Adoption Coalition of Texas

Participating Organizations

- Lutheran Social Services of the South, Austin, TX
- Texas Department of Family and Protective Services / CPS, Austin, TX
- Marywood Children and Family Services, Austin, TX
- Arrow Child and Family Ministries, Round Rock, TX
- Pathways Youth and Family Services, Austin, TX
- Austin Community Foundation, Austin, TX

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: Joint Programming to launch and manage one or more programs
Geographic Scope: Multi-County
Collaboration Focus Area: Human Services
Population Served:
- Children and Youth
- Families

Year Collaboration was Established: 2003
Goals Sought Through Collaboration:
- Develop a stronger / more effective "voice"
- Expand reach and/or range of services / programs
- Address unmet and/or escalating community need

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

Who Initiated Collaboration: Community leader(s) / organization(s)
Number of Participating Organizations: 5-7
Nature of Funder Involvement:
- Lead Investor
- Funded implementation

Were Partners Added or Dropped?: No
In early 2002, a group of nonprofit child placing agencies met with the Texas Department of Child Protective Services (CPS) to see how they could work together to better meet each organization's mission, resulting in moving children from foster care to permanency. This group met for about a year. According to founding partner organization Marywood, "we would meet, talk about ideas, and then go back to our every day responsibilities…we were not able to make progress". During that time frame, each agency operated independently, was competitive with one another and had limited resources. In 2003, the partners approached the Austin Community Foundation, a local foundation that supports small nonprofits and new endeavors to seek seed funding, which was awarded in October 2003. The Austin Community Foundation offered to be the umbrella 501c3. Immediately, the group set out to hire an Executive Director to establish the organization, develop its mission and strategy and build the organization's capacity. The Adoption Coalition of Texas was formalized in February 2004. The approach was to establish a central nonprofit organization whose only mission is to find forever families for children languishing in the foster care system. The philosophy being that partner agencies may come and go, but the core organization needed to stay intact. To be an initial member, an agency had to have an adoption contract with the state and specialize in straight adoptions. The founding members included five child placing agencies and CPS. (This effort included all of the agencies that had adoption contracts at the time of formation).

The quality and experience of the agencies involved contributed to the credibility of the organization and allowed for the seed funding. It was realized that if every organization worked together to recruit families and advocate for children under one umbrella, there was no need to be competitive, an aggressive strategy with one voice would produce more success.

As the Adoption Coalition of Texas grew, we realized that moving out from under the umbrella of the Austin Community Foundation would increase the need for financial resources to do accounting, auditing, human resources and back office services, taking away the financial resources available to actually work towards our mission.

Management

Management Structure: One Executive Director / CEO / President

In early 2004 as the organization was being established and the partnerships formalized, each agency dedicated one high level executive staff person to the effort. Determining the structure was actually something that was relatively easy and came naturally. The Executive Director for the Adoption Coalition of Texas was hired and tasked with creating and leading the organization. Several organizational structures were reviewed, but it was recommended that the simpler the better. The Austin Community Foundation was the fiscal agent, the Executive Director was in place and the Advisory Board of Directors consisted of one key representative from each partner agency. As this was (and continues to be) a grassroots effort, the goal was to keep the administration at a minimum and allow the Executive Director to develop a continuum of services to meet the mission.

With the Austin Community Foundation as the umbrella organization, the Adoption Coalition of Texas operates as a special fund under its 501c3. The Austin Community Foundation co-signs on grant contracts, handles all of the accounting and includes this special fund in its auditing processes. Within the Adoption Coalition of Texas, the Executive Director is responsible for the annual budget, submitting payables and receivables, handling office administration, fundraising and all program development and activities. The Advisory Board of Directors meets monthly to discuss activities, upcoming projects, problem-solve system issues, review financials and build on previous success.

Challenges

Challenges to Making the Collaboration Work: Raising funds or integrating fund development to support the collaboration

The greatest challenge was creating an independent identity and fundraising. As with any new organization, aggressive marketing and media as well as quality of service was the catalyst in moving this small Central Texas organization on the maps nationally. With a small budget and one staff, volunteers were utilized. In many ways, we have been successful because our mission is one everyone can support, it is straight forward, we are the only organization in Texas who has this has their only mission, we are in line with national organizations such as the Dave Thomas Foundation for adoption, and no one was providing this service in our community. We are successful because there was a need, and we are filling it in a very user friendly manner.

