

Turning the Curve on Positive Discharges from Spectrum Youth and Family Services Homeless Shelter

Section I. In the Beginning: Spectrum Youth and Family Services is a community-based youth service agency with community outreach, shelter, transitional living, educational and substance abuse treatment programs serving approximately 2600 youths per year. The youth homeless shelter serves as an entry point for short term, temporary supported housing, where the youth identifies how they got to be homeless and develops a plan for employment, permanent housing and independence. A positive discharge from the shelter includes going to Spectrum's Single Room Occupancy (SRO, providing up to 18 months supported housing and case management), Own apartment, Drug treatment, College, Job Corps, Family, or other improved living conditions.

Performance data: At the beginning of 2007 Spectrum's use of data to improve performance, like many small not-for-profit organizations, was limited. They already had two unsuccessful investments in data software. These investments had not been made in concert with developing and using performance measures and had not met program needs. Data was not analyzed to improve performance. Each program, however, had identified at least one "outcome", and the shelter program had discharge data from 2005 showing that the % of youth with positive discharges had steadily gone down from a high of 72% to a low of 42%.

Section II. What happened? Spectrum's leadership at the end of 2006 had decided that they needed to employ a structured approach to identifying their "outcomes". After a happenstance meeting at a conference between Spectrum's Executive Director, Mark Redmond, and Trine Bech, a Results Accountability (RBA) Consultant, Spectrum began an RBA journey starting with the shelter program. Over a period of several months, a small group, consisting of many of the Spectrum leadership staff and residential program managers, developed performance measures by asking the three performance measures questions 1. *How*

much do we do? 2. How well do we do it? 3. Is anyone better off? These discussions helped the group clarify the purpose of the shelter, the program approach and the underpinning values of the shelter within Spectrum. The result of this at times enlightening and tense introspection created a good blend of **How well do we do it?** And **Is anyone better off?** measures. The % of Positive Discharges from the shelter (to SRO, Own apartment, Drug treatment, College, Job Corps, Family, Other) was a headline measure with baseline data and the curve they chose to turn first.

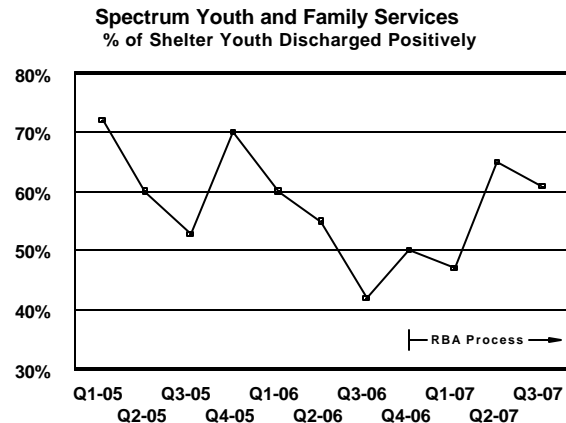
Section III. What happened? How did things get better? At the end of June, a half day "turn the curve" session was held on this measure with shelter youth and Spectrum staff both from the shelter and from other programs to which the shelter residents would feed including the drop-in-program (day program for homeless youth) and the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) program. At first the participants were afraid to speak up in fear of stepping on someone's toes. After the facilitator emphasized the permission for honest, even blunt, conversation, the shelter youth and one front-line-staff who had been a shelter resident herself, gave a brutally critical observation. This allowed all participants to begin to analyze the story behind the curve. The conversation included: that the shelter had become rule-driven without the necessary relationships between youth and staff; the front-line staff lacked the necessary skills and understanding of their role; rules were applied inconsistently; and when the youth were ready to leave, there was a long waiting list to get to the SRO. To turn the curve on the % of shelter youth who were discharged positively from the shelter, the group devised the following action plan.

1. Work with youth for feedback, to restructure rules and how applied/used to create community.
2. Train, supervise residential staff in team building
3. Create another long term transitional living program
4. Add activities, mentors, volunteers to shelter

Before this meeting the Director of residential programs was anxious about how the staff would respond and rated herself high on the “anxiety meter”. After the meeting the residential program Director plopped down with a big smile and shared that her anxiety meter was now at 0. She explained that as a program leader the most challenging part of her work is how to invite staff into a process that elicits concrete steps toward improving service delivery. She said: “The most powerful part of the first turn the curve experience was the awareness created for all of us in the room that day. The correlation between the discharge data and the story that began to unfold regarding the curve made perfect sense. RBA removes the blame from anyone individual within the program and creates a community sense of ownership around the specific measure of positive discharge.”

In July the shelter, outreach and SRO staff began working together to devise a plan for team building, clarify the definition of positive discharges, work with shelter youth to restructure the rules, and create a tool for youth feedback. Several months earlier the shelter leader had begun addressing some long-standing personnel issues. Disgruntled front-line staff and a “wrong-fit” supervisor left the program, making room for energized, skilled new staff. A new supervisor began working with the residential team in September. Staffing changes were seen by the shelter leader as one of many critical first steps. A supervisor with the skills to support staff in their role and find ways to approach the work to positively impact the youth’s better-off outcome was seen as critical. Once the team acquired new residential staff committed to relationship building and they gained improved ability to negotiate some of the power struggles that arise, the ability to hold onto youth in the shelter improved. Additionally, having staff work together to examine the rules and the rationales behind the rules supported some insight to better teach youth about how to develop the necessary skills and make changes while still in the program. Staff has more permission to be flexible and support youth in creative ways to reach success based on their program goals.

At the beginning of October, when the third quarter data was run, the heartening news was that the curve had taken a sharply upward trend since the RBA process was started. This showed that the collection of actions taken so far had improved positive discharges for the shelter youth.



This good news has continued to energize the shelter staff in their commitment to sustain the positive discharges in the shelter and to keep the curve turning. They will continue to explore increasing activities for the youth both onsite and out in the community. They will be organizing a retreat to discuss in greater depth the type of residential culture they want to continue to strengthen as a team. Additionally they want to explore using team meetings for all shelter youth to better support them in their day to day achievements to move into safe and more permanent housing. They are also adjusting their staff meeting format to focus on the programmatic aspects to stay on track with positive discharges. They will continue to support training and guidance to all staff in an effort to strengthen and maintain a consistent approach to many of the situations that staff has to deal with on a daily basis.

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