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## Family Service Alliance sees benefits of sharing: New grants, revenue

BY SHERRI WELCH

The cost savings, new grants and revenue and benefits of shared expertise continue to add up for the **Family Service Alliance for Southeastern Michigan** as it enters its third year.

The alliance has four members and a number of new grants and contracts based on their joint work and geographic reach.

Beyond that, as trust increases, the agencies are learning from each other about all aspects of their businesses, sharing best practices and discovering unexpected areas for improvement, said Michael Earl, managing partner of the alliance and president and CEO of **Oakland Family Services**.

"Once you lower barriers, you find opportunities for mutual learning, mentoring, process improvements and greater efficiencies...people start to talk to each other and uncover new ideas (and)...opportunities," he said.

New funding the alliance has attracted includes \$960,000 for the year from **United Way for Southeastern Michigan** to help run its Early Learning Communities program, which teaches early childhood development to non-professional caregivers with the goal of getting more children entering school ready to learn.

Inkster-based **Starfish Family Services**, which became the fourth member of the alliance last year, was the first to begin work with the centers and was followed six months later by the other alliance members: **Oakland Family Services**, **Macomb Family Services** and **Family Services Inc.** in Detroit.

The latest United Way grants to the alliance come in addition to a \$1.5 million grant made two years ago to improve access to services for families in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.

Oakland Family Services recently secured a \$3 million, three-year contract under a new pro-



Michael Earl



Ann Kalass

gram to serve severely emotionally disturbed children in the county, thanks to assistance from Starfish.

"This was a natural extension to things we were already doing, but there were several things...(the county was) impressed by," including the fact that the alliance already had an electronic record system and that Oakland had tapped Starfish's expertise, Earl said.

Starfish, in turn, tapped Oakland Family and Macomb Family Services for help in diversifying to more private-pay mental health clients from government-pay clients, an effort that should bring in about \$200,000 in new revenue the first year, said CEO Ann Kalass.

Early on, the alliance pooled purchases of office equipment, shaving 15 percent off of its combined costs. Since then, it has jointly licensed an electronic medical record system and is sharing the cost of a systems administrator, collectively saving \$300,000 on system implementation and about \$50,000 each on the system administrator's salary.

The alliance also is looking at pooling health care, and Starfish and Oakland plan to share a full-time child psychiatrist beginning this fall.

But Kalass and Earl both stress that cost savings and increased revenue aren't the only goals or benefits the members are seeing.

Employees from billing to human resources

call each other to share problems and solutions.

"By seeing some quick wins early on, like the implementation of this electronic records system ...it's become a very safe process," Kalass said.

Given that the four agencies decided early on against mergers in order to remain rooted in their communities, "there isn't the threat of a merger, and there's also something safe in that we represent different service areas," she said.

Of equal or greater importance to the agencies is quality of care. Each now uses an evidence-based model to deliver services to their collective 20,000 behavioral health clients.

The **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services** for the past couple of years has asked Oakland Family Services to replicate what the federal agency considers promising practices, Earl said. "The alliance offers that opportunity at the regional level to be a testing site for these types of practices."

Staff know the day-to-day inefficiencies and "if they can reach out to their peers and begin to learn from each other, that's the door opener," said Deanna McGraw, interim executive director of **Detroit Executive Service Corps**, a Southfield-based agency that provides management consulting to local nonprofits, K-12 educational systems and governmental agencies with the help of retired and working executive and professional volunteers.

The alliance members are open to all levels of collaboration, even though they are still competitors, she said.

The transition by all four members to an evidenced-based model in behavioral services is also a huge indicator of success because that transition is very hard, McGraw said.

"If they've been successful, it makes evaluations of programs more reliable."

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