



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

School of Social Sciences

Counting in the community sector: how clients measure success



Dr. Maxine Campbell

A Report prepared for Link House Agency

2010

Counting in the community sector: how clients measure success

Maxine Campbell¹

School of Social Sciences
The University of Waikato

The author may be contacted *via*
Dr Maxine Campbell
School of Social Sciences
University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105, Hamilton
New Zealand
Email: maxine@waikato.ac.nz

© 2010 Maxine Campbell

¹ Lecturer in Sociology, Social Policy and Women's and Gender Studies, School of Social Sciences, University of Waikato

Link House Agency is a Hamilton community agency which provides social work, counselling and life skills education services to single parents, along with high quality educational courses and counselling to the wider community. Its primary purpose is to foster wellbeing and independence within single parent families through the support of trained social workers and qualified counsellors. In addition to counselling and social work services, the agency provides a base for single parents to access legal and practical advice as well as regular visits from Work and Income advisors. It also runs regular personal and professional development courses ranging in content from self-esteem and assertiveness to communication and counselling skills. Link House embraces a philosophy which encourages staff and clients to work together to create a community atmosphere where the needs of single parent caregivers are responded to in a way that promotes positive family relationships. Most services are provided at low or no cost and in many ways Link House is typical of the non-profit or community sector.

This report reflects on the contributions of Link House clients to a project which attempted to find ways to measure the various means by which Link House meets its clients' needs. The primary objective of that project was to derive some useful measures by which to quantify successful outcomes for Link House clients. It was therefore necessary to understand success from a client perspective as well as including goals and objectives determined in conjunction with the professionals who provide Link House services. In terms of quantifying the provision of personal services to clients, the project has assisted in the creation of a draft *Client Service Review forms (SMEPP Assessments)*, which have been designed to measure Link House's performance across a range of service parameters. The ultimate content and scope of those documents was informed by the experiences of Link House clients as expressed in focus group discussions. During the discussions, the clients' stories provided stark evidence of the inadequacy of attempts to quantify and measure the types of services provided by Link House. Measuring and quantifying personal services is inherently difficult and measuring success in regard to those services is even more fraught. Within this brief report, the voices of the clients themselves provide an insight into the immeasurable dimensions of what – for them – constitutes success.

Background

Like other non-profit organisations, Link House is funded in large part through charitable donations largely acquired through competitive tendering processes. The funding environment serves two distinct types of non-profit organisations (Sanders et al, 2008, p.7) – those which are broadly described as *creative* (sports, arts, cultural) and those which are *service-oriented* (social service, welfare, health). Service organisations are therefore not only competing for funds amongst themselves, they are also competing with their creative and sporting counterparts. Irrespective of the funding source (charity, grants or public sector contracts), since the 1980s non-profit organisations have faced increasing pressure to establish that they are delivering high quality, cost-effective services and meeting the expectations of funders, who increasingly require evidence of quantifiable outcomes. For many, this has meant establishing

“performance-monitoring systems to regularly collect and review information on the effect of their services” (Thornton, 2008, p.11).

In a service organisation such as Link House, this can present significant problems since the organisation produces neither goods that can be counted, nor indicators which adequately measure the success or otherwise of specific interventions. The nature of the services provided by Link House is such that “achieving completion” in regard to their clients is an ephemeral and often inappropriate concept. Success may not be contingent upon completion, but may be evident in steps towards completion. Documenting success in its various forms by way of client review forms can allow quantification and therefore points of reference for funders, but it falls far short of providing an accurate measure of the effects of Link House services on the wellbeing, lives, families and futures of its clients. The following pages begin the process of attempting to fill this void.

Method of information collection and analysis

Link House Agency² requested and supported this research, which was undertaken primarily by means of focus groups. There were two distinct focus groups, one composed of 6 agency staff members and the second seeking the views of the agency’s clients. The selection of client participants for the focus group discussion was undertaken in conjunction senior staff, trained in counselling and social work. Although staff will be aware of the identity of clients involved, beyond this, anonymity of all client participants was assured.³ The focus group discussions took place at Link House Agency and were electronically recorded on audiotape. The discussions were expected to be of approximately one hour’s duration and this was the case for the staff group. The client group however, chose to continue discussions even after the recording had stopped.

