

Interview with Sister Linda Yankoski

The new Alliance board chair shares her insights

Q: As the new Alliance board chair, tell us what strategic priorities the board of directors and leadership plan to address over the next two years.

A: The previous year's board, under the leadership of Tony Coleman and the Alliance staff, crafted a dynamic strategic plan. The focus of that plan was designed to strengthen nonprofit human service organizations and to strengthen the voice for children and families in need in North America. The mission and values provide the heart and soul of our future direction, and they are the underlying focus of the plan. It's a dynamic mission, one that will guide us, and me, over the next few years.

Q: The first value, and the one that the Strategic Planning Committee considered the top value, is that of "members first." How will the Alliance's leadership bring this value to life?

A: We've come to terms with who we are as an organization, that our focus is on those members who are solely nonprofit child- and family-serving organizations. "Members first" will require maintaining effective and efficient services to member agencies, pro-

viding the right resources, and promoting public policy that will further the ability of agencies to better serve their clients. By focusing on our members, we will achieve our mission to be a voice for children and families—through our members. As they are strengthened, the Alliance's voice will be strengthened. This prime value will underlie everything that we do.

Q: What key issues and trends do you see facing member organizations?

A: There are so many. Some trends include the issue of public funding of our members' programs and services. Public funding for services has become a substantial source of revenue for many organizations, if not for most of our members. In order to do the most good, social service organizations have become dependent on such revenue, even if it doesn't adequately cover the cost of care. While we have a few members who have great sources of private funds or large endowments, a majority of our members rely on public funding. Because of that reliance, we have to interact with government and public entities all the time. In addition, it seems that obtaining govern-

ment contracts has become more competitive than in the past.

Many of our member agencies have also had to embark on capital campaigns to increase revenues, or to undertake for-profit or entrepreneurial activities in order to create a more diversified funding base. Because government contracts have become more competitive, and are performance-based, almost all of our agencies have had to find other ways to increase revenues, which of course creates additional challenges. To continue to receive governmental funding, organizations may have to provide their services in a different manner or organize differently. Such requirements have changed the shape and the focus of many agencies. Another issue regarding governmental contracts has been the extension of the managed care model to social services. Managed care has been around for a number of years, of course, and has also changed the landscape of nonprofit organizations.

Global concerns also include restrictions on nonprofit advocacy, as well as challenges to nonprofit tax-exempt status. A new concern is the changing relation-

ship between church and state, the entire “charitable choice and faith-based initiative” that will impact public policy, and will ultimately impact all of our member agencies. A final trend that deserves attention is the need for nonprofit agencies to continue to work on attracting and retaining qualified staff.

Q: The state of the economy, fundraising initiatives not reaching their targets, and reduced state and federal budgets are sources of organizational stress at many nonprofit social service agencies. Do you see any changes ahead?

A: I believe we’re all going to be negatively affected by lack of monies at the state and federal level. The economy is another issue. Even those agencies that are heavily endowed have lost money from their investments. Certainly resource development, managing resources, and finding resources to do our work are all going to be critical in the next few years.

To address a specific issue, welfare reform has also had an effect. As welfare reform legislation is reauthorized, families will be asked to work even more hours in order to receive subsidies. This will have a trickle down effect, for example, on families already struggling with day care expenses. With reform, a number of families have been able to get off welfare, which is a positive benefit, but there’s very little said about the down side of welfare reform. Agencies in the field know first hand the down side, because they provide services to those children and families when reform adversely affects them. Due to the decline in jobs during the past three years, welfare reform is a growing area of concern.

Q: In light of these challenges affecting Alliance member agencies, how do you think our leadership can best serve its constituencies?

A: Given the trends, there are a number of ways to help agencies. As a core benefit to members, the Alliance pro-

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smaller nonprofits. Ideas for entrepreneurial activities are also a means of additional resource development.

We also help nonprofit agencies, both new and current members, by promoting the importance of accreditation. Accreditation provides information both to the communities we serve and to the public, indicating that we are willing to be reviewed by our peers according to set standards for quality. Accreditation says that we will live up

vides education and training in critical areas, such as resource development. Because of performance-based contracting and requirements for more accountability, the Alliance’s program evaluation is of key interest to many members. Other topics include understanding the stock market, pursuing investment management activities, and identifying ways that nonprofit executives can find other avenues for resource development, especially for the

to those standards, and provide effective and appropriate goods and services. Indeed, accreditation has been extremely important for my board and for me in being able to ensure that we are meeting national standards and providing services equal to that benchmark.

We also hear from our members that they learn best by getting together with their peers. Because the Alliance can better strengthen and enhance networking

opportunities through development of conferences, committee meetings, and task forces, and of course Alliance members can become enriched through these opportunities.

In the public policy arena, we stay on top of critical issues facing children and families, including how the legislative process is affecting them. As such, the

can be the organization that helps keep our work focused and relevant to meet the critical needs of children and families. Nonprofits are not the only institutions that meet the needs of children and families—there may certainly be a role for public and for-profit public organizations as well. But the boundaries of those roles are sometimes blurred, especially as

ernment provides services to children and families have made a difference and have helped a great number of people.

