

A Circle of Place: Engaging Institutions in Shared Values and Actions to Serve Youth in Crisis

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Executive Summary

Many young people in crisis spend a large part of their time living in or moving between institutions - juvenile justice, social services, foster care, the police, school, and youth development agencies. Often, these organizations are at odds with one another or not effectively communicating about the dire needs of the young people they serve. Worse, it is extremely rare to find any organization that looks at the holistic developmental needs of youth in crisis and many unintentionally reinforce negative behaviors of youth.

Chelsea, Massachusetts is home to Roca, a values-led youth and community development organization that has taken an effective and holistic approach to connecting and building relationships with other institutions in order to address the multiple needs of youth in crisis and enhance opportunities for their growth and development. This approach, the Engaged Institutions (EI) Strategy, is comprehensive and groundbreaking, challenging those serving youth to take risks and build bridges with one another. It encourages unlikely partnerships and transformational relationships, and demands empathy and mutual learning from all the participants. EI is a vital technique with invaluable implications for youth and community development work across the field.

An undeniable strength of EI is its focus on long-term solutions to the problems vulnerable youth face. At many institutions young people turn to for support, they find short-term, band-aid solutions. Roca's focus on its core values of belonging, generosity, competence and independence form the foundation for its use of EI to address the mix of educational, employment, social and personal issues that affect young people's lives. This focus on core values leads to a deeper level of collaboration than traditional systems alignment processes and offers an alternative strategy for transforming the lives of youth and community. Key emphasis in the EI strategy is placed on the intentionality of relationships across all levels of the organizations, shared learning and accountability, honoring all the voices at the table, and implementing creativity in figuring out how to navigate difficult issues and challenges facing young people. Roca and its EI partner organizations participate as equals in peacemaking circles focused on healing and responsibility for the youth and the adults involved. They conduct training sessions for each other on issues of shared importance. They are relentless in holding each other accountable in their different ways for the growth and development of the youth they serve together. Put simply, the EI strategy is street work with adults.

Roca's implementation of EI serves as both an incubator and case study for other organizations interested in observing its profound effect on communities and youth. The lessons Roca has learned and the work the organization does provide a compelling roadmap for this innovative work.

Introduction

For vulnerable young people struggling to carve a life out on the streets, public sector institutions such as social services and the juvenile justice and health care systems can bring promise and hope for a better future. Yet, this hope is seldom actualized. Young people in crisis have extensive developmental issues and often require a wide range of

services including substance abuse counseling, mental health services, health care, employment readiness training, basic education and most importantly, personal growth assistance and support. With needs greater than any one agency can address, vulnerable young people struggle to navigate the supports and services offered by many agencies, often entering into a downward spiral with a climax so severe that one agency such as the justice system or foster care steps in and exerts total control over the young person's life.

For many young people at risk, the transition out from the formalized institutional structure and control of foster care, juvenile justice or social and health services catalyzes a new episode of crisis. Without the presence of the intentional relationships, support services and boundaries of the institutions, they often relapse into old patterns of bad relationships and problem behavior that led them to the institutions in the beginning. As Child Trends reports, this is particularly important for young people who abruptly age out of foster care or re-enter the community from an institutional environment.

Adolescents in or leaving the foster care, juvenile justice and special education systems are also at a greater risk for disconnection than other groups. As these groups transition to adulthood, they lose the support and benefits from the systems they depended on as children. (Hair, 2005, p. 2)

Critical developmental phases in the lives of young people, transition times such as the first 24 hours a young person transfers out of the House of Corrections, the painful transition period out of a harmful relationship, or the transition to work all require coordinated services and support. Young people need to be able to successfully navigate through a variety of systems to find their way onto an integrated path of development. Young people are especially vulnerable in these time periods; any gap in system support can rapidly send them into a destructive relapse.

For these young people, intensive integrated community supports and services are needed - not only to bridge the transition period but also to build on and reinforce the developmental progress that they may have made with institutional programs. It is essential that wraparound services and supports augment the ongoing relationships, assistance and expectations that institutions may provide for young people.

Unfortunately there are few examples of integrated community based services and supports for young people in crisis. Designing such a system is expensive and complex, requiring significant time, intentionality, public will, organizational development and intervention to transform mammoth bureaucracies, build system alignment and transform service delivery structures. Yet, system re-engineering is not the only way to transform service delivery and provide pathways for youth to thrive. The Engaged Institution (EI) strategy fostered by Roca, a human development organization in Chelsea, Massachusetts, is demonstrating success and building system alignment in a different way, from the bottom up by following a path of emergence, cultivating innovative practice and supporting staff from a variety of agencies to lead change from the heart.

Roca has demonstrated through their programs and work that deep level collaboration between institutions can originate from core organizational values, regardless of any financial or practical incentives. This approach has become known as the Engaged Institutions strategy and is demonstrating remarkable success in helping Roca and its partners achieve their goals of providing meaningful opportunities to the most hard-to-reach young people.

