

Connecting Point: Crisis Center for Homeless Families

Described Through Banathy's Three Lenses

Revised & Resubmitted by Daniel Pascoe on 3/27/03

Introduction:

This paper describes an organization, Connecting Point (CP) as a System of Interest (SOI). Throughout the document, CP is presented through different perspectives or Banathy's three system-perception lenses. Thus this paper is divided in three sections: System-Environment Lens, Functions/Structure Lens, and Process Lens (Banathy, 1992). Each and the combination of these three points of view are used in hope of bringing a comprehensive and diverse light to the description of CP as an SOI.

1. System-Environment Lens

System: From August of 1995 to June of 2001, Connecting Point (CP) was a crisis center for homeless families. It coordinated the provision of emergency services and shelter placement for homeless families in the San Francisco (SF) County.

Environment or suprasystem: CP was one of 4 programs of Compass Community Services (CCS), a social service agency in San Francisco, California. CP collaborated with the Continuum of Care (other SF service providers and advocacy groups) via formal networking in consortia, coalitions and advisory boards designed to explore deficiencies and solutions for the services of CP and the suprasystem. CP also collaborated with federal, county and city funding and political organizations: Housing & Urban Development (HUD), Department of Human Services (DHS) and Mayor's Office on Homelessness (MOH). CP services were also affected by political campaigns, interaction with media, and environmental factors such as an inflated rental market, and fluctuating city policies.

Boundaries: CP served homeless families who were physically residing or requesting services within the SF County. Although shelter beds were never enough, CP services remained accessible to all families who requested shelter. CP was not a shelter; its operation took place during business hours. Office space and time boundaries impacted most interactions, requiring safety guidelines. Boundaries with political entities, such as MOH, DHS and the media were also necessary. Most of these interactions were delegated to the program director due to their sensitive nature.

Inputs:

Definitional: The CP shelter WL remained saturated, partially affected by significant city service gaps, such as limited housing options, the termination of shelter programs, and extended shelter stays. Most families faced these limitations as unresolved needs, in addition to adjacent issues such as domestic violence, mental illness, substance abuse, etc. By operating CP, the City hoped to better understand SF's homelessness problem, and thereby consider more effective service delivery.

Resources: Connecting Point received portion of its funding from the HUD federal fund. The SF DHS was HUD's grant recipient and simultaneously provided CP with the rest of its funding. DHS subcontracted with CCS for the operation of CP. CCS thus sponsored CP, as well as provided CP staff with administrative and service leverage, through the participation of the CCS Executive Director and Development Department staff, as well as through the services provided by sister CCS programs like the family shelter or the child care center.

Noise: Families commonly displayed limitations on issues of violence, illness, addiction, employment, etc. These factors were often presented as problems to be addressed prior to service eligibility, communication, or even safety. Strict information, eligibility and safety guidelines were tough to implement, but necessary. In addition, city political agendas and pressures required boundaries in CP's relationship with particular entities (MOH, advocacy groups, etc.).

Outputs:

Definitional: By 2001, over 18,000 family members had accessed CP services. These families had received crisis intervention, emergency assistance, hotel accommodation, case management and/or shelter placement at some point. CP's data collection efforts made it possible to provide comprehensive statistical information about homeless families in SF. The CP Database on family homelessness assisted all entities involved in better understanding the characteristics and needs of this group.

Requests for resources: In order to continue its sponsorship and funding, CP reported its services to CCS, DHS, HUD, and other entities of the suprasystem. Most requests for information and resources came from these entities, often in the form of advocacy for particular services or families. CP attempted to maintain fair and consistent service provision.

Waste: CP was frequently pressured and sporadically forced to implement funding specifically designed to address families' symptoms rather than fundamental problems. One example of this was MOH's persistent push for temporary hotel accommodation for families with no other options. This strategy temporarily removed homeless families from the streets, but also exacerbated fundamental problems, such as the transient and at-risk status of homeless families and the exhaustion of other human and financial resources.

Relationships with supra and peer systems: CP had a hierarchical relationship with its funding and sponsoring sources. CP services were designed in an attempt to centralize family access to shelters so that families could apply once to any of the four SF family emergency shelters. Although these shelters worked with CP in an egalitarian basis, CP had no peer programs. Through 2001, no similar programs were found within the US. CP found support from the other three CCS programs, as well as leverage from other SF service providers.

