ABC - Abyssinian Partnership

Participating Organizations

- Abyssinian Development Corporation, New York, NY

Please note that all data below was derived from the collaboration's nomination for the Collaboration Prize. None of the submitted data were independently verified for accuracy.

Formation

**Type of Collaboration:** An alliance or similar collaborative structure through which members retain structural autonomy and have defined roles and responsibilities to achieve specific social goals or purposes

**Geographic Scope:** City

**Collaboration Focus Area:**
- Education
- Mental Health

**Population Served:**
- Children and Youth
- Economically Disadvantaged
- Families

**Year Collaboration was Established:** 2006

**Goals Sought Through Collaboration:**
- Improve programmatic outcomes
- Serve more and/or different clients / audiences
- Address unmet and/or escalating community need

**Reasons Prompting Collaboration:**
- Advancement of a shared goal
- Response to a community need

**Who Initiated Collaboration:**
- Other senior management staff
- Executive Director(s) / CEO(s) / President(s)

**Number of Participating Organizations:** 2

**Were Partners Added or Dropped?** No
The Association to Benefit Children (ABC) and the Abyssinian Development Corporation came together three years ago in a collaborative seeking to bring much needed mental health services to preschool aged children. They each have long held mutual goals for children and families in the Harlem community. Each organization runs early childhood programs under its auspices and works specifically in Harlem. While ABC focuses in East Harlem, Abyssinian’s target population is mostly in West and Central Harlem; the two organizations combined work with thousands of children and adults in the heart of Upper Manhattan. The collaboration highlighted here involves ABC’s mobile mental health clinic services and the children being served in Abyssinian’s Head Start program.

Mental health services, especially evaluation and treatment, are desperately needed by many in our community but inaccessible for several reasons. For some families, the stigma of mental health treatment overwhelms the need for it. Others don’t know where to begin looking, or can’t find affordable treatment options. ABC responded to the growing need for mental health services for needy children in 1996, with the creation of Fast Break, NYC’s first mobile mental health clinic for children. In 2007, Fast Break was awarded Clinic Plus funding to provide emotional health screenings to children throughout Manhattan and to assess each child so that those children who are vulnerable, in emotional distress, or experiencing behavioral difficulties are identified and treated as early as possible. While most children will not need mental health services immediately, the screening begins to sensitize parents to the specific symptoms of distress and to focus on the emotional as well as physical health of their children.

As a Head Start preschool provider, Abyssinian was an ideal partner in providing mental health services to the under-served 3-5 year old population. School leaders at Abyssinian are dedicated to enriching all aspects of their children’s lives, and their highly trained and experienced staff had a deep appreciation for the enriching benefits of infusing early childhood programming with mental health services for the children and their caretakers.

Management

Management Structure: Management team / oversight committee with representatives from each partner

ABC’s Clinic Plus works effectively with two directors; one for administrative tasks and another for clinical services. We learned that one person for each role works smoothly because Fast Break is a small clinic, and information flows quickly to the director.

Abyssinian Head Start has a mental health team comprised of a mental health consultant, family services staff, a disability coordinator, and the education director. Family services staff maintain ongoing communication by email and telephone with Clinic Plus to follow up on referrals and monitor children’s progress. The director and mental health consultant meet with the Clinic Plus management team twice a year to plan and assess the partnership.

The management structure at ABC provides additional support for the collaboration; there is a central team of key managers and administrative staff that help develop policies, benchmarks, and goals. This extra support opens up more time for Clinic Plus staff to focus on screenings and follow-up treatment, thereby yielding improved outcomes for children who would otherwise not have received any treatment. In this way Clinic Plus staff can devote themselves to coordinating care and services so that clients are in a seamless referral system that puts their needs first.

