

Collaborating for Youth Development in Hartford

Abridged Case

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In the middle of the year 2000, civic leaders in Hartford were at a low point in an emotional rollercoaster ride—what they hoped would be the lowest point.

The first part of the ride had seemed so promising. Early in 1999, the US Department of Labor (DOL) had announced its “Youth Opportunity” grant program: twenty-five to thirty cities would receive generous funding to develop a broad spectrum of services for young adults in targeted low-income areas to prepare them for mainstream jobs and careers. Seeing the “YO” grant as a rare chance to address one of the city’s most pressing problems, Hartford Mayor Michael Peters had asked leaders from fifty public and nonprofit organizations in the Hartford region to develop a strong grant proposal with widespread community backing.

In March 2000—to the surprise and delight of most Hartford leaders—the DOL had awarded the city a large grant. Hartford would receive \$7 million for the first year of the program, and, depending on its performance, could receive another \$21 million over the next four years.

The glow of the grant success was short-lived, however. Within weeks of the grant announcement, dissension gripped the coalition leading Hartford’s program. Power struggles and divergent views tore at the group even as they grappled with a crucial decision: picking a director for YO Hartford.

The Department of Labor’s Youth Opportunity Program

The DOL’s nationwide YO grant program was designed to help adolescents and young adults in economically distressed areas finish high school, enroll in job training, and land good jobs. Social service providers were pleased that the YO program represented a departure from the DOL’s traditional approach. Rather than designing a narrow program to provide young people with a specific set of employment-related services, such as job readiness classes or computer training, it borrowed a page from the “positive youth development” philosophy embraced by many social service providers. This philosophy held that every young person needed to be seen as “whole,” not just as a person who lacked particular skills. A trained adult mentor or case manager needed to help the youth develop a comprehensive plan to address personal problems or skill deficits within a larger and more positive

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context. The plan might include not only training programs but also social services, recreational outlets, work experience, and practical “life skills” instruction.

The YO program departed from the traditional DOL approach in another respect as well. The DOL served any income-eligible person in a large geographic area, while the YO program provided substantial resources to a specific low-income area. The idea was not only to provide saturation service to each young person but also to maximize impact on the target area as a whole by serving 20 to 25 percent of the fourteen to twenty-one-year-olds living there. The hope was that this saturation would “tip” the local peer culture toward positive attitudes and behavior. The YO program represented the largest investment DOL had ever made in a program of this type—\$1.4 billion nationwide over five years. The planners hoped they had hit on a winning formula for breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and unemployment.

Young People in Hartford

According to 1990 census data, Hartford was the nation’s fourth poorest city in the medium-sized category—and in child poverty, it ranked second. Nearly 40 percent of city residents were under twenty-two. Hartford’s citywide poverty rate was 27.5 percent, and in a largely African American area on the north side and a largely Puerto Rican area on the south side, the rate was 42 percent. Median household income was \$15,852 in these neighborhoods, compared with \$22,140 citywide and \$42,324 in the region. Unemployment was rampant. The city also suffered from “the thirty syndrome,” according to Hartford Human Services Director Ramon Rojano: if young people in Hartford managed to earn a salary of \$30,000 by age thirty, they almost certainly left Hartford.

In the city as a whole, recent economic development efforts were bearing fruit and jobs were coming to Hartford. Many of the city’s young adults, however, were ill prepared for employment. Hartford high school students had consistently ranked last out of 164 communities on Connecticut’s standardized “mastery tests.” The four-year cumulative dropout rate for the Hartford high school class of 1998 was 51 percent, compared to 15 percent statewide. One consultant calculated that the total number of teenage girls in Hartford who gave birth was higher than the number of teenage girls who graduated from high school in almost every year since 1990.

