

## Applying a Theory of Change Approach to Interagency Planning in Child Mental Health

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**Abstract** This paper describes the use of a theory of change approach to community-based cross-agency service planning for children with serious emotional disturbance and their families. Public agency planners in Contra Costa County, California used the theory of change approach to organize service planning for a population of youth who had been arrested and involved with juvenile probation. The theory of change process described in this paper links community outcomes with planned activities with the assumptions or principles that underlie the community planning efforts. When complete, a theory of change logic model can serve as a guide for implementation, ensuring that community plans for service delivery remain true to their intent. The theory of change development process includes twelve stages and is based on a step-by-step approach. Theory of change logic models establish a context for articulating a community's shared beliefs and prompt local stakeholders to establish logical connections between the population to be served, expected results, and strategies intended to achieve those results.

**Keywords** Theory of change · Logic model · Interagency planning · Child mental health · Juvenile probation · Serious emotional disturbance

Community planning efforts of multiple child serving agencies occur in local environments that are complex and typically unstable. Differences across agency missions and goals, staffing patterns, and budgeting processes play a part in this complexity. In addition, the categorical nature of child serv-

ing agencies and the resulting turfism that often occurs in a time of limited resources, challenge collaborative planning of services. Under these conditions, community planning efforts often fail to fully integrate planners' ideas about what will result in improved community conditions for children and families. Across a variety of approaches to planning, the use of logic models has demonstrated great promise for addressing barriers to effective collaboration at the local level (Connell & Kubisch, 1998; Julian & Lyons, 1992; Weiss, 1995). This paper describes a community planning process that uses a theory of change logic model as a tool to facilitate cross-agency service planning for children with serious emotional disturbance and their families. Based on a case example involving public agency planners in Contra Costa County, California, this paper illustrates how developing a theory of change can serve as a facilitating mechanism for linking the planning of collaborative services to their implementation and how this planning can be used as a tool to improve the community context of services.

Like many government supported human service agencies, Contra Costa County's child serving agencies have responded to increasing expectations for the efficient and effective use of tax dollars by collaboratively developing cross-agency services incrementally and over time as opportunities for funding became available (Hernandez & Hodges, 2003a; Lourie, 1994). The effect of this incremental approach to building Contra Costa County's service base was an array of individual programs and services that were developed without a clear idea of how they could be organized into a community wide cohesive and strategic whole. As a result, agency administrators and managers did not feel that they were efficiently maximizing the benefits of their efforts.

The planning process described in this paper involves three county agencies: Department of Mental Health, Department of Corrections, and Department of Education. Planners

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focused on Contra Costa County's population of youth identified by the Department of Mental Health as having mental health needs and who had been arrested and involved with local Juvenile Probation. The goal of the process was to organize the county's programs and services targeted for probation involved youth with mental health needs into a community wide strategic, cohesive, and collaborative whole. The resulting plan is presented along with a description of the process.

### Theories of change and their usefulness

Although few would deny the value of good community planning, the considerable effort put into planning often results in plans that are printed, distributed, and placed on a shelf until the next planning cycle (Hernandez & Hodges, 2001). Rosencheck (2000) suggests that this occurs because complex community organizations typically have their daily decisions shaped by power structures, ingrained routines, and established resource configurations rather than by current research or through the results of planning. Within such organizations, leaders do not have sufficient time to devote to even a fraction of the issues for which they carry responsibility and problems are often not so much solved as superseded by other problems. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to engage in meaningful planning or to implement the elements of any plan.

From a local planning perspective, the constellation of skills necessary to support community-level change should include planning and decision making that focuses on community-level problem solving and solution identification. The lack of consistent impacts from community interventions suggests the need for further improvement including the greater articulation of the reasons or theory behind resulting plans (Wandersman & Florin, 2003). This articulation of theory should include a focus on current community resources, their deployment, and an assessment of how those resources are and can be used to support what community planners are trying to achieve contextually for children and families (Hernandez & Hodges, 2003b).

To make community planning efforts meaningful for human service agencies, it is important to link the implementation of plans to a clear idea of how and why those plans are expected to have a positive impact on the people they are intended to serve. Being able to articulate the beliefs and assumptions that underlie a community's service strategy is a key element to supporting its implementation (Hernandez & Hodges, 2001; Using logic models, 2000). However, implementation of a plan is commonly undertaken without a clear expression of how or why the plan is intended to affect change in the community context or in local agencies.