However, I also believe that because we have received so many of our resources from government, we may no longer have the independence to do some things that we were once able to do when the money was all privately given and we could

decide how to deliver services. That's another major issue, because it's the government's responsibility to help people achieve the basics: the "pursuit of happiness" in our country. It's not for nonprofit charitable organizations to be held accountable for what government should be doing. However, government has partnered with nonprofit organizations to meet these goals, so the roles have become blurred. And we have accepted some of the responsibility on ourselves.

Such confused responsibilities, along with a changing economy and funding bases, makes times very challenging

for us. Of course, every generation has a unique set of challenges facing society, facing our organizations. I think that the challenges we face as a community have to do with economic realities, but wealth does not necessarily alleviate suffering. There are just as many children from wealthy families that need services as there are children from the poorest of the poor. Children have the same problems with drugs, lack of supervision, and sexual misconduct whether they are poor or rich. Our organizations are designed to help children and families at any level. We run the gamut. And we need the resources to provide all these needed services!

Q: What brings you the greatest satisfaction?

A: I see so much good happen for kids and families through the services that we provide. I see far more good than bad. One of the best things about being involved in an organization for as long as I have is that I've been able to visit with children who were once in our residential

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Alliance can be a voice for not only children and families, but also for all nonprofit human services.

Finally, I would also say that we should challenge the reluctance of foundations and other donors to support operating budgets of nonprofit organizations.

Q: What is your vision of what the Alliance can and will ultimately mean to its members as well as to children and families?

A: I would like to see the Alliance as the primary resource for developing, strengthening, and enhancing the role of this country's nonprofit child and family service organizations. If we become the primary resource—and there are so many nonprofit agencies out there which we invite to join us in this mission—we will be able to mobilize our collective resources more effectively to alleviate suffering and to heal and build communities.

The Alliance, through a strong and powerful network of nonprofit leaders,

agencies become increasingly dependent on government monies. Despite this blurring of roles, nonprofit organizations continue to excel through their mission-focused work and have been doing so since our country's founding.

Q: From your professional experience in the field working with children and families, what is your sense of the state of children and families? Are social service agencies making inroads to solving long-term problems?

A: We are indeed making inroads. Nonprofit organizations are steadfastly doing this important work and meeting the critical needs of children and families. We are receiving referrals for every type of client in every type of organization, outpatient, counseling, residential care, and any number of other services. We have been able to serve people who haven't previously been served because the system was originally built for more moderate individual problems. Some of the changes in the way the gov-

program and have come back to visit after they've grown up. They now have their own kids and are doing very well. That brings me immense satisfaction.

It also brings me satisfaction to know that our work not only serves clients, but also serves our staff—staff who have grown and developed and have come into their own because they've worked at Holy Family Institute. I get great joy from watching staff blossom into great professionals, including some who leave our organization and head up other organizations around the community.

Q: Tell us about your background: what helped you become involved with your agency and the Alliance?

A: Certainly my life's vocation of being a religious sister meant wanting to use my life to serve. I happened to land at Holy Family Institute very early in my religious career. I fell in love with it and made it my life's work. I worked through the ranks like everyone else, first as a child care worker. When I became executive director, I wanted the opportunity to network with other people who were in similar positions.

The first thing I did as a new executive director was to join a national association and go through the accreditation process. I wanted to be able to benchmark Holy Family against national standards and judge where we wanted to go. Those were two important decisions I made, because as a new exec I learned a lot about the organization through accreditation. And by joining a national association, I had a peer group which allowed me to test ideas with other professionals. It was vitally important that I become part of an association that could help me professionally.

Joining the Alliance turned out to be a great thing for Holy Family Institute. I never left an association meeting—any kind of meeting, really, whether it was a board meeting, committee meeting, or conference—without receiving one good idea that I could bring back to Holy Family. And I would say, "That was well worth the cost of the meeting." I still feel that's true in my own career and for Holy Family. That's what I want the Alliance to be for all of our members. ▲

Sister Linda Yankoski

Sister Linda Yankoski, president of Holy Family Institute in Pittsburgh, is the newly elected chair of the Alliance's Board of Directors. Alliance President and CEO Peter Goldberg commented, "Sister Linda's election to chair the Alliance's board is a reflection of the great contributions she has made on the board since the merger in 1998, and of the widespread admiration and esteem in which she is held throughout our nationwide network of nonprofit human service providers."

In addition to her role on the Alliance's board, Sister Linda has served on the boards of the Community Care Behavioral Health Organization, Duquesne University, and National Association of Homes and Services for Children. She is currently a doctoral candidate at Duquesne University and is researching the impact of government funding on the religious mission of faith-based organizations.

Holy Family Institute

Guided by values of family perspective, dignity, excellence, and community, Holy Family Institute serves thousands of children and families daily throughout Pennsylvania and in Fort Worth, Texas. In the tradition of Catholic social teaching and rooted in the heritage of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, the agency offers healing and hope to children and families through multiple programs in a loving environment. Each day, educators, therapists, residential care workers, and administrators work with children and families in need of opportunities to succeed.

This multi-service organization, based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with a staff of more than 600, operates with a combined budget of more than \$28 million through four subsidiary nonprofit corporations.