

Cross-Systems Collaboration: System Leaders Round Table Dialogue to Diminish Disparities

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Abstract

Disproportionality is a national widespread issue that affects everyone. Various community initiatives at the local, state, and federal level have sought to ensure integrating community voices is at the forefront of equity related work. Among the initiatives, there is a county specific cross-collaborative effort to build action steps towards eliminating racial disproportionality and disparities. This qualitative study observes preliminary action steps of systems and community leaders in having a dialogue about efforts to address inequitable outcomes with transparency of thought at the forefront. Researchers reviewed responses from a systems leader discussion about how to address disproportionality and disparities across systems. The results reveal a heightened awareness of the problem and impact of racial disproportionality and disparity within systems and communities. When engaging community members in decision-making processes there is a sense of empowerment. Too often programs and practices are developed that do not include the voices of the people it intends to help. Using the results of this research support additional efforts of developing solutions for increasing systemic partnerships within the community.

Key Words: *cross systems collaboration, community voices, community initiatives, disparities, social work*

Introduction

In many states across the United States, people of color are disproportionately represented (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, n.d.) in child welfare, juvenile justice, and within educational institutions. Given the increased racial disproportionality, as people of color penetrate deeper into these systems, analyses also need to address racial/ethnic differences (Shaw, Kolivoski, & Farrell; 2015). Disproportionality is a national widespread issue that affects everyone. Various community initiatives at the local, state, and federal level have sought to ensure integrating community voices is at the forefront of equity related work. The purpose for getting the community involved is to gain information based on experiences. Several systems such as child welfare and juvenile justice have paved paths of being intentional of hearing the voices of the people being served within their system. They have made efforts to ensure inclusion of their thoughts and suggestions for systemic change. Among these types of initiatives is a county specific cross-collaborative effort to build action steps towards eliminating disproportionality and disparities. For instance, health disparities, education reform and community policing.

The goal is to educate and eliminate the delivery of disproportionate services to children and families who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group resulting in disparities. Several systems are making decisions rooted in systemic racism and implicit biases; and have begun implementing trainings to educate and equip their workers in having equitable lenses when developing interventions. Hundreds of child welfare workers in Texas (including upper level management) were trained in Undoing Racism, a two and a half day workshop, facilitated by the People's Institute. Due to the growth and impact from the pilot areas (Specialists, Advisory Committees, Child welfare leadership), the work was legislated to expand to all regions in the state

of Texas in 2007 under Senate Bill 758 which led to the creation of additional Advisory Committees covering each of the 11 regions. This qualitative study seeks to efforts to address inequitable outcomes within systems for people of color while emphasizing transparency of thought at the forefront. Using a qualitative focus provides for more of in-depth exploration of collaborative works amongst systems where disadvantages and inequitable outcomes are rampant within the communities they serve.

Different facets have been part of initiatives to end disproportionality and disparities: integration of the community voice, community partnerships, and cross systems collaboration. Community voices are the voices of the persons residing within the community being served by that particular system such as children of color who are remaining in foster care longer than their counterparts. Listening to the voices of children who were in the foster care system has been able to spark additional efforts of foster care redesign. This integration of community voices can include community partnerships who may also be involved in serving the same group of children such as the educational system or the hospital system. These partnerships exists between those being served and the systems providing the service. The community voice provides the experiential perspective, community partnerships provides an effort to operate as a unit and cross systems collaborations assist with allowing specialty groups to serve the community in a healthy manner. For so long, many systems serving populations who are disadvantaged and impoverished have operated in “silos,” often repeating similar initiatives and creating additional layers that could be avoided and executed more cost efficiently (Stewart, 2013). By focusing on cross systems collaboration, systems are able to consistently communicate with one another about areas of concern and develop a process that lessens the compounded and repetitive expectations of community members. Because “[c]ommunities [of color] have been ignored and marginalized by certain groups” (Detlaff, 2012), establishing relationships and building rapport are fundamental components in trust. It is important for organizations to have relationships with one another in efforts to create partnerships. Bridging organizations by facilitating the necessary communication between those organizations serving the same people help with collaborative efforts to close gaps (Serrat, 2017). While collaborating, the silo effects of organizations will end and an increased amount of community members will be served.

Review of Literature

Across all systems involved in meeting needs of the community, ineffective and limited cross-system communication, role uncertainty among stakeholders, and prevalence and complexity of behavioral health needs among children are barriers to achieving educational success for children in foster care. Innovative approaches to cross-system collaboration between education and child welfare systems allows these positive outcomes (Noonan et al., 2012, p. 403).