The careful articulation of these assumptions and beliefs along with the actual community strategies and expected goals provides a solid foundation for future planning and implementation in the form of a theory of change. A theory of change can be defined as the articulation of the underlying beliefs and assumptions that guide the development and implementation of a strategy. For developing systems of care in children's mental health, a theory of change can be defined as the beliefs that funding agencies, planners, and implementers have about what children with emotional and behavioral conditions and their families need and what multi-agency strategies enable them to successfully have their needs met (Hernandez & Hodges, 2001, 2003b).

There are two components to a theory of change (Hernandez & Hodges, 2001). The first component is the conceptualization and operationalization of three core elements. These elements are: (1) the characteristics, needs, and strengths of the population to be served; (2) the desired outcomes for this population; and (3) the strategies designed to accomplish the articulated outcomes. Identifying these elements requires that planning participants consider local data that identify and describe the population they plan to serve, identify the values and principles that guide their effort, and identify existing services and community infrastructure.

The second component involves building an understanding of the relationship between the three elements and expressing that relationship clearly. This component clarifies how the three elements defined previously are related to one another and makes explicit assumptions about how strategies are expected to produce results for a particular population. Without such an expression of this connection, there is no theory of change. The clear articulation of a theory of change requires making explicit the linkage between the identified populations, intended outcomes, and planned strategies. Once the elements of a theory of change and the relationships between these elements are clearly articulated, stakeholders have an informed understanding of what should be implemented in their community and what is expected to be accomplished. As a result, information gathered by community planners for the purposes of internal evaluation and ongoing monitoring is more useful because it can be related directly to the articulated ideas within a theory of change (Hodges, Woodbridge, & Huang, 2001).

### Using theory of change logic models as a tool

The development of a theory of change is facilitated by organizing ideas into components and serves as a tool for documenting what planning participants believe to be central to their strategy (Hernandez & Hodges, 2001). The process of developing a theory of change is similar to program-based logic modeling in that it articulates the assumptions that

link outcomes with planned activities and principles (Julian, Jones, & Deyo, 1995; Using logic models, 2000). Both approaches provide a map that displays how strategies are expected to work. The advantage of the theory of change approach is that it is conceptual in nature. The process is designed to make the assumptions underlying implementation plans and strategies explicit. In addition, the theory of change approach can be undertaken as an iterative process rather than a static, linear approach. The theory of change approach is also more appropriate for complex, multi-faceted initiatives because it encompasses multiple levels of implementation and it links community wide strategies with the level of direct service delivery. In summary, a theory of change logic model is a tool for articulating the goals of system development at multiple levels and clarifying why identified strategies are expected to accomplish desired goals.

The process of developing a theory of change serves multiple purposes. In the early development phase, it is a useful tool for helping community stakeholders articulate their ideas, identify differences in both need and perspective, and build consensus around a plan. When complete, a theory of change can serve as a guide for implementation, ensuring that once implemented, plans are true to their original intent. This is helpful as implementation is carried out across agencies within a community and correspondingly at the level of direct service to children and families. In addition, having a theory of change facilitates the utilization of evaluation feedback regarding results because the results can be compared between the clearly articulated plan and what actually occurs during the plan's implementation. In this manner, a theory of change logic model serves as a heuristic to compare the intended approach with what actually occurred and thus facilitates reflection on specific strategies and their associated results. Theory of change logic models also serve as a point of reference over time as changes or adaptations to the original theory of change occur (Alter & Murty, 1997).

### **Contra Costa County's theory of change planning illustration**

In August 2000, faculty from the Department of Child and Family Studies at the University of South Florida were invited by the Child and Adolescent Services Program Chief in Contra Costa County, California to consult with an inter-agency policy council about how to use a theory of change approach in designing the county's community wide plan to serve children with serious emotional disturbance. This consultation and subsequent technical assistance was supported through the evaluation of the federal Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and their Families Program and Contra Costa County Children's Mental Health. The consultants spent five, eight-hour days

on site, spanning a year-long period. Local planners continued their work in the interim periods maintaining contact with the consultants through telephone conferences.

Contra Costa County is located on the east side of the San Francisco Bay. Home to 972,100 people, the population has grown 21% since 1990 (Contra Costa, 2002). In 1999, the children's Mental Health division of the Contra Costa County Department of Health was awarded a federal grant of approximately six million dollars for the purpose of developing a community strategy for serving children with serious emotional disturbance and their families (Public Law 102-321, 1992). Implementation of this grant, as well as State of California funding to develop an organized, cohesive community plan for serving children with serious emotional disturbance, required that local agencies collaborate. This collaboration was intended to improve the local context of service delivery and to result in better access to an expanded array of services that were aimed at keeping this population of youth within their natural community environments.