System control:

Adaptation: Due to their relevance and visibility, the services of CP were often criticized by the diversity of entities mentioned above. Unfortunately, negative feedback from these groups frequently pushed CP to adapt to tangential needs of the suprasystem, often without appropriate regard for families served.

Transformation: Representatives of all entities mentioned above composed the CP Advisory Committee (CPAC), designed to evaluate and provide recommendations to CP about its services and challenges. Due to its advisory nature, although politically charged, this feedback was structured and frequently positive. Bimonthly meetings were held during which input was provided to CP and CCS. Their suggestions, expectations, and CP's service performance, were noted and reviewed during subsequent meetings.

2. Functions/Structure Lens

Core definitions:

Purposes: The generic purpose of CP was to assess and refer homeless families to critical services in SF. More specifically, as family shelter space remained insufficient, CP contingently managed the SF family shelter WL and temporary accommodation and crisis services for families who remained homeless. In

addition, due to its comprehensive data collection practices, CP also became the first SF source of statistical data on family homelessness.

Specifications: CP clients were homeless or almost homeless SF families or pregnant women. CP staff consisted of 8 family counselors and 2 administrators. Services included hotline or drop-in crisis intervention, case management, temporary hotel accommodation, emergency food and clothing, transportation assistance, and referrals to other critical resources, including eventual shelter placement. Family-staff relationships were client based since families approached CP voluntarily, as well as contractual since shelter placement was contingent upon a CP assessment and placement on the shelter WL. The greatest constraint the program faced was insufficiency of shelter space; SF could only place one third of homeless families.

Functions/Purposes:

Input, transformation, output: CP was in charge of providing homeless families with *crisis hotline services* (crisis intervention, family psycho-social intake, referral to other critical services), *emergency services* (crisis intervention, information on resources, emergency assistance, temporary hotel accommodation), *family assessment* (counseling and case-management services, placement on the shelter WL, referral to long-term services), and *shelter placement*. Homeless families received services from their crisis hotline call and remained CP clients through their shelter placement. Families received these services throughout an average 90-day shelter placement wait.

Growth, feedback, control, adjustment, accommodation, integration: A longer-term function of CP was the pursuit of family independence; thus, all services became means toward self-sufficiency. CP also supported families during their placement process, worked on the constant adjustment of intervention services, and turned referrals to services into family accommodation and integration to the system. On the other hand, administrative elements such as staff training, professional development and continuous staff support, all were needed means of program growth, feedback, control, adjustment, accommodation and integration. CP staff met regularly and in a variety of formats for service supervision, training, processing and brainstorming on issues of individual and team performance, as well about potential program improvements.

Coaction, termination, systemization, information transmission: The CPAC had the function of providing CP with external feedback about the services, impact and potential of the program. Internally, as CP attempted to foster professional fairness, equality and ethics, CCS regularly provided the program with the necessary hiring, supervision and termination guidelines. In addition, CP held regular staff meetings for service supervision, training, processing and brainstorming about potential improvements.

Components:

Families, services, administration, governance systems: Components of the Program included its 10-member staff, the continuous availability of emergency assistance through operational and service expenses such as the rent of office space, a server and 10 personal computers with internet access and links to an MS Access network database, a toll-free crisis hotline and offices with headphones, the master-lease of 24 hotel rooms, transportation assistance, dry food, toiletries and clothing for families, etc.

Learning-resources, planning/arrangements, resource-acquisition/control, and guidance systems: Resource information was provided to families in the form of handouts, interventions, and a self-help resource center, including a family computer with links to an on-line SF resource database. These resources were obtained through networking, collection from and contracting with a diversity of organizations. CP staff learning and guidance systems were provided via formal training, shadowing, supervision and evaluation, all components of continuous performance enhancement.

3. Process Lens

Input processing:

Interaction: Families could only access shelter placement in SF through CP. Thus, families initiated interaction, whether by calling the crisis hotline or by dropping-in. Families also interacted with CP staff when visiting the center for an appointment, for emergency assistance, or to use the resource center. Child supervision space and support was provided during office hours.

Identification: As families called, 4 crisis counselors assessed their eligibility for services and intervened. Families were tentatively added to the shelter WL, and if necessary, they were linked to immediately needed resources, including hotel accommodation for families with no options. In the end, families were referred to revisit CP for a shelter assessment.

