



Conflict Resolution and Systems of Care: A Five-year Study

Introduction.

Like many other initiatives involving a variety of agencies and actors, systems of care may experience conflict. A study by Evans and Armstrong on collaboration within systems of care, for example, found that issues related to resources often fosters competition rather than collaboration among partner agencies (Evans, Armstrong, Beckstead). Anecdotal evidence of conflict in systems of care was also obtained at a roundtable discussion conducted by Thomlinson, Boustead and Blanch (2004) at a previous Research and Training Center conference.

To date there has been no systematic study of the sources of conflict within systems of care nor the methods used to resolve conflict. Through a contract with ORC MACRO, the University of South Florida is engaged in a five-year study. The purpose of this study is to explore the nature and extent of conflicts in systems of care; to determine how these conflicts are perceived by the participants and how these conflicts have been resolved. A second purpose is to design and implement an alternate dispute resolution approach in several systems of care and to evaluate the outcomes associated with these approaches. It seems reasonable that early intervention using a mediation approach to conflict resolution could have positive benefits for the functioning of systems of care.

Method.

A review of literature on sources of conflict was conducted. Common reasons for conflict include:

- Incompatible goals and time horizons
- Scarce resources
- Communication issues
- Overlapping authority and task interdependencies
- Decision making authority
- Status inconsistencies
- Prior history
- Interpersonal relationships

Three phases are planned for this project. The first stage comprises a mail and web needs assessment survey of key informants in local SAMHSA funded systems of care sites regarding sources of conflict and their resolution. Dillman's Total Design Method (Salant & Dillman,) will be employed to ensure an optimal response rate.

The second phase includes site visits to three systems of care. During these visits the visitors will review documents and interview key informants about conflict and its resolution within their system of care. A concept mapping exercise will also be conducted. Concept mapping (Trochim,) is a structured, participatory process that involves qualitative data collection and quantitative analysis using a software package called The Concept System. It provides a way to visually organize the ideas of a heterogeneous group such as participants in a system of care.

The third phase will be a development of an alternate dispute resolution technique for pilot testing in several systems of care. The experience of using this technique and its outcomes will be evaluated.

References:

Evans, M. E., Armstrong, M. I., & Beckstead, J. W., & Lee, J. (accepted for publication). A method for examining the impact of policy on collaboration in systems of care.

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Salant, P. & Dillman, D. A. (1994). How to conduct your own survey. NY: Wiley.

Thomlinson, P., Boustead, R., and Blanch, A. (2004) Conflict Management in Systems of Care: A Fruitful Research Agenda? Roundtable discussion presented at the Florida Mental Health Institute Annual Children's Research Conference, Tampa, Florida, March 2, 2004.

Trochim, W. M. K. (1993). *The concept system*. Ithaca, NY: Concept Systems.