These grant dollars and the charge to develop a cohesive community approach for the delivery of services to children with serious emotional disturbance provided an additional layer of support to years of effort on the part of children's mental health to organize services in partnership with the local juvenile probation, child welfare, and education authorities. Although dyadic relationships and a considerable array of collaboratively provided services existed across child-serving agencies, the federal grant provided the impetus to organize the deployment of services into a cohesive whole.

### **The theory of change development process in Contra Costa County**

The theory of change development process as applied in Contra Costa County includes twelve stages and was based on a step-by-step approach to developing theories of change for child-serving organizations (Hernandez & Hodges, 2003b). Table 1 provides an outline of the phases and stages associated with this planning approach. There are three phases: Pre-Planning, Theory of Change Development, and Implementation. Multiple stages are included within each phase. While Table 1 depicts a sequenced process, the stages do not always proceed in the order shown. The time it takes to go through the entire process is dependent on the commitment of participants and the time they have available. Planning groups may choose to reconsider areas that they have already developed and may be able to move quickly through other stages because of early foundational work. In addition, the theory of change planning process may take longer to complete if participants have little information about the children and families they serve and/or the services they provide within their communities.

**Table 1** Theory-based logic model development process

Developmental phase	Stages in process
<b>Phase I</b>	
Pre-Planning	Stage 1: Form Workgroup Stage 2: Articulate Mission Stage 3: Identify Goals and Guiding Principles
<b>Phase II</b>	
Theory of Change Development	Stage 4: Develop the Population Context Stage 5: Map Resources and Assets Stage 6: Assess System Flow Stage 7: Identify Outcomes and Measurement Parameters Stage 8: Define Strategies Stage 9: Create and Fine-Tune Logic Model Stage 10: Elicit Feedback
<b>Phase III</b>	
Implementation	Stage 11: Use Logic Model to Inform Planning, Evaluation and Technical Assistance Efforts Stage 12: Use Logic Model to Track Progress and Revise Theory of Change

One final challenge to the timely development of a theory of change is the history of collaboration among participating agencies. A history of interagency collaboration can speed the process of theory of change development because participants have already established mutual trust and understanding. Developing a theory of change logic model when participants are less familiar with one another will require time being spent on development of collaborative relationships as well as the theory of change. Contra Costa County's experience with theory of change based planning is presented below in the order summarized in Table 1.

#### Phase I: Pre-Planning

The first three stages in developing a theory of change constitute the Pre-Planning Phase. This phase focuses the planning process by anchoring it in the stated goals of the participating organizations/agencies. Pre-Planning allows the group to define the boundaries of the process and allows participants to build rapport, trust, and a group identity. The stages of Pre-Planning are Workgroup Formation, Articulation of Mission, and Identification of Goals and Guiding Principles.

During Stage 1, Workgroup Formation, Contra Costa County's participants were identified and given authority by their agencies to participate. The county's Interagency Policy Council, a group of nearly 50 members representing child-serving agencies across the county, guided early community wide planning. Contra Costa County's population growth and the complexity of its established service delivery base made planning challenging. This challenge was met by breaking

the planning effort into smaller and more achievable parts. The Interagency Policy Council decided to simplify the process by focusing on particular clusters of partnerships among child-serving agencies.

The initial cluster included Juvenile Probation, Mental Health, and Education and focused on the population of children and youth with mental health needs who were under the supervision of the county probation office. The composition of the workgroup is a critical consideration for the success of the process. Participants should fully understand and have the authority to make changes in personnel roles and responsibilities as well as funding commitments. This authority should include access within their agencies that allows participants to act as liaisons between the planning group and their agency staff. In Contra Costa County, the workgroup participants included both high-level administrators such as the Chief Probation Officer and the Chief of Children's Mental Health and their middle management counterparts as well as representatives from the education system that included special education. In addition, family representatives, countywide service coordinators, and management staff and evaluators from the collaborating agencies participated. Once participants were identified, they were trained and orientated to the theory of change logic model development process.

