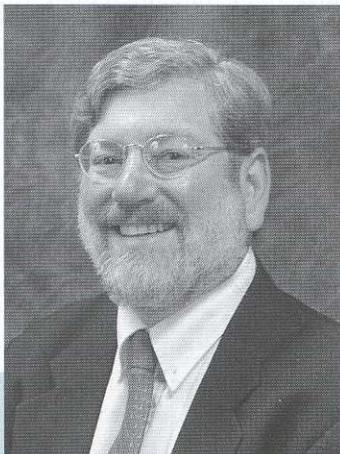


A Spirit of Collab

A Conversation with Marc Cherna

In the seven years since its creation, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has benefited enormously from the spirit of collaboration and the generosity of Allegheny County's business, educational, and philanthropic communities as well as its cultural organizations, grassroots organizations, and individuals. Millions of dollars in donations and in-kind services have flowed from the community



through public/private partnerships, and hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals have partnered with the department to help it define and realize its mission in ways that were well beyond the resources of traditional funding streams.

To learn how the agency succeeded in its efforts, *Policy & Practice* talked with Marc Cherna, director of the Allegheny County Department of Human

Services. Cherna was appointed department director in 1997. As director, he oversees the department's operations that bring under one umbrella, with a shared vision and goals, five programmatic offices: Children, Youth and Families; Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities; Community Services; Behavioral Health; and the Area Agency on Aging.

Cherna has extensive experience in human services, including serving four years as director of planning, allocations, and agency relations for the United Way of Union County (New Jersey), and almost 14 years as assistant director and deputy commissioner in the New Jersey Department of Human Services.

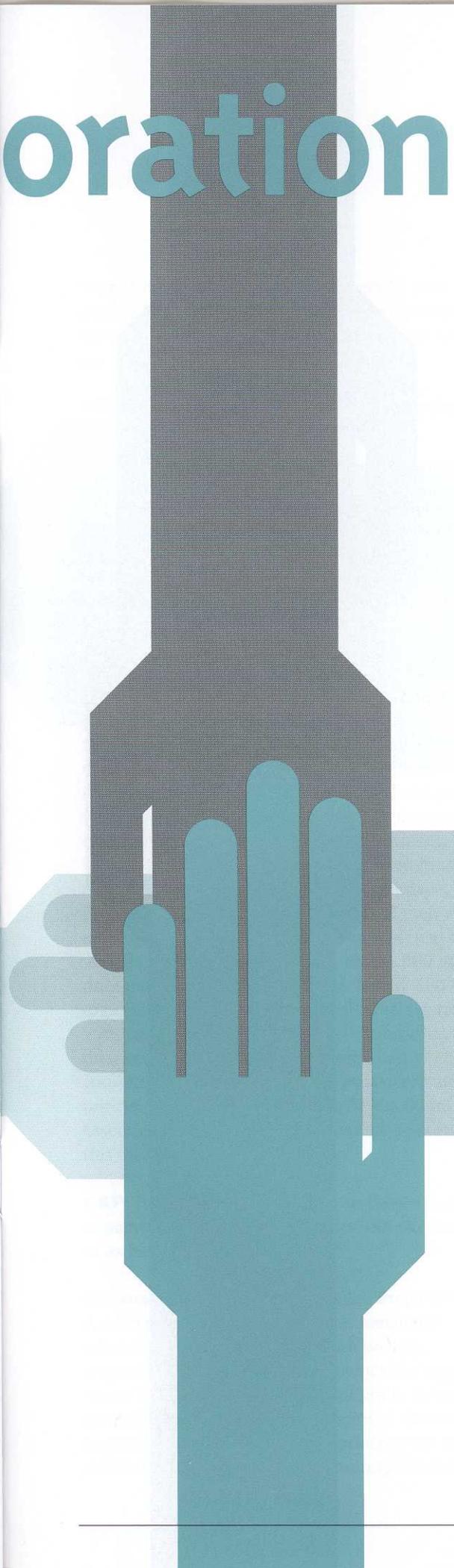
P&P: What was the agency's impetus for seeking assistance from such a wide variety of sources?

Cherna: About six months after I was brought in to head the Allegheny County child welfare agency, the county commissioners merged formerly discrete departments into one, what is now the Department of Human Services. In January 1997, I was appointed director of the new human services entity. We were faced with the task of taking the different rules, regulations, and cultures of separate departments, with 80 different funding sources, and bringing them together under one umbrella to improve services to people in need. We knew this would be a momentous undertaking. We also knew that government could not operate in a vacuum outside the community it serves. Social issues are the responsibility of everyone. For instance, we all need to take ownership over keeping children and seniors safe from abuse and exploitation. We knew we would need assistance from the community to ensure this new department offered the very best human services to its residents.

P&P: And the assistance came?

Cherna: We were overwhelmed by the level of support and encouragement from the community. After surveying our stakeholders about what they wanted our department to accomplish, we developed a blueprint to redesign human services. We then set about the process of restructuring with the assistance of foundations, businesses, universities, religious institutions, the Chamber of Commerce, an oversight committee of community leaders, and statutory advisory boards. The blueprint led to a new vision for human services, one that stressed the importance of holistic, culturally competent, and strengths-based partnerships across all direct service areas. The vision and the partnerships, both then and now, have allowed us to refine and extend our capacity to serve people in important and enriching ways that could not have happened with public dollars alone.

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P&P: How have universities played a part in the redesign of human services in Allegheny County?

Cherna: Graduate students from Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz School have done five synthesis projects for us, including researching MIS (Management Information System) integration efforts for human services; developing, implementing, and automating bulletin boards for placements; and benchmarking independent living programs. The University of Pittsburgh's Katz School of Business helped design a contract monitoring system. The University of Pittsburgh's School of Social Work did a workload study, and Duquesne University's Occupational Therapy Program does work in our county jail.

