

Professionalizing community helper role

ANTHONY SILVERMAN, LARIMER COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
MR.NICLELY@GMAIL.COM

SUMMARY

Anthony Silverman, a Foster America fellow with Larimer County Department of Human Services, helped to build the case and implement a program that formalized and professionalized a role that some had already been playing in their communities: connectors, helpers, and advocates for individuals and families in need. Anthony and Larimer County believed that these connectors and advocates played a critical role in driving towards community well-being, especially for those communities that face the greatest disparities.

THE OPPORTUNITY

The Supported Families, Stronger Communities Initiative is a cross-sector initiative in Larimer County, comprised of county government agencies, community-based organizations, and community members. The initiative's goal was to improve the well-being of communities in Larimer County, particularly those that face the greatest disparities, through prevention-oriented service coordination.

With the goal of improved community well-being in mind, Larimer County was interested in finding ways to better deliver services and support to children and families in ways that fit the families' cultural contexts, and to design solutions and resources in partnership with communities that will address their needs. Larimer County saw that there were already some community members who were naturally serving as advocates, connectors, and helpers, and was interested in growing this network.

THE SOLUTION

Scan the landscape for formal and informal “community helpers”. Anthony first identified people and organizations that were already connecting families to resources. These community helpers may be individuals who others turn to for help because of the individuals' lived experiences and provide the help without compensation; others may be community-based organizations. Anthony spoke to county partners and individuals and families to learn where people were turning to for assistance.

Build a case with key stakeholders. Anthony, in partnership with Larimer County and county partners, built a case for formalizing and compensating the community helper role, articulating the goals and outcomes for children and families the initiative could achieve. Then, the goals were shared with a broad array of cross-sector stakeholders, including, but not limited to, county agencies; non-profit organizations; religious organizations; and local coalitions to build support and enthusiasm for the effort.

Create a formal “Community Navigator” job. After the key stakeholders agreed on the value and goals of the community helper role, Larimer County created a job description for the role. The job description drew from conversations with individuals and families and community-based organizations from the landscape scan, as well as existing job descriptions from organizations and other agencies that employ resource navigator type roles and/or lived experts, people whose expertise may derive from their personal experiences.

In addition to the job description, Larimer County needed to create a position within the department to be able to begin the hiring process. Working with the county's Human Resources team, Anthony identified an existing position that served a similar function of connecting individuals and families to resources and did not have strict education, training, and professional requirements--so that the county could then prioritize lived expertise in the hiring process. This role was ultimately called a "Community Navigator."

Hire and train Community Navigators. In the hiring of Community Navigators, the county thought about the profile of natural community helpers and the cultural contexts of communities most in need of connections to resources. For example, they worked to ensure that the Community Navigators were representative of the linguistic diversity of families most in need.

The Community Navigators' first assignment was to gather information about the needs of the community and various county teams and departments, such as the child welfare, public health, benefits, workforce and behavioral health teams. Community Navigators attended trainings with and for the various teams and departments in the county, to learn about their work and practices. Community Navigators have been speaking to their respective communities to learn about their needs and identify resources the county might offer, as well as sharing back the needs they are hearing from community members to case managers. As of June 2020, the Community Navigators have gone online due to COVID-19: they are currently sharing information about community needs and resources to service providers and those serving in the role of informal community helpers through an online messaging board.

Once Community Navigators can return to in-person work, Community Navigators will be assigned a small caseload of families to work with on an ongoing basis, as well as build the capacity of case managers to identify family and community needs and connect families to resources in a culturally sensitive manner.

THE RESULT

Larimer County hired and trained 3 Community Navigators in early 2020, who will be working to identify community needs, advocate for missing services and resources, and design and connect children and families to resources through a wraparound case management model that will enable them to thrive.

RESOURCES

- [Community Navigator position description](#)