

Ad-Venture Philanthropy Creating The Community Campus: A Work in Progress

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INTRODUCTION

In late 1999, the Foundation for Seacoast Health celebrated the grand opening of a noble experiment: The Community Campus, home to health-related nonprofits, public programs, and the Foundation. The road that led to this decision to build and share space with grantees was long and winding, leading us to question if we'd ever get there.

As we settle into our new home and face the financial and logistical realities of being the owner and landlord of an 80,000 square foot building, the way ahead is still marked by bumps and potholes. Yet it also offers a fabulous view. Toddlers and teens, doctors and patients, families, citizens, and community leaders come together at the Campus to work and play, meet and learn in open, sunlit facilities. The entry walls are adorned by artwork from the children and adolescents who make this place their "home away from home." The Community Campus says to families and children, and the modestly paid and often under appreciated staff who work with them: "You are important."

This article explores the difficult route to our final destination, shares some of the lessons we've learned (and are still learning), and concludes with a frank discussion of the challenges ahead.

EXPANDING OUR VISION

In the mid-1990s, the Foundation began to explore the possibility of buying or building a new home for a Foundation-funded program, New Heights – a wildly popular teen center housed in the basement of a leaky municipal building. The scope of the project soon expanded, however, in view of the facility needs of several other Foundation-supported agencies. Being ousted from their locations because of lease expirations, these agencies covered the gamut of health services including a major community health center, Families First of the Greater Seacoast; the Portsmouth Early Education Program (PEEP), a preschool program for learning delayed youngsters; the community's Head Start program; and the only nonprofit child care center in Portsmouth.

But what was originally a crisis for space-hungry nonprofits turned into a unique opportunity for the Foundation: how to address the inefficiency of providing health, educational, and social services to many of the same children and families at different sites. The agencies were quickly invited to become anchor tenants in the proposed child-centered facility, with the Foundation's caveat that they work and plan together to reduce duplication of services, increase resource sharing, and maximize program effectiveness.

BREAKING NEW GROUND, IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

After several years and several false starts, the Trustees located 100 acres in a centrally located but industrially zoned site. They began the very long and tedious process of evaluating the buildable acreage, the feasibility of filling in a defunct quarry, and the willingness of the Portsmouth City Council to change the zoning to accommodate medical, recreational, and child care entities.

Simultaneously, we began intensive planning with each agencies' board of directors and executive staffs, engineers, architects, and attorneys. The Foundation's Facility Committee, composed of Foundation Trustees and community members, met once a week for three years to address the many issues facing what often seemed like an impossible venture. But the collective vision of supportive, accessible, family-friendly services pushed us onward.

In October 1998, dignitaries for the groundbreaking ceremony were upstaged by thirty toddlers from the Portsmouth Community Child Care Center, complete with plastic hardhats and shovels, happily digging in the pile of sand that would become a hub for health-related programs on the Seacoast.

SURVIVING AND CELEBRATING OUR FIRST YEAR

Even though the facility was not completely finished, by late November 1999, all original agencies and the Foundation moved to the Community Campus. They

were followed by two new tenants: InfoLink, a community information and referral service, and the Seacoast Child Advocacy Center. While the vision of a Community Campus made the abstract ideal of collaboration come alive, it wasn't always a smooth ride, particularly in the beginning. Continuing construction; plumbing problems; and erratic heating, security, and computer systems caused months of frustration, friction, and unwelcomed surprises.

Despite a bumpy start, today the Community Campus is functioning as envisioned: a closely-knit collaborative community boasting a broad array of services for more than 3,500 children and their families. Together, the Foundation and tenant agencies created a comprehensive Campus Handbook that includes common intake and outcome assessment tools, emergency procedures, accident and incident reporting guidelines, and the successful sharing of space and personnel. The well-designed conference rooms, gymnasium, teaching kitchen, greenhouse, and computer and art rooms are used to capacity by tenants and at no cost to other nonprofit agencies. The Campus Resource Center is helping both campus tenants and other Seacoast nonprofits identify and pursue funding and technical assistance opportunities. The miles of wheelchair-accessible trails with fitness stations donated by Portsmouth Hospital will be completed this spring.

The synergy of having a continuum of services available under one roof is beginning to pay off. Teen participants are guest readers in the Community Child Care Center. Parents whose children receive primary and preventive care at the Families First Health Clinic often attend GED or ESL classes, or parent support groups. Head Start, PEEP, and Community Child Care are planning a major collaborative initiative, scheduled for next fall, to expand interactive child care opportunities for families.

What we had hoped for has happened: the development of a more seamless system of services for children and families.

TURNING RISK INTO REWARD

We are learning as a team now – the Foundation and grantees in partnership. While we still have far to go to maximize economies of scale and to lessen each tenant's dependence on Foundation financial support, we are working on it – together. Along the way, we've learned some important lessons:

- This project was vastly more complicated than envisioned. What we thought would take three years to complete took nearly a decade. The cost in staff, board, and volunteer leadership time was incalculable.
- Early, continuous, and frequent communications and planning among all players are critical to success. Even though we involved tenants in every aspect of the design of the Campus and its facilities, we still endured several costly and time-consuming mistakes.
- Operating a facility of this scale is more complex and expensive than estimates indicated. The Foundation as

landlord and its accessibility to grantees has created many challenges as we grapple with ways to cut facility costs and prod tenants to generate new funding streams.

- An investment of this magnitude attracts significant public attention. While there are many people who disagreed with our investment in bricks and mortar, there are more who believe we have created an invaluable resource that will greatly enhance the quality of life in our community for future generations.
- The Community Campus solved our tenant agencies' space needs, but created significant new challenges for them. Their public visibility and the appeal of this facility have spiked the demand for agency services. Higher operating costs and the need for more staff have put enormous pressure on tenants to find additional funding sources.
- Collaboration is difficult and extremely time-consuming, but worth the effort when the goals are clear. Collaboration among Campus tenants and offsite nonprofit agencies is resulting in tangible and meaningful results where it counts: in the lives of children and families.

FOLLOWING A NEW PATH

Creating the Community Campus forever changed the Foundation for Seacoast Health. We grew from a staff of two to five full-time and two part-time employees. While we formerly operated quietly behind the scenes, today the community looks to us for advocacy and leadership on a local, regional, and national level. The Foundation is challenged to increase the financial independence of its grantees and reduce the cost of the Campus facility itself in order to maintain our investment in new and innovative initiatives.

We embarked on this project without a blueprint or a role model to guide us and took a risk, not only with our assets but also with how we define ourselves as a private foundation. Only time will measure the return on this investment. If we've succeeded in creating a better model for reaching and serving our community's most vulnerable families, the rewards will be well worth it. Call us in five years, and we'll let you know.

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