Key Players in Hartford

Applying for the YO program held a complication for Hartford. The DOL stipulated that only regional workforce development boards could apply for YO grants. Such boards had been federally mandated in the past to coordinate employment and training programs at the regional level and overcome a legacy of program fragmentation. The Connecticut board that served Hartford and twenty-nine other communities was called the Capital Region Workforce Development Board (CRWDB). Hartford civic leaders felt that the CRWDB had not worked well with city agencies and small city-based providers in the past. “There was a lot of negativity in the community about the workforce development board—not a lot of trust,” said Tom Phillips, the director of Hartford’s city grant office. Many felt that the CRWDB lacked the drive or wherewithal to develop a proposal that had any chance of securing a YO grant. All in all, “The board had not positioned itself to take a leadership role in shepherding this process,” Phillips said.

On the bright side, DOL had required all workforce development boards to include public, private, and nonprofit organizations in the community in developing a YO grant proposal. Civic leaders set out to use the community consultation process to diplomatically take the grant application out of the CRWDB's hands. Mayor Peters asked the CEOs of about fifty public and private sector organizations that served Hartford adolescents and young adults to work with the CRWDB to develop a grant proposal for the YO program. From June through September 1999, a city-hired facilitator led this group and its committees through a series of meetings to develop the proposal for YO Hartford. In addition to the controversial CRWDB CEO, Frank Chiaramonte, four key players emerged in the group:

Ramon Rojano - the city's director of Human Resources. Human Resources served children and teenagers—mostly younger than the YO target population—through its Parks and Recreation facilities. A clinical psychologist by training, he believed the potential of the YO program lay in developing a citywide system imbued with the principles of the positive youth development philosophy. In particular, he favored thorough assessments of each youth and an extensive system of information sharing among public schools, city agencies, and community service programs.

Anthony Amato - newly appointed superintendent of the Hartford Public Schools. Amato had recently come to Hartford from a New York City school district where, as superintendent, he was credited with effecting a dramatic improvement in standardized test scores. He had a reputation as a forceful and determined administrator, devoted to improving the education of low-income children, but some found him rigid and high-handed. He saw in the new YO program an opportunity to expand technical and vocational education in Hartford and strongly argued that the CRWDB should contract with Hartford Public Schools to operate the program.

George Bahamonde - president of the United Way of the Capital Area. Leading an organization that funded a number of nonprofit organizations serving young people, Bahamonde had long been concerned that the youth service system in Hartford was badly fragmented. A 1996 city study had found 175 programs in more than one hundred organizations that served young people. While there were certainly gaps in the service-delivery system, Bahamonde believed that Hartford's problem was not a lack of services, but a failure of coordination and—even more importantly—a failure to put the needs of the young people themselves at the center of the efforts. He thought that if Hartford received a YO grant, it should not use it to create “the city's 176th” youth program, but rather to create a more coordinated and collaborative youth-centered system of service delivery.

Bob Rath - Southend Community Services (SCS) executive director and creator of a four-agency “collaborative” organization called PROGRESS (Program for Economic Self-Sufficiency). Rath was known as an energetic and pragmatic administrator who had spent his five years at SCS trying to expand youth programming, especially in the employment and training area. In response to frustrations that the CRWDB seldom awarded employment and training contracts to small Hartford-based organizations, Rath had joined forces with the CEOs of the Urban League of Greater Hartford, the Connecticut Puerto Rican Forum, and Hartford Areas Rally Together—all providers of employment and training services—to form the PROGRESS collaborative in 1996. Together, the four groups offered a complement of employment and training programs and represented all the major ethnic and geographic areas of the city. Rath wanted both PROGRESS and SCS to play a role in the YO initiative.

Crafting the Grant Application

The community group had to resolve five major issues in order to apply for the YO grant.

Choosing the Program Operator

Although the CRWDB was the only entity that could apply for a YO grant for Hartford, state policy dictated that it could not serve as a program operator for grants it received; instead, it had to contract out this function. Who would operate Hartford's YO program if the city were to win a grant?

Discussions about the program operator were awkward, as there was no obvious candidate. A committee assigned to the matter came up with several possibilities. One leading contender was the Hartford Public Schools system. It had a large organizational infrastructure to support the fast development of a big program and was already working with the in-school-but-vulnerable population. But the Hartford Public Schools were embattled, with Amato being the eighth superintendent in six years. The school system had a poor reputation for collaborating with the city and other organizations, and the DOL had specified that at least 60 percent of the young people served under the YO program must be out of school.

