CHAPTER SIX - DISCUSSION

Introduction

  This study had two purposes. The first purpose was to develop a method of evaluating a teen shelter to determine if the shelter was meeting the needs of the clients. The second purpose was to apply this evaluation process to a specific teen shelter. Evaluation researchers have cited limitations in previous studies, including the failure to describe the program adequately, failure to include multiple variables that contribute to program effectiveness, and failure to include feedback from more than one participant subset (Cornsweet, 1990; Pratt & Moreland, 1996; Pfeiffer, 1989.) It has also been noted that few studies have had adequate collaboration between the researcher and the key stakeholders of the program being evaluated (Harinck et al., 1997). This study begins to address these limitations in the application of an evaluation process that includes program description, examination of multiple program components, feedback from three participant groups, and intensive collaboration between the researcher and the key administrators at the shelter.

  In this section, the findings will be discussed, addressing both the creation of the evaluation process and the application of this process to the Alternative House shelter. This chapter begins with a summary of the findings. The summary will be followed by a discussion of the limitations of the study and implications for clinical practice. Finally, suggestions for further research will be explored.

Summary of the Findings

  The Creation and Application of the Evaluation Process

  Using the logic model as a framework for the evaluation design (Julian, Jones, & Deyo, 1995), we used the administrators' stated intentions of the services they hoped they were providing to fulfill the teens' needs. Key administrators identified the goals and objectives of the program and the components they feel best address these goals. The goal of the evaluation was not to determine any cause and effect relationships, but to determine if the aforementioned program objectives were being achieved. Working in collaboration with the key administrators of Alternative House allowed me to learn about the program as it is experienced by staff and clients while simultaneously addressing the

evaluation goals I established with the administrators. These goals were based, as Hadley and Mitchell (1995) recommend, on the program's service mission. Because one of the evaluation goals was program improvement, it was important to have the key administrators' support and involvement. Cohen and Kibel (1993) suggest that evaluation results will be meaningless if they are unable to elicit change. Change cannot occur if the administrators do not trust the evaluation results and are not willing to act on these results. Therefore, the collaboration between the administrators and myself was an integral part of achieving the evaluation goals.

The development of the questionnaire was a complex undertaking that involved several drafts and input from seven different individuals. This meticulous process allowed for a thorough description of the program components and ensured that many components would be examined for effectiveness. The only component that was missed during this process was the individual therapy the teens receive during their stay at Alternative House. One teen participant discussed in the interview how important the individual therapy had been to his/her experience of success at the shelter. Pilot tests of the questionnaires might have helped me find some of the flaws that were discovered after the evaluation was completed (i.e. awkward wording and confusing structure of questions, and the difficult structure of the questionnaires for data analysis).

The parent interviews revealed several other themes that were not addressed in the questionnaires. Both parents talked about feeling very desperate when they came to the shelter. They had both tried several other agencies without finding any help and they both reported feeling blamed for their families' problems by these other agencies. These could be interpreted as reasons for their teens' admissions into the shelter. Desperation, not finding help elsewhere, and being dissatisfied with other agencies because they felt blamed were not listed in the choices parents could check for their reason for admitting their teens into the shelter. A pilot questionnaire may not have caught these missing themes. It may have been helpful to conduct interviews before finalizing the questionnaires to try to identify additional themes.

Because evaluation researchers suggest collecting data from multiple participant groups (Pratt & Moreland, 1996), questionnaires were distributed to teen clients of