Impact
Internal Efficiencies and Effectiveness:

- **Financial savings - Combined / coordinated marketing**
- **Greater ability to allocate resources to areas of need - Greater ability for each partner to focus on core competency**
- **Improved marketing and communications, public relations and outreach - Improved marketing and communications, public relations and outreach**

Community Impact:

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

Each year, we track the number of children who get adopted. This is our target. However, we also track the number of families we bring in as a result of our comprehensive campaigns. Through the partner agencies and the core headquarters of the Adoption Coalition of Texas, we are able to track the families. The State of Texas has a computer database that provides a daily census on the children who are waiting for adoption. We are able to track this on a quarterly and annual basis. More importantly, we get to know the children we work with through our recruitment efforts so we are able to get both quantitative and qualitative data from case workers at any time. (In Central Texas alone, there are more than 700 children waiting for adoption daily).

Over the past 6.5 years, the Adoption Coalition of Texas has:

- Increased the number of annual adoptions by 75% (from an average of 370 annually to 760 annually)
- Reduced the time it takes for a family to become certified from 9 months to 3 months
- Increased the quality of the training and support offered to families and to persons who work in the system
- Created local, state and national recruitment efforts and programs to target a broad variety of families
- Changed the dynamic of the children adopted (before it was primary children under the age of 10, now children up to the age of 18 are being adopted!)
- Established its niche within the national foster care adoption world as an expert on teen adoption.

Model

This collaboration is quite simple and revolves around everyone working together for the betterment of the mission. It simply gets the left hand talking to the right. Utilizing a basic customer service oriented approach; we have been able to far exceed our expectations. Because of the central organization created, there is one voice, one process. The Adoption Coalition of Texas receives no money from the state for its efforts; it is the central organization that brings all of the pieces together. There are no conflicts of interest. Replicating this would be easy if all organizations truly want to achieve the mission and are willing set their independent needs aside for the betterment of the whole – the children. (This isn’t about the partners, this about the children).

Efficiencies Achieved

The Adoption Coalition of Texas realized significant systemic change within a very short period of timely, measured in the first week weeks, the first six months and the full first 12 months. The collaboration brought together competing organizations to work together to increase the number of adoptions of children from foster care. This would be similar to Dell, Sony and HP partnering to increase the sales of computers in general. Typically, collaborations include organizations from various parts of a particular sector (i.e. social service, law enforcement, academia, and/or housing); however this collaboration includes organizations from the same sector, all previously competing for the same dollars, and the same families to adopt children from the system.

Change was realized immediately in the shift from a competitive environment to one where each partner set aside their own individual interests and pooled resources, both human and financial, to create a centralized system and a united voice. The methodology focused on a customer service oriented approach. In order to achieve the mission of more adoptions of teens, sibling groups and minority children (the children actually waiting for families) more outreach, education and recruitment needed to occur. Prior to the collaboration, each organization conducted these activities separately. It was inefficient and left potential adopters confused as to what part of the system to access, who to work with, and so on. From the partner perspective, working together and generating more interest would in turn increase the numbers of families each partner worked with, and thus, increase the number of adoptions of children. From the “central” perspective of the newly formed collaboration, it was, and still is, all about the kids. Each partner is held to a certain level of quality as each partner’s reputation is now directly linked to the others within this collaborative effort. The Adoption Coalition of Texas organization itself, led by its Executive Director, was the facilitator for streamlining the system.

Targeted media and outreach strategies started within a month of the formalization of the collaborative. The Executive
Director was charged with building the organization and the tools to achieve its mission. The organization serves as the front door to the system. Because there were not people lining up to adopt teens from foster care, strategies had to be created to go out, one by one, and bring families to the system. Prior to this effort, the system was reactive. With this collaboration, it now became proactive. Within two months, projects were being developed and the community was responsive. Providing a customer service approach immediately improved the previously bureaucratic system. Not only did the process turn from paper to a human process, the system change included an increase in flexibility in the formal process to work with families. Market research was conducted immediately to determine barriers to the existing system and change based on that feedback occurred within six months.

By the end of year one, the goal of a 10% increase had far been exceeded. Prior to this collaboration, adoptions from foster care were flat at about 370 per year. Because of more information being provided, someone available to respond and answer questions, a streamlined message and a streamlined process that reduced the timeframe for families to become certified from nine months to three, more families, and particularly families that had never considered adopting teens or sibling groups, stared to come forward. For a child, having a safe, loving family, is a basic need. Children who had waited for years were now being matched with potential families. The impact far surpassed our imagination.

For each partner, saving recruitment and advertising resources meant reallocating those resources to providing a better quality of service to the families coming into the system. So not only was the number of adopters increasing, the quality of adopters increased as well.