Initially, many favored giving the job to the United Way, which was seen as neutral, well-regarded, and capable. The United Way was not a direct service provider, however, and Bahamonde made it clear that it could not serve as program operator.

The decision—though not unanimous—was to make PROGRESS the program operator. PROGRESS offered an array of employment and training services, and it represented all the major ethnic and geographic areas in the city. Some worried that the four PROGRESS organizations were primarily workforce-training providers rather than youth development agencies. In addition, PROGRESS itself was a “handshake agreement” and a collaborative, not a unified nonprofit organization. With the exception of its director, Pam Walsh, it had no staff. In the end, a majority of the group agreed: although PROGRESS was not a perfect solution, it was the best of the options before them.

Developing a Governance Structure

A second question was how to govern YO Hartford. The group decided to establish a high-level guiding board that would set the direction for YO Hartford and oversee its operations. The “Executive Leadership Team” (ELT) included Chiamonte, Rojano, Amato, Rath, and Bahamonde. Bahamonde—a mediating presence who got on well with all the others—would serve as its chair. “My job was to be the lion tamer,” he quipped. Paula Gilberto, the United Way's vice president of community service, would orchestrate staff work in support of the meetings.

Legally, the DOL grant would be awarded to the CRWDB, so the exact division of authority among the CRWDB, the ELT, and PROGRESS would eventually have to be established by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The committee began to work on this MOU, but, for grant-writing purposes, decided it was necessary only to agree on the basic concept. Hartford's grant application said simply, “A Memorandum of Understanding among the five [YO Hartford] partners will define an executive structure for policy leadership, resource development and allocation, and evaluation of outcomes.”

Devising a Mechanism for Community Accountability

DOL required every YO site to create a community advisory group to oversee the new program. The grant writers pledged in their application to do so. They did not specify, however, who would take responsibility for forming the group and what role the group would play. Beyond the advisory group, Bahamonde believed that YO Hartford had an obligation to provide meaningful information about the program's accomplishments and failings to parents, businesses, and community organizations. To that end, he proposed—and the group readily agreed—that the United Way would collect, for free, the outcome metrics gathered by program administrators and report them in language easily understood by a lay audience.

Determining the Target Area

DOL required that the YO targeted areas that were contiguous and economically distressed, with a population of under 50,000 people. Agreeing on the YO target area was not the challenge it might have been; Hartford had recently gone through a time-consuming effort to designate part of the city as a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) "Empowerment Zone," which could have made the zone eligible for a number of tax breaks. HUD's rejection of the bid had disappointed civic leaders, but the Empowerment Zone requirements were quite similar to those for the YO Hartford target area. The YO group agreed on a similar target area—an hourglass-shape with a doughnut hole in the middle to exclude the downtown business district. This configuration comprised ten of the city's seventeen neighborhoods, including several predominantly Black neighborhoods north of downtown and several predominantly Puerto Rican and white neighborhoods to the south.

Creating the Substance of the Program

The DOL allowed communities creativity in developing a program, but only after meeting some basic program requirements. Each city had to create at least one YO center and had to serve at least 20 percent of the age-eligible residents in the target area—in Hartford's case, 1,400 of 6,500 eligible young people. Each YO program had to offer tutoring; study skills; instruction leading to high school graduation; alternative school offerings; summer employment opportunities linked to academic and occupational learning; paid and unpaid work experiences; occupational skills training; leadership development opportunities; adult mentoring; follow-up services; and comprehensive guidance and counseling. For a program of Hartford's size, DOL required a staff of forty case managers, ten job developers, and ten outreach workers, all to be paid at competitive rates. The array of additional services could be provided by the YO program operator or contracted out to other providers.

Hartford's proposal included two main YO centers and four satellites. The two main centers would be open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and would serve as "communications hubs rather than full-service facilities." Thus, the Hartford vision of YO was a case management-and-referral model rather than a one-stop model with lots of onsite services. A northern center would be in a Salvation Army facility, and a southern center would be in a new facility to be built by a community-based organization called Mi Casa. The proposal listed several service providers that YO Hartford expected to contract with but did not specify which agencies would provide which services and in what amounts.

