

CASE STUDY

Communicating Program Demand and Impact with Brain Science

BBBS of Calgary and Area gains support for flagship mentoring program

Overview:

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Calgary and Area, the largest standalone BBBS in Canada, influences policy and directly provides programs to thousands of children and youth across the country. However, it faced significant challenges amid organizational change during Alberta's 2016 recession.

"At the time, we were struggling to articulate the value of our agency's work and the importance of relationships," explained former president and CEO Karen Orser. "Maintaining our core funding had become an issue, we weren't realizing the revenue we needed to keep operating at the level we were at, and we weren't doing a good job measuring or communicating our impact."

To thrive beyond the end of the recession, BBBS of Calgary and Area needed to re-evaluate its central mission. Orser's vision for the organization's future rested on a simple premise: Positioning community mentoring as an essential service and a "need to have" as opposed to a "nice to have" service.

"Prior to 2016, every child who wanted a mentor received a mentor, but we weren't using the term adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) at all," said Orser. "We were serving kids with many ACEs. We were already doing the work; we just weren't telling the story."

In 2015, the team at BBBS had taken the opportunity to apply for the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities' Change in Mind Initiative. Change in Mind, which sought to better understand how advances in neuroscience can be leveraged to create broader systems and policy change, was developed in partnership with Palix Foundation's Alberta Family Wellness Initiative and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

BBBS of Calgary and Area's involvement with Change in Mind would revolutionize its approach to mentoring youth and catapult the agency into a role of forward-thinking leadership.



Advances in Neuroscience:

Advances in brain science research are fundamentally transforming the ways community-based organizations engage with children and families. As the understanding of ACEs and the effects of toxic stress and trauma on brain development and long-term health outcomes deepens, the

human services sector is eager for opportunities to exchange ideas on integrating, implementing, and communicating the importance of neurosciences across stakeholder audiences.

The Change in Mind Initiative sought to engage organizations doing inspired work in the field of applied neuroscience for community revitalization in Canada and the U.S. By the time Orser joined BBBS of Calgary and Area, the organization had already been accepted into the 15-member learning collaborative and had participated in the first convening of the cohort.

"When I started, Change in Mind made it to the top of our project pile," noted Orser. "We saw using brain science as an opportunity to elevate our work, our credibility, and our conversations about mentoring. It would also allow us to align ourselves with the Alliance, Palix, and other organizations doing great work."

With multiple sites in Alberta, BBBS of Calgary and Area would focus on three key areas:

- Data collection on ACEs
- Organizational and systems change
- Service improvement through rapid testing and experimentation of program design

Orser hoped to reposition the organization's mentoring program with research on breakthroughs in brain science while responding to internal apprehensions regarding new language and the potential alienation of supporters.

By engaging everyone from frontline staff to the board of directors throughout the initiative, the organization was able to invest time, effort, and capacity into accomplishing its goals.

Change in Mind:

Orser asserts that one of the greatest benefits of participating in the Change in Mind Initiative was taking change management processes that could be considered time-consuming and intimidating and breaking them down into manageable, collaborative project pieces. One such process was determining best practice for applying brain science, particularly ACEs scores, to its mentoring program.

A result of rapid prototyping workshops conducted as part of the initiative, the organization's "magical match" paired mentors and mentees based on similar ACEs scores. In this way, clients would be better served based on individual experiences and needs, creating new opportunities for lifelong health and wellness and allowing BBBS of Calgary and Area to do its best work.

Even though the organization wasn't given explicit instructions for adapting the guiding principles of Change in Mind's brain-focused aims, working directly with fellow sites, the Alliance, and the Palix Foundation was instrumental to BBBS of Calgary and Area's success.

"It was tremendously valuable to learn from all of the different organizations that were infusing brain science into their work. You know you're on the right track when you're seeing so many good things happening for the other participants," commented Orser. "Having the Alliance's



Change in Mind team facilitate the project and hold everyone accountable to the initiative's goals was also a very positive experience."

Orser has since left the organization to explore other opportunities in the sector, but BBBS of Calgary and Area's involvement with the initiative has empowered the organization to overcome concerns regarding terminology like ACEs and adversity, surmount fears of volunteer attrition, and truly lead with vision. With investment from BBBS's national office, Canada's 108 BBBS agencies now look to Calgary and Area as a leader in the application of brain science for enriched service delivery.

"We can now demonstrate and show other organizations, including other BBBS organizations, how using brain science has changed our ability to do good work—and continue to do good work sustainably—on every level," said Orser. "It's certainly increased our agency's capacity and ability to respond effectively to community needs."

With the initiative concluded in 2017, the Alliance is launching the next phase in applying brain science-based research: The Change in Mind Institute.

By fostering and accelerating the application of brain science in practice and policy, the Institute is poised to help transform human services organizations, public agencies, and community partners through ongoing consultation and access to a wealth of resources and expertise on how the brain develops. Learning collaborative replication too will usher organizations along the path BBBS of Calgary and Area has taken to large-scale systems change.

"There's a lot of learning around how to drive change and convene and connect as well as build common language and research around brain science. That's the value of the Change in Mind Institute, knowing that there's a place to find inspiration or new information," said Orser.

"Through Change in Mind, BBBS has been able to totally reposition its mentoring programs and finally help the community see that relationships aren't a nice to have, they're a need to have for kids. Relationships buffer toxic stress," she added. "Change in Mind really changed everything."

"Participating with Change in Mind allowed us to test and challenge our assumptions about brain science in safe, constructive ways. We went from having staff who resisted talking about adversity or ACEs to acknowledging that this is really the common language of our every day mission."

Karen Orser, former president and CEO, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Calgary and Area