

2014 Chicago-Paris Social Services Exchange Summary

The Paris Social Services Committee of CSCI hosted a delegation of leaders from French social service organizations in Chicago for a week in March 2014. This is the third visit in an ongoing exchange program, following Chicago hosting a delegation from Paris in 2010 and Paris hosting a Chicago delegation in 2012. The exchanges were energized by the fact that both cities have very similar demographics, size and social issues to address. The outcomes of each visit were so positive that delegates from both cities plan increasing exchange of information and shared trainings for the future.

For this exchange, Chicago tailored visits to the requests from Paris and had three goals that were integrated into all of the selected site visits. The exchange set out to showcase our best practices with a focus on corporate partnerships and volunteerism, culturally informed services and university partnerships for assessment and evaluation, highlighted at the fifteen programs chosen for visits. Additionally, the exchange focused on social interactions to strengthen the relationships and highlight visits to Chicago icons. The exchange was completely supported by fundraising done by the Paris Social Services Committee.

Our Paris partners have written sophisticated reports detailing what they took home from the visit and we were impressed with the insight they had in summarizing three themes emerging from their discussions of the visit. Our first goal of highlighting fundraising through corporate partnerships and volunteerism was successful. Paris is just beginning to implement such programs and was very interested in all aspects of non-governmental funding and the many ways in which those funds are secured.

Our second goal of highlighting university partnerships, measurement and evaluation was another successfully achieved goal. Measurement and evaluation is not an integral part of French social services. They recognize the need to move toward more evidence based practices and are interested in implementing evaluation practices. Given that this would be a new approach, the adaptation of program evaluation in Paris would not likely be tied to funding, but rather initially implemented to improve care. The delegates observed a second difference – that the direction is not only determined by evaluation but also by public policy goals.

Our third goal of culturally informed care was achieved in a way we had not anticipated. While the French delegates were impressed with how culturally informed care could also be delivered with a reflective deconstruction of the culture, this was not the primary theme that emerged. Rather, our culturally informed care is embedded in an approach of empowerment that includes community stakeholders as decision makers in local services. The concept of empowerment (so imbued in all of our services that we hardly note this as a best practice) was the most compelling aspect of our services for the French. They noted the empowerment approach across work with youth, domestic violence, homelessness, placing out of foster care and community mental health services. The empowerment observed in all of our programs that was the most compelling theme for the French is the practice of helping people change rather than supporting them because of their problems.

We achieved our cultural competency training goal in the larger context of community inclusion and empowerment, clearly an approach that could more easily fit with French values. Empowerment is linked with our social action evaluation systems – something that was new to the delegation.

The future of the exchanges has left the members of both cities excited about future plans. We are all eager to continue the relationships and have both short-term and long-term goals for continuing our challenging work together, where we share information between two world-class cities.

Short-term goals include keeping the exchanges going and making them a part of training and information sharing on the return home. Long-term goals include cross-training programs as well as exchanging trainees and professionals between the two cities.