The staff discussed existing practices around needs assessment and goal setting with clients, along with their thoughts about how they might determine progress or success with clients. The semi-structured discussion with the client focus group canvassed clients’ experiences and personal progress in their interactions with Link House. The group reflected on their initial contact with Link House, their goals (if any) and subsequent achievements (or otherwise) and the role that Link House played in their progress. The welfare of members of the client focus group needed careful consideration since their discussions necessarily revisited their circumstances and associated feelings prior to and during contact with the agency. For most, this entailed the breakdown of a relationship and upheaval for the family. All participants were advised of the continuing availability of Link House counselling services should they need to address any issues that participation may have provoked. One client availed herself of this offer.

² While individual staff are not identified by name here, the nature of the community sector is such that both the agency and individual staff may be recognised by others in the sector. They are comfortable with this possibility.

³ All client participants were assigned pseudonyms. They were also informed of the need for absolute confidentiality in regard to any personal information or disclosures made during the focus group discussions.

Link House induction processes

There is a variety of ways by which people come to Link house: some are referred by other agencies such as Plunket, CYFS, the Department of Justice, Family Start, medical centres, schools or district nurses. Others learn of Link House services and courses through advertising or by word of mouth and phone or simply walk through the door. Other than those who ring to enquire about personal and professional development courses, clients typically call to ask for support for their family and/or for counselling. Single parents seeking counselling must see a social worker in order to access the single parent counselling service. This allows for an assessment of the full range of potential needs with which the client might present and ensures that they are referred to the most appropriate agencies for help. For example, families can have urgent housing or health needs. Link House does not offer direct assistance in these areas, but will refer and advocate for clients with other agencies where necessary. It is common for clients in counselling to subsequently enrol in Link House courses and occasionally the reverse occurs. The counselling service has gradually increased over the years, particularly since a similar local service closed, leaving no other free or low cost non-denominational service available to Hamilton residents.

During the first appointment the client and social worker complete a form which grades the level of need across a range of areas: in terms of material, spiritual, physical and emotional wellbeing, and parenting needs. While some clients present with just one area of need, others can have high levels of need in all areas. Improvements are possible quickly for some needs but not others – practical needs such as housing or finances can be addressed immediately, for example, while emotional wellbeing typically takes significantly longer. Historically, success is counted officially when a client no longer needs Link House services. In terms of quantifiable data, annual summaries of the numbers of clients and their families who have accessed Link House services are created and similar tables document the number of hours of counselling that have been provided. Neither of these indicate “success” however, but rather turnover or throughput. The summaries also do little to indicate the degree of improvement achieved in the various areas of concern identified for individual clients.

Counselling clients’ progress is reviewed periodically, though the timing of the review is dependent on the source of the client’s contact with the agency. If they have been referred by other agencies, a documented need and objective already exists, which allows immediate action to address the need. Self-referrals are less clear cut. Often, the immediate presenting problem is not in fact their main issue and it can take time to isolate key or underlying problems. While isolating and acknowledging problems can be momentous, again, it is not counted officially as a success. As a rule, after five counselling sessions, the client’s case is reviewed by counsellor using a standardised checklist and after 10 sessions their forms go back to the referring social worker to discuss whether more counselling is needed. Generally, this equates to a period of three months.

The Single Parent Counsellor usually receives some information about a client’s situation from the referring agent, but not always. Even where she does have information, she often finds the client has different or further needs from those stated initially. This is especially the case in

regard to abuse or trauma disclosures, though eliciting such disclosures is not viewed as part of the social worker's role. Counselling is goal oriented and some clients arrive with a good understanding of what they hope to address or achieve. The service assists clients in setting achievable goals which are more specific than clients' declarations that they "want to be happy".⁴ Sometimes new goals emerge as counselling progresses and clients can be referred back to the social worker for support alongside counselling. Since the family is regarded as the client, rather than the individual, the service can ultimately include sessions with children.

