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FROM CRISIS TO CLARITY: Unity Care's PropelNext Journey



The past year has fundamentally tested the adaptability of systems and people alike. It is increasingly clear that the most successful organizations are those that are able to integrate external perspectives and collaborative efforts that exist beyond their immediate community. When nonprofits can step back, reflect, lean in, and learn, they ultimately thrive. A new case study from Engage R+D, *Leaning into Learning in Times of Crisis*, documents the journey of Unity Care, a grantee of PropelNext that embraced PropelNext's insights to realign with its intended mission, improve its services, and create lasting impact.

Background on Unity Care

For over two decades, Unity Care has provided families and transition-age foster youth of color in Northern California with safe, stable, affordable housing, and supportive services. In 2019, Unity Care was at the helm of a state-funded pilot program for high-need foster youth. However, as one of the first providers to serve this new influx of foster youth, Unity Care underestimated the challenges and complexity of this new state program and its impact on service delivery. The organization was soon short on staffing, resources, and capacity, making it difficult to sustain its efforts.

One year into the program, the state of California chose not to renew Unity Care's provisional license that would have allowed the agency to continue spearheading the program. This initiated some critical decisions over the next year resulting in a

spinoff of Unity Care's community services reducing its annual operating budget of \$20 million to \$5 million, and from a staff of 200 to 50 full-time employees. And with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and mass protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, Unity Care found itself at a tipping point, challenging its leaders to reflect on the future of the organization.

“There was a lot going on at the time,” André Chapman, founder and CEO of Unity Care, recalled. “It’s both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is we’d never move toward our number one priority if we hadn’t been through this chaos.”

Influence of PropelNext

Enter PropelNext, a three-year intensive capacity-building program to help promising nonprofits transform into high-performing data-driven organizations. PropelNext believes that investing deeply and directly into helping youth-serving organizations apply robust performance measures can help each set strategic priorities informed by



data and improved decision-making, measure and track performance and impact, and use evidence to increase support for its work.

Unity Care had become part of PropelNext's third cohort in 2019 and was given access to investment and services. Unity Care leveraged these resources to reimagine particular areas of its infrastructure by:

- Embracing executive-level coaching and group learning sessions provided by PropelNext to acknowledge mistakes made, create measures of accountability, and renew trust among stakeholders;
- Consulting PropelNext's "Theory of Change" framework to clarify the organization's central purpose and core strengths, which led to doubling down on its new housing initiative, "A Place to Call Home;"
- Engaging staff with PropelNext's "Learning Culture" survey, to assess the organizational climate among the staff, while simultaneously creating open and brave spaces that invite honest communication in the organization at large;
- Conducting an onsite financial review via PropelNext, to help identify areas to cut unnecessary spending, and other areas to invest in new talent and partnerships;
- Integrating user-friendly reports and data-dashboards, created by PropelNext, to help mitigate organization-wide data paralysis, generate fruitful discussions among staff at all levels, and drive informed decision-making.

The Road Ahead

With the support of PropelNext, Unity Care has introspectively and intentionally transformed the inner workings of their organization and improved its active support of foster care youth. Not only is Unity Care able to play a critical role in providing housing and services, but with a refreshed sense

“The people we worked with at PropelNext gave very, very clear direction and they held the organization accountable to it,” said a Unity Care board member. “But at the same time, no one ever felt like the people at PropelNext weren’t in the organization’s corner and doing everything they could to make the people within Unity Care successful.”

of purpose, it is able to support local communities more broadly as they struggle to heal, recover, and thrive. As one Unity Care board member said, “[the confluence of crises] reaffirmed that we as an organization need to be around [and] we need to take this moment and share our voice.”

To learn more about Unity Care's story and work with PropelNext, check out [*Leaning into Learning in Times of Crisis: A Case Study in Unity Care's PropelNext Journey.*](#)

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