Day, Somers, Smith Darden, & Yoon (2015) provide additional insight about the “knowledge of federal policies and how they support and hinder communication across systems” (p. 57). Several factors influence policies and are often identified through discussions between policy makers. When the federal government passes laws to the state level, there are populations who are largely impacted. There are groups who benefit from and appreciate the policy. However, there are groups who are impacted financially and deem themselves in awkward positions within the community (Welch & Thompson, 1980).

Texas has been the only state to legislate the examination of the existence and extent of racial disparities of its child welfare enforcement actions, and has even implemented the work of advisory committees (Senate Bill 6, 79th Legislature, 2005). The use of advisory groups began in 2005 in the Child Protective Services arena after several child deaths in Texas warranted research delving into identifying underlying factors. These research findings revealed and confirmed the inequities that existed with various factors. One of the most dominant factors that existed was race with African Americans having the most detrimental outcomes in every system even when controlling for poverty. One of the outcomes from the research was more intentional methods of including community in the decision-making process, which began with the emphasis on systemic transparency. Growing from three pilot groups to each Texas region having an advisory committee, advisory groups in Texas consisted of systems and community persons collaborating to address the disproportionate outcomes. The department acted in full transparency to identify and address what it termed as “disproportionality” within its own system to influence other systems to follow suit. These efforts included the development of advisory committees that purposefully recruited community residents as an integral voice in dealing with the issue.

Disproportionality is defined as “the under or overrepresentation of a particular group, race, or ethnicity in a public system compared to their representation in the general population” (Child Welfare Gateway, 2016, p. 2). Disparity is defined as “the unequal or different treatment or services provided to one group as compared to another group” (p. 2). Texas’ Center for the Elimination for Disproportionality and Disparities (also known as The Office of Minority Health Statistics and Engagement) eventually closed in 2018. Currently Texas addresses issues of disproportionality and disparities within several departments including the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TDFPS) and the Texas Juvenile Justice Department. However, the past cross-collaborative initiatives integrate within the fabric of helping systems and focus on emphasizing dialogues between community residents and system leaders that nurture understanding human relationships, critical thinking, and leadership skills. Those involved in the cross collaboration work place a value on connections and social networking. Collaboration is a pivotal building block in building such solid and productive relationships of trusts between systems and community include the willingness of systems to be vulnerable and transparent.

Texas’ prior efforts are vital to community revitalization through cross collaboration. One of the resources developed by Health and Human Services was the Texas Model (2010, 2015), which is a framework for equity within systems. The model includes advancing data driven strategies, engaging community, developing leaders, collaborating across systems, and promoting work defined by race equity principles. The Texas Model emphasizes a “development of effective collaborations across systems and meaningful community partnerships” (para 1). Such cross systems collaboration enhances the strengths of collaborating agencies/programs to promote a continuous system of services for youth and families (Stewart, 2013) lending itself to community organizing efforts that encourage communities to advocate on their own behalf (Beckwith & Lopez, 1997).

Scholars have noted potential barriers in cross systems collaboration, specifically in child welfare, education, criminal justice, and behavioral health (Gartska, Lieberman, Biggs, Thompson, & Levy, 2014; Jensen & Potter, 2003; Noonan et al., 2012; Stewart, 2013). Many of the barriers identified related to “agency policy or practice” (Gartska et al., 2014, p. 196), but also included obstacles in communication, stakeholder roles, and needs of community persons being served.

Identifying effective strategies is a necessary action step institutions must be willing to initiate as they embrace transparency.

Collaboration that includes the community voice is paramount in assuring acceptance and participation in the intervention. Such cross systems collaboration enhances the strengths of partnering agencies/programs to promote a continuous system of services (Stewart, 2013) lending itself to community organizing efforts that encourage communities to advocate on their own behalf (Beckwith & Lopez, 1997).