Alternative House, their parents, and the staff at the shelter. Staff questionnaires were self-administered and staff members were asked to distribute questionnaires to the teens and their parents. The support of the key administrators was crucial in encouraging staff involvement in the evaluation process. Attending staff meetings and checking in with the staff consistently was beneficial in eliciting staff involvement in the study. The distribution of the questionnaires was to take place during the teens' discharges to address evaluation researchers' suggestion that the evaluation be part of the program routine so it is not experienced as an interference by clients or staff (Leber et al., 1996). Staff reported teens were compliant in completing the questionnaires during the discharge process, but parents were not as apt to complete the questionnaire at the shelter. Most chose to take the questionnaire home, and only three mailed them back. It also seems, that because the evaluation process was new to this shelter, the staff may have experienced the administration of the questionnaires as an interference. During several months of the study, questionnaires were not consistently distributed to teens and parents. It was one more task on a list that was already quite long. It may be that staff need to be trained to continually collect evaluation data so that is a typical part of the discharge procedure, rather than an added task for a limited time period. Parents may also be more likely to participate if the evaluation were framed as a typical part of the discharge.

Program responsiveness was strongly related to the level of collaboration on the evaluation. Key administrators demonstrated a vested interest in the study and were available throughout the process for additional ideas and support. The study procedures had to accommodate the requests of the administrators. They had to feel comfortable with the data collection methods in order for the study to continue, and so they were an integral part of the creation of new procedures when the first approach was not eliciting enough data.

Data analysis was facilitated by cross-coding with my research advisor. The feedback from another researcher added a different perspective making it possible to more thoroughly analyze data collected.

The Alternative House Evaluation Results

The goals of the evaluation were to determine if the program and its activities are addressing the needs of the clients who use the shelter and to use the client and staff feedback for program improvement. Most clients found the Alternative House shelter to be a helpful resource for them during times of family stress and crisis. Teens commonly identified talking to others about their problems, the people they met at Alternative House, and the respite from their family as the most helpful aspects of the shelter program. Most parents identified the respite from their teen as the most helpful aspect of the shelter. Staff members most commonly identified the respite experience and the peer connection teens experienced as the most helpful aspects of the shelter for clients.

The respite aspect of the shelter was a theme that emerged in many parts of the questionnaires and interviews. Teens and parents alike reported they liked the break from each other because it gave them time to cool down and think about the situation from a different perspective. They reported using the time apart to think of new solutions to their problems and to reevaluate their behaviors. One parent stated, "These two weeks away from [my teen] has been a great slap in the face. I sat the other kids down and I said in no uncertain terms, 'If you can't follow the rules, you're out.' This has been a real clarifying time. I've come to the point where I can't make exceptions anymore." This kind of bottom line was new for this parent, and she attributed her change both to the respite she got from her teen and to the family counseling sessions she participated in at the shelter. Interestingly, although the program is titled a "runaway shelter," it seems more to serve a population of families that agree to take a break from each other. The respite appears to allow clients, teens and parents alike, the opportunity to step away from the constant conflict and crisis they typically experience at home, and think about their situation in a new, and often more productive, way.

The peer connection the teens experienced at the shelter was a theme that surfaced many times during different parts of the questionnaires and interviews. This theme illustrates Buysse's (1997) theory that teens tend to develop their own set of morals and values from a larger network of peers and non-familial adults than they did during their younger years. Both teens and staff responded the peer connection was a source of support, education, and healing for the teens. Most notably, the peer connection offered

the teens a sense of perspective on their problems, a break in the isolation many were feeling, and a means to learn coping skills other teens had found effective in similar circumstances. One teen who completed a questionnaire requested "a bigger house to fit more residents." It seems that some teens may benefit from having more teens in the house with which to interact.

All of the teens and staff identified the shelter as a "teen-friendly" resource. Teens typically cited the staff and the peer connection they experienced at the shelter as teen-friendly aspects of the shelter. Staff commonly noted the earned free-time as a teen-friendly component. All of the parents and staff identified the shelter as a parent-friendly resource. Parents commonly identified communicative staff as a parent-friendly part of the program. The staff identified the responsibilities the teens had to agree to and the family counseling as parent-friendly components of the shelter.

Teen interns and volunteers were also identified by staff and teens as a helpful part of the program. Teens generally reported they were easy to talk to and the age commonality made them feel more comfortable. Staff reported they were an integral part of the day-to-day running of the shelter.

