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Collaboration Overview

[The Atlanta Housing Authority](#) (AHA) partners with service organizations in Atlanta to provide comprehensive, coordinated services to almost 50,000 customers in the Atlanta metro area. AHA’s service collaborations provide customers with appropriate supports as they meet work, minimum rent, and individual development requirements as determined by the AHA. The AHA forges partnerships with organizations that provide critical supportive services such as mental health services, substance abuse counseling, educational training and testing services, and transportation assistance. The AHA is the largest housing agency in Georgia and one of the largest in the nation. It is organized under Georgia law to develop, acquire, lease, and operate affordable housing for low-income families. AHA is committed to delivering quality affordable housing and spurring community development.

The AHA collaboration with service organizations is supported by:

- Careful screening of partner organizations
- Engagement in a collaborative strategic planning process
- Provision of seed grants to partner organizations

The AHA’s best practices include the following:

- Limit the number of partnering organizations to only those necessary.
- Involve program partners in the strategic planning process.
- Evaluate whether customer needs are met through partnerships.
- Value customer feedback.
- Provide opportunities for partner organizations to share concerns and challenges.
- Support partner organizations in obtaining funding.

The AHA has learned these lessons:

- Duplication of services is wasteful.
- Discussions around funding issues with partnering organizations can produce solutions.

Collaboration Purpose

AHA has partnered with a network of service providers in the Atlanta area to provide its customers with appropriate supports as they strive to meet mandatory work, minimum rent, and individual development requirements. AHA's partnership with service providers offering these and other types of supports creates a network that furnishes families with opportunities to address common barriers to self-sufficiency.

About the Collaboration

In October 2004, the AHA implemented a new policy whereby all its adult customers ages 18 to 61 must secure employment and continually maintain work throughout their stay in AHA communities. Seniors age 62 or older and disabled family members are exempt from this requirement. When this policy was implemented, AHA administrators knew that in order to ensure that families in its communities were able to successfully meet its work/program requirement, partnerships with supporting organizations in the Atlanta area would need to be established. Thus, the AHA began partnering with Atlanta area support service providers to create a service provider network.

The AHA's service provider network consists of more than fifty various organizations that have committed to working with AHA families as they work toward success. Services available to AHA customers through the service provider network are numerous and include:

- GED preparation and testing
- Vocational and technical skills training
- Child care services
- Transportation assistance
- Mental health and substance abuse services
- Job training and job readiness programs
- Services for seniors
- Disability services

Collaboration Structure

The collaboration structure is supported by:

A collaborative strategic planning process

Each year, the AHA formulates a strategic plan to structure the goals, activities, and action items for the upcoming year. During the planning process, the AHA invites its partnering organizations to submit feedback. Based on feedback from service partners, the AHA adjusts its strategic plan.

Ongoing communication with partner organizations

The AHA and its partners within the service provider network meet every other month to ensure partners are continuously aware of what each of the others is doing. This allows partner organizations to learn from others' experience, discuss clients that they may have in common and who may need wraparound services, identify places where they might work together, and determine if there is any duplication of effort.

Seed grants provided to partner organizations

The AHA provides a seed grant, or a grant intended to strengthen existing services, to some of its community partners in exchange for benefits offered to AHA customers. These grants are typically funded at around \$25,000 per year. For example, the [Boys & Girls Club of Metro Atlanta](#) offers discounted afterschool and summer programming as well as transportation assistance to youth customers of AHA. In exchange for these benefits, the AHA furnishes a grant that helps offset the costs associated with youth programming. Other organizations with which the AHA forms seed grant agreements include [Literacy Action, Inc.](#), [The Atlanta Workforce Development Agency](#), and the YWCA of Metro Atlanta. Partners receiving seed grants are required to outline services that are to be provided and program expectations in exchange for the grant. At the end of the year, the partnering organizations submit a narrative report capturing the scope of services delivered to AHA customers the previous year.

Careful screening of partner organizations

The AHA's collaboration with area service providers is carefully administered by the AHA; organizations eligible for partnership with the AHA must meet certain criteria before they are invited into the service provider network. Budgets and funding, program goals, prior outcomes, and sustained success over time are attributes that the AHA carefully weighs in the partnering process. Consideration of these and other organizational characteristics allows the AHA to identify organizations with which sustained, collaborative commitments are possible.

