

## Voices from the Field: A Focus on Flint, Mich.

Kristina Johnston, Rhetta Hunyady and Cheryl Adkins

From *Big Picture Approach Consulting*. Interviewer: Emily Stets

What happens when you cross the best-laid plans with unexpected crisis? How do partnerships and initiatives – whether they are long-standing, emerging or re-emerging – respond in real-time and demonstrate their relevance? Increasingly, community leaders across the country find themselves handling crises – both natural and human-made. In some situations there can be intense attention and a national spotlight, but the reality is always personal and extremely local.

While members of the Flint & Genesee Opportunity Youth Coalition (OYC), housed in the Flint & Genesee Chamber of Commerce, had been meeting together for several years, 2015 marked the beginning of a new era. In the spring, the chamber was asked to serve as the “backbone” organization for OYC and Kristina Johnston was asked to step up into the lead facilitation role, bringing additional voices to the table and building momentum to move the coalition’s work forward. The start of the 2015/2016 school year marked the beginning of a nine-month effort to relaunch, reengage and reinvigorate efforts to address the needs of Opportunity Youth in Flint and Genesee County. Kristina turned to the Forum’s Big Picture Approach Consulting team for capacity-building and co-facilitation support as they engaged a broad set of providers and stakeholders in priority-setting. As they rounded the corner into 2016, they were honing their action agenda and building consensus on starting points for new areas of joint work.

At the same time, Cheryl Adkins and Rhetta Hunyady from YouthQuest, another initiative of the chamber of commerce, were in the ninth year of working with The Forum’s Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality on building a continuous quality improvement system for their extensive out-of-school time program serving over 1000 young people throughout Flint and Genesee County. In the 2015/2016 school year, they were deepening their focus on social and emotional learning in this work.

But their work that year played out in a very different context than originally anticipated. The water crisis moved into the foreground over the course of the fall. Increasing revelations and news coverage eventually led to federal investigations and the declaration of a state of emergency in January 2016. National attention soared. A local response was essential. The chamber of commerce connected with other key leaders throughout the community on coordinating multiple efforts, dedicating a large board room on the main floor of their repurposed downtown bank building as a “war room” of maps, data and deployment strategies. Chamber staff, like many others, pulled double duty – staying the course on core work and identifying ways that their mission-driven work could aid in the recovery effort.

In March 2018, a new documentary called “Flint Town” was released, which reflected on the impact of that crisis and the ongoing story in Flint. We used that opportunity to have a conversation with the team leaders in Flint and asked them to think back on that time period and the roles that they played.



### How did the water crisis impact your work at the time?



**Johnston:** When the response to the water crisis started to hit, it was organized chaos. We had the Red Cross, the National Guard, United Way and several different groups trying to have a united front, which really pulled from those already involved in the coalition.

So, it wasn’t so much that the coalition had to create a response; we knew that getting water to people and meeting basic needs was a high priority.

We were more so looking for little pockets of need, especially when the big players, like the Red Cross, have basic needs covered and you’ve brought resources together.

In a way, we were “responding to the response” and taking advantage of what we knew was a short window of opportunity to get resources to benefit Opportunity Youth and as many populations as we could. The most impactful part about the visibility was that it highlighted a host of social challenges in our community—not just the physical ones affecting people’s health, but the educational, employment and infrastructure challenges we faced, too.

**Hunyady and Adkins:** The staff and community leaders remained calm and looked to the community to help pull together people with the know-how and resources of programs already in place and knit it all together.

We had people getting systems in place and getting help available in many different places in the community, so that there wasn’t an additional burden on a family to access services.

We saw everyone working together to really stand up to the crisis and say, “We might have this crisis, but we’re going to work at it together and overcome it and get to the other side.”

We were most focused on providing consistency for the youngest residents, which was the biggest part YouthQuest could play. We kept things going so that kids didn’t realize there was such a crisis going on, because when they came to YouthQuest, life was consistent.

## What advice would you give to other initiative leaders responding to a human-made or natural disaster?

**Johnston:** When things like this happen, there are groups that start to rise to the top to convene people.

It's important to understand your skill set and to not get too far out of your lane. Be open and let those leaders drive things, but also look for gaps of service and be responsive to your main goal. It's so easy to focus on the main thing, but there are lots of pockets of need that aren't always going to show up as the highest priority that you can still focus on.

For the chamber of commerce, small business and Opportunity Youth are important, so when the conversation about employing folks to distribute the water pods came up, we were able to ask, "Are they getting the right populations involved?" Most people involved in that were part of OYC. In the end, they were able to employ Opportunity Youth to distribute the water pods.

**Hunyady and Adkins:** During the water crisis, we focused on providing a consistent, safe learning environment with adults who cared about the kids and could connect with them.

Our response was woven into YouthQuest's professional development through our relationship with the Weikart Center. The Weikart team helped our staff focus on quality programming, learn how to do cooperative learning and how to foster the social and emotional learning of young people.

As the water crisis began to unfold, there were physical, emotional and social changes that were brought to our attention. We connected with a local pediatrician who provided our staff with the skills and techniques to use with the children to help them during the crisis. As part of our Family Nights, we had the ability to share strategies and resources with families, too, not just youth.

### Two years later, what is the story with your work now?

**Johnston:** The water crisis generated a new expectation of working together now that basic needs are less urgent. We have new initiatives, like Flint Promise, a tuition-free education for Flint High School graduates who stay in Flint. We ensured the eligibility requirements incorporated Opportunity Youth in their age range.

While the release of the "Flint Town" documentary highlighted our capacity challenges, it doesn't show the positive changes we've made. For all the resources that came to the community during the emergency, we also need to instill a sense of continued investment and hope for residents. We certainly have ongoing needs, but encourage others, near and far, to visit and see all the positive things going on in Flint and Genesee County, Michigan.

#### Working with



**Johnston:** From an Opportunity Youth perspective, the Forum connected us with other communities that had experienced significant disasters, including leaders from New Orleans, who provided their perspectives on the short- and long-term impacts of these challenges on the coalition's work. It was helpful to understand what we might expect and also to gain national visibility for our community and the efforts already in place to improve outcomes for young people.

#### About Big Picture Approach Consulting:

Big Picture Approach Consulting consolidates into one technical assistance center the Forum's teaching, coaching, technical assistance, facilitation and actionable data services focused on mobilizing the work of community coalitions and partnerships. BPA Consulting is led by Merita Irby, the Forum's co-founder, and includes an expanding team of expert consultants from across the country and within the Forum leadership team.

### How did you stay on track and change directions when you needed to?

**Hunyady and Adkins:** Our program staff are so well-trained, so it was easy to continue our work. We knew kids needed to come to a program with consistency and stability, where they knew they'd be safe and have a meal.

They also looked to us for resource connections. Our staff talked with mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles during Family Nights, saying, "Here's who you can call, here's what's available," and helped us get resources to others.

#### Working with



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**Hunyady and Adkins:** Our response to the water crisis was woven into YouthQuest's professional development. The Weikart Center has been a real assist in helping us improve the quality of our programs, to help staff be well-informed and take a look at how they're doing their work and how we could do it better. They helped us communicate and talk with kids. For example, when the water crisis started, kids were afraid, but because they could communicate with someone, it helped calm their

#### About The Weikart Center:

The Weikart Center is a field leader in at-scale performance-based accountability systems for out-of-school time (OST) programs and other settings focused on positive youth development. The Weikart Center builds system- and site-level capacity for continuous improvement by focusing on three things: quality improvement system design, effective performance data and lower stakes accountability.