Institutions as the Context for Young People in Crisis

Young people existing at the margins of society - youth living in high-risk environments, experiencing crisis due to substance abuse, violence, poverty, lack of education, or mental illness - have limited options, most of which are negative. Programs designed to serve the youth at highest risk are rare. Programs addressing more than symptoms of crisis and effectively meeting the myriad of these young people's developmental needs are rarer still.

For many young people in crisis, life on the street is their only reality. Incarceration, institutionalization, or residential treatment programs are the lone options for ending their negative trajectory. Systems such as juvenile justice, social services, public education, and public health become dominant and significant influences and often controlling factors in the young person's life. Yet for the most part, these programs have a single focus – such as substance abuse rehabilitation, adjudication, or mental health - and do not respond to what is needed most by the young person in order to sustain positive change: holistic developmental opportunities that facilitate the acquisition of the social, intrapersonal, educational, and employment skills required to become productive citizens.

While these programs and services may be supportive in removing the immediate negative influences the young person faces, such as a physical dependency on substance abuse, and thus be helpful in achieving short-term solutions, these approaches are often provided as a part of a discrete program or service of an agency. It is reasonable to expect that if a young person in crisis were able to access a coordinated and reinforcing pathway of programs, services, and supports, they would have a better chance of staying out of harm's way and beginning their journey to self sufficiency.

For young people in crisis, sustainable developmental results are found in community-centered programs that engage young people within the context of their lives and society. These programs work on the individual level to build competence and resiliency and create opportunities for personal growth, education, and employment, while at the same time working to improve the milieu of the young person's life.

Contextual change is seen primarily as a means of bolstering the achievement of individual outcomes and is accomplished through a variety of strategies. Because of the overarching impact of systems and institutions on the lives of these young people, system change work by youth advocates is often targeted to institutions in the social service and juvenile justice fields and is designed to increase the quality and effectiveness of services,

and catalyze changes in other contextual factors specific to the needs of youth in crisis, such as housing, immigration reform and economic development

Roca is committed to working with young people and families, institutions, and the community. All of the young people in the communities that Roca serves function in major institutions or systems including schools, the criminal justice system, the child welfare system, transitional assistance, workforce organizations, healthcare organizations, government, and others. Borrowing from the African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child,” it is important to understand that in urban communities, many of the adults with whom disenfranchised youth engage are from these systems. This reality sheds a different light on community building, suggesting that it is only in partnership with these organizations that Roca can succeed to truly serve young people and promote justice. To take the dream of the proverb one step further, Roca is moving people to the path of village building in partnership with everyone – young people, families, people in organizations and institutions, and members of the community.

It is critical to understand that large bureaucratic government agencies – like the Department of Social Services, the Department of Youth Services, the criminal justice system, schools, etc. – are pervasive in the lives of low-income youth and young adults in communities like Chelsea, Revere, East Boston, and Lynn, communities with high poverty, dropout, teen pregnancy, and gang involvement rates. These systems unintentionally feed a self-reinforcing downward spiral that increases the barriers these young people face, discourages them, and makes it more difficult for them to succeed. Through its Engaged Institutions strategy, Roca attempts to support these partners in adopting methods that catalyze a self-reinforcing “virtuous cycle” through which young people build confidence, a sense of self-worth and belonging, skills and knowledge, successfully transitioning to being contributing adult members of the community. Engaging with these institutions and impacting the way in which they work ultimately establishes a supportive base for youth. These are large and relatively resource-rich institutions that are involved in the lives of young people, therefore influencing their practices lends important leverage to Roca’s work with youth and young adults.

Institutional Engagement: An Emerging Strategy for System Reform

Achieving the high level of support and services needed by vulnerable young people requires systems change – both at the social service institution level and at the community institution level. Young people in crisis have inter-related needs that require an integrated human development process and overlapping services. This is highlighted in the Child Welfare League of America [Guidebook for Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare System Coordination and Integration](#):

Increasingly, practitioners and policymakers are recognizing the overlap of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. This overlap is evidenced by maltreated children who become juvenile delinquents, delinquent children who have the history of maltreatment, and families that have intergenerational histories with both systems. It is also evidenced by some administrative and operational

realities, in that the agencies face duplication of services, competition for scarce program dollars, unmet service needs and a dearth of prevention activity to help to stem the tide of children coming into the two systems. (Wiig and Tuell, 2004 p.ix).

Gaps in services to young people are caused by structural barriers across institutions such as insufficient availability or scheduling of social workers on nights and weekends or lack of documentation needed to access services. Personal barriers may also accelerate gaps in services - cultural or language barriers, lack of awareness of the availability of services, and the perception of negative attitudes of service providers are common.