Although community-based agencies play an important and vital role within the community, many times you do not find collaboration with community members themselves—the very same people you are trying to help. Community member participation may be relegated to advisory positions and only included after the program has been designed. Ideally, a diverse mix of people from the community and those representing related community agencies should be present from the conception of the program. In addition to researchers, each group can bring to the table a number of valuable perspectives and resources. (Franco et al., 2007, p. 2)

Theoretical Underpinnings

Various systemic and organizational theories attribute to cross-systems collaborative work. Various theoretical sources enhance the perspective of collaboration within systems such as the concept of outlined in the Systems Theory (Bertalanffy, 1950). When wholeness is applied to communities, it takes into account all members of a community, and its ability to work together. Utilization of the basic concepts of Systems Theory creates a visual for grasping the interrelated nature of cross-systems collaboration. Systems Theory is a conceptual framework that guides the ideology of teamwork, as it focuses on systems interacting with each other to fulfill an identified purpose or equifinality. More importantly, it highlights concepts of relationships among individuals, groups, organizations, and/or communities and other mutually influencing factors within the environment. Systems Theory explains that even though levels in a system have an interdependent relationship, it is helpful for the purposes of analysis to separate levels conceptually focusing on boundaries of subsystems within a system and maintaining homeostasis/balance within a system.

Stakeholder Theory is another theoretical underpinning that takes into consideration systemic thought as an integral component of the organization, creating the potential for organizational change using change agents. Stakeholder Theory involves the “management as it encourages collective input and shared responsibility” (Suter et al, 2013, p. 60). In particular, McCoverly & Matusitz (2014) combine concepts of Systems Theory and Stakeholder Theory as basis for arguing the importance of community collaborations among nurses, patients, and other health providers for the improvement of community health. Systems theory recognizes the needed input and impact of all stakeholders, such as marginalized members, business, civic and natural leaders, and social services. This concept of collaboration recognizes the importance of creating space for all voices to ensure equitable practices produce outcomes that are more equitable.

In addition, using a strengths-based approach, social workers must address strengths, examine problems, and encourage existing and new strengths. Major concepts observe an individual’s

character traits and values are as strengths; human development is not static and resources can be developed; and using positive resources can promote well-being on mental health (Ashford, LeCroy, & Williams, 2018). Other major concepts are empowerment, collaboration with the client, resilience, and healing and wholeness (Saleebey, 2006). These existing and newfound strengths can be utilized as resources for growth (Teater, 2010). This approach seeks to assess strengths and resources in order to promote individual, groups, and communities.

Research Design & Methodology

This qualitative study observes preliminary action steps of systems and community leaders in having a dialogue or Think Tank about efforts to address inequitable outcomes with transparency of thought at the forefront. The purpose of the study was to review responses from a systems leader discussion about how to address disproportionality and disparities across systems with underlying initiative to produce efforts of challenging structural or institutional racism. Researchers examined secondary data from a community advisory committee which consisted of agency and community leaders representing various systems of child welfare (regional and program directors), education (superintendents and administrators), community safety (police chiefs), and health (hospital and clinic directors). All system leaders held decision-making capability within their systems.

Sample

Texas once had eleven regional advisory committees with a sole responsibility of developing strategies and activities of eliminating disproportionality and disparities within systems. The sample size for this study was retrieved from one of the largest advisory committees in Texas, which grew from roughly 9 members to 119 members in a ten-year period. Members of this advisory committee represent various systems who have effectively worked together through cross-collaborative initiatives. This advisory committee has also consistently established an effort of semi-yearly town hall meetings and leadership round table discussions for system accountability for five years. The committee has maintained a concentration on involving and developing community partnerships to increase equitable outcomes within systems while making efforts of transparency in data collection and information sharing to community. The research includes a qualitative secondary data analysis of community and agency leadership who serve children and families in a metropolitan area. The sample size consisted of 22 participants. The majority of participants were male 52% (n=12). There were an equal number of African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic participants (32%; n=7) and 4% (n=1) indicated others. Each of the system leaders participating oversee a minimum of 10 to 2500 staff.

Procedures

The research examined and reviewed answers from questions addressed to community leaders during a systems leader round table discussion. The round table was a four-hour format. Purposive sampling identified specific leaders from the existing advisory committee. The data provides a pivotal building block in building such solid and productive relationships of trusts between systems and community includes the willingness of systems to be vulnerable and transparent. The questions focused on how to address disparities within systems and between communities. Discussions centered primarily on education, disparate influences, policy shifts, and expected obstacles presented in this shift and change for the future. Leadership participants provided several

statements from a four-hour format. Questions were developed based on a previous town hall meeting where community members had provided their feedback that expressed several concerns related to disproportionate outcomes affecting them. After review of all discussion items from the town hall, the following questions were asked to each system leader:

- Question 1: How do we educate and get people involved toward the movement of change?
- Question 2: How does disparity affect our community health as a whole and as a society?
- Question 3: How do we fundamentally change social services to start a "shift" in policy?
- Question 4: How do we prepare to meet obstacles of this transition?

