

# Placer County Commission for Children and Families "Request for Results" Case Study in Alternative to "Request for Proposal"

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*"Language and metaphor shape our thoughts."*

Don Ferretti

## **Purpose**

Placer County Commission for Children and Families developed a process to solicit collaborative community-based proposals for strategies aimed at improving specific child, family and community outcomes called "Request for Results." The purpose of this paper is to document that process.

## **Proposition 10 Context**

California voters approved a ballot initiative to tax tobacco products in order to generate funds for program for young children and their families. The initiative formed a state commission and 58 county level commissions. The language of the law required the grantees to track outcomes. The state commission developed guidelines that identified four strategic results that each local commission was to impact: strong families; healthy children; school readiness; and improved integrated service systems. Each local commission developed its own strategic plan; its own process to solicit proposals; its own methodology to prioritize and fund projects; and its own system to evaluate impact.

## **Placer County Context**

It is no surprise that the request for results process was created in Placer County, a mid-sized California county (population 2 million) blessed with a tradition of both private/public collaboration and innovative administrative practices. These include: an integrated human services agency; top management "barrier busting" culture with regular meetings; a single outcome based assessment tool used with all human services clients; a long standing "Greater Collaborative" that coordinates and plans with service collaborative; high usage of facilitated community engagement processes; and as an AB1741 county, a consolidated claim form with State Health and Human Services.

## Placer County Children and Family Commission Context

*In developing the Children and Families Commission's strategic plan the message came across loud and clear that, in order for Placer County to positively impact children 0-5 and their families, we could not just do business as usual. We have set aside the competitive grant writing process that pits one vulnerable population against another. What we want are measurable results that improve the lives of our children and families. We ask our proposing partners<sup>1</sup> to think through the important results that can be achieved with Prop. 10 funding, and work with us to measure those results.*

--Placer County Children and Families Commission Request for Results

### Theoretical Basis

"Request for Results" has a significant theoretical basis and leadership story.

The Commission appointed an experienced county facilitator, Don Ferretti, as Coordinator and a 9-member team to design the strategic planning process. The process included: review of 5 existing needs assessments; 12 community "learning conversations" in both English and Spanish; a strategic planning event attended by 96 stakeholders; and two community response meetings to comment on the draft plan.

Don Ferretti's leadership is grounded in organizational theory and experience. He points out that he is not an executive director, but rather a coordinator or facilitator of a process designed to engage all those in Placer County wanting to work toward better results for children and their families. Don deliberately crafted a non-hierarchical networked organization, drawing on models from Dee Hock, former CEO of VISA; Harrison Owen and others. David Thornburg describes the approach.

*"The industrial era, characterized by a linear model of time, was also dominated by metaphors based on physics. We talked about businesses that ran like a well-oiled machine, of processes that ran like clockwork, etc. Coupled with these metaphors was a reductionist approach to thinking that implied human control over all processes. Organizations were built around the concept of command and control, with hierarchical structures and a clear chain of command. Because of the perceived need for central control of an organization, many companies built up a set of rules that were propagated to all members of the group. These complex rules dictated behavior. They also had another consequence: **Complex rules often resulted in simple (and) simplistic behaviors**"*

*"Structures based on physical metaphors resulted in management systems in which information flowed from level to level, often at a snails pace. While the stability and strength implied by these structures may have served industries in a time of less rapid change, they do not work so well in the fast-moving non-linear world of today. The idea that stable organizations were the result of a clear set of*

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<sup>1</sup> The funded collaborations are called "Partners" not "Grantees" and rather than "grants" the commission refers to the community's "investments toward results".

*commands from a central source was an artifact of this mechanical view of the world.*

*And yet, all around us, the world was teeming with self-organizing structures that had no clear leader - bird flocks, ant colonies, and other complex biological systems common to nature. One of the positive consequences of self-organizing natural systems is their incredible tolerance for disruption. Anyone who has tried to entice ants to locate somewhere outside of their kitchen knows, first hand, how resilient these biological systems can be. The new sciences of chaos and complexity theory emerged to explain self-organizing systems, and a new rule emerged; **simple rules could lead to incredibly complex behavior**. Add to this the incredible resilience of biological systems, and the power of this metaphor for the creation of 21st century businesses and organizations of all kinds is tremendous.<sup>2</sup>*

In order to achieve results in Placer County, no one agency could be in control. Many partners must be engaged. Given the complexity of players, Don wanted a system with simple rules. Using the strategic plan as a guide, Don saw the purpose of his coordinator role to:

1. Help partners build upon and connect to existing systems.
2. Help folks describe the results they are trying to achieve. "If you talk about what you do that's process. If you talk about what people will do after you do what you do, that's the result."
3. Provide the technical assistance folks needed to develop strong proposals.

## **How It Was Done**

The Request for Results emerged from a very participatory strategic planning process and proceeded with numerous opportunities for community partners to meet one another and refine their proposals.