The responses for the least helpful aspects of the shelter were less congruent among participant groups. Teens most commonly identified specific rules as least helpful. Interestingly, although teens identified rules as unhelpful, several later communicated that they understood why certain rules were important. The "no touching rule" received a lot of attention from teens. They complained about the rule, but several stated they respected the rule and understood some people can misinterpret intentions from touch and become hurt or violent in reaction to touch. This implies that although teens don't like some rules, they may learn from them and therefore, some rules may actually be later interpreted by the teens as quite helpful. This comprehension by the teens about the rules speaks to the competency of the shelter staff who are working with the teens. Not only are they enforcing the rules, they are helping teens to understand why the rules are important in a way that teens can grasp. From a clinical perspective, it is obvious the structure and rules of the program provide the teens with the limits they need to feel comfortable and safe. Most teens will complain about any rule they are given to

follow. Surprisingly, several teens noted the structure and limits of the shelter, including the clear schedule of activities, was very helpful for them. It seems some of the teens who access the shelter are able to transcend their stereotypical role of rebellious teen and embrace the comfort of clearly defined limits.

Parents commonly cited either that there was not anything least helpful about the program, or that they found the program structure to be too liberal with the teens' free time. Two staff answered that the program structure was probably the least helpful aspect, one citing the short two-week program specifically. The theme of lengthening the program surfaced in both the teen and parent interviews as well. One parent requested that the program be lengthened to a month stay. She stated, "Two weeks doesn't seem long enough. One month would be nice, but two weeks…" Another parent expressed her concern that her teen's changes wouldn't have had time to solidify in the two-week period, saying, "It's only been two weeks, what do you expect?" This discussion of future doubt and concern related to the short-term stay at the shelter lead to a theme of an after-care program.

In both the teen and parent interviews, after-care groups and a continued connection to the shelter were suggested. In the interviews, as well as in the questionnaires from all three participant groups, there was a general concern that parents were not involved enough in the shelter program. Teens expressed concern that their parents hadn't made any changes and that they would return to the same conflictual home environment. When asked on the questionnaire if the clients had learned any skills at the shelter, most teens responded that they had learned at least a couple of the skills. Most staff agreed that teens learned skills such as anger management and interpersonal relationship skills. Most parents responded that they had not learned any of these skills at the shelter. One parent stated during the interview, "No, this time was mostly for [the teen]."

It seems that parent groups conducted during the teens' stay at the shelter would help the parents feel more involved in the process and would be a place for parents to feel supported while they learn new skills to help them parent their teens. Parents may also

benefit from the peer connection they would experience during the meeting. One parent explained in the interview,

> I think it would be just a slap in the face for some of the parents
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> to learn that their situation isn't as horrendous as they think. Maybe there's
>
> a lot worse going on. I think what's going on in my house is the worst.
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> But there's probably a heck of a lot worse, but I wouldn't know it. We could
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> kinda network each other and support each other in a positive atmosphere.

This parent speculated about benefits to interacting with her peers in a group setting, which were similar to those noted by teens. Gaining perspective, learning new skills from people who have experienced similar problems and feeling supported by people who understand what you have been through would all be potential gains to parents who participate in a group run through the shelter.

Parents also requested more counseling sessions in both the questionnaire responses and during the interviews. Beyond an increase in the number of sessions, both parent interviewees requested that Alternative House set up a method where families could use the therapist at the shelter as an out-patient therapist after their teens' discharges from the shelter. Although not all clients were satisfied with the family therapy they received through the shelter, it appears that many who did would like to expand on that experience, during and after the teens' two-week stay.

Finally, the themes of desperation, lack of help, and feelings of blame were addressed by the parent interviewees. One parent found her first contact with the shelter to be unpleasant. She stated she felt staff was cold on the phone and it triggered her defensives because she feared the staff at the shelter were going to treat her in a blaming or rejecting manner. She recommended staff treat all intake calls in a gentle and kind manner. It seems some parents may be calling for an intake after having been blamed and turned away by many other agencies. They may be waiting for another attack and any short tone of voice may be too much for them to hear. The contact staff has with a parent or a teen when they call to ask about admission is the first impression people have of the shelter. It seems imperative staff always remain cognizant of the state of mind people are in when they call for a placement at the shelter.