Promising Practices

The following practices have helped the AHA and its service provider network work collaboratively and meet the needs of its clients.

Limit the number of partnering organizations to only those necessary

AHA's intent is to build a trusting relationship between AHA clients and service providers to ensure that clients feel that the AHA's network of service partners is reliable. For this reason, AHA does not widely recruit new partners but carefully screens potential community partners to identify organizations with which sustained, collaborative commitments are possible. By intentionally keeping the number of providers involved in its network to a minimum and through careful screening of potential partners, the AHA feels it is better able to create a trusted network of providers to which clients have access.

Involve program partners in the strategic planning process

Each year, the AHA invites all of its service providers to a strategic planning feedback forum. During this forum, the AHA presents its strategic plan to the partners. Valuable feedback, as it relates to services and connecting residents to services, informs the adjustment of the strategic plan moving into the next fiscal year.

Evaluate whether customer needs are met through partnerships

The AHA offers its customers the chance to participate in a formal evaluation of how effectively the AHA is able to address customer needs through its partnership with area service providers. Most recently, the AHA utilized an evaluation consultant to design and administer an AHA customer survey. Evaluation delivery methods are varied but often include door-to-door interactions with AHA customers. The AHA uses formal evaluation and informal feedback from its clients to shape its work and partnerships involved in the collaboration.

Value customer feedback

AHA employees interact with customers on a daily basis and thus have the opportunity to note feedback as to the customer opinion. The AHA is responsive to this feedback and has added service partners to its collaboration as a response to this data. For example, based on noted customer concern about utility rates and bill payment, the AHA invited utility providers in the Atlanta area to join the network of service providers. Until that point, utility companies had not been represented in the service network.

Provide opportunities for partner organizations to share concerns and challenges

During service provider network meetings, partner organizations share challenges they are facing in order to troubleshoot and learn from other organizations' experiences. These meetings also give partner organizations the opportunity to share resources. For example, when one partner organization represented at the monthly meeting was in need of computer workstations to support staffing needs, another organization was able to provide the additional workstations. As a result of the monthly shared forum, partner organizations are often able to meet one another's resource needs.

Support partner organizations in obtaining funding

Many partnering organizations do not have the financial flexibility to fund a full-time grant writer. To support partner organizations' continued funding and success, AHA provides a grant writer to assist partners to identify funding opportunities and to submit proposals for funds. In exchange for the use of the AHA's grant writer, partnering organizations propose to include supporting funds for AHA customers in their applications. If a service partner receives funding, the service partner's staff takes the lead in implementation and reporting for the funds received.

Lessons Learned

The AHA and its service provider network have learned the following lessons.

Duplication of services is wasteful

Through regular meetings with the service providers within its network, the AHA keeps track of the supportive services that customers receive through its partner organizations. In tracking customer utilization of services, the AHA avoids duplicating the provision of services. A reduction in service duplication cuts down on overall costs and allows the AHA to more efficiently direct its limited resources to areas of greatest customer need.

Discussions around funding issues with partnering organizations can produce solutions

An unintended yet desirable byproduct of regular meetings with service providers is that organizations within the network of service providers are often able to meet one another's resource needs. If one organization within AHA's service provider network is in search of resources (such as computers, staff, meeting space, etc.), partnering organizations may have additional resources that can be utilized to meet the needs of partners in search of resources. Regularly scheduled meetings are the forum within which these and other productive conversations occur.

Accomplishments

The Atlanta Urban Debate League, an AHA partner, provides one example of what the collaboration has been able to accomplish. The Atlanta Urban Debate League currently serves 23 schools in the Atlanta area with programs such as an afterschool program, the Debate Center, and monthly tournaments. League participants have showed an improvement in school performance and in the development of life skills after joining debate activities. Here are a few examples of the benefits of debate:

- After one year in debate, 83 percent of students with recorded disciplinary incidents reduced their number of incidents.
- After one year in debate, 81 percent of students suspended the previous year reduced their number of suspensions.
- Compared to national norms for annual progress, students in debate showed, on average, an increase of a year and a half improvement in reading levels.
- Students develop leadership qualities through debate training.

Resources

Learn more about AHA:

- Visit the Atlanta Housing Authority's website www.AtlantaHousing.org
- Read about how [HUD Encourages Nation's Housing Authorities to Celebrate Fathers](#)