



Quality Services. Adequate Funding. Measurable Results.

Whatever it Takes: Building Solidarity Across Silos

Introduction

Have you ever struggled to bring folks with divergent interests to the same table? Conventional wisdom tells us that when advocating for institutional change, the larger the number of participants and the more representative the voices, the more likely it is that your efforts will succeed. But as many of us working in coalition-building can attest, this ideal is not always easy to achieve. When organizing a group that encompasses such wide-ranging interests, as does the human service sector, diverse silos and their corresponding trade associations are placed in direct competition for resources. This can result in detached, sometimes even adversarial, interactions among them. In the mission of building a statewide coalition of service providers to fight for the needs of all Illinoisans, it is critical to identify opportunities that unite in spite of these silos.

Illinois Partners for Human Services (Illinois Partners) was established in 2008 with the goal of breaking through the issue-area silos that keep human service providers across Illinois from communicating their collective value to the public and securing stable sources of funding. While most of our work over the past three years has focused on legislative wins that effect service providers, in 2011 we were able to utilize what others might view as a bureaucratic issue - FY2012 contracts from the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) - to engage our partners, build relationships with trade associations and a large state agency, and increase the credibility and power of Illinois Partners and our member organizations.

Background

Illinois Partners is a statewide network of human service organizations that advocates for high quality human services, adequate funding, and measurable results. Founded in 2008 by the members of the Chicago Alliance for Collaborative Effort (CACE), we began with a small group of providers and advocacy organizations located in Chicago. In just three years, we have grown to include over 650 members statewide, with member organizations in every state legislative district. Illinois Partners grew out of the realization that because human service providers across Illinois are a diffuse group of organizations, they often fail to work collectively to secure public resources and stable sources of funding. Consequently, human services organizations have remained remarkably underfunded despite the critical work that they do - programs that include child welfare, child development, disability programs, anti-poverty, juvenile justice, aging, mental health and substance abuse, housing, and support for low-income working families.

Tangible Results in Just Three Years

In the three years since our creation, Illinois Partners has made significant strides in building strong name recognition and relationships with critical stakeholders, including both provider agencies as well as local and state administrative staff. In large part, our work has focused on legislative efforts that effect service providers. In 2011, this included an organized campaign to prevent drastic budget cuts in response to a dire statewide deficit, upholding the idea that investments in human services saves costs elsewhere, and that our sector should not be cut disproportionately.

Additionally, we secured a solution that would put a stop to consistent late payments to service providers from the state, a situation which had been threatening to reduce staff and close facilities

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for months. One of our most significant victories was in advocating against the TABOR bill, a piece of legislation that mandated state spending caps, which would have suffocated future allocations to human services. Coming off of a legislative season with such notable wins for our sector, we took that momentum into the upcoming fiscal year and tackled other essential matters that involved our partners.

Bringing Different Voices to the Table

Illinois Partners aims to be a truly representative and collective voice of the entire human service sector, and we have had the opportunity to reach out to the trade associations of the varied service silos. It is often true that as organizations which focus on winning funds and protections for their dues-paying membership, even at the expense of other providers, trade associations have been reluctant to place stock into Illinois Partners. Through our various legislative campaigns, we had been attempting to identify which issue could act as a vehicle to garner their collaboration, with only limited success.

Towards the end of the 2011 fiscal year, Illinois Partners previewed the updated FY2012 contracts from the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) and discovered multiple drastic changes. There was no warning that these adjustments were being made, and they raised serious concerns for our member agencies on changing interactions and payments with the state of Illinois. The lack of proactive outreach on the part of DHS to explain why their contracts with providers had changed so significantly while contracts with other state agencies had remained the same, as well as the withholding of information by the Governor's Office of Management and Budget, incited a call to action from our members. Responding rapidly, Illinois Partners began engaging our full expanse of service providers, and initiated a side-by-side comparison of the FY11 contract to the proposed FY12 contract. Providers gave feedback, and we reached out to subject matter experts to analyze the contract.

Through our network and relationships, Illinois Partners had the influence to convene a meeting between DHS and our partners to clarify what we had found and raise our concerns. Although state agencies and non-profit agencies can have strained working relationships, our initial meetings proved fruitful. Even when DHS did not deliver immediately, our strength in numbers and persistence allowed us to establish a process for moving forward. The most critical step was getting the agency to acknowledge the changes that were made to the contract, and to identify line-by-line what they were and the reasons behind them. Since new federal reporting was cited as a driving force, our members and subject-matter experts on federal law were instrumental in counteracting some of these points. We were able to take this information and create a document in response to each change, facilitating understanding for the wide range of providers and the participation of all of our partners on the issues at hand. In addition, the changes to the DHS contracts provided an ideal opportunity to engage trade associations. It represented an issue that affected all providers, was more likely to be resolved in their favor with the participation of a sizeable group, and a solution that would not force them to compete with one another.

Power in Numbers Leads to Tangible Results

With the force of our partners behind us, our first major request was a six-month delay on rolling out the new contract, so that the table we had convened of providers, trade associations, and the state agencies could have the opportunity to create a working partnership and collaborate on solutions.

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DHS did agree to a four-month delay, allowing us time to address our member's concerns one by one, as well as hold follow-up meetings with DHS. Minor changes, with the input and approval of our partners, were made to the FY11 template, and these were the contracts that were sent out to providers across the state at the start of the fiscal year.

Currently, our partners are involved in a workgroup assigned with analyzing the proposed changes, making recommendations based on their understanding of federal requirements, and coming to an agreement with DHS. Our efforts engaged the participation of a broad cross-section of administrative staff, from the Secretary of DHS, Michelle Saddler, her legal counsel, chief financial officer, and various division heads from within the department. The Vice Secretary recently participated in a phone conference with Illinois Partners, answering previously-submitted questions from our network about the contract updates. These responses were collaborated into a FAQ document, which has been posted on the DHS website. The groundswell of our advocacy encouraged DHS not only to engage with providers, but to actively solicit our assistance in this effort, opening up the July 14th contracts meeting to those interested in collaborating

This form of collaborative work on such a large-scale is a perfect vehicle for Illinois Partners to internally build its members' leadership skills and externally solidify our role as key players. Preparing our partners for meetings where they speak on behalf of a broad cross-section of services, as well as communicating expert analysis of the contract issues through action alerts and phone conferences, has strengthened and expanded our overall advocacy abilities, placing us as a clearinghouse for information on the latest contract discussions. As we try to balance the reactive nature of our advocacy, these new partnerships will help us leverage new campaigns. It opens up the door to more pro-active work, giving providers greater control in conversations moving forward, instead of constantly reacting to crises. Using this model, we believe that coalition organizing can lead to long-term success for our entire sector.