

HOW TO APPROACH POTENTIAL PARTNERS THE OTTAWA SALVATION ARMY'S EXPERIENCE (OTTAWA, ONTARIO)



The Salvation Army (SA) offers emergency assistance to people in Ottawa. Its programs address various needs, particularly housing, addictions, community and family support, legal services, and spiritual support.

Capitalizing on past experiences

Past experiences can be useful in developing partnerships. Prior to joining the organization, the executive director of the SA had been a manager with the City of Ottawa. This was a great advantage, since he already knew the SA and its range of services, and his experience with the City of Ottawa gave him a better understanding of the area and the homelessness sector. As an administrator for the City, he focussed on the system as a whole, rather than on the operation of an individual agency. This broader perspective made him aware of gaps, overlaps, strengths and weaknesses throughout the system. When he was hired by the SA, he was able to connect the agency with a larger network of agencies and their services for people experiencing homelessness. He saw many complementarities between the service providers.

Complementary thinking

His first goal was to maximize services based on the resources available. To do this, he had to talk to other organizations working in the same sector.

At the time, the Housing First model was brand new for the City. It changed the practices and the responsibilities of the agencies. The old philosophy was that people had to be “housing ready” to access housing. In concrete terms, this meant that the SA would call a partner when it had a given number of people ready to enter housing. However, the partner would sometimes return a person to the shelter, saying that he or she was not ready to enter housing for all kinds of reasons (for example, economic, or related to mental or physical health). Consequently, the SA would end up with all the clients that other agencies or hospitals could not serve, impeding its ability to provide services.

With Housing First, the client was the starting point for discussion with potential partners. This led agencies—at that point each working on their own—to review their procedures. He admits that at the beginning there was some

mistrust and fear, and that this is to be expected. With the new approach, the agencies had to come together, talk to each other, be part of the solution and start thinking about how each agency could complement the others. This was even more important with the Housing First model, because the agencies continued to offer services after the person had found housing. (This was not the case under the old model.)

Having an open mind

The biggest challenge that he observed was the overlapping of services in shelters: “How many drop-in centres, offering the same services and referring clients to the same places, do we need?” This overlap could harm clients with complex needs. Flexibility and openness to other ways of doing things would help existing programs work better for more clients.

Building the web

During his first week in the position, the new executive director met with other agencies to discuss the issue of overlapping services. How did he approach them? Simply by telephone or email, after identifying agencies that were part of the SA network. He already knew some people,

but did not limit himself to them. He wanted to speak with other organizations that served the same clientele and did similar work. He made a list of organizations in the area and asked them to identify who their connections were. He then contacted those agencies as well. The goal was to learn the agencies’ points of view and to understand how each of them viewed their role and the system in general.

Planning meetings

When arranging the meetings, he was careful to clearly state the goal, emphasizing that it was an information exchange, from which each organization could learn something. He wanted everyone to participate in the meetings with an open mind, a listening ear, a respectful attitude and a willingness to share: “We have to ask questions and be willing to share as much as we expect from the other person.” He ensured he was well prepared by doing research on the organizations and their expected results. “In short, we had to succeed in both gaining the trust of the organizations contacted and discussing concrete issues regarding their work.”

Understanding the network

The goal of the meetings was to understand the network by finding out:

- how colleagues in other agencies viewed their roles;
- what they considered to be the strengths of their organizations;
- how they felt that they fit into the network; and
- what their opinions were of the SA (its role, its strengths and weaknesses, and what it should do or stop doing).

The advantage of initiating meetings in this way, between agencies that could become partners, was that it validated the other agencies' points of view and provided an outside view of one's own organization. Every meeting ended with an agreement to meet again to discuss more specific topics: "People are always open to seeing how they can work together better, collaborate better or find out what another agency is doing. Personally, I learned a lot of useful things I didn't know before." This also gave employees from different agencies the opportunity to meet each other.

The meetings were very informative. They helped him learn about the agencies,

particularly those working in different contexts. They enabled him to validate the relevance of the work done by each one, observe the gap between the needs and the services provided, and have a frank discussion on the distribution of desired services, realizing that sometimes one must give up certain activities because others do them better. The meetings allowed him to gain the support of other agencies and form relationships to build partnerships. The goal was not to ask prying questions on, for example, the number of employees, size of the budget or sources of funding. Rather, the objective was to think about providing services in a different, more complementary way, and to follow up with concrete action, despite potential but temporary resistance.

The importance of meetings

The initial meetings also served as stepping stones to expand the discussion to even larger groups. Once a rapport had been established and initial resistance overcome, the next logical step was to gradually include other stakeholders and fields of activity in the discussion. The City of Ottawa also helped to bring agencies together by organizing several

"[...] the most important thing is to believe that agencies and clients alike have nothing to lose and everything to gain from complementing each other. We need to believe in this principle; otherwise, there is no point in requesting meetings."

information sessions. This allowed agencies to meet face to face and continue the discussions after the official meetings with the City.

Establishing regular meetings with community organizations makes it possible to inform public authorities about the problems that clients face (adequate or inadequate services). Having different people repeat the same message helps show the significance of flaws in the system. The message is better received because no organization is blamed directly.

Partnerships are not developed without resistance. However, the dialogue must be maintained with reluctant

organizations, because the resistance generally does not last long. Continuing to include reluctant organizations (even the most difficult ones) in meetings ensures that everyone involved is at the table and that the dialogue is open and keeps going. It is essential to understand what the most closed organizations have to say and why they are saying it. These organizations may gradually come to realize that they can no longer work alone and, at that point, collaboration becomes possible.

Consulting is engaging

Consultations with community organizations and the community have led to:

- consensus on the need to centralize as much as possible clients' access to housing, to avoid duplication or contradiction in the provision of services; and
- avoiding competition among organizations for access to housing.

This "housing locator" function, developed in partnership with the City of Ottawa, was assigned to the SA because of its experience and the work it does. This means that a client who approaches an organization to find housing will be referred to the SA, which becomes the gateway. With the housing locator function, caseworkers, who are all part of a larger team, meet with owners, describe the situation and make sure owners are committed to offering housing. The caseworkers find housing for a group of organizations, and not just for SA clients. The housing is listed in a databank that shows the number of spaces available each month, their location, the owners' preferences, the clients' characteristics and so on. Thus, clients are matched with housing in a much fairer and more efficient manner that favours the maintenance of long-term relationships.

Entering into a partnership also means understanding that each organization has a duty to maintain the conversation between partners. Funds are granted for the provision of services and each agency has a responsibility to do the best it can to establish and maintain relationships with other agencies, to agree to hear things that are sometimes hard to hear and to listen, with the understanding that the community is sticking together to maintain services for clients—who are, after all, the starting point.

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