Data Analysis & Results

The data was initially transcribed by hand by the researcher, then processed and organized based on responses from the questions using excel, then moving to an open coding process (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw; 2011) focused on emic language of the participants. Emic language refers to the specific terms that participants themselves use, and can be an important analytic focus in understanding how participants themselves identified solutions to the posed inquiries. The researcher used an analytic strategy for the central steps of the coding process most similar to a grounded theoretical approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used a line-by-line coding process for each of the responses to the questions in efforts to identify the system leader's experiences related to addressing disproportionality within systems. The line-by-line coding was followed by researcher's aligning each code and categorizing them into groups.

Once all 54 categories were aligned with the 204 codes, the researchers were able to collapse the categories under a thematic concept. Utilizing Hahn's (2003) analysis, researchers identified 204 codes and placed them into 54 categories, which researchers collapsed into 3 themes of *Emotional Response*, *Community Responsibility*, and *System Management* (see Figure 1).

Emotional Response refers to the feeling or reaction of a situation to a specific event(s) that occurred. When the participant responses included emotional terms of feeling words they were categorized as emotional responses.

Community Responsibility refers to the responsibility of community involved; in order to maintain function, adhere to society, and flourish successfully. Researchers placed those participant responses that alluded or mentioned the community being active in some manner in this theme.

The last identified theme was *System Management*, which refers to the legal and social institutions that manage communities with policies and procedures in order to maintain effective order. Any responses that identified the system or agency as the root of the problem or solution were considered part of the system management theme.

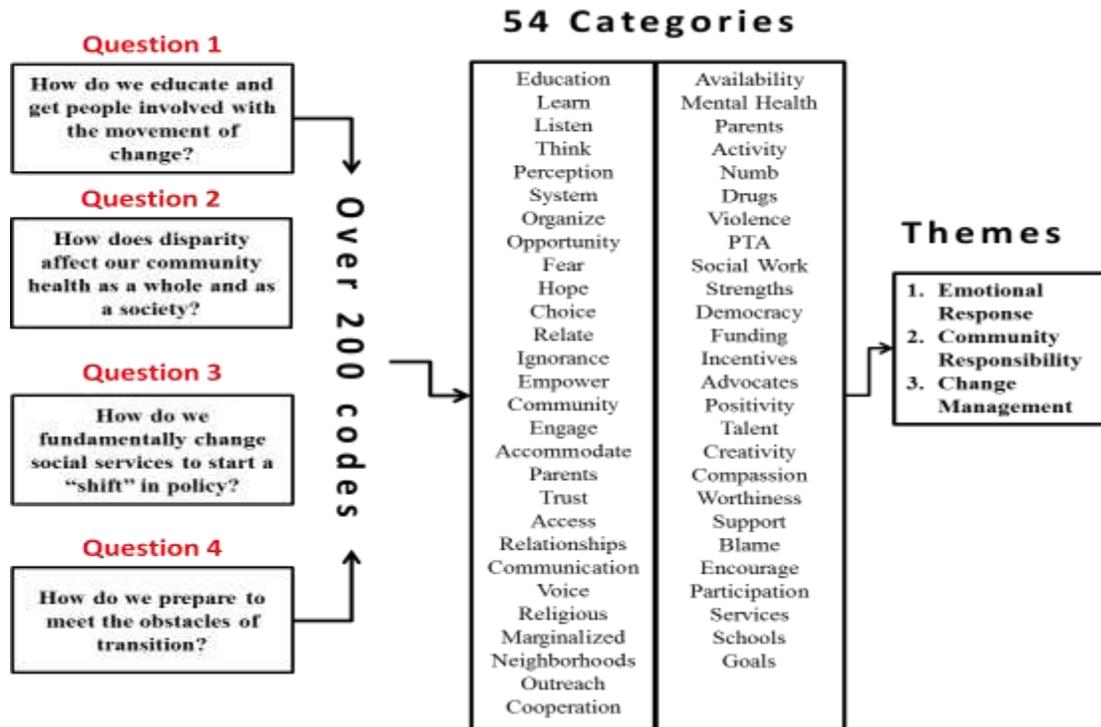


Figure 1. Visual of the Responses, Categories, and Themes.