Roca's Engaged Institution strategy (EI) is an emerging model – four years young – as well as a model of emergence based on generative learning, emerging practice and innovation. Like many institutional engagement strategies, it draws its history from the work of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities. In 1996, the Kellogg Commission outlined an ambitious project focused to higher education reform that included the following strategies:

- Reinvigorate student experience by creating a student centered approach
- Improve student access
- Energize and enhance partnerships
- Address the role of the public university
- Attend to the culture on campus (Byrne, 2006)

Similar efforts are underway with health care reform, most notably with W.K. Kellogg Foundation-funded efforts to leverage a strategy of institutional engagement to address health care disparities, and in school reform movements, especially with advances in place-based pedagogy and community school engagement.

Each of these efforts reports promising results and brings the importance of engagement - defined as two-way learning, reciprocity and action - to the forefront of system reform efforts. Leadership for institutional engagement as it is evolving in the health care, higher education and formal education sectors is being provided by leading institutions with the most formal power and control - most often major universities, health care systems and schools districts. For these influential and dominant systems at the most fundamental level, institutional engagement first means opening up their institutions to change and sharing of their institutional power, a process analogous to launching a self-initiated system transformation.

Yet, what happens in the cases of the most vulnerable youth when multiple systems intersect and there is not one major single institution (such as a university or a school) that exerts influence on the system interaction and can take the lead in reform efforts? The quagmire of policies, practices, regulations, and competing priorities that arise when multiple systems interface creates a bureaucratic muddle. Examples abound of failed reform efforts designed to engage multiple systems- the re-inventing government effort of the Clinton Administration is but one of many examples. The complexity of the

situation is overwhelming and the act of simply trying to agree on which system or leaders within the various systems are sanctioned to lead action is daunting. How do you approach systems change when the map of the intersections between youth in crisis and the systems and institutions that interact and exert power and control over the young person looks like a bowl of spaghetti?

For Roca and its partners the answer is to flip the paradigm inside out, beginning, not as in the other examples, with the position of power, but instead creating a youth centric approach that engages youth voice, responds to developmental needs, and creates opportunities and experiences for the young people in crisis as the core organizing principle. The EI strategy as conceived by Roca creates opportunities for adults working with youth to look within themselves asking the question, “how do I show up for young people?” At the same time these adults engage with other adults from partner organizations striving to create values based practices. Ever expanding its circle of influence, the EI strategy endeavors to create a new community culture, building skills, knowledge, and attitudes so that all adults, be they service professionals, community members, or family can be fully present for young people - engaging, supportive and accountable.

Overview of Roca’s Engaged Institutions (EI) Strategy

The EI strategy was born as Roca realized that its core values of belonging, generosity, competence and independence needed to be lived not only among staff members and participants of the organization, but in its relationships with other public and private agencies in its locality. In order to ensure that the most high risk young people would receive the comprehensive services they needed, Roca previously used confrontational power organizing strategies to force other agencies to change or improve ineffective practices with regard to young people. Through the EI strategy, Roca has been able to develop a climate of shared values and practices among staff in partner agencies, and promising practices that include widespread use and recognition of Roca’s method of peacemaking circles, better communication and transparency between organizations, and a commitment to truth telling.

The EI strategy is fundamentally about systems change from the ground up embodied by mutuality of intent, respect, and shared visioning among partners. Roca has been able to engage institutions as a result of their lessons from the peacemaking circles- the importance of living and practicing the four values of Belonging, Generosity, Competence, and Independence in every interaction with other individuals and institutions. This approach, regardless of how difficult the issue or the time it takes to build trust, guides Roca staff’s behavior and seeks to hold the promise of community building, creating places where change can happen and promoting hope. Roca’s consistency and willingness to be accountable has built trust, and institutional partners come to depend on Roca to behave, respond or act in the most straight forward, courageous, generous and ethical manner. Furthermore, this “way of being” embodied by Roca staff and the institution as a whole appears to invite people in the engaged institutions to “be a different way,” which in turn begins to impact the informal and

formal systems of institutions, youth and family interactions with institutions, and community context. Thus systemic change, policy impact, and/or shifts in practices become an inevitable outcome.

Mutuality of intent bonds the process together. As one of Roca's partners describes, "When we didn't have money for programs we have a resource- that's Roca. They know they need us as much as we need them."

Layers of relationships are deliberately built among the staff in partner agencies. Building multiple pathways among agencies and staff for structured communication and accountability builds respect as expressed by another Roca partner who said, "We have embraced each other and respect the parameters of each relationship."

As a result of this open communication, trust and accountability, a shared vision develops and evolves into ongoing visioning. As the city manager expresses, "There is a symbiotic relationship between Roca and the city. We don't just do something without thinking of Roca."

This process requires intentionality and time but is well worth the effort as it builds public support and confidence for both the individuals and their agencies.

