

“Structural Framework: Authority and Supervision” Program Transcript

MAURICE WILLIAMS: As former director of Treatment Foster Care, when I show up at work every day there are hundreds of problems that need to be solved-- really hundreds. So when I show up at work, first thing I'm thinking is, "Have we had any disruptions overnight? Have we had any foster parents call the hotline and say, 'Listen, I want this 15 year old boy out of my home immediately?'"

Second problem would be, do we have enough children in the program? We need to do more recruitments, get other clients into our program, so that we can continue to grow. Our program, of course, thrives off of serving clients. And in order to serve them, they must first be transferred to us from the Department of Social Services.

So when foster parents say, "Listen, I want this child out," it is my responsibility to get with the clinical director, to get with case carrying social worker to figure out what actually is the problem in this home. We do what we call an emergency case review. We gather the entire team together, clinicians will come in, we will speak at length about what these issues have been. Most of the time we already know what some of them are, but then maybe there were some new issues that presented over night.

ANDREA INGRAM: You know, Maurice, it sounds to me like you have the families to be concerned about, the children to be concerned about, and your staff to be concerned about.

MAURICE WILLIAMS: Absolutely.

ANDREA INGRAM: And there's a little part of what you said, it reminded me a little bit of my job, which is when you come in the morning, you have an agenda of things you want to do, and lots of times, that's not what you end up doing.

MAURICE WILLIAMS: We're crisis interventionist people. We thrive in crisis. We want to work it out. And I must ensure that the social workers don't get tired. There are a lot of problems that they're having, so the social worker could get tired, and just be like, well, "Listen, I'm done with this family as well." So when I show up at work every day with all of the hundreds of problems that we do have, that is my primary responsibility, to keep these families intact.

ANDREA INGRAM: My youngest child described my job one day as-- somebody asked her, what does your mom do? And she said, well, she solves problems all day. I hadn't thought about it, but in our agencies, that's what we're doing, we're solving problems all the time. And I share a lot of those kinds of staffing and concern for families, because I run a crisis center also.

But I wanted to mention a sort of ongoing larger problem that we have. Our organization has two main things that we do. We do crisis services, and we have a whole staff that does that, and we have shelter programs. And so it's almost like we have two big departments, and we share the same building, and our staff need to be very integrated.

And what happens sometimes is that they start to sort of go their separate ways and lose some of that understanding of each other. I might start to hear criticism from one side to the other, criticism, or not understanding why they're doing certain things. I've got to bring them back together, because we are a unified staff, and we also need to back each other. So how do I do that? How do we avoid that?

One of the things that I have found to be most successful is cross-training-- to take a crisis staff person and teach them to work in the shelter, take someone who's in house in the shelter and have them work in another location, at our day resource center for example. So cross-training-- and not only is that a good way to understand each other, but as far as in an emergency, if we have staff who are trained in a lot of different positions, then we can keep going, because we've got to keep all of our programs going 24 hours, all the time.

Also, sometimes we just have meetings, if I'm hearing something's cropping up as a problem, bring people together, and, OK, let's have the shelter staff explain to the crisis staff why they did that, because there's usually a good reason. So I'm constantly trying to keep people together, keep cohesiveness in the agency, keep respect for each other, and keep understanding of their jobs.

HOLLY HOEY: So this question actually-- you both were talking about internal problems, and this question to me, I automatically thought about external. And you work directly with clients, and United Way works indirectly with clients, through our partners. And I was thinking about volunteer management.

And when I say volunteer management, I don't see it as a problem, but it's more about preventing a problem. I've been at United Way for about 12 years, and 50% of my job is working with volunteers, which I absolutely love. They're vital to our organization, yet as a staff person, it's very challenging managing volunteers, as we all know. And so with my team and to new staff that come on board, it's really teaching them volunteer management 101.

They always have great ideas, which is wonderful. There is just no possible way that we can accept all of these ideas. And so you as a staff person are responsible to make sure that you're aligning with the mission and the strategic direction of the organization, and that you have to vet those ideas, and that it's your responsibility to say to the volunteer, that's a great idea, do we have the internal resources to support this idea? Do we have the finances to support it? Do we get it sponsored?

I think it's important that you really instill in the staff members who are managing volunteers, that one is to manage the expectations-- well, to have clear expectations up front. Let me give you an example of a couple of years ago, I'm working with a wonderful volunteer who is just so dedicated. He had an idea to bring together certain volunteers and our most generous donors to an event at an art museum, and to just have a kind of celebratory event, and to thank them, and to kick start the campaign, and he wanted to get the sponsorship.

And I did not feel good about it as a staff person. I thought, It's sending the wrong message, people aren't feeling good, and we're going to have this event. It just isn't the right feel." And he kept pushing me, he kept pushing me, and I finally had to say to him, "I just don't feel good about this. Let's really think about the environment right now."