### Sequence of Events

- June 14, 2000 Commission approved strategic plan pending two more community response forums. Community Response meetings requested simple and accountable grant application process
- August 10, 2000: Release of *Integrated Plan for the Strategic Deployment of Proposition 10 Resources in Placer County*
- October 12, 2000: Invitation to reply to Request for Results
- November 8 or 9 and December 15, 2001, three 5-hour applicant workshops (Tahoe and Auburn)
- January 8, 2001, first application deadline, 49 applications submitted
- January 11, 2001, 11-member Application Review Committee was chartered by the Commission
- February 2001, Review team read all applications and looked for alignment with strategic plan. Clarifying questions were posed to applicants

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<sup>2</sup> David Thornburg; *Brainstorms and Lightning Bolts: Thinking Skills for the 21st Century*

- March 29, 2001 Public application review and refine
- April 19, Commission approved 27 proposals
- May, applicants submit two page scope of work
- June, 2001, Contracts are negotiated

In the summer of 2000, as Placer reviewed and revised its "Integrated Plan for the Strategic Deployment of Proposition 10 Resources in Placer County", it continued to engage community members about how to proceed. At one community meeting, a session was hosted to address the question "How can we have useful Request for Proposal process?" Those present were clear: keep it simple, be flexible, let us e-mail it, and encourage applicants to build on what exists. The Coordinator then applied his twenty years of experience writing Requests for Proposals (RFP) to the creation of a Request for Results. After consultation with David Gray, the county evaluator and the commissioner, it was approved and released in October 2000.

A database was created of all those folks who attended any of the Prop. 10 community or commission meetings. Everyone was invited to attend an applicant workshop. The stated purposes of the workshop were for all participants to:

- "Understand the Request for Results application and have identified results/outcomes and measures for their proposed initiatives.
- Have identified potential partners and linkages to other agencies involved in related services;
- Have a rough draft or at least an outline of their application;
- Be prepared to collaborate with other partner agencies and/or consumers to achieve comprehensive child and family outcomes;
- Be prepared to offer and/or participate in comprehensive family service models that involve one coherent family plan spanning multiple provider agencies. "

The workshop agenda had three components:

- A power point presentation of Children and Family Commission plan (see <http://www.placer.ca.gov/childrenfamcomm>)
- Training in outcomes by the county evaluator, David Gray
- "Open Space" session<sup>3</sup> to answer the question: "What will we do collaboratively to improve the lives of children 0-5 and their families in Placer County?" This group process allowed those present to self organize, make connections, and form collaborations. Laptops were available for groups to document their ideas.

Applications were due January 8, 2001. The Commission appointed an 11 member Application Review Committee that included staff within the Health and Human Services agency, community members and three commissioners.

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<sup>3</sup> Placer utilized a large group process called Open Space Technology. See bibliography for more information on this technique.

The review meetings were open and announced through the media as well as mailed and phone invitations to all applicants. All in attendance were encouraged to participate. At these meeting questions were raised and either addressed by those in attendance, or referred back to applicants for clarification or refinement. About seventy percent of the original applications generated comments or requests for greater clarification.

All applicants were invited to attend another meeting on March 29<sup>th</sup> to review and refine proposals. They were told that this was all about collaboration, starting right then in that room. The intention was to create an environment to foster connections so that "No child should go without care and/or enrichment just so one applicant can get money and another not." Participants were asked "Are we creating a results oriented partnership characterized by cooperation, creativity and mutual respect?" In this context, the proposals were revised.

On April 19<sup>th</sup> the commission made decisions on the 49 proposals received. Most proposals were approved, \$5.5 million was allocated over three years, and some funds remained unspent. Twenty-seven proposals were approved and the partners are moving forward to develop their scopes of work. Applicants of fourteen separate proposals seeking to support children with special needs were asked to meet and form a coordinated proposal. Six separate applicants were encouraged to find partners and resubmit. For example, authors of a proposal on reducing exposure to second hand smoke were asked to partner with public health. Three proposals created administrative dilemmas, like how to fund faith based organizations or private businesses. These are getting committee support to resolve administrative challenges.

Prospective partners were given the message that there are no bad ideas if they help kids 0-5. If their proposal was not approved today, the commission was committed to help dedicated folks to find the needed resources. The emphasis was not on the dollars but rather on the results. In fact, when recipients were interviewed, most could describe the funded activities and tell the intended outcome but were unable to remember the dollar amount awarded.

At the time of writing this case study, the funded partners have just written their 2-3 page scope of work to answer: "What are the results you are after? What specifically are you going to do? How are you are going measure it? What will it cost?" This will lead to a result-oriented contract.

## **Further Technical Assistance**

Plans for ongoing technical assistance will continue to build on collaboration. It will include training and Learning Symposiums.

The county evaluator, David Gray, will be leading the partners in an empowerment evaluation process. Partners will be trained through data planning workshops to address:

- What are common community-wide data elements

- How to use the Placer County SMART outcome screen<sup>4</sup>
- Plan 6-month data collection trial and 3 month check-in meetings. Don Ferretti explains, "The purpose here is not a lot of time scrutinizing what is collected: the expectation is that it will be modified. Rather, it will be helping them build their own 'dashboard' to show how well they are doing reaching desired results."

