



## A FIO PARTNERS PERSPECTIVE:

### **Systems Participation: A New Performance Criteria for Nonprofit Organizations**

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A Community Foundation Director explained to me in the late 1970's that consultants of my generation would spend our lives trying to integrate what his generation built. Over the span of his career, he watched a unique service system evolve as a silo for each new community problem identified, with its own sets of agencies, courses of study, vocabulary, professional standards, and government bureaucracy to regulate how it was supposed to work. His concern then, as many people now recognize, was that people's problems and issues don't fit so neatly into the categorical systems his generation built. He saw the need to create community systems that would be generic and comprehensive, familiar and accessible to those they serve, and able to guide individuals and families to the widest array of services and supports, without regard to their initial reason for seeking help.

A few years later, I had reason to think of what he'd said while working with a group of substance abuse treatment and prevention organizations in a not very large city in the northeastern US. I was facilitating an all day retreat to consider what might be done to create a more cohesive, less confusing system of services for those with substance abuse issues. While I had facilitated a few similar discussions previously, this one stands out because it was attended by state and federal officials, advocates, and a wide range of non-profit organizations and there seemed to be a sincere desire to rearrange whatever needed to be rearranged in order to make services accessible to those who needed them. The organizers had tried hard to make the invitation list inclusive of anyone who had a vested interest in the issue, though there were no actual consumers in the room (something that would not, and should not, happen now).

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