

Spotlight on the Safety Net

A Community Collaboration

Durham System of Care: Creating a Foundation for Community Change

System of Care (SOC) is an organizational philosophy that promotes collaboration across agencies, families, and individuals for the purpose of improving access to and coordination of behavioral health care. It is designed to enhance the provision of evidence-based, culturally and linguistically competent services and supports for our most vulnerable adults, children, and families.

Durham County adopted the values and principles of SOC as a way of doing business in 2002 with our child-serving partners. This major paradigm shift was prompted by Durham County expenditures of over \$2 million in court-ordered out-of-home placements in 2001 with little evidence that placements had improved life outcomes. Leaders from the community convened and quickly recognized that the “siloed” systems did not communicate well and did a poor job of coordinating services, even when they all shared the same child or family.

With no new dollars, The Durham Center led the development of SOC. Staff was hired to begin the process of creating an SOC infrastructure, promoting a community-wide approach, and developing community-based alternatives which have since resulted in Durham County spending no money on court-ordered out-of-home placements in the last several years. These efforts were recognized nationally in 2006 with the Excellence in Community Collaboration Award from the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare and have since received a variety of other state and local awards.

Drawing on the success of SOC for children, in 2007 Durham County decided to expand SOC to our adult-serving partners, making Durham one of the first communities in the country to begin integration of the SOC values and principles into adult services. In 2010 child and adult SOC was fully integrated fiscally, programmatically, and with co-located staff.

To be successful and sustainable, SOC must establish itself as meaningful and relevant across multiple systems and with non-traditional mental health partnerships. While there is an emphasis on mental health conditions, it is critical to establish the applicability of shared values and principles across systems. Strategically it is also important to strike a balance between system reform efforts and improving individual life outcomes—ultimately the system is changed one valuable person at a time.

Each year Durham System of Care hosts a Steps Forward event to engage the community in a dialogue to identify system priorities and to develop an action plan. These priorities are aligned around the 8 service dimensions of SOC—mental health, substance abuse, social services, education, vocational training, health, recreation and, operational services [1].

In Durham, the SOC approach served as a catalyst for several major federal grants, including a multi-million dollar, multi-year Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grant to work with disconnected youth. (Disconnected youth are those with a serious mental illness who have become disconnected from needed services and supports, such as school, employment, or community or family support.) We also host trainings, work groups, an online resource directory called Network of Care, cross-system studies, and the Community Collaborative, which is a monthly meeting of all SOC partners who inform and promote the SOC approach.

One of the most successful activities is the implementation of “Care Review”, a multi-disci-

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plinary, collaborative process between professionals, the client, and members of their support team to increase access to needed services and supports. The planning process is based on motivational interviewing, self-determination, and recovery—with the client present to tell their own story, assemble their own support team, and identify their own needs and desires.

The goals of Care Review are to improve timely access to needed services and supports and to enhance retention in services and supports. It is an opportunity for comprehensive and holistic planning that breaks down system barriers and, through the collection of data, facilitates a better systemic understanding of what did and did not work and why.

In FY 2011 SOC facilitated over 225 Care Review meetings highlighted by 2 core teams focusing on children/adolescents and adults, and 4 specialty teams focusing on transition age youth, persons who are homeless and living in a shelter, juvenile justice-involved individuals, and the Latino/Hispanic population.

Here is an example of how Care Review works: 'Rhonda' was 17 years old when she and her mother were referred to Care Review to request a residential substance abuse placement. Rhonda had become non-compliant with all treatment services, had stopped going to school, admitted to smoking marijuana every day to self-medicate for traumatic memories, and had begun exhibiting more reckless and threatening behaviors. Despite many personal strengths she had become withdrawn and despondent.

At her first Care Review meeting she refused to make eye contact or to participate at all except to object to an out-of-home placement, even though her mother had increasingly become a target of her

anger. Due to concerns for her safety and her escalating substance use, the Care Review team, with her mother's urging, supported a recommended placement in a residential facility.

Rhonda was given several options for treatment programs and she agreed to call each program to ask a list of questions generated during the Care Review to help her establish a sense of control. She selected a program but, promptly upon admission, got into a physical altercation with staff, which led to criminal charges and transfer to the local detention center. When she returned to Durham, her Care Review team reconvened and this time Rhonda was an active participant in the planning process. She articulated insight into her mental health and substance abuse needs and discussed recommendations with the Care Review team. A plan was made and one year later Rhonda is substance free, is a student in the Gateway to College program, works part time, and has been a youth consultant with the SAMHSA grant.

When Rhonda was publically recognized for her achievements she stated, "When someone listens to what you want, everything changes and you start to believe in yourself again and you want a better life."

That's what System of Care is all about. NCMJ

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Reference

1. Stroul BA, Friedman RM. A System of Care for Children & Youth with Severe Emotional Disturbances. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Child Development Center; 1986.