Clients can have multiple historic difficulties and the most common goals involve seeking to address depression and anger, often connected to historical abuse. Typically, clients are looking to talk through these types of issues and move forward, though individual levels of motivation vary significantly – highly motivated clients can move through quickly and tend to make maximum use of support groups, courses, social worker etc. Whatever their pace, clients' feedback to the service reports multiple ways in which they are helped, but again, these are difficult to quantify – the counselling provides an independent view of self, which is more positive than their own self-image; they are no longer self-harming, or they have learned and are implementing coping strategies, or have become more self-directed and independent, for example.

Some clients are enormously damaged, described by staff as "off the page" in terms of levels of need. These fragile clients will always be accommodated by Link House, but make very slow progress, typically in very small steps over many years. For them, the ability to keep striving for a goal is in itself an achievement, though the official records give no indication of the exceptional efforts involved – by both staff and the client. Inevitably, there are also some clients best described as "frustrating", either because they are unreliable about keeping appointments or because they appear not to be committed to achieving goals and consequently are very long term, making no or very slow progress. Such clients are challenged at review time and this sometimes results in Link House withdrawing from services to the client, especially if they are repeatedly unreliable. If there has been no contact with a client for 6 months, they are taken off the agency's books.

Clients

The focus group was composed entirely of women and their connections with Link House began through a range of sources including mental health or welfare services, word of mouth, walking in off the street or simply looking through the phone book. Some of the participants knew each other in passing, while others were close friends, though neither situation appeared to inhibit the flow of conversation during the focus group. All the women were happy to talk about Link House and willing (rather than happy) to talk about their own experiences and situations. In general, their experiences with Link House had been positive and this facilitated an easy flow to the discussion. Their personal circumstances and experiences however, were often distressing

⁴ The approach here reflects the core elements of the commonly used SMART framework in which goals must be specific, measureable, achievable, realistic and time-limited

and sharing their stories was therefore a challenge for each woman and consequently, a humbling experience for the researcher.

Carla⁵ arrived at Link House seeking help with mental health problems stemming from childhood abuse. She rated her self esteem at the time as very low (she spontaneously rated it at “-10”) and she was in severe need in terms of mental health and anger problems. Initially she worried she would be treated the same way as she had in the past, in as much as her previous experiences with helping agencies had done nothing to foster positive changes in her self-esteem or mental health. At Link House, she was given “marvellous” service. In addition to her heartfelt gratitude for what she considered to be an effective counsellor, she was also at pains to describe “something extra here – open, warm, friendly, welcoming. I’m allowed to be me and it is accepted. I am affirmed and it is okay if I get angry.”

For Carla, improvement came relatively quickly. She recognised a “massive difference between me in June and me in December” which she attributed not simply to her counselling sessions. She identified other Link House Services which had helped in her recovery and had similar effects on her friend, who was also present in the focus group. “The self esteem courses are brilliant; did wonders for Claire!” she teased. Carla pinpointed the end of the second self-esteem course as a milestone: “I have come such a long way... I’m not as aggressive, I’m not as angry, I’m not as violent. It’s great! I’m not sad. I’m more happy and that’s what I wanted. I just want to be happy with who and what I am.”

Her improved self-esteem and mental health is reflected in other areas of her life and assisted in the development of a much better relationship with her mother. She sees her connections with the agency as continuing for some time to come. Her former partner currently has custody of their child and Carla is seeking shared custody, a process in which she feels Link House’s support has been “brilliant.” She does not, however, align her self-esteem with success in this single issue. For her, success is “contentment, to wake up happy, be cheerful at work in the morning.” When others are grumpy she can recognise her old self - “I used to be like that!” – and she treasures her new outlook. The improvements in her emotional and mental health have also translated into other aspects of her life. She has started an exercise programme for health and weight purposes – and has encouraged other Link House clients to join her!