In Stage 2, Articulation of Mission, participants defined a shared mission for their planning. This began with a review of existing mission statements for their individual agencies. This process is critical since each agency must stay within its established mission as it participates in the collaborative (Nichols, 2002). For example, a primary responsibility of Juvenile Probation is public safety, while Education is charged with teaching academic skills. Mental Health's responsibility is for the treatment and care of children and adolescents with diagnosable mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders. The task for participants throughout the planning process was to meld their independent agency missions into a shared collaborative charge that would serve their joint purposes while not detracting from their ability to carry out their established agency responsibilities.

The purpose of Stage 3, Identification of Goals and Guiding Principles, was to identify goals for planning that stakeholders could support and acknowledge goals they might not share. This took place during a morning of brainstorming, during which the goal statements from each participating agency were identified and similarities between goals were noted. As suggested by Prilleltensky, Peirson, Gould, and Nelson (1997), goals and expectations that were not shared by the group were discussed prior to selecting a final list of shared goals.

With goals more clearly identified, the group was able to define a set of values and principles that they could use to guide the development of their community plan. Because

the group developed the values and principles together, they subsequently served as a useful frame of reference for the development and organization of the theory of change logic model that represented their community plan. The group decided that any strategies developed during their planning process would have to be aligned with the values and principles they had identified. The values and principles included the commitment that in working together, they would: respond flexibly to children and families; serve commonly agreed upon goals; ensure collaboration across organizations and organizational levels; design services to reflect needs of the identified populations; be committed to information, evaluation, and accountability-based decision making; include families and youth as participants in planning and service delivery; and provide the least restrictive/most appropriate service choices for children and adolescents.

#### Phase II: Theory of change development

Although the Pre-Planning process provides a necessary foundation, it is during Phase II that the theory of change describing a plan actually takes shape. Phase II focuses on developing three core elements: (1) the characteristics, needs, and strengths of the population being served; (2) the desired outcomes for this population; and (3) the strategies designed to accomplish the outcomes. These elements are defined by participants and the logical and assumed links between strategies and expected results are made explicit. As suggested by Nichols (2002), it is important that participants stay cognizant of their preplanning components including the defined mission and goals as well as the resources and flow of children through the multi-agency networks, as they work to define the elements and logical linkages of their theory of change.

Stage 4, Develop the Population Context, is focused on developing clarity around the population within the community to be served. Although the population of children and youth that is served by both Mental Health and Juvenile Probation is broad, the Contra Costa County planning group decided to focus on their community's population of children and youth with serious emotional disturbance who had been arrested. The planning participants decided to make these youth the focus of their initial efforts because the results of preplanning led them to a shared belief that they could have a significant impact on the way their community served these youth. The group expressed their commitment to expanding their focus beyond these youth in subsequent planning efforts. Developing a clear definition of the population of focus is crucial in order to ensure that the plan adopted responds to both the needs and strengths of the population rather than to the categorical demands placed on each participating agency. Moreover, it is important for planners to have a clear understanding of the needs

of the population before selecting outcomes. This avoids selecting outcomes not relevant to the population of focus.

In Stage 5, Map Resources and Assets, participants shared information regarding their existing services and programs and created a map of existing services and supports relating to their mission and goals. This kind of assessment of resources and assets has been identified as a useful element in community planning because it provides planners with a contextualized understanding of existing resources and their deployment (Mayer, 1985). Over the several years preceding the planning process described in this paper, the Contra Costa County Departments of Probation and Mental Health expanded their service array to include both agency-specific and interagency services. The ultimate purpose of Stage 5 activities was to understand the existing service array in order to re-organize it into a cohesive and efficient community wide plan that was aligned with the stated goals of the planning effort.

An inventory of existing services was completed for children served by Mental Health and Juvenile Probation. The completed inventory was augmented with information about the number of children served and the number of staff committed to the various services. This inventory or mapping of existing resources helped the planning group gain clarity regarding how county funds were being invested and whether this investment supported the achievement of the mission articulated in Stage 2 and the shared goals from Stage 3.

Upon review, it was clear that the existing allocation of the community's multi-agency resources did not correspond with the planning group's goals. Participants were able to observe that more resources were invested in services for youth who already required out-of-home placement within the community and fewer service resources were deployed in a manner that supported keeping youth within their neighborhoods and not in out-of-home placement. Having clearly identified goals earlier in the planning process helped the participants assess the appropriateness of their current investment of resources and assets. Once complete, the inventory served as a context from which the group could consider potential strategic changes.