Learning Symposiums are a peer-to-peer reflective process that has been piloted in four Placer County school districts over the last 5 years. The process includes a facilitated technique developed by the Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs called the focused conversation. Participants explore "What are these data telling us about what we need to do or be to improve outcomes?"

Don explains: "Without the feedback loop where you can actually learn, its like putting paper over your dashboard." Don acknowledges that processing feedback takes time and critical thinking skills. The process assumes and builds upon the wisdom and assets of individuals in a group. It is not without risk. "The facilitator must create a context that fosters safety in telling the truth in the data, otherwise the whole process crumbles. We must create nutrient environments for people to tell truth as best they know it without fear of de-funding. We need to examine assumptions; bring experiences out into the open without moralization. This is not about winning conversations, but laying ideas side-by-side for a while and seeing what we can learn."

## **How Was This Process For The Funded Partners?**

To answer this question the author interviewed six of the funded partners. Most of those interviewed had extensive experience writing grant proposals for private and public funds. Many had been involved in other collaborative efforts within the county.

### How was this different?

When asked how the Placer Request for Results was different from other grant seeking process their answers included:

*I thought the applicant meeting was going to be about learning how to write a grant proposal. Instead I found a consensus and cooperative model that was easy to enter into... it was just fun! They had us come up to a wall and very briefly state what we wanted to do. I thought "Oh gosh, I'm interested in that.. I want to hear what they have to say. I think my group can work with this idea.."---Leah Jacobs*

*The emphasis was on collaboration. ---Phebe Bell*

*We identified our partners at the community forums. ---Jackie Clarke*

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<sup>4</sup> Placer county has developed a child and adult outcome tool that is used by all county funded child and family providers. See SMART form in appendix.

*The application required a lot more thinking time and a lot less writing time. We had to think about what difference we would make in our community ---Pamela Williams.*

*The community process served to point out ways that county assessment forms could be improved. Our involvement caused us to note that the existing SMART form did not include nutrition data. ---Bev Anderson*

*This process was dramatically different from day one. It was not competitive. There was no scoring. All those interested came. They wanted us to work together. The Commission put resources into developing successful proposals. The review process was very open. You could go to any review meetings and clarify. You could say "oh, we do need to think about that" and go back to your partners. We redid our whole proposal. ---Sharon Junge*

### What Are the Benefits?

*Open Space offered a creative way to surface real questions involving many people. Our group attracted statistical folks, nutritionists, agencies... 14 people from 10 agencies...No one person could have thought of pulling this group together for a successful collaboration. --- Bev Anderson*

*You really, really meet community needs. There is no duplication of services. --- Sharon Junge*

*It was a community building process. The day they were reviewing the proposals, a lot of us did not know one another. After attending a few reviews, the group built an esprit de corps. When the commission made its decision, the audience applauded each approval. There was tremendous buy-in. We all want it to succeed. ---Sharon Junge*

*We learned a collaborative process that we are applying in our work in Nevada county. ---George Le Bard*

*What came out of it was a deep fostering of good will. It was miraculous.---Leah Jacobs*

### What are the Challenges?

*It is hard work separating what we think of as outcomes: process milestones from measurable child and family change.*

*With multiple partners, we must work for shared clarity. This requires more administrators to contribute in-kind hours.*

*Evolutionary process frustrating for some. There was so much review, revision, resubmission, rewriting for scope of work.*

*Collaborations across organizational cultures challenge operational norms. We are trying to figure out how we can purchase modular unit and place it on church grounds with a non-profit fiscal agent.*

*Not all the partners in a proposal understood importance of attending review committee meetings. This required more custom follow-up with the coordinator.*

*Still hard to involve those on the Lake in review process. Geography is a challenge.*

## **Other Benefits**

The Proposition 10 contribution to the administration of this first year and a half process to develop the plan; and solicit, review, approve grants has totaled \$52,900. This is only partly due to the informal support from a number of agencies, most notably within the county Health and Human Services Agency (within which the Coordinator was contracted.) The self-organizing process simply required less staff management.

In human terms, the process strengthened emotional and social capital. There was no pitting folks or agencies against one another.



## Source Interviews

*The author would like to thank each of the following dedicated community servants who patiently explained what this process was like for them.*

Bev Anderson, Facilitator, Placer Caring Connection  
Phebe Bell, Director, Children's Collaborative of Tahoe-Truckee  
Jackie Clarke, Program Director, Advocacy Resources and Choices (ARC)  
Don Ferretti, Coordinator, Placer County Children and Families Commission  
Leah Jacobs, Administrative Coordinator, Live Oak Waldorf School  
George Le Bard, Executive Director, Project Mana  
Pamela Williams, Executive Director, Children's Museum of Truckee

## Appendix

1. Placer County Children and Families Commission Request for Results, October 12, 2000.
2. Invitation to Partner with the Placer County Children.
3. SMART screen.
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*Physical metaphors lead to complex rules that result in simple and simplistic behavior.  
Biological metaphors lead to simple rules that result in complex behavior.*