Roca defines the purpose and desired outcomes of its engaged institutions' strategies as:

- (1) to further serve young people and their families by increased access to and/or leveraging of resources;
- (2) to improve the quality of Roca's work to better serve its vision and mission;
- and
- (3) to engage institutions in mutual discussions, initiatives, projects, etc. to better serve young people, families and the community.

Roca likens the process of engaged institutions to street work with adults - it is about relationships on many levels with different points of engagement designed to foster change and growth. As a senior staff member of a partner agency expresses it - "Being an engaged institution is like having ongoing relentless street work done with us."

There are different levels of engagement with institutions and organizations as well as different levels of results, and there is often the ability to transfer the trust built in one relationship to another relationship or to undertake a new beneficial activity. At times, like with young people, Roca is relentless in its efforts to engage individuals and institutions and will settle for nothing less than relationships that are transformational.

Through the engaged institutions strategy, Roca is pushing the understanding and boundaries of interagency collaboration and cooperation to a more intense and meaningful level. The activities of engaged institutions work include: relationship building at many levels in an organization or institution; honesty; listening to the needs of partners; forthright communication; working with other institutions on committees and

projects; mutual assistance and cooperation; supporting the needs of partnering institutions or staff such as peacemaking circles training; multidimensional sharing of information; implementing joint projects; facilitating committees and working groups; and sharing resources.

The activities of the engaged institution strategy, while they include many of the typical activities of interagency collaboration, extend far deeper in breath and scope than ordinary collaboration. For example, Roca hosted a four day training for all its institutional partners on how to build the communication skills needed within a learning organization. This training, conducted by Dialogos (the organization founded by William Issacs, author of *Dialog and the Art of Thinking Together*), was a remarkable experience not only because of the quality of learning and interaction among participants, but also because it is almost unheard of for a non-profit community based agency to take the initiative and leadership to plan and offer such a high level training experience for mostly government employees. Also remarkable is that Roca offered this course at no cost to participants or agencies. The 25 partners and Roca staff attending this session found it extremely stimulating as evidenced by their almost perfect attendance.

As a result of this and other experiences, participants from multiple agencies and systems are readily able to focus on single issues and actions of the EI strategy such as enhancing the ability of a young person in crisis to access resources, finding a counselor for a young adult who has slipped through the cracks, accessing medical coverage for someone with no insurance, clearing warrants in court, or developing pathways for success for young people in long-term suspension or expulsions. Because of the depth of individual relationships, knowledge of agency scope of services and shared commitment, these issues which in the past took a long time (and a great deal of bureaucracy-induced frustration) to solve can now be expedited in a relatively efficient manner.

Other issues are more complex and have multiple layers like gang intervention and public safety, positively impacting youth with CHINS (Children in Need of Services) cases, the challenge of youth and young adult employment, addressing the barriers facing refugees and immigrants, drop-out rates, etc. EI partners are committed to take the time to work together to develop solutions to these challenges. Complex issues addressed in these relationships in the past year include intervention for high-risk young adults; creating alternative pathways to suspension for high school youth who are no longer able to remain in high school; youth courts; re-entry for ex-offenders; teen prostitution; and youth participation in governance and policy change.

An Examination of EI as a Strategy for Transforming Systems

Grantmakers in Health's seminal portfolio "Agents of Change: Health Philanthropy's Role in Transforming Systems" describes ten strategies for transforming systems and creating change. This report illustrates the role of interrelated organizations in addressing systemic problems through their interactions with one another. Additionally, the report highlights the need for innovation in social change work. The role of the publication itself is in line with EI in that it was written to connect funders and service providers in

transformation, sharing strategies by which the best work can be done and constituents can be best served. Following are the ten strategies and a discussion of Roca's application of them. The strategies serve as a useful framework in which to categorize and examine the various elements of Roca's EI approach.

Strategy 1: Stimulating Innovation

As described by Grantmakers in Health, this strategy for change involves supporting projects and approaches that are potential-oriented and creative, and investing in those to help them build for the future. The logic behind it is that by investing in work that is new and groundbreaking, it will grow and reach its full potential. A key piece to this is buy-in, support and belief. In the grantmaking world, this strategy focuses on support and assistance to start-up organizations that are visionary or new to the field. Stimulating innovation involves seeking new ideas, developing demonstration projects, evaluating effectiveness, replicating models at the state level, and replicating models at the local level. By engaging in this model, diverse approaches and locally grown processes are able to come to fruition.

For Roca and its institutional partners, programming innovation became a pathway to transforming the way services and opportunities are provided to young people. Major innovations include the development of an Alternative to Suspension and Transitional Employment (TEP) process. A new major initiative of Roca, TEP was conceived in partnership as a result of the EI strategy. Agency partners participated in advisory groups, visioning sessions and on action planning teams. As a result of the actions of partners, significant changes in policy were made at the state level to create a retained revenue account in the state budget to fund portions of the program, as well as numerous changes in the practice of local agencies to ensure on going referral and support of participants.

