relationships with individuals and institutions (Eichler, 2007).

-Limited amounts of literature on building relationships between non-profit and public sectors exist to provide insight into their specific effectiveness, or how to do it (Gazley & Budney, 2007).

-One longitudinal study revealed that partnerships between non-profits and a county child protection unit improved trust among agencies, improved service delivery to the community, and significantly decreased out of home placements (Alexander & Nank, 2009).

-Strategic planning is a primary step in the process of initiating relationship marketing strategies (Levy & Weitz, 2004), and should be conducted regularly using a variety of inputs (Long, Tice, Morrison, 2006;Lehman & Winer, 2002).

Survey Design

-IRB approval was obtained to protect the rights of study participants.

-Three surveys of 15 southeastern county human services departments were conducted to aid in determining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of the agency in relation to the three groups of services it offers—CTSS, Special Needs Adoption Services, and Foster Care Services.

-Surveys were sent to county staff from two lists of contacts provided by Family Focus, and to county administrative staff identified from county websites. A total of 35 surveys were sent due to inability to identify three participants from each county.

-Surveys included items regarding the amount of each service needed in the county in March, April, and May, what service providers are known and used, satisfaction with services, and opportunities for learning more about Family Focus.

Abstract

-The purpose of the project is to investigate how a non-profit organization can collaborate with other agencies to increase referrals for services. Research was conducted to determine the best avenue of increasing utilization of services in southeast Minnesota by strategic planning. A survey was conducted of 15 southeast Minnesota counties to conduct a SWOT analysis of 3 key services offered by Family Focus that are currently underutilized. Information was compiled in order to support a more comprehensive marketing plan to build relationships with county agencies and increase awareness and use of the services provided by the agency. Recommendations and implications for future practice are offered.

Survey Results

-Table 2.5 shows the results of the adoption services survey. Family Focus was selected as the provider of services for the families a local social worker contacted, and for the families that a social worker referred. The agency was recognized as a provider by one respondent. Accessibility was a concern of respondents, and they requested information via brochure and website.

-Table 2.6 shows the results of the CTSS survey. CTSS respondents all chose presentation as an avenue for more information about Family Focus services.

-Limitations

-Survey response rate (32% overall) was insufficient to identify opinions of entire region.

-Survey questions and responses were not coded for statistical measurements.

-Information on pre-survey referrals to Family Focus for southeast region is not maintained in a way useful to measuring post-intervention outcomes.

-Limitations on the information available about Family Focus services.

Conclusions

Strengths

-Family Focus provides a continuum of services that are heavily utilized in rural Minnesota. They employ highly trained, licensed professionals, including an in-home therapist in the southern region. The agency has existed for 7 years and is open to expanding services. Two offices are located in southern Minnesota which cover many rural areas.

Weaknesses

-Agency services are underutilized at times. Social workers are responsible for their own advertising and recruiting" new clients. Underutilized office spaces increase operations expenses.

Opportunities

-Surveys indicated that southern county agencies are referring clients for the services studied. Counties indicated that there is room for improvement among the services and agencies they currently refer clients to. Rural counties have fewer choices when seeking services, and would utilize in-home professional services that are available.

-Threats

-Surveys indicated counties do not recognize Family Focus as an agency providing the services studied.

-Surveys also indicated that counties would prefer to learn more about the services Family Focus provides through access to an informative website and brochure materials outlining the services offered. County workers referring children for CTSS indicated they would prefer to learn about Family Focus through a presentation. This matches sentiments in one study indicating the importance of relationship and trust building with counties when providing children’s services (Alexander & Nank, 2009).

Recommendations and Implications

Recommendations

-Identifying Opportunities and Evaluating Alternatives:

-Create measurable growth objectives, even in declining economic climate

-Update website to increase accessibility and provide information.

-Offer to meet with county workers to provide information on services

-CREATE partnerships with related service providers and agencies (Alexander & Nank, 2009)

-Establish Objectives and Allocate Resources:

-Create measurable growth objectives, even in declining economic climate

-Establish budget allocations for marketing projects, employ marketing professional?

-Evaluate Performance and Make Adjustments

-Collect and organize information to determine pre and post intervention data.

-Implications

-Social workers must be aware of macro environment factors which negatively affect their ability to assist clients effectively.

-Quality services can be limited in scope without effective planning and outreach.

-Relationship building does have the potential to increase service provision and create positive community outcomes.

-Nonprofit organizations can benefit from continued strategic planning.

-Macro social work has a clear connection to direct practice.

References


-Nonprofit organizations can benefit from continued strategic planning.