Challenges

Challenges to Making the Collaboration Work: Lack of trust among partners

Our partnership is an ongoing process. While we share the same goal, we work from different angles. Abyssinian, as a Head Start, is philosophically rooted in educating children and parents/caregivers concurrently. Enrollment into the Head Start program begins with a program orientation in which parents/caregivers learn of the mental health services available to their families. The following months are spent building respect and trust between staff and families. During this time, parents/caregivers are educated on mental health issues in their families and/or neighborhoods. Abyssinian works against this stigma by framing mental health in the context of relevant issues. The economic recession, for instance, is understood by many to be a source of stress on the family unit. Helping parents/caregivers learn about and identify common stressors on families and children makes it easier for them to seek help dealing with them.

Clinic Plus staff is challenged by the immense need for mental health services in the Harlem community. In the past, children from Abyssinian are screened because they are presenting behaviors that suggest they may benefit from mental health treatment. Starting this coming fall, the two programs have streamlined this process so that ABC’s Clinic Plus would screen all Abyssinian children, at intake. Thus, each parent will know from the moment they sign to the Head Start program that ABC and Abyssinian have partnered to bring vital mental health services to Head Start families, and that emotional wellness screens are part and parcel of the normal screening process that children undergo as they enter a new chapter of their lives. Caretakers will also have the opportunity to reflect on their child’s mental health and know the resources available to them. Developing strong ties with Abyssinian’s education director has been an invaluable direct linkage that has facilitated close communication and coordination between the two programs. She regularly offers suggestions and points out programmatic improvements that inform the practical implementation of the Clinic’s ideas.

Impact
Internal Efficiencies and Effectiveness:

- Greater ability to allocate resources to areas of need - Greater ability for each partner to focus on core competency
- Greater ability for each partner to focus on core competency - Greater ability to allocate resources to areas of need

Community Impact:

- Previously unmet community need now being addressed
- Greater range / variety of services/programs offered

Community-based organizations have much to gain from coordinating services and sharing work, and so do their clients. This collaboration has connected staff from two distinct programs, building on their relative strengths, which in turn will help to cultivate future partnerships between these organizations. The main impact of the partnership has been a sharper look at who is being screened, how quickly the Clinic responds to referrals, and how soon children begin treatment. The collaboration has brought a level of insight into the process of referrals: the smooth transitions between service providers make a huge difference in how families respond to referrals and whether or not they follow continue with services.

Model

The mental health of children will always be related to their child care and school environments. These places are where they learn about the world, other people, and themselves. Programs that serve children must have a mental health component in order to serve the whole child - however, this isn’t affordable or realistic for many programs. The collaboration between Abyssinian and Clinic Plus is a worthy model because it is entirely replicable and functions under the leadership of a few devoted professionals. Both parties benefit from the partnership, with an equal share of administrative and direct work involved.

Efficiencies Achieved

Since the partnership between ABC and Abyssinian revolves around serving the most children and families possible, its success is measured not in savings and revenues but in real people. The ability to deliver screenings to increased numbers of children is the primary gain in the alliance. Sharing responsibilities allows each program to focus on what it covers the field of mental health clinicians. Thus data on Abyssinian screenings is collected and maintained by what is a sort of third party – the ABC administrative staff. Both Abyssinian and Clinic Plus staff can relay information to this team, thereby allowing them more time to provide direct service.

Most importantly, the collaboration has made treatment more accessible to children who need it. Seamless referral ensures that no child has to wait to receive mental health services. Parent feedback suggests that education around socio-emotional wellness is working; awareness among parents has increased and more caretakers report conversations with parents about mental health.

Evolution

Abyssinian and ABC partnered because each party was serving the same population from different angles; partnering increased the efficacy of both organizations. ABC initially reached out to Abyssinian with the idea of collaborating due to the need for Clinic Plus to make official partnerships in the NYC early childhood community. Abyssinian’s holistic approach to serving families appealed to the ABC’s mental health outreach strategy – ABC has always emphasized the correlation between healthy children and strong families. Additionally, the Head Start infrastructure was amenable to the open communication ABC craved with its collaborators. The management structure, furthermore, was already in place in both organizations – the small teams at either agency existed independent of the partnership and had established methods of service delivery.