In Stage 6, Assess the System Flow, the group determined what information they would need in order to assess the movement of children through their multi-agency networks or systems. Each participating agency identified the trajectory of children and youth through their respective systems along with any time sensitive, child level decision points within the trajectory. For Juvenile Probation, this included information regarding how and when the decision is made to release or retain a youth after their arrest. For Mental Health, it included information about how and when mental health assessments are conducted for youth who have been arrested. For Education, this included information about how children

and youth are schooled when in out-of-home placement and the timeliness and success of reentry into their school of origin.

The group decided to place an emphasis on the movement of children and the specific timelines associated with this flow because this timing is mandated by the juvenile courts and could not be changed as a result of a local planning effort. The group continued their information gathering by determining where information was missing or outdated. This included data on the number of children and youth in need of collaborative services; the existence of waiting lists or other issues of timing and access to Mental Health and Juvenile Probation services; and information concerning criteria for entry into particular services and programs.

The final result of this information gathering was a cross-agency understanding of multiple dimensions of youth involvement in the juvenile justice system. These dimensions included the number of youth that were jointly served each month by Juvenile Probation, knowledge of how each agency made decisions about the disposition of these youths at different points in their juvenile justice trajectory, and what services they received. Ultimately, participants gained a shared understanding regarding challenges to the timely and appropriate flow of youth throughout the juvenile justice system. This understanding allowed cross-agency partners to reflect more clearly upon their individual agency missions and the resources available to serve targeted youth. Clarity on these dimensions of service delivery allowed planners to identify critical points in the service delivery process and to target planning efforts to these points.

In Stage 7, Identification of Outcomes and Measurement Parameters, participants determined the best possible selection of outcomes and measures. Although there is no requisite number of outcomes that must be identified, it is important that the outcomes respond directly to the needs and strengths of the community's identified population. This process of checking outcomes against population needs and strengths ensures that participants discuss why they believe the identified outcomes reflect the goals they have articulated in planning in the context of the population they hope to serve. Also, the selected outcomes should be checked against the planning group's mission and goals from Pre-Planning to ensure that the outcomes are not broader than those stated in the planning process.

Contra Costa County's planners agreed that two categories of outcomes best reflected their efforts: Individual Outcomes and System Outcomes. This approach is consistent with Rosenblatt's (1998) suggested approach to evaluating collaborative community efforts for children with serious emotional/behavioral issues and their families. Individual outcomes included expectations for positive functioning at the child/adolescent level. These outcomes included the

reduction of initial arrests and recidivism and an increase in school success, school attendance, job readiness, and life skills. The list of individual functional outcomes was considered reflective of the group's expressed value of focusing not only on the achievement of positive outcomes but also on achieving reductions of negative outcomes. At the system level, the outcomes that were identified included the efficient and effective use of resources, reduction of length of stay in out-of-home placement, development of less restrictive placement options, and service delivery that clearly demonstrated the use of a least restrictive/most appropriate principle in making placement decisions.

As planners moved to Stage 8, Definition of Strategies, they developed the action link that connects how they intended to accomplish the identified outcomes with their community's population of focus. The strategies that are developed must be aligned with the group's shared mission and guiding principles. Each strategy should also be considered in terms of the planning group's beliefs about its ability to influence identified outcomes and participants should consider what change is feasible in both the short and long term. For this reason, it is important for planners to consider the role of existing programs in the context of the plan's expectations and to identify strategies to fill service gaps or to redirect existing resources in order to build strategies that are congruent with the plan.

The composition of the planning group is especially important to the task of strategy development because programs and services that do not support the developing plan may require change or elimination. It is crucial to know how well existing services are functioning and supported, information most often available at the direct service level. However, the involvement of front-line staff in the planning process can be complicated if their program is marked for significant change or elimination. In Contra Costa County, the inclusion of middle management staff provided a clear assessment of program functioning. None of the Contra Costa County decisions involved program elimination but rather the expansion and coordination of existing services.

Contra Costa County's planners organized their community's services/programs into two bundles or categories reflecting their role in achieving the overall expectations of the plan. One bundle included the services/programs that had a countywide focus on youth needing out-of-home placement and the other bundle included services/programs that served youth within geographic regions or neighborhoods of the county. While taking stock of the current distribution of the county's interagency resources, the planning participants noted that their current deployment of services and resources were aimed at youth requiring out-of-home services. That is, their existing service resources were primarily focused on a population of youth already in the community's juvenile

facility and other court-ordered secure settings and relatively few resources were deployed in a manner that allowed a focus on regional/neighborhood services.