Introduction/Activation: Four family counselors assessed families by reviewing their housing and employment histories, their need for medical, mental or substance treatment, and their children's needs. These interviews served as the entry point for all family shelters in SF, and replaced the prior practice of families having to go to each shelter for a separate intake interview.

Guidance/Management: All data gathered on the process and status of homeless families was collected in an MS Access database for the purposes of periodic statistical reports, family case-management services, management of the shelter WL, and reporting to the Consortium of Family Shelters. For purposes of guidance, managerial and or contingency support, paper and meeting systems ensured the ongoing accuracy of family appointments, hotel accommodation, other emergency services, and WL processing and shelter placement.

Transformation processing:

Service:

Transformation of the: During client interviews, counselors assessed and reported family needs. Interviews were conducted in a highly supportive environment to assist families in processing and further understanding their situation, exploring their opportunities and pursuing their maximum potential.

Systemization/integration: Counselors provided families with assessment services through crisis intervention, psychosocial assessments, case management, referral and networking services. Subsequently, they linked families to immediately needed resources, provided hotel accommodation to families with no other options, and eventually placed them in one of four shelters.


Facilitation: Counselors motivated families in their process toward self-sufficiency by eliciting and facilitating their own exploration of their potential, their core needs and their most viable options. Families were continuously encouraged to maximize their housing and other opportunities. At the Center they were provided with a self-

help resource center with diverse digital and printed information and free telephonic communication. In turn, counselors participated in regular and on-demand debriefing, and planning meetings with their supervisor, other CP staff, other service providers and consultants to facilitate their crisis intervention services.


Management:


Performance effectiveness: The shelter WL movement was calculated by the database and by internal/external networking to ensure the fair implementation of a shelter placement triage criteria. In addition, services were monitored and supported through regular staff supervision, coordination meetings, debriefing sessions, and training and professional development events. Services were also reviewed in CP Advisory Committee and CCS meetings.

Cost effectiveness:

Families with no other resources were eligible for hotel accommodation through the Hotel Voucher Program. CP master-leased 24 hotel rooms at a city low-income hotel. Every morning, 2 counselors received hotline calls from families and assessed their lack of options to provide appropriate cases with temporary accommodation. Family hotel placement was managed through  database reports and printouts, which functioned as listings of current family placements, hotel vouchers, regulation contracts and grievance information printouts.

Output processing:

Identifying: Counselors assessed each family's eligibility and readiness for shelter placement and managed their case accordingly. They reported their situation and needs in the database and prepared to present their family caseload to other CP counselors and, when prioritized among others on the WL, to emergency shelter staff for potential shelter placement. 

Dispatching: CP staff met in a daily basis to discuss families and recommend them for shelter placement according to their WL date of entry and the Shelter Placement Triage Criteria. Referred families accessed shelter based on corresponding vacancy. If they refused their placement, families could be placed at the bottom of the list to wait to wait for another vacancy. Once families were referred and placed in shelter, they became clients of the  lter for the following 90 to 180 days.

Facilitating: CP counselors met weekly with all SF shelters to present families ready for placement in order to determine where and when they could be placed. This



collaborative process ensured placement fairness in the face of persistent city shortage of emergency shelter beds.

Guiding/Managing: Cases were reviewed according to the Family Shelter Placement Triage Criteria and each family's place on the WL. This process allowed the system to prioritize families who faced particular challenges or who had waited longer than usual due to specific shelter space limitations. Once pertinent shelter space was found for a family, CP counselors contacted them to finalize their emergency assistance and case-management process, as well as to provide them with clear information on their shelter intake.

Systems guidance and management processes:

Feedback, adjustment and system change: Due to their relevance and visibility, CP services were reviewed by the diversity of entities mentioned above. Their input, although often skeptical or abrasive, served as relevant feedback about the services and allowed for consistent performance adaptation and transformation.

Collect evidence, analyze it, construct a model or change, stipulate consequences, and implement: Representatives of all these groups composed the CPAC, designed to provide formal evaluation and recommendations to CP about its services and challenges. These were then discussed individually with funding, sponsoring and direct leverage sources for analysis, consideration and implementation.

Conclusion:

This paper has described CP as a System of Interest (SOI) through Banathy's three system-perception lenses: a System-Environment Lens to describe CP's relationship with its sister and larger systems, a Still Picture Lens to describe its components and functions, and an Action Movie Lens to describe its processes (Banathy, 1992). Each and the combination of these three viewpoints was used to bring a comprehensive and diverse light to the description of CP.

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