One of the items explored in the market research was to determine where and/or why families that may have expressed interest in adopting did not complete the process. There was an organization in Houston that did mass media and boasted to having 900 inquiries in one year. That was a big increase. However, as we dove deeper, only 16 adoptions were a result of those 900 calls. We needed to determine what kept the other 884 people from proceeding — was it the system, were they not the right target market to begin with, was the process too long, was the process to overwhelming, was the system user-friendly, and so on. What was realized immediately is the answer is quite simple — we are out there begging for families to adopt children previously labeled as “unadoptable” by the state, we needed to educate families about teens, about abused and trauma, and be responsive to the family as it is the family who will change their lives forever by making the decision to adopt. We simply applied common sense business practices to the social work dynamic.

The benefits of this collaboration touch many stakeholders, most importantly, abused and neglected children growing up in foster care. With more than 70% of those that leave foster care at 18 without a forever family ending up homeless or on the streets, something needed to change. The children benefit. The agencies benefit in that they are able to meet their mission through better quality as they are able to focus on what they do best, licensing families to adopt, not recruitment and advertising. The community benefits in that this serves as a homeless prevention program, fewer children are aging out of foster care. In addition, families are being created.

Each year, the number of children waiting as well as those adopted is tracked. In addition, we track the number of inquiries, the number of people that attend information meetings, the number of people that start training, the number of people that finish training and the number of families that adopt. Tracking along the process continuum allows us to identify issues if they should arise. (For instance, in the beginning, many families were lost after beginning training. We had to determine what was wrong with the training and/or format to make sure families completed the process).

By working together and having a united voice, a variety of outreach and recruitment programs were created that ultimately had a national impact. By working together, more was achieved. Programs such as The Heart Gallery of Central Texas could not be developed and/or implemented without the collaboration. It is because of the neutral core that the respect with the state of Texas CPS was earned (i.e. the staff of the Adoption Coalition are completely neutral, no strings attached to money. For example, child placing agencies, thus, the partners, get reimbursed from the state for adoptions. The more families that work with an agency, the more funds that come in. The Adoption Coalition has no such strings, and thus, was able to earn the respect of the case workers for the children – we were in it only for the betterment of the children.
Evolution

The founding partners included five nonprofit organizations and the State of Texas, a public/private partnership. The State wanted to increase adoptions, the partner agencies wanted to increase adoptions. Some of these nonprofits were small, some were medium sized, and none had the capacity to be the sole service provider to meet the need of the hundreds and hundreds of children waiting. Before the collaboration, each partner worked independently. It was realized that alone, the mission would not be accomplished. None of the organizations, including the state, had the experience or resources to do the community outreach necessary. The collaboration formed brought business and marketing principles to a social work environment through the hiring of a central Executive Director.

Hiring the Executive Director was achieved through seed funding from the Austin Community Foundation, the fiscal agent. The Austin Community Foundation supported working together and streamlining efficiencies among nonprofits, and realized this collaboration had great potential.

The Management structure included the Adoption Coalition of Texas becoming its own independent organization with partners. Each partner allocated its executive director to sit on the advisory board. Each partner had to agree to participate in activities, share resources to include various trainings, and streamline each agency’s individual systems to mirror that of the others – that way, the community would receive one voice, and one united system.

By collaborating, not only is there a greater reach, but problems can be addressed across the system in a much timelier fashion. This structure significantly contributes to the success of the organization.

The challenges to establishing the Adoption Coalition were primarily financial – finding sources to fund this project long term. Since day one, each partner agency has held true to its commitment to pooling resources so that everyone benefits.

Through the partnership, there have been three weekly television segments created, extensive free print media, and other national projects. Because the Adoption Coalition promotes the adoption of children, and does not promote individual agencies, many more doors with funders and the community were opened.

Success is measured in the number of children being adopted. Annually, the number has gone from 370 to well over 700. Success is also measured by the thousands and thousands of phone calls from families across the country who are touched by our outreach, who thank us for responding, who thank Texas for being a responsive system. We are definitely a model in the country and hear over and over again that we far surpass any other state.

The Adoption Coalition of Texas should win the Collaboration Prize because it truly exemplifies the concept of collaboration. It is unique in several ways: 1) first, this is a partnership between a state agency and several nonprofit agencies; 2) the nonprofit agencies are all in business to do the same things, thus, they were previously competitors; and 3) the collaboration’s efforts have extended out of Central Texas and Texas as originally anticipated, and now we impact, and are recognized, nationally in the foster care adoption community as a model and one of the primary sources for information. We “win” every day that we see an 18 year old, or a sibling group of five get adopted, but recognition from a prestigious national resource would certainly be an honor, and allow the Adoption Coalition of Texas to further its mission. As long as abused and neglected children enter the foster care system, the Adoption Coalition of Texas needs to continue its efforts to find safe and loving homes so these children can flourish.