Planners observed that regional/neighborhood care was largely restricted to outpatient mental health services that were not well developed from an interagency perspective. In addition, access to these services was somewhat serendipitous, as no formal referral process was in place to ensure community-based access to mental health services for youth involved with juvenile probation. The partners agreed that to be consistent with their guiding principles/values and goals, they would have to increase the deployment and development of collaborative services within their community's regions/neighborhoods.

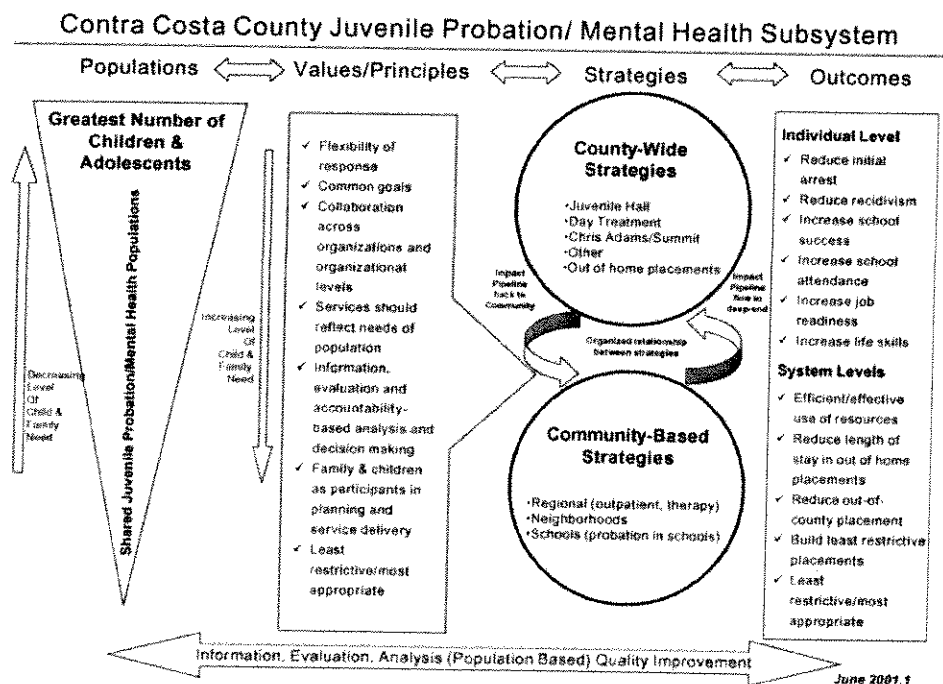
Recognizing the need to increase the availability of regionally-based services throughout the county, planners focused their discussion on how their countywide and regional services related to and impacted one another. In keeping with their articulated goals, planners agreed that regionally-based services should be actively involved in maintaining youth within their families and neighborhoods. The success of this was thought to be reflected in a reduction in the placement of youth into the more restrictive bundle of countywide services and programs. In addition to stemming the flow of youth from their neighborhoods to countywide services, planners expected that those youth leaving countywide services would be able to successfully return to their neighborhoods and families in a timely manner. This expectation suggested to planners that they needed to identify and deploy service strategies aimed at successfully transitioning youth back into their neighborhoods.

Stage 9, Create and Fine-Tune the Logic Model, gave planners a chance to depict the components of their plan and to reflect on the whole of what they had created. The chief role for planners in Stage 9 was to make sure that their plan reflected their intentions accurately and that all participants shared a similar understanding of the relationships among the components of the plan and resulting theory of change logic model. It is important for planners to examine the degree to which they believe the articulated plan has the potential to produce the identified outcomes for their community's population of focus.

Figure 1 shows Contra Costa County's theory of change logic model. The logic model includes the articulation of three broad areas: context/population, strategies, and outcomes. Additionally, the mission statement, guiding principles, and an evaluation/feedback cycle are shown. The logic model is intended to read from left to right beginning with information about the population of interest and moving to the far right with short and long-term outcomes. The middle portion of the logic model displays the guiding principles/values and the service strategies.

In Contra Costa County, the process of fine-tuning led planners to develop a collaborative decision-making process regarding how youth receive and move through their community's array of services. Participants shifted their discussion from a focus on service and program development to a discussion regarding how, as a group of community agencies, they could share in the process of making placement decisions for youth at strategic points in the flow of youth through the Juvenile Probation system.

