Introduction

The onset of the Information Age has affected homelessness in significant ways. Societies are becoming increasingly stratified as the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen. The homeless are encountering more difficulty securing employment in a market that now demands knowledge-based, white-collar skills in place of labor intensive, blue-collar skills.

As a result of increasingly more challenging circumstances, some homeless have come to adopt the welfare system as a way of life. Services such as Connecting Point (CP), although designed to serve as temporary interventions, have become a permanent part of some people’s survival.

System and Change of Interest

Given the magnitude of difficulties facing CP, we have decided to further focus the scope of our organization. For this and subsequent papers, the system of interest will be CP’s family services.

The duration of this paper will consider the characteristics of CP’s systemic organization and environment that could potentially impact the change process and the changes we plan to implement. Specifically, the characteristics listed in this paper have been identified based on our initial change idea, which is to shift the role of family services from crisis intervention to early intervention/prevention.

The following represents the results of our team brainstorming and discussion sessions. The first section looks at characteristics of the environment of the organization. The second section considers the characteristics of the organization itself.

Environment Characteristics

The following section identifies the main characteristics of the environment by examining: (1) markets and users; (2) challenges; (3) regulations; (4) tools; and (4) financial, human, and facility resources.

(1) Markets and Users

a. The SOI local environment is San Francisco, which is characterized as the costliest rental market in the nation.

b. The high number of services are an attempt to handle the number of families whom are either migrating from outside cities in search of assistance, or SF resident families in need of repeat homeless services. CP’s shelter placement waiting list currently averages 100 families.
c. Families receiving services at CP often struggle with crises besides homelessness (i.e. substance abuse, mental illness or domestic violence).

(2) Challenges

a. Other services in the area offer longer emergency shelter stays, slowing the family shelter placement process and increasing the length of the waiting list.

b. Saturation and unavailability of other shelter systems (domestic violence shelters, in-patient treatment programs, transitional housing programs, and other Bay Area shelters).

c. Constant political debate with MOH, advocacy groups, media and other service providers about the purpose and extent of CP services and its responsibility to “fix” SF’s crisis on homelessness.

(3) Regulations

a. The “No Turn-Away” City Resolution adds pressure on CP’s services to meet all needs of families seeking assistance regardless of the availability of resources.

b. The family-favorable grievance arbitrations enable ineligible or system delinquent homeless families to access service access or extensions.

(4) Tools

a. The Hotel Voucher Program (funded by the City) is an immediate response to providing temporary accommodations to a small percentage of homeless families, however, is not a long-term answer to remedying family homelessness.

b. Another limited tool of the CP services was the intermittent implementation of winter temporary shelters by churches and other non-profit organizations. CP found consistent leverage and pressure from City, advocacy, media and service organizations.

(5) Resources

a. Financial assistance from federal sources (HUD and SHP)

b. Human resources are a vital resource to CP and include the full time employed staff who carry out a number of the services.

c. Facility resources include conveniently located offices leased by the program.
Organizational Characteristics

The following section identifies the main characteristics of the environment that could affect potential changes and their processes including: (1) Culture & Individual mindsets/attitudes/values; (2) new processes and skills; (3) opportunities and directions; (4) problems; (5) assets and strengths; (6) resources for change and (7) others.

(1) Culture & Individual mindsets/attitudes/values

a. CP, Compass Community Services (CCS) and CP Advisory Committee (City staff, Mayor’s Office, advocacy groups, homeless family members and other service provider representatives):

- offer support and investment in providing the best direct services available to homeless families
- shared vision of ultimate self-sufficiency for all homeless families served
- shared value of the need for centralized access to family shelters in SF through the services of CP

(2) New processes, skills (tools)

a. CP and CCS administration and staff offer:

- preliminary buy-in to the value of preventive services in addition to crisis intervention
- understanding of the liability of the CP Hotel Voucher Program (limited accommodation and lack of residential safety and support)
- buy-in to the many benefits of a temporary shelter over the CP Hotel Voucher Program (shelter accessibility and availability of residential safety and support)

(3) Opportunities/planned directions

a. Staff demographic representation of clientele (formerly homeless)

b. Accessible organizational leverage when facing political dissent or turmoil

c. Intermittent leverage opportunities available via the CP Advisory Committee

d. Compatibility between CP/CCS mindsets and the new focus on prevention services in addition to crisis intervention
(4) Problems (internal, including politics, interpersonal relations)

a. Safety concerns and problems inherent in crisis work
b. Staff burn-out and high levels of turn-over
c. Restricted type funding from HUD (federal) and DHS (city)
d. Unstable HUD SHP Federal funding
e. CP often perceived by CCS as organization’s “problem program”
f. Occasional disciplinary problems presented by entry level staff
g. Communication and collaboration challenges between CP and Advisory Committee

(5) Assets/strengths

a. Five years of consistent networking for leverage and collaboration with system
b. Five years of consistent program operation
c. Five years of consistent efforts toward further structured services
d. Five years of consistent availability and operation of the CP family homelessness crisis hotline
e. Availability of personnel with expertise in bilingualism, homelessness and crisis intervention

(6) Resources for change (support or hinder)

a. Stable funding and political support from the SF DHS
b. Leverage/challenges provided by the CP Advisory Committee
c. Opportunities/challenges presented by CP staff turn-over (introduction of new skills and energetic services, lack of professionalism and boundaries, training needs, staff burn-out)
d. Annual salary savings (new monies easily reallocated to emergency assistance and other service line-items)
e. Families at the verge of homelessness calling the CP crisis hotline for preventive services
(7) Others

a. CCS staff compensation/benefit package implementation, administration, modifications

b. Staff training and professional development

Conclusion

This paper identifies the characteristics of CP and its environment that could impact the change process and the changes that our team would like to make. In summary, we came to the conclusion that CP has an urgent need for systemic change due to following characteristics:

- **Resources**: Foreseeable reduction of financial and human resources and consistent insufficiency of shelter space and increase of the SF rental market.

- **Process**: Well constructed institutional networking and good information and database services, but lack of evaluation and quality control mechanisms, as well as collaboration among all constituents.

- **Value**: Lack of shared vision, and contradictory demands from various sectors

As a result of this analysis, the team realized that CP should transcend the existing system by combining systemic analysis with systemic design and thus become a purpose seeking organization as an open system.

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