Young people are not the only ones benefiting from TEP. As a result of this co-creation, agency partners such as probation and the Department of Youth Services are also reaping the benefits of the program as the TEP partnership has created a way for the young people to cover court costs and provides structured opportunities to commute sentences.

Strategy 2: Building the Knowledge Base

In this strategy, the focus is on the importance and value of research, exploration and discovery. By collecting data, doing research, and evaluating results, organizations and individuals can operate with real data when making decisions about programming content and approach. This will help guide new solutions. The difficult element of investing in building the knowledge base is that it can take a lot of time to engage in research, and it is expensive and often requires community based organizations to make the complex decision to use limited financial resources for knowledge creation instead of direct service. Also there is the ever present risk that these efforts may not always result in information that is applicable or worthwhile. For this reason most community

organizations have very limited if any research, documentation and evaluation strategies. Once again, Roca is the exception to this rule.

As a learning organization with generosity as a fundamental value, Roca understands that its experience and pioneering work has much to offer others. Roca takes its role in field building very seriously as evidenced by the large volume of documentation studies, process evaluations and theory producing papers that it has produced or have been commissioned on its behalf. These range from work by the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development focused on Roca's understanding of the program opportunities and supports needed to meet the needs of the most at risk young people, to reports by university scholars on Roca's approach to restorative justice, to papers by foundation researchers outlining Roca's theory of change. (A complete listing of these papers is in the Appendix).

Roca's Engaged Institution partners have been active participants in the co-creation of this knowledge. They regularly and eagerly engage with scholars on data gathering visits, participate in ongoing reflection sessions with other partners which are carefully documented, and have begun to share the knowledge generated in this effort with others in their systems and networks.

When good results are gleaned, it is imperative that they be shared with as many in the field as possible. Roca is exploring ways to create partnerships to more extensively share and disseminate its findings and new knowledge. To ensure that this work does not distract from programming efforts, this work will require an ongoing knowledge development strategy, a dedicated funding stream and partnerships that will ensure support for Roca's research and evaluation efforts, as well the development of dissemination, training and technical assistance strategies for others in the field.

Strategy 3: Meeting Immediate Needs

In grantmaking, this kind of institutional change work is most often supported through general operating funds. Roca has been privileged to have the support of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for these efforts. Creating system change to more efficiently and expeditiously meet the needs of young people has always been central to Roca's Engaged Institution strategy. Investigating ways that service systems have untapped efficiencies – areas in which time or resources could be saved but aren't - quickly became an ongoing theme of discussions among partners. All partners are striving to find ways to ensure that meeting basic needs of program participants becomes more cost effective and sensible.

As relationships were built with in the EI strategy, institutional partners began to understand exactly the services that each could provide, building a shared understanding among individuals across agencies that could cut through agency red tape and increase efficiencies. For example, Roca staff report that the old practice of call screening by administrative staff in partner agencies has stopped, and where once it was extremely difficult for Roca staff to get their phone calls answered or returned, they are now directly

transferred through to the appropriate staff saving time, money and often averting a potential crisis.

Working as partners in EI to meet the shared needs of the young people created opportunities for the emergence of new policies and practices to better meet individual needs such as the creation of the Transitional Employment Program and the retained revenue account fund in the state budget. Thus the Engaged Institution strategy serves as a breeding ground for new innovations to meet immediate needs, creating infrastructure for integrated service delivery and increasing each organizations' cultural competency. As the organizations work in partnership, access to needed services is improved. Sharing of accurate and reliable referral information across agencies assists in service delivery as young people and their families are directed to appropriate staff in partner agencies that will ensure that pressing needs will be met.

Strategy 4: Capacity Building

This strategy, defined as an important systems change strategy by the Grantmakers in Health, involves analyzing and addressing organizational needs. Often, this requires board development, staff training, technology improvements, management assistance, and strategic planning. Capacity building work is often done with consultants and coaches, who are able to come to the organization without the history and baggage of being involved in the on the ground, day-to day work. This perspective affords them the ability to help see the big picture, and offer possible strategies to recurring problems.

In Roca's Engaged Institutions work, a focused effort is directed to capacity building of both Roca and, equally importantly, system partners. The Roca staff has created a wide variety of capacity building opportunities for their partners most often in the form of specialized in-service trainings for Department of Youth Services (DYS) and Department of Social Services (DSS) staff. Roca's capacity building efforts with DSS are proving to have a profound effect on the agency. As one DSS staff member explains, "Our relationship with Roca has helped us redefine and implement our own values - we can't do it alone."

The DSS has found Roca's training on the Circle methodology so useful that all the staff people in the Chelsea regional office have been required to take the course. Additionally the staff of the Chelsea DSS office is now working to share their success and lessons from their use of Circle methodology with other DSS offices across the state. Because of their impact in helping with family transition, Circles are now a standard part of the closing of each DSS case by the regional office. More than 20 DSS workers regularly use circles as a part of home visits, meetings in the office, staff development and as a part of ongoing projects. Additionally one DSS staff member has been working with Roca to further develop her skills in the Circle methodology. She is now a senior trainer in the method and has joined Roca senior trainers in conducting workshops within the agency as well as in Oakland, California.