Table 1 provides an overview of the responses. Questions 1 and 3 had the most responses from participants. From the 54 categories, the results revealed overall 37% (n=20) of the responses were identified as emotional, 30% (n=16) identified emphasis on community support, and 33% (n=18) primarily focused on system management. Various statements supported each thematic concept.

1. Examples of Emotional Response Statements:

- *"We need to shape the community with talent, creativity, strength, respect and compassion."*
- *"They have shut down, they have become numb."*
- *"...decisions are punishing and communities lose hope."*

2. Examples of Community Responsibility Statements:

- *"We need to recognize the history of marginalization."*
- *"Collectively systems can coordinate a presence in a community."*
- *"Educate the existing community groups."*

3. Examples of Change Management Statements:

- *"Systems are expanding the voice of what community organizing is."*
- *"How can we get funding?"*
- *"We need to accommodate for the purpose of the future."*

Table 1. Overview of Codes, Categories, and Themed Responses.

<u>Group</u>	<u>Coded Responses</u>	<u>Categories</u>	<u>Emotional</u>	<u>Community</u>	<u>System</u>
Question 1	32% (n=65)	44.4% (n=24)	n=7	n=9	n=8
Question 2	16.74% (n=34)	25.9% (n=14)	n=2	n=6	n=6
Question 3	33.5% (n=68)	64.8% (n=35)	n=14	n=9	n=12
Question 4	22.7% (n=46)	42.6% (n=23)	n=7	n=9	n=7
Raw Number	203 codes	54 categories	(37%) ¹	(30%) ²	(33%) ³

Note. Percentage based out of the total number of codes (n=203) and categories (n=54). Scores will total 203 by adding the Coded Responses column. Scores will total 54 by adding the Categories column. The three remaining columns labeled Emotional, Community, and System will add to 54 per column.

¹Refers to percentage of responses which were categorized as Emotional Responses.

²Refers to percentage of responses which were categorized as Community Responsibility.

³Refers to percentage of responses which were categorized as System Management.

Question 1: How do we educate and get people involved toward the movement of change?

Question 1 had 65 responses across 24 categories and Question 3 had 68 responses across 35 categories. When reviewing answers to the first question addressing education and awareness, the participants placed the largest emphasis on the community taking responsibility to gain information related to community organizing and involvement. System leaders made several comments about community being more involved in the system efforts to develop initiatives for restoration. Several examples were provided by system leaders of their current efforts of educating the community using educational tools of pamphlets, presentations, involvement in community and health fairs. Many of the system leaders desired for more input and involvement of community persons as part of the movement. One response included holding parents accountable:

- *How do we harness that same energy from parents who gather at track meets and football games?*

Other responses provided possible reasons the community was not involved in the movement for change.

- *People have forgotten how to come together and how to resolve*
- *Communities have a tendency to ignore the issues*

Question 2: How does disparity affect our community health as a whole and as a society?

Question 2 had the least amount of responses from the participants compared to the other three questions with 34 responses across 14 categories. For the second question inquiring about the effects of disparity on communities, there was a balance placed on the systems negative impact on communities as well as the community's impact on itself. The systems leaders expressed an understanding of the historical impact including institutional racism and its impact on the people who are being served within their systems.

- *There is a lack of trust*
- *Decisions are punishing and shocking the community that they lose hope and do not believe it will ever or can ever get better*
- *People are scared because it is a gun*
- *There are varying levels of comfort*

Question 3: How do we fundamentally change social services to start a "shift" in policy?

For Question 3's inquiry into initiating a systemic change through policy, majority of the participants (40%) provided emotional responses and 34% of the responses stated it was institutional ownership and system responsibility (34%), with community responsibility being the lowest expectation (26%). This observation supports a necessary effort for institutions to be mindful of their emotional influence on how to make changes through policy.

- *Systemic thinking needs to shift*
- *Systemic ignorance perpetuates the sense of hopelessness*
- *Systems need to earn the trust of the communities*

Question 4: How do we prepare to meet obstacles of this transition?

When participants responded to Question 4 about how to prepare for potential obstacles of transition, much of the reliance was on the community to provide guidance and answers (39%) along with systems making an effort to be proactive as well (35%). Fewer of the responses were emotional in context (29%).

