

Creating a Better Community with the Community Action Network

By Annie Kovski

Having a vision is not uncommon; however, the ability to attain that vision is often an undertaking. Achieving unprecedented goals takes resources, time, and a great deal of coordinating, and the Community Action Network (CAN) is a structure that helps transport those of vision to their destination.

CAN is an Austin-area-based partnership with the purpose of "achieving sustainable social, health, educational and economic outcomes" by involving the community in a process that optimizes actions and resources of individuals and of the public and private sectors. The unique aspect of CAN is that it is not a structure that provides a direct service, rather it is a structure that helps by providing two main things: product and process. Documents on health and human services are produced and distributed throughout the community with the purpose of increasing

information about the problem issues, publicizing information about the groups of CAN, and acting as guides for the Issue Area Groups (e.g., the Homeless Task Force) of CAN. The documents range from pamphlets to web-based materials to press releases. The process aspect involves bringing together groups on certain issues and helping to support and build these groups.



Fred Butler is the Executive Director of the Community Action Network and he along with Sam Woollard, the Associate Director, and their small staff has worked diligently to improve the community. Their main responsibility at CAN is similar to that of the organization: help communicate and coordinate among individuals of the Austin community. They particularly focus on maximizing productivity through eliminating and avoiding duplication by combining resources among the organizations.

In order to accomplish these tasks, there is an internal and external composition of CAN. The internal structure involves three tiers of collaboration. First, the Community Council consists of 30 community council members who look at emerging issues in the Austin community while taking into consideration community voice and input. Second, the Resource Council is board level and composed of 2 members from each of the 14 participating CAN partners. They discuss policy and guidance for CAN. The last division is the Administrative Team, which encompasses executive level management from the 14 partners, and they deal with implementation and application of the products CAN circulates. The 14 partners that assist CAN and the Issue Area Groups are organizations that specifically deal with health and human services.

Where does CAN interact with the bulk of the community? This is done through the external part of the organization in the CAN Issue Area Groups. There are about 20 different Issue Area Groups that CAN has helped to create or bring together. Each group focuses on a specific aspect of health and human services, and the groups do research for the documents produced by the CAN leadership and staff. New groups are formed through individually expressed interest or are invited by CAN when a need is identified. CAN additionally supports these groups through a variety of ways by creating websites, organizing and producing press conferences, and publicizing the group. Because CAN is now well established within the community, their credibility is quite valuable when orchestrating public events like a press conferences. Thus, the Issue Area Groups benefit a great deal from the presence of CAN.

Each group specializes in issues ranging from education to the effects of homelessness. The Homelessness Issue Area Group has especially been nurtured by CAN. In particular, CAN assisted in founding the Homeless Task Force (HTF) in 1998, and it is still going strong. The task of overseeing the HTF was originally given to the Mayor of Austin. However, he wanted CAN to take over and oversee the program for sustainability and to act as an overarching entity. HTF is extremely active in the community and also conducts surveys on the homeless that provide useful information. For example, they were recently able to identify the lack of availability for affordable, long-term housing for those in homeless situations. This information is pertinent to CAN because they have the ability to communicate and collaborate with a wide range of individuals and organizations that can provide resources to address that problem.

CAN has been able to contribute a great deal to the community and inspire others to emulate their model. Before joining CAN, Sam Woollard (pictured here) recalls really liking what the organization stood for and the impact it had on others. So, the moment she got the chance to join, six years ago, she jumped at the opportunity. Woollard has an undergraduate degree in Social Work from the University of Texas at Austin. Her experiences include directing the substance abuse AWARE program at the Young Woman's Christians Association; running a drop-out prevention program for young individuals in England; and counseling,

support, and case management for the Austin Family House among many other things. She enjoys working with Fred Butler and remarks "CAN is one my favorite organizations to work with because of all the positive change." Woollard's greatest desire for the community is for them to engage in the Issue Area Groups and use the information provided by CAN. She loves to see the combining of people and organizations in order to realize their visions in helping the community.

For More information about the Community Action Network, visit their website at <http://www.caction.org/index.html>.