The Mockingbird Society:

An Organizational Case Study

Karolynn Tom

HEHD 8000: Foundations of Youth Development

September 29th, 2016

Clemson University

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The Mockingbird Society is a non-profit advocacy organization in Washington State. Originally founded in 2000 by Jim Theofelis as a way to provide a voice for youth in foster care, today its mission is "to improve foster care and end youth homelessness" (The Mockingbird Society, 2015). According to their website, at The Mockingbird Society, youth and allies work to change policies and perceptions that stand in the way of every child having a safe and stable home. In order to achieve its mission, The Mockingbird Society (TMS) has two main service areas, Youth Programs and Family Programs. The Youth Programs consist of the Mockingbird Youth Network (MYN) and the Youth Advocates Ending Homelessness (YAEH) program. The Family Programs outreaches, trains and supports foster licensing agencies in implementing the Mockingbird Family Model (MFM). The MFM is a unique foster care delivery system that provides greater supports for foster parents and foster youth (The Mockingbird Society, 2015).

The Youth Programs has a dual focus on advocacy and youth development. Each year Mockingbird serves approximately 500 participants through monthly chapter and leadership team meetings, quarterly State Leadership Council meetings and annual events including the Youth Leadership Summit and Youth Advocacy Day. Programming also includes a youth authored newspaper, *The Mockingbird Times,* and public speaking engagements. There are six MYN chapters throughout the state: Seattle, Everett, Tacoma, Olympia, Yakima and Spokane. The YAEH program is currently only in Seattle. Each chapter serves young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who have experienced foster care and/or homelessness (The Mockingbird Society, 2015).

Program Organizational Driver

In 2015 there were more than 8,000 youth and children in an out-of-home placement in Washington State (Partners for Our Children, 2015). Out-of-home placement is a "placement in

a foster family home or group care facility…or placement in a home, other than that of the

child's parent, guardian, or legal custodian" (Washington State Department of Social and Health

Services, n.d.-a). There is ample evidence that outcomes for youth in care do not match those

from intact families (Burley, 2013; Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2003). For instance, the

high school graduation rate for foster youth is only 48%, compared to 72% for non-foster care

students (Burley, 2013). Furthermore, 28% of youth who age out of foster care will experience

homelessness within the first year of their exit from care (Ford Shah et al., 2015).

The Mockingbird Society believes that youth who have experienced foster care and/or

homelessness are truly the experts as to what changes need to be made in the system.

Mockingbird trains youth to be their own best advocates. TMS provides opportunities for

participants to inform decision-makers about the policies and laws that need to change in order

for current and future foster youth to have a better experience while in and after exiting care.

Since its inception, Mockingbird has helped advocate for over 20 legislative and policy reforms

in Washington State (The Mockingbird Society, 2015).

<p align="center">**Goals and Performance Objectives**</p>

There are three main categories of performance objectives for the Youth Programs at

Mockingbird: connection and empowerment, community education, and systems reform. In each

category both desired outputs and outcomes are outlined.

Connection and Empowerment

The goals in this category for 2016 were "1) Youth learn leadership and self-advocacy

skills; 2) Youth feel accepted by their peers and Mockingbird staff; positively connected to the

foster care and youth homelessness community; and empowered to improve systems that affect

them" (The Mockingbird Society, n.d.-a, p.1). Success in reaching these goals are measured by

outputs including the number of leadership team and chapter meetings held and the number of

youth engaged. Outcomes in this area are measured through responses from an annual survey

administered through SurveyMonkey. This survey attempts to measure program impact and

quality. Desired outcomes in this area include youth feeling safe and respected by staff and other

participants and feeling more connected to the foster care and/or homelessness community. A

benchmark set for 2016 was that 80% of participants surveyed will "credit Mockingbird with

helping them become a better leader" (The Mockingbird Society, n.d.-a, p.1).

Community Education

The performance objectives in Community Education are different than the other two

categories because success is measured not only through participant contact, but through the

contact with the community at large. The Youth Programs goals in Community Education for

2016 were:

> 1)Youth learn effective communication skills with a focus on writing and public
>
> speaking; 2) Youth develop more interest and confidence in effectively and purposefully
>
> sharing their personal story; 3) Youth help educate the public about issues related to
>
> foster care and youth homelessness, and increase public will to act. (The Mockingbird
>
> Society, n.d.-a, p. 3)

The measured outputs include the number of articles submitted for publication, the number of

Speaker's Bureau events and the number of audience members at these events. Finally, the

number of youth engaged in both writing and speaking opportunities is measured. Again, the

annual survey serves to measure the outcomes from participating in these Community Education

activities. An example benchmark in this area would be that 80% of surveyed youth will "report

they have learned public speaking skills from advocating with Mockingbird" (The Mockingbird

Society, n.d.-a, p.4).