The success of the Roca's training programs for DSS staff over the past two years has influenced the Department of Youth Services (DYS) to seek training for their staff. A four day regional Circle training was conducted by Roca in Worcester for DYS staff. Participant evaluations of the training were very positive and all indications are that Roca's circle methodology will begin to emerge as a proven practice throughout DYS just as it has with DSS.

Strategy 5: Strengthening Infrastructure

As the Grantmakers in Health portfolio noted, data collection systems are an important yet often overlooked element of organizational infrastructure. For several years Roca has conducted a massive overhaul and redesign of their evaluation and outcomes tracking system. This has proved to provide essential support to the EI strategy because the custom development of the software tracking system allowed Roca to create an infrastructure that would track the outcomes and indicators of interest to each of their partner systems as well as funders. This was a massive undertaking but the results are well worth the effort as Roca youth workers now have access to a far greater range of information regarding the developmental progress and plans of each participant. Thus, Roca youth workers have become a valuable resource to staff in partner agencies who need monitoring information as well as information that can support the progression of individuals to additional developmental opportunities and placement in new programs.

Strategy 6: Cultivating Talented Leaders

Leadership transitions are inevitable, and to have a healthy, successful organization a cadre of qualified and motivated individuals is required who can step up to the leadership challenge as new opportunities emerge. One strategy described by the Grantmakers in Health publication for ensuring this is to dedicate time and effort into building individual skills and networks. Because leaders often get burnt out, it is important to encourage sustaining those individuals, and looking for guidance and support from others in similar leadership roles. Participation in Roca's EI strategy provides partner agency staff with significant opportunities to deepen their professional relationships networks and sharpen their career focus.

An organization's ability to establish ways of sharing power and promoting the next generation of leadership from within the ranks is important to ongoing work. Through their experience with EI, which models power sharing and personal growth, individuals in partner agencies have been able to take this practice back to their own agencies often through the practice of circles which give underrepresented groups access to power structures and decision making tables.

Through the use of Circles, Roca has been able to create opportunities that mitigate the destructive influence of power in relationships. For example when Roca hosts a circle for a juvenile offender it is common for probation officers, Roca staff, and other service providers to participate on an equal basis with the young person in crisis, their friends, family and other community members. Such a degree of openness and commitment

between civic servants to participating as partners in a developmental process for young people to move them from a state of crisis to thriving is uncommon across the field, yet widespread among Roca's partners in the EI strategy.

Strategy 7: Mobilizing Communities

Community mobilization is a key element of system change as it ensures that the voices, ideas and opinions of the communities that an organization is serving are heard, addressed and incorporated into the work. Nonprofits have the ability to serve as engagement vehicles for active citizenship, as Diana Aviv, president and CEO of the Independent Sector notes (Grantmakers in Health, 2005).. Developing and supporting community leaders is vital here, and often those people may not exist within formalized organizational structures. Work to mobilize communities also requires spending time in communities, and learning them inside and out. It involves encouraging the voices and participation of people from across the community. Assisting and supporting the capacity growth of community groups that are active is a good strategy for social change as well.

Throughout the EI strategy, Roca has used the concept of engagement by establishing or managing a variety of advisory structures. The advisory structures help to mobilize community members and institutional partners and to grow to a deeper level of commitment. The deliberate sets of relationships include the following policy and practice influencing groups:

- **Coalition for Youth and Family** - focused to teen pregnancy prevention and youth development.
- **Young Adult Advisory Board** - focused to youth issues and informing Roca's programming.
- **Transitional Employment Advisory Board** - informed the design and start up of Roca's transitional employment initiative and will advise ongoing work.
- **Young Parent Advisory Board** - ensures that the unique needs of young parents are addressed throughout Roca and the work of partner agencies.
- **Tacos Unidos Advisory Board** - informs the development and expansion of Roca's social purpose business.

Strategy 8: Advocacy and Policy Analysis

One of the most startling innovations in Roca's EI work is the total paradigm shift in the way advocacy is perceived. It is common for long-term strategies for change to involve challenging and affecting public policy. Organizations that are doing work on the ground have distinct insights into the needs of their communities and often perceive social service institutions in an adversarial role, unaware of the needs of their clients. By joining together on coalitions and the use of power organizing, these typical community based organizations attempt to influence system transformation. They do this by dedicating time to speak on behalf of constituents' needs, and often employing power organizing techniques to target "actions" against institutions with the hope of creating disruptive behavior that will raise awareness for the need for system change. With the work of EI

Roca has flatly rejected the “us vs. them” paradigm of power organizing and its self righteous practices of demonizing people and institutions. They have created a new way of being at the institutional and individual level that is based on trust, accountability and shared values.