P&P: How have the foundations supported your human service efforts?

Cherna: The foundation community stepped in to help deal with all these problems. Fifteen foundations came together to establish the Human Services Integration Fund (HSIF) and, over the last seven years, have invested more than \$5 million to address many system-wide issues, projects that could not have been funded through categorical government funding streams. Some examples are a data warehouse, research and design for a financial software package, a personnel audit, a child welfare workload study, an aging system analysis and redesign, and a customer satisfaction study. Without HSIF we wouldn't be able to work toward improving the awareness of disabilities issues. The money wouldn't be there to form coalitions, to identify additional funding, or to run the toll-free hotline for anyone—our staff, employees in other county departments, or anyone living in Allegheny County—with questions related to disabilities. And the work the Children's Cabinet does would not have been possible without the foundation money given to us through HSIF.

P&P: What does the Children's Cabinet do in Allegheny County?

Cherna: The Children's Cabinet is a collaborative partnership of child-serving agencies and individuals from government, education, the courts,

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medicine, public health, behavioral health, developmental disabilities, and substance abuse treatment fields. It has 38 members who serve on nine committees. They identify barriers and address ways to eliminate these barriers in providing services to children, adolescents, and their families who are getting care. Their goal is to develop a county-wide system of care for children and adolescents with social, emotional, and behavioral health needs, one that is accessible and individualized to their needs.

P&P: Is it correct to assume that offering a full continuum of services to individuals and families seems to be a priority for your agency?

Cherna: Most definitely. Unfortunately, though, this is rarely a priority in public funding. That's why our public/private partnerships with local foundations, communities, and institutions are so important. Not only can we address crises, we can intervene early with prevention initiatives that avoid or forestall more serious problems. With these partnerships, we can offer initiatives like the family support centers or the Beverly Jewel Wall Lovelace Fund for Children's Programs, which provides a safe, stimulating community-driven and community-designed after-school and summer programs for about 1,000 children in 19 public housing communities.

P&P: In what other ways have public/private partnerships helped the community?

Cherna: A local health insurance provider covers the cost of 3,500 immunizations at community centers and another 1,600 for homebound seniors. They also underwrite the printing costs for *A Parent's Handbook* and gave us a \$15,000 grant to purchase gift certificates or small gifts that recognize individual consumers' achievements or reward volunteer service to the agency. We also partner with the StateWide Adoption Network, Juvenile Court, and the law firm Reed Smith, where attorneys finalize the adoption of kids in our child welfare system free of charge. More than 700 of our adoptions have been handled by this firm. After September 11, 2001, when the airline industry faced major layoffs,



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we partnered with other public agencies and private businesses to establish a one-stop shop for job seekers, employers, and commuters in the communities surrounding the airport.

P&P: Are all of your public/private partnerships on such a large scale?

Cherna: Not at all. We strive to develop partnerships that make sense, whether they are large or small. They are all so important in helping us serve our consumers. Our Office of Community Relations coordinates partnerships with cultural institutions, businesses, and individuals. Throughout each year, we get tickets and gift certificates from local restaurants, theaters, sports teams, and hotels, which we use as door prizes at our outreach events. We also have two larger projects that give our consumers opportunities that government cannot pay for. The Allegheny County Music Festival, for one, is a popular public event that also raises funds to fulfill unique wishes of children served by all of our program offices. This could mean musical instruments or lessons, art supplies or lessons, sports equipment, or something else. The other is the Holiday Project, for which local businesses and their employees, as well as schools, churches, and individuals, purchase gifts for more than 6,000 children in our child welfare system. Nearly 100 organizations, churches, and individuals partner with us, including six large corporations that conduct company-wide drives for gifts. Last year, this combination of large and small public/private partnerships represented nearly \$700,000 in essential tangible aid and enrichment opportunities for our consumers.

P&P: It sounds like much time and effort is spent expanding the existing programs. Are any new ones being developed?

Cherna: We have a program called Project Prom, now in its second year, that gives teenagers whose families are wrestling with poverty, impending homelessness, or violence the opportunity to attend their high school prom. Before, going to the prom was, to them, just a dream because of the cost of an appropriate gown and accessories. Our Office of Community Relations

partnered with some 20 businesses, schools and colleges, social service agencies, and many individuals so they can actually live that dream. Last year, we collected more than 450 new and gently used evening dresses and more than 300 shoes and other accessories and stored them at one of our provider sites where the high school juniors and seniors who were referred to the Office of Community Relations by our caseworkers and counselors, went to shop for their outfits. This has really been a successful program.

P&P: You mentioned giving your consumers an opportunity to participate in cultural activities. How is this done?

Cherna: We partner with a group called Tickets for Kids that, each year, gives several thousand children involved with us a chance to participate in cultural activities, whether it is going to a play or a musical performance at the theater, or going to one of our museums, or even attending a sporting event. We also have an annual art exhibit for special needs artists that allows hundreds of our consumers to create artwork, have it shown in our own gallery, and offer it for sale to the public.

P&P: Your partnerships with the community seem far-reaching, and the benefits are obvious for the people you serve. What are some of the benefits for the Department of Human Services?

Cherna: These partnerships represent just a sample of the many contributions from the business, education, cultural, and philanthropic communities and from grassroots groups and individuals. They all add immeasurably to the impact of the direct services we provide, and they help us leverage additional funds by demonstrating that Allegheny County residents care deeply about each other and are willing to work together to improve the quality of life for all of us. We are so grateful for community leaders who always share their time and talent with us, for the institutions and corporations that support innovative programs, and for the individuals who step forward to help. ☐