When Claire came to Link House she enrolled in self esteem courses, which required her to set specific goals. She has met many of these goals and again, there is a variety of aspects of her life that have benefitted over time. Some challenges were physical, such as her goal to to rehabilitate her injured spine. Her physical pain is now much reduced and she recognises and appreciates the improved mental health that helped her achieve this goal. An assertiveness course allowed her to improve her confidence in social interactions – allowing her to “raise my head” in public and talk to strangers. She feels “more open now; this is a second home.” Achieving her goal of being more independent is reflected in her now having her own home and a new car. Most important to her is the improvement in her parenting – she “wasn’t coping as a

⁵ All names have been changed.

mum”, but is now much more confident and competent. Like all the women, she recognises that there will still be “down days”, but is generally happier and reflects the other women’s assertions that they are now able to “like their own company.” They also “appreciate that someone else cares.”

Rosie needed to find structures and strategies to put into place to help her deal with her broken relationship and the effects the break-up was having on her children. Her husband shares custody of the children and takes them every second weekend. She felt she needed help with resisting his “mind games”, had no self-confidence and “did not recognise the person she had become.” She wanted to find ways to “push forward” with her life, but, in addition to her family responsibilities, Rosie was engaged in nursing studies and did not have the time or energy to undertake any of the courses offered by Link House. Her contact with Link House was therefore primarily confined to counselling services. Rosie felt that her study gave her extra insight and understanding in her sessions with the counsellor, whom she to be affirming and non-judgmental. Although it was important that that her needs were validated, Rosie particularly appreciated the opportunity to see her situation from a different perspective.

After five sessions, her counsellor felt that she had progressed sufficiently to be able to leave counselling. None-the-less, Rosie needed to know the option was still there and finds strength simply in the knowledge that she can return to counselling at any time if she feels the need. Although she too still has down days, she knows they are “normal” and now feels strong enough to resist her former husband’s manipulations. The journey has been a “rollercoaster”, but Rosie feels that “the troughs have become further and further apart.” Her children still struggle to understand the changes, but Rosie feels she is coping better and paid tribute to her own mother’s unfailing support through “the break-up ... and reconciliation ... and break-up.” Supported by both her mother and Link House, Rosie is positive about her family’s future.

When Martha came to Link House, she “just did it to please Mum!” She expected “nothing”, and felt that she was “too messed-up” for anyone to be able to help. She had formed this view based on past counselling experiences and came to “tell someone about what had happened”, but saw it as merely a formality. Her history is harrowing (including parental abuse and fraternal incest) and she had lived with its ghosts for many years. None-the-less she didn’t think that she needed help, and her involvement with Link House continued for five years before she noticed anything she regarded as “improvement”. She undertook a self-esteem course when she first came to Link House but “got nothing out of it.” In retrospect, she felt it was “too early”, though she maintained her connection with Link House despite her lack of progress. She later enrolled in parenting courses, which she found helpful and small improvements slowly compounded. She is now much more confident and feels she has made significant progress. Her trauma continued into her adult life however, and counselling continues. Success comes in small steps for Martha, and with much effort.

Claudia was the youngest of the women in the group and was referred to the self-esteem course by mental health services following the birth of her daughter a few months earlier. The child’s father is involved with child, but Claudia finds his presence threatening and does not

have any of her own family nearby. She arrived at Link House “completely” lacking in confidence, and struggling with her mental and emotional health. She went into counselling and also undertook two self-esteem courses. She then returned to counselling, by her own choice because child’s “father’s influence became too much.” Often for Claudia, just “talking” was an achievement. She therefore felt very positive after courses or counselling sessions during which she had managed to contribute at all. Link House provides not simply a place to talk, but the strength she needs to go forward and she “trusts Link House above all other” confidantes and sources of advice – “even more than family” though she acknowledges that friends are still important. Her greatest hope is that Link House can help her develop the strength and skills to “find the person she used to be.”

Margo left a neighbouring city with 3 children in order to escape horrific memories and court cases. She was suffering from long term depression as a result of abuse and walked into Link House off the street four years ago when she saw the agency sign as she was passing. She had a new baby, whose father had disappeared. Although her mother is supportive, she does not live in Hamilton. Margo feels she would still need Link House even if her mother was in Hamilton, because there are some things she cannot discuss with her. Margo also suffered childhood abuse, but her mother feels that the details should be “kept private” and that it is best to “get on with it”, rather than talk it through.