Roca has always been known as a persistent advocate for high-risk youth. Passion for and belief in the untapped potential of young people have constantly fueled Roca’s fervor in doing everything possible to ensure that the young people it serves have every available opportunity to heal and succeed in life. Throughout much of Roca’s eighteen year history of observing the ongoing struggle of young people to access services and meet expectations of public institutions and systems, Roca’s passion for change was often expressed in an adversarial way. Like many youth advocates, Roca’s ways of work built on a framework of utilizing the skills of “power organizing” to elicit and advocate for change.

Power organizing is a common strategy used by youth advocates to shift power relations and create institutional or public policy change. Often deficit-focused, it is commonly expressed in some form of direct action or confrontation in opposition to a policy, practice, or belief of an institution or an individual. While it builds alliances among those sharing similar views, power organizing pays little attention to understanding the experience or value of those it opposes. Advocates are known to stand up for and push for the rights and justice due marginalized people, delivering criticism wherever criticism is due.

Roca operated in this adversarial manner for many years. In fact, they became quite good at it, gaining a reputation for promoting youth voice and rights while calling public systems and community leadership onto the carpet when needed. Like all power organizing strategies, it was effective when Roca did its homework and had garnered the constituent support or strategic advantage to shift the balance of power. However, from the perspective of the targets of change, the strategy was far from positive. As one law enforcement leader describes it, “they (Roca staff) were a pain in the ass.”

The adversarial relationship Roca built with the police department, city management, juvenile justice system, and human service agencies fostered mistrust, lack of understanding and hostility. At one point in time Roca was incorrectly perceived by public officials and law enforcement to be “the gang house;” a place that supported gang behavior and would shelter gang members in trouble with the law. While this perception was far from the truth, many in community leadership operated as if this were the reality because there was no trust or avenue for meaningful two-way communication among Roca and public institutions.

This adversarial role for a youth agency in marginalized or oppressed communities is not uncommon. It is often perceived as an important way to promote social justice, especially in regard to the issues of juvenile justice reform and police brutality where community-based youth agencies can play a significant role in catalyzing system reform through the engagement of staff and youth in promoting a voice and direct action for change. What is

unique is that as an agency Roca came to the realization that its adversarial approach was inconsistent with its core values of belonging, generosity, competence and independence, and Roca made a commitment to live their values by working in a much different way.

The transformational shift to fully living and expressing the organizational values was not an easy one. Roca staff people who were highly skilled adversarial advocates had to develop new communication skills and could no longer use public officials as objects upon which they could vent their anger, stress, and frustration. Staff had to learn to develop compassion and understanding for their colleagues in other agencies, while exercising extraordinary patience as they struggled to live their values, a change that often went unnoticed or was not believed by others for quite a long time. Likewise at the organizational level, Roca had to build a sense of transparency, open communication, and accountability. Similarly, the players on the other side of the equation - the public officials and staff of the public systems and institutions - needed to develop new communication skills, learn to perceive Roca in a different manner and, most importantly, begin to build the internal motivations to hold themselves and their agencies accountable for their actions.

However, the results of working in this new values-based paradigm of the EI strategy have been well worth the effort. Roca is now affecting policy change through work on the ground within systems. As one Roca frontline staff member explains:

We can become pretty influential in encouraging change in institutions and in us. It's a mutual push. When you are a youth worker on the ground and we ask how do we create mutual respect, it is about how we show up. We don't need to do a big systemic change effort. Here on the ground we just make it filter up, make on the ground people like us enjoy it, say that we are ok.

One of the most remarkable outcomes has been this total mutual shift in perception regarding Roca's role as advocates among Roca and its partners. As the Chelsea Chief of police expresses it:

We (police) come from a tradition, history, and customs. When Roca just came onto the scene I didn't know what to make of them. At court they sit on the bench with the defendant- they were 'the other side' – but my mindset has changed. I realized that just because they sit on the bench with the kids in court doesn't mean that they approve. Maybe they are just trying to help.

For the Chief, the EI strategy has not only resulted in a mindset shift regarding Roca's role as advocates, but also in the opportunities for the police to contribute in a different way. One example of this is the Chief now comes to Roca to conduct information sessions for immigrants and undocumented newcomers about their rights.

Strategy 9: Fostering Public Awareness

Grantmakers in Health describe how a communications strategy can delineate tasks that help an organization to build public awareness about the issues and concerns they address. One element of fostering this is to make the public aware of the needs in the community, and why it is necessary to address those. Trying to reach out to media and enlist its help in informing public debate is important as well, as is educating people about possibilities for engagement as well as resources available to them.