Systems Reform

As an advocacy organization, Systems Reform is central to the work at Mockingbird.

The goals outlined in this area for 2016 were:

> 1)Youth will learn how Washington state is governed; 2) Provide youth with
>
> opportunities to organize, develop relationships with policymakers, and become civically
>
> engaged; 3) Engage youth in policy development and systems advocacy to bring about
>
> lasting improvements to foster care and homeless youth serving systems (The
>
> Mockingbird Society, n.d.-a, p. 5).

The outputs measured in this area included the number of youth trainings provided, the number

of youth who attend the Mockingbird annual events (Youth Leadership Summit and Youth

Advocacy Day), the number of youth who participate in State Leadership Council meetings and

the number of policymaker meeting held through the year. The outcomes measured through the

annual survey and through post-training and post-event surveys focus on participants reporting

they learned advocacy and public speaking skills, knowledge of government and systems reform

and feel more interested in advocacy as a result of Mockingbird activities. On the systems level,

a measured outcome is the number of chapter proposals that are advanced through legislative,

administrative or budgetary action, with the target goal of at least two of the seven being

advanced each year (The Mockingbird Society, n.d.-a).

Program Activities

The activities provided by the Youth Programs align well with the outlined goals and performance measures, falling again into three categories, connection and empowerment, community education and systems reform.

Connection and Empowerment

Each region holds monthly leadership team and chapter meetings. The leadership team which consists of the chapter leaders and two to three highly engaged chapter participants who meet to plan and practice facilitating the upcoming chapter meeting. The chapter meetings are typically two hours long, with agendas determined by the phase of the advocacy cycle. The Mockingbird Society follows an annual advocacy cycle that has four phases: identifying problems, defining solutions, refining solutions and advocating for change. For example, during the identifying problems phase, chapter meetings will include brainstorming and consensus activities. Meetings are a space for participants to connect to others in the foster care and homeless communities, to feel accepted and empowered to advocate for change.

Community Education

The two activities that fall under this category are contributing to *The Mockingbird Times* and presenting in a Speaker's Bureau event. *The Mockingbird Times* is a newspaper that is published bimonthly by TMS. All newspaper articles are written by participants and cover a wide variety of topics concerning foster care and homelessness issues. Youth writers are encouraged to write about their own experiences and how that may relate to current or past advocacy topics. Speaker's Bureau events include any public speaking opportunities for chapter members including being part of a panel and facilitating an informational training or workshop.

Each time a participant writes or presents they are supported by their Engagement Specialist and other chapter members to learn and improve their skills.

Systems Reform

Systems Reform program activities include State Leadership Council meetings, youth trainings, and annual events. There are four State Leadership Council (SLC) meetings each year. Mockingbird's SLC is made up of the two chapter leaders from each chapter. At these meetings chapter leaders meet with community advisors about their policy proposals, getting feedback and resources to make them stronger. At the winter SLC meeting, the youth members will endorse Mockingbird's legislative agenda for the next year which is based off of the policy proposals that each chapter brought forward that year. There are four youth trainings given each year aimed at preparing youth for civic engagement and advocacy. These trainings also serve to prepare youth for the two annual events, Youth Leadership Summit and Youth Advocacy Day. The Youth Leadership Summit is a two-day event that brings representatives from each chapter together in Seattle which culminates in the chapters presenting their policy proposals for the year in front of the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care, the Office of Homeless Youth Advisory Committee and other concerned citizens and policymakers. Youth Advocacy Day (YAD) is an event that occurs during the legislative session in Washington's state capital, Olympia. During YAD, youth in small groups are able to meet directly with legislatures and their aids to discuss Mockingbird's legislative agenda. During previous YADs, youth were able to witness the legislature vote on policy proposals that they had advocated for passage.

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Resources

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The Mockingbird Society employs 36 full and part-time employees. The majority of the employees have experienced foster care, homelessness or both. The largest department at

Mockingbird is its Youth Programs, with each of the MYN and YAEH chapters having an

Engagement Specialist who supervises two Chapter Leaders. The Chapter Leaders are recruited

from within the chapter participants and work an average of 15 hours a month. Also within the

Youth Programs are six Network Representatives. The Network Representatives are also

participant eligible (between the ages of 13-24 and have experienced foster care or

homelessness). Network Representatives provide support to the MYN and YAEH programs,

working an average of 15 hours per week. Youth Programs management includes an

Engagement Specialist Coordinator, Network Coordinator and a Youth Programs Manager.

Outside of Youth Programs, there are six administrative staff whose responsibilities include

development, human resources and finances. The Family Programs consists of two employees

who outreach and train foster care agencies in the Mockingbird Family Model, a unique way of

foster care delivery. Finally, the Public Policy and Advocacy team is comprised of two

experienced government advocates. All operations are directed by the Board of Directors which

includes 16 community members.