YO Hartford would also take advantage of "HARTnet," a project already underway to provide direct communications among all schools, libraries, and city offices. This infrastructure would allow student

records to be centralized, coordinated, and readily shared. The YO program would contract with the school system to extend the network to include all YO sites.

The organizations involved in writing the YO grant remained constant, though the representatives of several organizations changed from time to time. “There were different people in the room at different times for the construction of the program narrative,” recalled Rath.

Painting a Larger Picture

In addition to hashing out how YO Hartford would operate and what it would do, the YO committee spent a good deal of time discussing the general state of Hartford’s youth services system and how it might be reformed. In fact, Bahamonde thought the greatest value of the YO grant lay in catalyzing these very discussions.

Under the current system, Bahamonde pointed out, service providers operated in the dark. When a youth arrived on their doorstep, the providers did not have any information about their track record in school or what other services they had received from other organizations. Providers generally relied on the youth’s own self-reporting about their needs before providing a new service. Youth organization staff did not tend to look at the service community as a whole. Instead, they often hung onto youth clients with proprietary zeal to bolster their own enrollments and financial position. Young people found their way—often haphazardly—to one organization or another where they were encouraged to participate in the services and activities that the organization happened to offer.

To Bahamonde, what would most improve Hartford’s youth services system did not require infusing several million dollars; it required a change of attitude, a new way of doing business, and increased trust among service providers in all sectors. In fact, he reflected, “I never said this, but, in my heart, I always hoped we wouldn’t get the grant. I thought we would get more done without the grant.”

In the end, of the roughly 175 communities that applied for the YO grants, Hartford was one of twenty-four cities to receive one. When the grant came in, Bahamonde’s heart sank a little. But the rest of the group was euphoric.

The Collapse of Consensus

When the city got the grant, PROGRESS Director Walsh recalled, “that’s when the true perceptions of all the players suddenly started to collide.” Conflicts broke out on at least five fronts.

The Uncertain Role of the Executive Leadership Team

At the first team meeting after the grant announcement—Rojano recalled—the CRWDB’s Chiaramonte “walked in and gave us a letter telling us that ‘we’re the grantee’ and, because of that, they have procurement obligations and they were the ones running the show.” During the grant-writing process, the rest of the Executive Leadership Team had believed that all five members would effectively function as a board of directors for YO Hartford. The CRWDB, however, had never signed an MOU with its partners on the ELT. With the grant in hand, the CRWDB argued that it was legally answerable to DOL for a large sum of money. While it would listen to the ELT in the manner of an advisory board, it would not cede decision-making authority to the ELT.

Angry at what felt like a double-cross and unwilling to fold its cards—but in a weak legal position—the rest of the ELT continued to meet with, and clash with, the CRWDB. In retrospect, Rojano believed the team wasted its time meeting after the CRWDB had presented its letter. He likened it to trying to keep a marriage together even though one’s spouse has moved out and filed for divorce. “I think ‘collaboration’ was dead that day with that letter,” he said.

The Uncertain Role of PROGRESS

Meanwhile, Superintendent Amato urged a reversal of the earlier decision to assign program operations to PROGRESS. He reiterated his view that the Hartford Public Schools would be a better program operator and said he had understood that the school system would take over the program in the second year, anyway—an understanding that none of the rest of the team shared. PROGRESS was not interested in stepping aside, and a series of “painful, stressful” conversations, brokered by Bahamonde, ensued within the ELT. Eventually, they affirmed PROGRESS as the program operator.

Amato also pressed strongly for YO Hartford to fund a “YO Academy”—an alternative, vocational high school program that the Hartford Public Schools would operate. This idea had not come up in the initial discussions about the program and had not been included in the grant proposal.

