

Case Study #2:

Mobilizing the community in Montérégie: Building a Group Home for Youth



A. Introduction

One of the success stories involving Townshippers' Association was the campaign for and the setting up of a youth group home to serve the Montérégie area. As we shall see, the process was long, but the youth of Montérégie served by youth protection services benefited and continue to do so to this day. Montérégie includes the south shore of Montreal and the Brome-Missisquoi area. Eighty percent of the residents are French-speaking and, in 1980, an estimated 100,000 Anglophones lived in the area.

B. Starting with an issue

1.0 Identifying the situation

The community mobilization around this issue began through a discussion between two concerned community members reflecting on the history of youth services in the community. Their informal assessment revealed that young people (10-18 years old) experiencing severe behavioural or emotional problems received limited services locally and were referred to Montreal agencies. These requests were often met with a nine to twelve-month waiting period, and access to the two English-language emergency shelters for youth in immediate crisis had been unavailable for the past two years.

2.0 ...and building a deeper knowledge base

Next, statistical information was gathered revealing that in 1985, a total of 26 English-speaking youth required placement, not counting those already in treatment programs. Instead, Anglophone youth were placed in detention centers or in exclusively Francophone institutions as far away as Québec City, and parents were often uninformed of their child's placement. The health care system was spending an astonishing one and a half million dollars (\$1.5 million) transporting the young people from one area of the province to another.

What kind of information was collected to expand the knowledge base:

- Number of youth who needed placement.
- Letters from parents.
- The budget for driving young people from one region to the other.
- Statistics and demographic characteristics of the Anglophone population in the region.
- Descriptions of the clientele.
- 5-year-plan of the CRSSS Montérégie.
- Official data on the number of youth who required placement.
- Models of other youth group homes.

"My teenage daughter was eventually placed at the Shawbridge Youth Center in Prévost, Québec, over 100 miles from Knowlton....Visiting hours were from 1 to 3. It took us longer to get there to visit than to visit, and that's not counting our returning home...Dealing or working with a teenager with a lot of miles in between is almost impossible. On numerous occasions, our daughter went AWOL with a few of her "new-found" friends who were originally from Montreal. You take a teenager who hadn't lived in the city since she was 3 years old, out on the run without money and only the clothes on their backs, certainly are heading for trouble or at least not a very healthy environment..."

Quotes taken from a letter by a mother in the Montérégie.

Based on defining the situation and documenting a deeper knowledge base, a clear case for action was identified for effectively engaging the community on this issue.

C. Getting the Community involved

1.0 Assembling and organizing the planning team

Initial steps to engage stakeholders and community members revealed that previous efforts had been made to establish a group home for youth in the Montérégie. With this knowledge, and a clear situation and need established, both current and past interested stakeholders were engaged to form an ad hoc organizing committee. The committee slowly began organizing by:

- ✓ Creating a formal name "Ad Hoc Committee on the Formation of an Anglophone Group Home in the Montérégie."
- ✓ Locating expertise and secretarial support from Townshippers' Association.
- ✓ Validating past and current perceptions and facts on the issue.
- ✓ Gaining consensus on a solution (need to have a group home in the Montérégie).
- ✓ Building a strategy involving community and government involvement.

2.0 Mobilizing the community through strategic efforts

As a major part of the strategy was to inform and gain support from community and government partners, a few strategic efforts were organized to create awareness of the issue. These efforts included such things as developing a media campaign (radio, press releases and interviews on CBC television) to inform people of the situation and need for a youth group home. Also, key individuals were asked to write letters to specific government departments and the local MNA, showing them the need to provide funding to the project and keeping them aware of the project's progress.

"Media coverage and keeping people aware of our progress was definitely a turning point in making government and community people aware and interested in contributing to the project." Michael Caluori, Social Worker and Ad Hoc Committee member

Other local initiatives were undertaken by the Ad Hoc Committee to further engage the community and keep them aware of the project. A few of them include:

- Sending 350 letters to individuals, businesses, organisations and municipalities asking for support. The Ad Hoc Committee received 268 letters of support from individuals and 29 from organisations.
- Publishing an open letter to the Minister of Health and to the local MNA was in the Sherbrooke Record (a local English-language newspaper). Individuals were urged to cut out the letter and send it to both the MNA and Health Minister.
- Organizing benefit dance was held and invitations were sent to politicians and others. The dance raised \$275 and these funds were used for mailings and advertising.
- Monitoring the media, and when monies were given for 20 beds in the Montérégie but, none for Anglophones, the committee reluctantly opted to publish an open letter to the MNA and the Minister of Health with the headline "WE'RE FED UP."
- Signing of a community petition during a local celebration "Townshippers' Day."

"We are a community. We need tools to raise our kids. We recognize the problem exists for Francophones. Solutions should help us as well. That was the crux of our message." Michael Caluori, Social Worker and Ad Hoc Committee member.

D. Achieving Results

1.0 Monitoring results and building on each success

The Ad Hoc Committee began to monitor each result in order to use that success in building further momentum towards accomplishing their goal. Some of these results and momentum included:

1. Receiving a letter of intent from the government promising \$300,000 for a Youth Group Home for Anglophones.
2. Pressure from the community to open the home.
3. Actions taken to develop a non-profit organisation.
4. Locating a home and a staff person to coordinate it.
5. Hosting the official opening of the group home.
6. Approaching a charitable foundation for additional and sustainable resources.

"In 16.5 years we have been home to over 250 kids. We have 8 beds and most kids stay less than 30 days, but one young person stayed with us for 5 years. Some kids have been abandoned, some come because parents can't handle them, but most are here because they can't stay in school. In 2002-2003, 44% of the residents were girls, 50% were boys and we had a 94 % occupancy rate."

Pat Delfino, group home coordinator.

2.0 Sustainability

It has been many years since the project saw its positive conclusion. Additional actions were taken after the home was established ensuring it would remain in the community for years to come. For example :

- o Original committee members were replaced by other interested stakeholders.
- o Work was done to ensure the youth group home was well integrated into the health and social service system.
- o The home was relocated in honour of the Foundation's patron (home is called the Maison Yvonne G. Contact Group Home).
- o Statistics were gathered on the youth group home's operations and provided to the government, ensuring ongoing communication and support was maintained.

E. Additional Lessons Learned

- ❖ Monitoring progress and keeping people informed about it, assisted in continuing the momentum and interest in the project.
- ❖ Gathering information and communicating evidence on the need for a youth group home was essential for government to act.
- ❖ Placing constant pressure on government and community stakeholders was also important. The media campaign greatly supported this effort.
- ❖ Using each success and result to re-plan and organise the next step along the way.

For more information on the Youth Group Home Project, you can contact Rachel Garber at (819)-566-5717 (toll free 1-866-566-5717) or execdir@townshippers.qc.ca.

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