Fig. 1 Illustration of the Contra Costa County theory of change logic model



Stage 10, Elicit Feedback, is critical for both communicating the theory of change to a larger audience and eliciting feedback from community partners who have not been involved in the planning process. Feedback from stakeholders outside of the planning workgroup serves the purpose of highlighting points of agreement and points where development of consensus within the community is still needed. Like other planning efforts, there must be a designated stopping point in order to avoid the risk of over-planning and thwart progress toward implementation of the plan. If the planning partners were carefully selected in Stage 1 and if they have kept their constituencies up-to-date throughout the planning process, it will be easier to avoid a breakdown when the process is presented to a larger group.

### Phase III: Implementation

In Stage 11, Informing Planning, Evaluation, and Technical Assistance Efforts, planners use their theory of change logic model as a guide to ensure that strategic planning and evaluation efforts are consistent with their plan. It is crucial that strategic planning efforts be grounded in the articulated theory of change. Similarly, internal evaluation in the absence of a theory of change logic model is of limited utility. That is, useful evaluation is dependent upon having information available that allows planners to assess whether accomplishments are a result of their intended community actions.

Evaluation staff advised planners regarding methods that were already in place for measuring the transfer of youth between countywide and regionally based services. At the time of the writing of this paper, details of this component of evaluation were being developed. Contra Costa County planners identified information needs related to the articulated relationship between countywide and regional services. As a result, they acknowledged the need to have a method in place to track the movement of youth between countywide and regionally based services.

Stage 12, Use Logic Model to Track Progress and Revise Theory of Change, is the ongoing process of using the theory of change. Contra Costa County planners developed a notebook of information related to their plan and organized by the components of their theory of change. The notebook was subdivided according to the key elements of the theory of change. Support documentation generated in each of the stages of the planning process was included in the notebook and additional information was added as changes and adaptations were made. Although one person in the planning group took responsibility for tracking all updates, planners have used their individual notebooks as a source for organizing information in a manner that creates a form of institutional memory.

### Conclusion

The development of community-based systems of services and supports to meet the needs of children and families, often referred to as systems of care (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Issacs, 1989; Duchnowski & Friedman, 1990; Friesen & Koroloff, 1990; Stroul & Friedman, 1986), are designed to provide community-based, culturally competent, individualized, family-centered services for children with serious emotional disturbance (Stroul & Friedman, 1986). The expectation is that systems of care can meet the unique population needs of communities by adapting the application of its values and principles to the complex and constantly changing conditions that characterize local service delivery environments (Hernandez & Hodges, 2003a). The challenge of developing such a system of care includes the complexity inherent in their development within an interagency environment. These challenges can dissuade even the most inspired and willing advocates of community planning.

In order to develop systems of care, strategies are needed to help local communities organize themselves into explainable, holistic, service delivery systems. Proponents of service integration claim that in order to successfully resolve human services problems, a broad segment of the community must be involved in local problem solving and planning activities (Wandersman, 1984). Service integration across local agency partners is at the heart of the development of systems of care. Participants in the system development process can benefit from an approach to service planning that helps them make explicit links between their ideas or theories about what will work best in their community and the strategies they plan to implement.

One strategy for addressing this challenge is to use a theory of change approach to planning. It can bring consensus among interagency partners and other stakeholders for a shared overall service delivery strategy. Theory of change logic models establish a context for articulating shared beliefs and strategies by having planning participants work together in establishing logical connections between who in their community is expected to be served, what strategies are expected to be implemented, and what results can be expected for the effort. The goal of the theory of change approach is to provide a process for expressing and monitoring the linkage between the ideas or plans about what is expected to occur within a community to the corresponding action(s) taken by planners regarding how services and supports are actually deployed.

The example provided by Contra Costa County's Juvenile Probation collaborative efforts is being expanded to include planning for children and youth in the child welfare system. This child welfare effort has begun with a focus on children and adolescents who are not experiencing stable group home or foster care placements. This particular population of



children is taxing the local emergency shelter care system and children and families are experiencing the negative psychological consequences of this instability. This planning group has collected information regarding rates of emergency shelter care placement and characteristics of the population receiving these services. Planners are considering strategies in the context of the population they are serving and the results they want to achieve. Overall, the theory of change approach is providing an anchor for planning and implementation that supports clarity and consensus across key stakeholders.

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