An Operations Team that Doesn’t Operate

Soon after Hartford received its YO grant, the ELT created an operations team, made up of one to two representatives apiece from PROGRESS, the City, Hartford Public Schools, and CRWDB, to make nuts-and-bolts decisions about the YO Hartford program. The ELT and the operations team members themselves assumed that they would continue to play this role, making executive-level decisions that Walsh and the to-be-named director of YO Hartford would carry out. Walsh disliked this arrangement. “They wanted to do everything by committee—and you know how hard it is to do anything by committee. How can you hire a staff? Or come up with job descriptions?” said Walsh.

The Hartford Vision vs. the DOL Vision

After attending DOL orientation and training events in Washington, D.C., the staff of PROGRESS, YO Hartford, and CRWDB noted a significant gap between the vision of the local ELT and that of the DOL program office. The ELT had talked repeatedly of not creating a large, new social service program in favor of a distributed, neighborhood-based organization with staff working in multiple locations all across the city. Their vision was to enrich and coordinate the existing youth service system by way of YO Hartford’s youth development/case management approach. In line with this thinking, the sites selected for the YO centers were not large enough to accommodate more than a few staff, kids, or activities. In the YO orientation sessions, however, DOL forcefully asserted its vision of “one or two big whopping youth centers,” said Walsh—each one a “jazzed up, sexy place that kids would want to come to” and that would serve most of their needs onsite, as a one-stop operation. Such a divergent vision about YO Hartford was unsettling to those—like Walsh—who were caught in the middle.

A Dearth of Existing Programs

When the grant was submitted, some members of the ELT were under the impression that—because the city had issued a report a few years previous identifying 175 programs serving young people—all YO Hartford needed to do was to train a cadre of case managers to connect young people with existing service providers. On closer examination, however, it turned out that most of the 175 programs

worked with youngsters fifteen years old or younger. Few options existed for older youth.

Hiring the YO Hartford Director

“The CRWDB will contract with PROGRESS for operation of the YO centers and day-to-day management of service delivery (including hiring of project staff), in coordination with the Hartford Public Schools and the City of Hartford.”

— YO Hartford’s grant application to DOL, September 1999

Conflicts within Hartford’s YO coalition came to a head as the group grappled with a crucial decision: hiring a director for YO Hartford.

From the point of view of the four organizations that made up PROGRESS, it was their responsibility to hire the YO director. Moreover, they believed that, once hired, the YO director should report directly to Walsh and indirectly to the four PROGRESS CEOs. In contrast, “the School District and the City had the perspective that the director would be hired by the [ELT] and that the person would report to the [ELT], not to PROGRESS, other than for day-to-day personnel supervision,” said Walsh. She continued, “The PROGRESS collaborative said, ‘Wait a minute. How can we be responsible for a person we hire and be responsible for performance under the grant if the person doesn’t report to us?’”

Given this rapid dissolution of what previously had been regarded as consensus, PROGRESS and the ELT began to negotiate, and the United Way engaged the National Executive Service Corps (NESC) as a consultant to help develop both a hiring process and a job description for the YO director.

In speaking with different members of the ELT about the kind of person the team envisioned, NESC quickly uncovered more disagreements. Did they want a CEO-type, big-picture person? Most on the team thought so. YO Hartford was a big operation. But if the YO director were a CEO-level person, this individual would effectively outrank the person they reported to—Walsh, who had no staff of her own. Walsh and the PROGRESS CEOs, on the other hand, envisioned the YO director as a nuts-and-bolts person who would run the YO program day-to-day and work closely with Walsh—and ultimately defer to her—on larger questions.

The ELT and PROGRESS negotiated and eventually agreed, more or less, to a compromise. No one would be hired without the ELT’s and PROGRESS’ approval. Once hired, the director would work for PROGRESS, reporting directly to Walsh, but the ELT would be intimately involved in policy and governance decisions, much like a nonprofit board of directors.

With this understanding in place, the group launched a nationwide director search. Time was of the essence. It was already mid-2000, and DOL expected each YO program to be up and running with one hundred young people enrolled by Labor Day. The following March, a DOL evaluation team would visit Hartford, and its assessment would influence whether YO Hartford received a second year of funding.