Information Sharing and the G.O.A.L.S. Profile

The East Region of San Diego County has been hard at work for many years building collaborative relationships among agencies in order to improve the health, safety, and well being of its citizens.

In particular, the Multi-Systems Workgroup, a subcommittee of the East County Human Services Council and under the direction of Pam Smith, Deputy Director for the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency East Region, chose a "whatever it takes" approach in its efforts to expand and guide community collaboration.

With the momentum of the Multi-Systems Workgroup and the awarding of two Safe Schools/Healthy Students grants for East County schools, Project PEACE (2005) and Project SHIELD, (2007) the opportunity to cement collaborative relationships among East County students, families, schools, social service agencies, mental health professionals, probation, law enforcement, and other community organizations has never been stronger.

And yet, along with this opportunity comes challenge. How can a collaboration of such diverse entities be effective enough to bring about meaningful and positive change to the lives of our struggling kids and families? How can multiple agencies pool resources, create a common language, and most importantly, legally share information that results in both increased benefits and services and a stronger, more effective network of resources? How do agencies navigate within the complicated landscape of information sharing laws like HIPPA and FERPA?

Committed to the idea that an effective interagency information sharing agreement could transform how East Region serves families and kids, Dr. Bernard James, Pepperdine law professor and nationally recognized expert in constitutional law and first amendment rights, was brought in to help guide the process. In two separate training sessions, Professor James educated community and government leaders on the true intent and scope of HIPPA and FERPA all the while driving home the point that while respect for privacy is of paramount importance, it does not necessitate organizational privacy policies that far exceed the expectations of the law.

While the information sharing agreement is complete and in the process of being signed by East Region law enforcement, mental health organizations, health and human services, probation, and school districts, the agreement itself is not enough. Project SHIELD has developed a protocol that involves data collection and analysis that can help determine effective strategies for individual intervention as well as identify trends across systems that can target objective, evidence-based self-improvement goals for the agencies involved.

The G.O.A.L.S. Profile
The Global Oversight Analysis Linking System or G.O.A.L.S. Profile is a response to the realization that, in order to best serve our "at risk" youth, we need a mechanism through which we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of each youth's history, not simply as a view from within our own jurisdictions, but also across the broad spectrum of social service agencies that serve our communities. The G.O.A.L.S. Profile answers a need for a viable process which not only collects and analyzes data regarding our clients, but one that also exposes trends from within and across systems.

The G.O.A.L.S. Profile program has been inextricably linked to the MOU on information sharing, for without that document, the G.O.A.L.S. Profile would be dead in the water. Once the MOU

document was well on its way to completion, the next step was to determine what data should be considered for the G.O.A.L.S. Profile and how that data could best be collected and analyzed while still continuing to honor a significant level of confidentiality. After several trial runs, the respective partners agreed on a discipline-specific matrix in which each agency selected meaningful data categories that might reflect that individual's history within that particular agency.

The G.O.A.L.S. Profile process begins by indentifying a specific risk group, drop-outs, for example. The school will compile a list of 15 students who are at risk of dropping out before the start of their 10th grade year. These students are identified and then their names are paired with identifier numbers. From this point forth, only the individual responsible for collecting the data within his/her respective agency will have access to names; all others will only be able to identify the youth in the study according to their number identifiers. At this point, each participating agency gathers data relevant to their jurisdiction on each of the 15 youth selected for the profile. Once all data is gathered, it is complied in a spread sheet style format. The spread sheet now allows for a global view. It reveals the trends and patterns of the individual youth, but also trends and patterns across disciplines. The drop-out profile may reveal patterns in the family structure, foster care, drug or alcohol abuse, poverty levels, incarceration, prior legal infractions or court issues, etc. Examining data in this way reveals intervention points for preventative action and exposes gaps within and across systems, all of which can inform future policy and practice.