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Social Capital and the Strengthening of Community and Family Relationships to address substance use and related issues

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Introduction

BADFS seeks to create structures and an environment in the Blacktown Community that encourages and facilitates individuals, families, different groups, organisations and sectors of the community to work together to build trust, strengthen relationships and develop skills whilst addressing drug and alcohol and related issues.

In essence, BADFS seeks to create social capital as a means of addressing family and substance use issues and our community's common goals. Eva Cox refers to social capital as "the processes between people which establish networks, norms and social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit.Accumulated social trust allows groups and organisations, and even nations, to develop the tolerance sometimes needed to deal with conflicts and different interests" (Cox. E.' 1995 : 14).

Rationale

There is much conflict and division in our community related to drug and alcohol and other related issues. Other related issues include tension and violence in families, community safety, child protection and housing. Community often cries for more policing and new laws to address these issues. However, there is a limit to the effectiveness of legal strategies. We seem to be at a time when there is little cohesion in the community. Individuals and families are often isolated. Even community and government organisations are often competing with each other for funds at the expense of working together. We often stop ourselves from truly looking at a whole of community approach as we can stick rigidly to our mission or roles without addressing long-term or linking issues in a holistic way. We need to find a new way to address the issues. This new way needs to be holistic and needs to tackle the causes, not just the symptoms.

How do we develop social capital

For BADFS, the new way involves the strengthening of relationships and it needs to occur on several levels. We need to build trust between individuals, families and different groups, organisations and sectors of our community. We can use our relationships to address the issues, to find new, creative ways whilst building trust.

The development of trusting relationships is not an easy task. It means being able to deal with conflictual issues as well as relating well with issues that we

have in common. The strengthening of relationships occurs through informal and formal mechanisms. In terms of the formal mechanisms BADFS has already and will continue to hold meetings and forums for other agencies and the general community. These meetings and forums have and will create a sense of connection, trust and common purpose as well as developing strategies to continue to work together to address drug and alcohol and related issues. The informal mechanisms are equally important. These include informal telephone and face to face conversations and of course communication on the net. It is often in these informal one-on-one chats that trust is built and ideas and frameworks are shared that support meaningful action in the more formal activities. These informal chats often support the engagement and continued involvement of individuals, groups and organisations in joint project work.

Meetings and Forums held by BADFS

In the last two years BADFS has held a series of forums. The themes have all been around collaboration. They are described below :-

December 1997 : AGM/Forum - Family, Substance Use, Conflict and Co-operation

“Alcohol and other drug usage in the context of family and community conflict is a complex issue, and if we wish to address it, we need to co-operate at all levels”.

The speakers were :-

- Andrew Penman, Director, Centre for Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
- Peter Connie, Executive Director, Network of Alcohol and Drug Agencies
- Louise Mulroney, Training and Resource Coordinator, Family Support Services Association of NSW

BADFS advertised this forum stating our concern that the NSW Drug Strategy(1993-1998) did not even mention “family” and that change was needed.

Fifty five people attended. The forum discussed the issues for families with substance use issues and identified the need for government strategies to address these issues. The forum broke up into small groups to brainstorm possible slogans for media campaigns and headings for a Strategy Document.

Headings that were brainstormed included *“Strengthening Families”, “Openness between parents and children”, “Lessening impact on children”, “Domestic Violence in relation to substance use”, “Adolescent substance use and impact on the family”, “Context of substance and gender relationships in the family”*

Slogans included *"You're not alone"*, *"Attack stereotypes, not people"*, *"Drugs/Family Breakdown"*, *"Supporting teenagers within families"*, *"You're not the only family with this problem"*.

It is heartening that government now has a range of strategies to address family issues and are continuing to look further into these issues. While a number of organisations and individuals have contributed to these changes, we at BADFS like to think that our activities have also had some influence.