"We're about to get into the recession, having an event right now, it just wasn't the right feeling. And I think donors would actually look poorly upon it." And so he finally agreed, and it was my responsibility as a staff person to push back. And I think that we have that obligation to our organization and to our donors. We have to be a good steward to our donors and volunteers, and to say, "Is this really the right thing to do?"

ANDREA INGRAM: Holly, what I really like about your story, though, is that you followed your intuition, your instincts. Sometimes we all are in situations where we have that battles with ourselves.

HOLLY HOEY: Yeah, and it's hard.

MAURICE WILLIAMS: It is hard.

HOLLY HOEY: It's hard.

ANDREA INGRAM: You know, "Am I right, am I wrong?" And you just didn't let go of that feeling. And you were right.

MAURICE WILLIAMS: It's not only because they're volunteers, I think it's with staff alike. Because even with my staff, right, we have to ensure that they are first seeing the problems out in the field, because I'm not out there doing the home visits. I'm not interacting with the families and children on a consistent basis. So staff has to believe that upper management is going to first hear the problems that they're having in the field. Part of our responsibility is to hear and listen to what the problems are out there, and then come up with a clear way of how to address them and modify any changes that we need to make in order for our placements to be successful.

One thing that we do as well as that, we meet with our foster parents once every three months. So they are all there, all 50 of them are in this room, we're talking

about all of the issues we've had on the ground. One thing that I've noticed that my staff is starting to do, is that any problem that has existed in more than three families in one review period-- which would be three months-- that is a problem that we will take to the major session that we have every three months. And we will speak openly about it, we will come up with a procedure that allows us to alleviate those types of problems.

So I think seeing trends in our homes and in our families that create issues, for not just one or two families, but multiple families, how do we clearly define a process that's going to be able to clearly talk to that problem, and come up with some viable solutions for all of us. How do you guys deal with problems that you see occurring currently, and then how you can mitigate those concerns from continuing?

HOLLY HOEY: At United Way of Central Maryland, we're a very complicated organization, because we send out checks and allocations to over 1600 nonprofit organizations a year. We can take credit cards, stock transition, you know there's transactions, there's payroll deduction, there's cash, there's checks-- I mean, there's so many ways that people can give on a monthly basis, on a quarterly basis, to United Way, and we have the infrastructure to support that, however, there's going to be a human error.

The one thing that we do to solve a problem is, right away, there's a team in place. We create a cross functional team from the different departments. We pull everybody together, we say, "OK, how did it happen, what are we going to do to fix the problem, but most importantly, what are we going to do to fix the problem so that it is preventable in the future?"

But this happens, and I think that it's important that the existing policies and procedures that are in place, that you're always maintaining that, you're double-checking that, you're monitoring it, and then if something happens, you're always modifying it to ensure that that problem will not happen in the future.

MAURICE WILLIAMS: So how do we, Andrea, teach our staff to identify problems, so by the time that it reaches our desks, we are already aware of it, and we can deal with it before it gets out of control?

ANDREA INGRAM: Well, I was thinking, as a response listening to you all, that it's-- for us, we're all about people, we have a lot of staff, they have stressful jobs, much like your situation, and I would say that we listen, listen, listen. Because staff are not always going to come to you, you know, so you really have to be listening all the time for any little undercurrents, and then you have to respond.

When you hear something, you have to respond. And I have found that you can't always solve a problem. If staff gets the feeling that you are trying to solve the problem, then I think that goes a long way to improve morale, so that people still

feel good about the organization and feel good about the way they're being treated.

HOLLY HOEY: You need to create a culture in which everybody-- and our president and CEO say this-- "You can lead from any chair in this organization. It doesn't matter if you're the CEO, or if you're an administrator-- you know, an administrative person-- or if you are in finance, you are a leader in this organization. And it is your obligation and your responsibility to raise your hand, to ask the tough questions, if you see a problem, to not overlook it. If you're at all in doubt of anything that you see or experience, you have to raise your hand."

MAURICE WILLIAMS: I tell my staff all the time that, "You guys are the ears and eyes of the agency. I mean, you will be the first ones to see, to sense some sort of inconsistency in the home. You always have to be in tune to what you see, what you've learned, your knowledge space that you carry every day, to bring back those problems to us."

And you're right, they have to feel like we listen, like we care, and then, ultimately, we can do something about it, because they don't always want to just have us listen. We can't always solve every problem, nor can we solve the problem easily or quickly, because sometimes we have to really look at how we solve this problem will determine whether or not-- for my organization-- whether or not this placement stays intact, whether or not we have to move the child, whether or not we have to in fact decertify the foster home. So we have to take our time, we have to look at all of the factors involved to come to the right conclusion.