Fostering public awareness takes a different bearing at Roca. Communications, marketing and fostering public awareness in regard to actions of the EI, like other aspects of Roca's work, is relational and intensive. Roca builds public support and opportunities on an incremental basis with individuals. Their approach as the lead partner in the EI is inclusive, respectful, subtle, and humble. Roca staff come to the scene with an open posture – not as an organization that has all the answers, but as experienced and inquisitive people who not only offer capacity building methods and techniques, but who also seek to learn from the people with whom they work. They recognize that individuals and communities have knowledge and skills of value and that they seek to add to that value. Through the EI they seek to unleash their communities' potential by fostering community education and awareness. An example of this is the leadership training Roca staff conducted for the Chelsea school district which resulted in increased ability of parents to advocate for their child within the schools.

Through its relationships with staff members and partners Roca has been able to help individuals perceive youth in completely different ways and become advocates for youth in their own agencies. As the Chief of Police explains,

There was a time when we said 'bad kid' - now we ask what is going on? Does he go to school? Is he at home alone? If people are in trouble it is a symptom of underlying causes. Now with Roca we have people who will address them with us.

Strategy 10: Partnerships

As described by Grantmakers in Health, social change requires the involvement of many different organizations, individuals and approaches. Partnerships make work easier than going it alone. Organizations can collaborate to influence policy and inform decision-making, partner to improve access to needed services, or work together to help educate the public. Partnerships help provide a safety net of services and support for constituents, and can generate lasting systems change by strengthening communities. One organization might meet needs or answer questions that another organization cannot, and additionally, groups can support one another and encourage multiple problem-solving approaches to the issues each addresses. Partners can also lobby together for joint funding for specific work, and present publicly together to show the range of ways to engage in social justice work.

As might be imagined, because of the ongoing communication and trust among agencies and staff there are many examples of partnerships that have been fostered by the EI strategy. Some are the typical ones you would expect to result from interagency collaboration such as cross agency communication about a participant's progress or sharing information about funding opportunities. Others are more atypical partnerships that demonstrate the depth of relationships and interdependence among agencies. For example, at lunchtime every Wednesday the young people of Roca's social purpose business, Tacos Unidos, take their mobile taqueria unit to the regional offices of the Department of Social Services where they sell freshly made burritos, tacos and salads. Everyone benefits from this – the DSS staff have convenient access to inexpensive high quality food as well as the opportunity for informal check ins with some of their clients; the young people learn valuable employment skills as well as have the opportunity to demonstrate to themselves and their social workers that they have value and can make a contribution in the workforce; and Roca is able to recover some of the program costs through revenue generated from food sales.

In EI, partnerships have become the vehicle to envision new services. For example, the Chief of Police has suggested that the police could create opportunities to go into the House of Corrections with Roca staff and conduct re-entry circles with offenders prior to their release. This is an unheard of role for the police, and could only result from the EI experience.

Another innovative partnership is the alternative suspension collaboration between Roca and the Chelsea school district. In this program students who are no longer eligible to attend school (usually as a result of repeated behavioral offenses) are suspended and Roca works with young people, their families and the schools on an alternative suspension project to help them return to school and succeed.

Conclusion

Roca's mission and values express who they are and how they work. The values of Roca and their partner agencies will be enduring guideposts as the EI strategy evolves over time, changing in response to the needs of young people and interests of partner agencies. Many factors contributed to the evolution and success of these efforts; bright, caring and courageous staff in many agencies; young people willing to engage and grow; leaders of agencies who were willing to take the risk to foster values based change; a commitment to learning and growth among everyone; ever-increasing ability of individuals to take action based on mutuality of intent; willingness to share resources; and the catalyst of it all - significant resources from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to explore new ways of institutional being, engagement and shared action.

The bottom line is that individual staff from Roca and the partner agencies are the EI strategy. They are facilitators working for justice; their focus is on young people in crisis, and actions oriented towards creating personal growth, education and employment opportunities for young people in the most need. Their concern is for a better future for

all, especially those who haven't yet learned how to live out of harm's way. The world has much to learn from these efforts.

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Appendix

Listing of Papers on Roca's Work

(these are available by emailing info@theinnovationcenter.org or calling 301-270-1700)

Boyes-Watson, C. (2002). *Holding the Space: The Journey of Circles at Roca*. Boston, Massachusetts: The Center for Restorative Justice at Suffolk University.

Hart, L. M. and Mahfuz, J. J. (2002). *Roca: Supporting Young People to Thrive and Lead Change*, Chelsea, Massachusetts: Roca.

Wheeler, W. (2005). *Roca Via Process Evaluation: Flexibility and Transformation*. Takoma Park, MD: Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development.

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Wheeler, W. (2006). *Enlarging the Circle: Sharing Success in Serving the Most High-Risk Young People*. Takoma Park, MD: Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development.

Wheeler, W. (2006). *Finding the Center of the Path: Transformational Relationships that Launch Youth in Crisis on Pathways to Education, Employment and Growth – a Reflection on Four Years of Experience Creating the Via Initiative*. Takoma Park, MD: Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development.