June 1998 : Statistics Are People : Drug Issues Public Forum

On June 10th, BADFS joined with the Damien Trimmingham Foundation to host a forum for the Blacktown Community. The theme of the forum was "Community and Families working together to explore issues of Drug Use in Western Sydney". The speakers were :-

- Hon. Michael Moore, MP, Minister for Health (ACT)
- Dr Jon Currie, Director of Drug and Alcohol Services (Western Sydney) and Chief Investigator in the Westmead Hospital RIORB (*Rapid Induction opiate Receptor Blockade) Naltrexone Trial
- Tony Trimmingham, Founder of the Damien Trimmingham Foundation and the Family Drug Support project
- Jenny Onyx, Head of School of Management and Associate Professor (University of Technology)
- Peter Slattery, Therapist/Educator/Trainer

The speakers discussed issues related to building community relations, social capital, drug law reform, naltrexone as a treatment, the needs of families, the context of substance use and the importance of openness and honesty. An estimated 150 people attended the forum. There was publicity in the four local papers. We received 44 completed evaluation forms of which 42 respondents indicated that the forum was worthwhile.

What did respondents like ?, 50% responded to this open question that they liked the *"range of speakers"*. Other comments included the *"openness and honesty of the speakers"*, *"the emphasis on family and help in the community"*, *"the explanation of naltrexone as a treatment"*, *"a better understanding of adolescents"*, *"the notion of partnerships and community action"* and *"contact with others who identify with the issues"*.

What would respondents like to happen next ? *"Support and educational groups for parents"*, *"family and community working together"*, *"community action groups"* and *"more information/advertising on where families can go for help"*.

There clearly was a call for action from the community to address family and substance use issues. However, as BADFS was and still is a small organisation, with limited resources, it was unable to follow through with activities requested. BADFS recognised that a strong interagency approach was needed to meet the needs of the community. Hence, its next forum emphasised just this.

December 1998 : Communication and Collaboration : Keeping the Lines Open : Drug and Alcohol and Family Issues in Context

The speakers were :-

- Kurt Kasyoni, District Manager, Blacktown Probation and Parole Service
- Helen Freeland, Area Manager, Cumberland/Prospect Department of Community Services
- Martin O'Grady, Manager, Intensive Programme Unit, Blacktown Juvenile Justice
- George Coward, Director of Community and Recreation Services, Blacktown City Council
- Dennis Ballard, Superintendent, Blacktown Local Area Command
- Louise Cowper, Deputy Director, Blacktown/Mt Druitt Community and Allied Health
- Tony Trimmingham, Founder, Family Drug Support

Sixty one people attended this forum. This forum addressed the role of different organisations and issues of collaboration in addressing family and substance use issues. It also discussed the need for open, honest communication and the need for this in a climate of limited resources and where different agency's approaches can conflict with each other.

Participants at the meeting stated a desire to carry forward the issues and ways of collaborating. However, BADFS did not have the resources to be the lead agency to do this and no other agency was putting themselves forward to take on this role. Hence, the next meeting that BADFS called focused on resource issues and targeted those in key decision-making positions.

June 1999 : An Intersectoral Approach and Resource Development and Management : BADFS and everyone's role in addressing family and substance use issues

This meeting was restricted to 17 invited stakeholders along with BADFS staff and management. The stakeholders were high level government officials from various government departments. A number of the officials were regional directors managing large budgets and large numbers of staff. In addition there was representation from two non-government peak bodies.

BADFS called this meeting in recognition that it needed support to address family and substance use issues. BADFS was particularly concerned as it was a small organisation and was not sure of its future in a climate where funding in real terms was decreasing. While BADFS certainly had support of grassroots workers, it also needed the support of high level officials. Their support could come in the form of funding and/or the release of their workers to participate in projects with BADFS. BADFS' focus here was resource development and management as well as the building of mutual relationships with other organisations in order to work together to address substance use and family issues.

This is a very clear example of a social capital process between organisations. BADFS transparency regarding its needs and dilemmas was being heard by its "powerful" stakeholders. The communication was honest and supporting the development of trust. The recognition of BADFS experience, skills and networks in return for the support allowed the relationships to be mutual.