Margo thought she was coping well when she got to Hamilton, but now realises she was in a “terrible state”. Initially, she simply wanted to meet other people in same situation as a sort of support group. Link Houses provided “much more than this; I got more confidence ... returned to church and ... developed a good support network.” Despite her much more positive position, she still visits Link House from time to time, a practice she sees continuing indefinitely as a sort of back-up to her usual support network. Most of all, she appreciates the chance to reaffirm the positive attributes she has “that are so easily forgotten. I can also get help through the rough patches.” In hindsight, Margo thought that she got far more than she expected to from her association with Link House. All the women reported similar experiences in this regard, if only because they had not anticipated the multiple areas of their lives that would be touched and improved as a result of their contact with Link House.

Asked what Link House could or should tell funders about, the women emphasised the ongoing, wide-ranging effects of improved self-esteem and confidence on all other areas of their lives. They noted how the most basic questions can begin a process of healing that might not be achieved otherwise. For example, Link House asks, “what do you need” and that “makes you think about your needs” in a systematic and purposeful way, perhaps for the first time. They also reiterated that while the agency provided “practical help with getting on to the DPB” or with housing or health problems, its major contribution was in the personal and emotional support it provided. Although they could not think of how to measure their changed self-perceptions, their new-found contentment or their conquest over old, destructive patterns of thought and behaviour, these were the achievements that were pivotal in developing positive futures for the women and their families. All felt that they understood themselves better and that their mental emotional health was unequivocally supported and nurtured by the agency – “it’s okay to cry at

Link House.” Their improved inner health in turn assisted in making positive changes in their outer lives. For example, all but one of the women reported better relationships with their families⁶ and the women displayed an ability to find joy, humour and purpose in their worlds once more.

Ancillary activities such as the playgroup that was operating at the time provided further healing and sources of strength. “Other mothers” were an important attraction for those attending the playgroup, since it provided an opportunity to interact with other adults in the first instance, but also fostered a camaraderie born of their common circumstances and experiences. The women noted that a “mothers’ group would be appreciated” and the weekly lunches provided by Link House were especially popular – for both their good food and good company. The women appreciated the opportunity to talk about “women’s stuff – beauty etc!” and to hold adult conversations and share their stories, problems and triumphs. The women’s interactions also provided evidence that personal growth had extended beyond what some of the women had ever aimed to achieve, with Carla in particular demonstrating clear leadership skills with other members of the group.

The women were also keenly aware that Link House’s philosophy permeated all its actions and services. They encountered non-judgemental, unconditional acceptance, validation of their struggles, efforts and feelings and an ethos whereby they “help you to fix yourself” rather than “telling you what to do.” Clients are “treated with respect” and this in itself begins to rebuild shattered self-esteem. Nurturing personal dignity to the point where a woman can once more lift her head and face the world changes that life and those it touches in immeasurable ways, ways which are not evident in statistical summaries or forms with ticked boxes. For some, the achievement may take a matter of months, for others years, and for a few achievement can be measured only by their continued striving to reach the goal.

It is not sensible that clients’ stories such as these should be attached to all funding applications, yet the clients’ voices provide a more accurate description of the achievements of Link House than any other measure will. It is not simply a matter of humanising the statistics; rather it speaks to the multiple levels and meanings of “success” in the field of personal services. It is about recognising that effort and achievement *count*, even if they cannot be measured in conventional ways. It is about recognising the strength and depth of community and caring work within an organisation, the immeasurable value of the human individual – however fragile its present form – and the services that help to restore dignity, confidence and hope.

Link House has recently introduced a new section in its newsletter. It provides a biographic profile of former or current clients who want to share their challenges and successes with other Link House clients. Funders might be well served by an annual reminder of some of their stories.

⁶ The one exception is unlikely to reconcile with her family at any point and the matter is not pursued.

References

Sanders, J., O'Brien, m., Tennant, M., Sokolowski, S. W. & L. M. Salamon.(2008) *The New Zealand Non-profit Sector in Comparative Perspective*. Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector: Wellington

Thornton, G (2008) *Take a fresh look at some of the Not for Profit issues currently affecting the sector*. Grant Thornton New Zealand: Auckland