Overall, all participants who completed questionnaires, except for one teen who left the question blank, reported that they would recommend the program to others. Although there were several suggestions for improvements to the shelter, it seems most people who use the shelter think it is a helpful resource for teens and their families. As one parent interviewee stated, "This place has been very useful. Just keep doing what you're doing!"

Limitations

The results and conclusions from this study begin to address the suggestions researchers have for an effective evaluation process for a teen shelter. However, several limitations should be considered.

The questionnaire format may have limited the participants' responses and kept valuable information from surfacing. As can be seen in the interview results, many themes emerged from a loosely based discussion format that did not emerge in the questionnaire results.

The limited number of participants may be a limitation to the study. It would not be appropriate to generalize the findings of this study to the entire population of Alternative House clients or to any other teen shelter clients. The parents' responses in particular may be misrepresentative of the typical parents' experience of the shelter because those who returned the questionnaires may have had more intensely positive or negative experiences of the program than those parents who chose not to complete the questionnaire. Teens and staff were more likely to complete the questionnaires when asked, so the "return rates" for these two groups, based on the percentage of participants who were asked to complete questionnaires were higher than that of the parent group.

Because I coded and interpreted questionnaire and interview answers myself, researcher bias may exist. Bias may have been introduced in the categories chosen for coding, interpreting and categorizing participant responses, definition of categories, and the selection of themes. Cross-coding sessions with my advisor were used to help reduce any researcher bias.

There will always be limitations to any study. Evaluation researchers attempt to address the many goals of an evaluation without compromising the quality or integrity of the study. It is a difficult job at best, and nearly impossible when trying to address all of the concerns and suggestions of the researchers in the field of evaluation.

Clinical Implications

Despite the limitations of the study, there are several potential implications for the clinical application of the results of this study, including both the lessons learned creating the evaluation process and in applying the process to the Alternative House teen shelter. Primarily, the results of this study can serve as a blue-print for other agencies when creating an evaluation process. It is clear that one needs to first collaborate with the key administrators and stakeholders of the agency before proposing an evaluation process. Evaluators need to develop an evaluation process that is both congruent with the program's mission and goals, and supported by the program's administrators. Methods for data collection need to be unintrusive and a constant activity in order for staff to consistently collect data from participants.

The feedback that was received from the evaluation was useful and informative for program improvement. We learned what clients and staff find helpful and not helpful about the shelter and we learned what suggestions they have for improvement. Learning about the clients' experiences and perceptions of the program can help any agency improve the services they offer to teens and their families.

One theme that was prominent in the participant responses was *Talking*. People felt better just being able to talk out their problems with people who genuinely cared. In the field of therapeutic services it is easy to become focused on complex interventions and grand interpretations. One benefit of this study is that the clients reinforced the notion of the healing power of simply being available to listen. Being heard is sometimes the most helpful experience for clients.

Further Research

This study begins to address the limitations described by researchers in the process of evaluating agencies that serve at-risk teens and their families. Evaluation of these types of programs needs to be a continual and consistent process. It is nearly

impossible to compare program effectiveness when evaluation of these programs in nearly non-existent.

Future research in the field of evaluation of programs that serve at-risk teens and their families would benefit from more in-depth, qualitative interviews to learn about the clients' experiences in these programs. A follow-up interview some time after discharge would help us learn if families are able to continue using the skills they reported learning at the shelter. A follow-up after the evaluation to determine if participation in such an interview changes teen or parent post-stay behavior would be an informative addition to an evaluation. Also, a follow-up with the program to learn if any of the recommended changes had been made would be a valuable addition to any evaluation. Since program improvement is a goal of most evaluations, learning how the program has improved would benefit both administrators and future clients.