Trusting working relationships between organisations provide a sound foundation for collaboration around the development of social capital with the community and for interagency project work to address family and substance use issues.

December 1999 : AGM/Forum : "Leadership, Social Capital and Action in the Community Sector"

Individualism, freedom of choice and competition certainly have a place in our society. However, BADFS was concerned that social cohesion in our community and trust and co-operation between individuals, groups, agencies and sectors was deteriorating. This deterioration negatively impacts on our ability to address family and substance use issues. We at BADFS viewed this deterioration as a barrier for both BADFS survival and growth in this competitive climate and for a truly effective interagency and community approach. We therefore believed that we needed to influence these big picture issues. Just as it is important for individuals, it is also important for agencies to feel that they can influence their context.

BADFS thought it was important to have a forum that considered the role of the community sector in addressing these issues. As a small, community based organisation BADFS was not feeling very valued, particularly with our limited resources to compete in this climate. We also often experienced our sector as invisible in the media, in the literature and even in everyday conversations. People easily recognised the private and the public sector but often did not know what the community sector was about. We sought to increase the profile of the sector.

The private sector addresses issues related to the development of financial wealth, individualism and choice, the public sector develops laws and policies and strategies to address public good. However, wealth, choice and legal strategies on their own will not strengthen community. There is a need for the development of trusting, co-operative relationships. These issues are increasingly coming on to the public agenda. The community sector has a strong role in this. For the development of such relationships it is important to hear the voice of the community and the community sector. BADFS sought to bring these big picture issues to a debate at a local level. Clearly, the aims of this forum were very ambitious.

The speakers were :-

Dr Ken Dovey, Senior Lecturer, University of Technology

Robert Griew, Chief Executive Officer, Aids Council of NSW

Gary Moore, Director, NSW Council of Social Services

Tony Trimmingham, Founder, Family Drug Support

Marg Spencer, Consultant Project Officer, Family Support Services Association
of NSW

The attendance at this forum was 49 people. The informal feedback that has been received has been quite polarised. Some people found the forum innovative and inspirational while those who were unfamiliar with the terms and with focusing on such big picture issues were less satisfied. In hindsight we needed a better introduction that included an explanation of the terms at the start of the forum. However, what many seemed to find inspirational was the openness and the challenging content. While the speakers were still viewed as experts they participated in open dialogue with the audience. In addition, both the speakers and the audience discussed concerns regarding the lack of trust between organisations and the need to address this. There was honesty in this meeting. At the end of the forum several agencies stated that they would get together to follow up the issues. This has happened and a further meeting will follow. The focus of these meetings is to identify ways in which small organisations can work together and support each other in a climate of competition and of decreasing resources.

While these follow up meetings are not specifically about family and substance use issues, they address infrastructure issues and they recognise that we have a common purpose and that we need to work together to strengthen ourselves and the community.

Conclusion

BADFS has used forums to bring individuals and agencies together to address both family and AOD issues as well as contextual issues. The contextual issues i.e. the political, social and economic climate affect an individual's, family's and

agency's abilities to address the drug and alcohol and relationship issues. It is therefore critical that the contextual issues as well as the specific AOD and family issues are addressed.

The forums provide an opportunity for individuals, agencies and groups to dialogue - to hear each other, to challenge each others' opinions and standpoints as well as learn from and inspire each other. It is at these forums that ideas are shared that can be put into action. It is also at these forums that relationships are developed that can support us to work towards our common goals. The informal and formal connections outside the forums have also supported the issues identified to be followed up.

While most of the forums described have had a focus on increased awareness and the development of relationships between agencies, this is an important step before such relationships can occur for the community. Resources, collaboration and trusting interagency and community relationships are required to effectively address substance use issues. This paper has described the progression in both the development of social capital particularly between agencies and also between other individuals and groups in our community.