  Mockingbird headquarters is located in Seattle where the administration, Public Policy

and Advocacy, Family Programs and most of the Youth Program teams are based. For the five

chapters that are not located in Seattle, Mockingbird collaborates with local organizations as host

agencies. The host agency is typically the organization that holds the Independent Living Skills

(ILS) contract with the state for the specific region. ILS provides skills based training for young

people ages 15-21 who were in foster care at least 30 days after their 15th birthday (Washington

State Department of Social and Health Services, n.d.-b). The participant eligibility and the

positive youth development mindset of both Mockingbird and ILS programs makes these

collaborations ideally mutually beneficial. However, as it will be discussed later, the strength of

the collaboration with host agencies are not equal and can affect the attainment of program goals.

TMS also partners frequently with various community individuals and organizations in

order to successfully advocate for policy changes. SLC meetings would not be successful

without the participation of community advisors. These advisors are experts in their field and

provide insight, critique and encouragement to participants about their policy proposals.

Mockingbird will often be the lead organization in advocating for a specific policy proposal, but

be supported by other child welfare organizations or coalitions.

The Mockingbird Society has an annual budget of around 2 million dollars, with half the

revenue coming from private grants, a quarter brought in through private donations and the

remainder from program service fees and fundraisers (The Mockingbird Society, 2014). As can

be expected, the largest portion of the budget is spent in the Youth Programs department, around

$800,000 (The Mockingbird Society, 2014). The expenses included wages for all staff and

facility rentals for host agencies. Each chapter has its own budget with money for travel,

supplies, food and youth stipends. While the chapter budget is adequate for the mission, there is

room for more investment. Specifically, an increased staff salary budget could be beneficial.

Currently, each chapter (excluding YAEH) has an Engagement Specialist at 0.5 Full-Time

Equivalent (FTE), or 20 hours per week. This means that the staff in each region must split their

attention, either between regions or between entirely separate roles. Two Engagement

Specialists serve two regions each, Seattle/Everett and Tacoma/Olympia. Two Engagement

Specialists (Yakima and Spokane) only serve one region, however to make a full time job,

Mockingbird has partnered with the host agencies so that the other 0.5FTE is filled with housing

case management responsibilities. Another area that could use more investment is the YAEH

program, which is currently only in Seattle. Ideally each region would have a full-time MYN Engagement Specialist and a full-time YAEH Engagement Specialist.

Theory or Framework

According to The Mockingbird Society website the Youth Programs utilize Positive Youth Development (PYD) theories and frameworks in their program design and implementation (The Mockingbird Society, 2015). Specifically, TMS references the Five C's of PYD as their guiding theory. The Five C's comprise of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Lerner, Fisher and Weinberg, 2000). There is also a sixth C, contribution (Pittman, Irby, Tolman & Ferber, 2003). Each of the program activities works towards developing one or more of the C's. Program activities in the realm of Connection and Empowerment work to build competence in advocating and public speaking while also building youth's connection to their community and their confidence in their ability to make a difference. Activities also work towards building character, with modeling of positive group norms. Community Education activities again strive to help build competencies especially in writing and public speaking. These activities also build a sense of connection as participants are able to network with various community members. Activities in the Systems Reform category are aimed to expand all six C's. Competence and confidence in advocating for oneself and for systems change; connections with other youth and community members and character in understanding and respecting norms. Finally, the activities expand on the youth's level of caring and contribution in that many of the results of these activities will not have a direct effect on participant's situations; but can have an immense impact on future youth who enter foster care or become homeless.

Strengths and Areas for Improvement

In critically reviewing TMS's Youth Programs in terms of best practices in PYD, several

strengths and areas for improvement were identified. An important strength in the Youth

Programs' design and implementation is the level of youth voice that is included. Multiple

frameworks and theories include youth voice and leadership roles as an integral piece of PYD

practice (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2011; Saito & Sullivan, 2011). For instance, in

the "Big Three" of PYD, Lerner and colleagues (2011) include "opportunities for youth

participation in and leadership of valued family, school and community activities" (p. 51). The

entire program is based around giving youth leadership opportunities and empowering them to

use their expertise knowledge and experience of the system to make positive changes in policy.

Almost all aspects of programming are youth led and driven, from the day-to-day activities such

as chapter meetings to the larger direction of the organizational advocacy agenda. Furthermore,

opportunities for increased responsibility, input and leadership roles are given to youth through

participation on the leadership team and through employment as Chapter Leaders and Network

Representatives.