- *Need to recognize that so many other things are going on*
- *Need to consider different religions and different ways of thinking affects perceptions*
- *It's important to be a listener*
- *We can work together to collectively meet one or two goals*

These results uncover a heightened awareness of the problem of disproportionality and disparity. Such efforts of awareness support the growing need towards community development and

community strengthening (NASW, 2011), because it involves both the community and systems working together. For social workers, the goal is human progress and the knowledge of disparity within agencies and communities informs early intervention to meet needs and prevent further systemic involvement for children and families.

Implications for Future Research

Future study must include community members' response to organizing. The need to include community members in decision-making and organization is evident in the finding that community members are “numb” and feel punished. What has been the impact of decisions made without community input? Additionally, researchers might consider exploring what community members know and need to know in order to have agency. McCovery & Matusitz (2014), as well as practice experience, suggests there is a vast difference in the perspective of the community in comparison to the perspective of civic leadership. Understanding the disparity between city leadership and community knowledge would propel community activists' work generating community participation and engaging needed change. Because academia has at times taken research into their own hands, remedies do not always translate in ways that help marginalized communities. Therefore, further research must include the community being served, as in community-based participatory research. This collaboration is necessary for the generation of sustainable solutions that often, in turn, create opportunities for continued community problem-solving (Adams, 2019; McCovery & Matusitz; Tremblay, Martin, Macaulay, & Pluye, 2017). Institutions of higher education often have resources that communities lack, but do not have the input, insights, and experiences of community members. Likewise, social services and community organizations should intentionally reach out to academic institutions for leveraging those resources, such as faculty-mentored student researchers and faculty consultants (Adams, 2019).

Implications for Social Work Practice

The results reveal a heightened awareness of the problem and impact of disproportionality and disparity within systems and communities. Community voices are vital in providing feedback and responses to various oppressive occurrences (McCovery & Matusitz, 2014). Historically, systems have developed programs for community without the inclusion or feedback of the community. So often these same systems will ponder about the reasons certain programs continue to reap disproportionate and disparate outcomes. Therefore, “[e]ncouraging participation and agency are fundamental elements of social work practice using a community development approach that emphasizes community identification of needs and strengths, and community involvement in social change” (Goodwin & Young, 2013, p. 344). Although community-based agencies play an important and vital role within the community, many times you do not find collaboration with community members themselves—the very same people you are trying to help. Community member participation may be relegated to advisory positions and only included after the program has been designed. Ideally, a diverse mix of people from the community and those representing related community agencies should be present from the conception of the program. In addition to researchers, each group can bring to the table a number of valuable perspectives and resources.

Further Reflections

Systems are formed by connections of people, places and things that work together in an organized manner. Several individuals make up the systems that represent the community (Mulligan, Stelle, Rickards, 2016). For instance, social workers, community leaders, and community members are included in those groups. The National Association of Social Workers code of ethics (2017a), focuses on the professional standards deemed necessary to guide social work practice. The standards provide guidelines to address decision-making processes when working with individuals, families and communities. Therefore, providing social workers the skills needed (such as organizing, facilitating conversations, researching, assessing needs, and evaluating efforts), will make an impact on the health of the community while working alongside communities.

As these findings suggest, when engaging community members in decision-making processes there is a sense of empowerment, as insiders know and understand their community needs better than any outside entity (Adams, 2019). Community members could become parts of advisory committees for systems to include their perspectives on important matters. Although systems usually have closed business meetings, there is a need to have “open” meetings to provide full transparency between the community and systems. With the engagement of community members, an alliance can develop between systems and therefore provides a well-synchronized community. Therefore, social workers can assist to bridge gaps within communities through a non-bias approach using brokering and advocacy skills. Using a strengths-based approach to working within the community builds continuity and supports strengthening and empowerment to develop progressive communities (Glicken, 2004). In so doing, social workers are reminded of a long history, dating back to its professional beginning with Mary Richmond and Jane Addams, of collaborating with communities for the sake of the community (Adams, 2019). Collaborative partnerships between systems and community leaders prove to be an effective way to combat lack in adequate resources throughout the community. Too often programs and practices are developed that do not include the voices of the people it intends to help. And various levels of the system often have limited understanding of the community. For example, when wanting to invite diverse populations, the particular system might suggest that the community “does not come when services are offered”. Social workers understand the dynamics of power that keep the two entities segregated, instead of collaborating. Using the results of this research support additional efforts of developing solutions for increasing systemic partnerships within the community. The efforts of social workers to connect local systems with outside systems appears to be a necessary effort to provide different tones to address the community needs.

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