

Collaboration – A True Story of STEP and ECI

For the past 30 years a sometimes simmering and sometimes boiling feud existed between two Part C Early Intervention providers in the Billings area, STEP and ECI. The differences were viewed irreparable and permeated into the staff. The conflict was known among partner agencies within the community and caused them to be especially delicate in their communications with each agency. Many in the Billings community were painfully aware of the “Hatfields and McCoys,” including many of the families served.

In 2011 the Yellowstone County Best Beginnings Council formed with 25-30 early childhood agencies and partners represented at the table. STEP and ECI sat at opposite ends of this table. After several meetings with open and hearty dialogue between and among all the agencies it was determined that Karen Ray, a national expert and trainer in agency collaboration, would be brought in to assist agencies moving from tolerance...to communication...to cooperation...to collaboration.

Solicitation was made for two early childhood partners who were willing to receive professional assistance in moving towards true collaboration. The directors of STEP and ECI eyed each other across the table, nodded to each other, and raised their hands in agreement. It was decided by the Best Beginnings Leadership Council that this would become an “incubator” project to see if/how agencies that were so far apart could be brought together for the benefit of families and the community.

The Best Beginnings Council brought Karen Ray to Billings for intensive work with the leaders and employees of STEP and ECI. She met separately with each director, then with each group of employees, followed by an entire day combined with both staffs. This emotional and intense day ended with a “funeral,” burying the bones of the past and a unanimous commitment to move forward with cooperation. There were many ideas generated by the staff members to help promote cooperation (and eventually collaboration) between the two agencies. These ideas served as a blueprint for the following months and years.

The Best Beginnings Council continued to support this new partnership with funding for joint high-quality training and encouragement to maintain the new trajectory of true collaboration. Currently a new Executive Director has taken the helm at STEP and the collaborative efforts continue to move forward. The efficiencies and positive spirit generated are deeply inspiring for many who have a long history with either agency. There is now a shared budget on many projects (efficient planning), plans for further common training (versus the same training repeated at each agency), and regular frequent productive communication at all levels of staff (preventing many problems from arising). STEP and ECI are confident the path of collaboration will lead to further efficiencies and stronger supports/services for the families of Billings and the surrounding area.