Another strength is that the Youth Programs provide, to some extent, all the features of

PYD setting outlined by Eccles and Gootman (2002). These include physical and psychological

safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social

norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and integration of

family, school and community efforts (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). As Hamilton, Hamilton and

Pittman (2004) note, it is not just providing these aspects in programming that is important, but

rather how the youth interact with the setting. Some of the features that Mockingbird provides

most strongly will be discussed. TMS provides a space that is physically and psychologically

safe. Each chapter has group expectations that protect these areas of safety. The 2015 annual

survey found that 96% of participant respondents "usually" or "always" felt safe during

Mockingbird events and activities (The Mockingbird Society, n.d.-c). Similarly, programming

offers opportunities to belong. During program activities youth do not have to feel alone or

strange because of their experience with foster care and/or homelessness because they are

surrounded by others who have had similar experiences.

One aspect that can be considered both a strength and an area for improvement is

Mockingbird's collaborations with other organizations, specifically the host agencies. TMS

relies heavily on host agencies to assist in program activities and specifically in recruitment.

Some of the partnerships with host agencies are stronger than others and this is evident in the

outputs achieved in various regions. For example, while the Everett and Seattle chapter are

supported by the same Mockingbird staff member, in 2015 the Everett chapter had 81 unique

participants, while Seattle only had 43 (The Mockingbird Society, n.d.-b). According to Byrne

and Hansberry (2007), there are four components of successful collaborations: shared priorities,

combined resources, institutional support and political will, and shared clarity of expectations.

Each host agency collaboration is unique and varies in its level of these components. For

example, the host agency in Tacoma is the REACH Center which does not specifically serve

foster youth or homeless youth. This has led to a lack of shared priorities resulting in potentially

an unequal need for collaboration. One of the most common issues with collaborations is an

absence of an actual need to collaborate (Byrne & Hansberry, 2007). To be sure, Mockingbird

needs to partner with some agency in Tacoma in order to maintain a chapter in the region;

however, there may be little value added for the REACH Center. Moving forward, a

recommendation would be to intentionally assess the health of each host agency collaboration.

The steps to establishing or improving collaborations outlined by Byrne and Hansberry (2007)

should be utilized in strengthening those partnerships that are found to be inadequate.

An additional area for improvement would be staff retention. Currently, within Youth

Programs, only one non-participant staff member has been employed with Mockingbird for more

than two years. Historically, Engagement Specialists remain with Mockingbird for 1-2 years

before moving to different agencies. While this is not uncommon in the field of youth work

(Yohalem, Pittman & Moore, 2006), efforts should be made to change this trend. Supportive

relationships are a key part of PYD programming (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hamilton,

Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004; Saito & Sullivan, 2011) and the relationship between staff and youth

can have an influence on program participation (Rhodes, 2004). One youth noted, when asked

what they would change about Mockingbird that they "wished the Engagement Specialist would

be more consistent and not change so often" (The Mockingbird Society, n.d.-c). Furthermore,

because of the nature of the Mockingbird's program design following an annual advocacy cycle,

many of the activities only happen once a year which means that a complete onboarding process

takes an entire year. This affects the quality of the services provided. One recommendation

would be to assess and adjust the program budget in order to increase compensation for Youth

Programs staff. It will probably be necessary to work towards increasing revenue as a means to

reach this goal. Another recommendation would be to establish a compensation matrix that takes

into account education, training, previous experience, length of employment and location cost of

living so that there is greater alignment in compensation levels and employee qualifications.

Final Recommendations

For the past 16 years The Mockingbird Society has been working towards the goal of

ensuring all youth have the resources to thrive in life. While there is clear evidence of the

organization's success as an advocacy agency through a long list of implemented legislative, policy and budgetary items, there is less evidence of the impact on program participants. Some efforts have begun to address this issue, for example, in 2015 the annual survey was overhauled to begin looking at program quality and youth reported outcomes. However, much more work is needed to appropriately match the evaluation with program goals. This alignment is essential in any quality evaluation (Little, 2014). An issue with designing a well aligned evaluation is the lack of evaluation expertise within the organization. As a solution, Mockingbird could partner with researchers in academia to design, implement and analyze results of a comprehensive evaluation.

TMS has just begun work on developing a three-year strategic plan to help give the organization direction moving forward. Keeping in mind current resources, strengths and limitations it would be beneficial to examine three key areas as the strategic plan is developed. First, Mockingbird's collaborations will need to be assessed. Are there partnerships that need to be altered or new partnerships that can be established in order to move the mission forward? What steps need to be taken to continue to steward strong collaborations? Second, the current staffing structure should be discussed. Is having a half-time Engagement Specialist for each region enough to reach the desired outcomes? Are there adjustments that can be made to reduce turnover? Finally, a plan for continued evaluation should be addressed. What is the quality of the programming based on best practices? What are the actual youth outcomes? What are the community outcomes? It is an important time in Mockingbird as critical decisions are being made which could improve and expand their impact at both the system and individual levels.

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