



FLY's Theory of Change Frequently Asked Questions

October 31, 2018

This document is intended for FLY staff and Board.

What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change explains how people and organizations make social or political change happen. The details of a Theory of Change are focused on mapping out what a program or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how this leads to desired goals being achieved (outcomes). Organizations look at their goals – say, to reduce recidivism in youth involved in the juvenile justice system - and then work backwards to define the steps they'll take to do this.

A Theory of Change also defines:

- Who you serve (target population)
- Why it matters (the need you are trying to address)
- How to measure whether the work is effective and *why* it's effective

Why does FLY have a Theory of Change? Do all nonprofits have one?

Theory of Change is widely used in the philanthropy, nonprofit, and government sectors, though not all organizations are *required* to have one. The concept is around 25 years old and it was designed as a way of figuring out how to define an organization's ability to make change.

FLY's previous Theory of Change, which was actually our second, was written in 2012 with the support of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. At that point, FLY had been in existence 12 years and we knew we were having an impact on youth and the local juvenile justice systems, but we needed to define that impact.

A Theory of Change helps us map out our goals and direction, and it demonstrates to our funders and system partners what is unique about FLY. It keeps us in touch with why we do this work and why we are successful. It also helps us stay a learning organization – a group of folks who are dedicated to always evaluating our work and changing when we need to in order to better serve youth.

What is our new Theory of Change?

Poverty, racism, immigration discrimination, and other forms of marginalization put youth at greater risk of violence and incarceration. FLY's program interventions, combined with extensive community and systems collaboration, disrupt the pipeline to prison and put kids on the path to a healthy, free, and productive life. Through

this work, FLY has a positive impact on our youth, the communities we serve, and the systems in which we operate.

Why did we decide we need a new Theory of Change?

We needed to revise our Theory of Change because we recognized a few important things about our work. We needed to fully articulate our impact on not just the youth we serve, but also the communities in which we serve them and the systems and other groups we partner with to affect change. We also know that the landscape of juvenile justice (justice as a whole, really) has changed since our last Theory of Change. While the work is still urgent—perhaps now more than ever—our approach must be more nuanced and complex to continue to be effective.

The development of this new Theory of Change was supported by the Sobrato Impact Lab, which is an intensive 18-month program designed to help nonprofits improve their evaluation systems and create a culture of learning. The Lab is sponsored by one of our major funders (and our Milpitas office landlord), the Sobrato Family Foundation. It started in fall 2017 and will go through spring 2019. There are three phases that 10 local nonprofits are going through together:

1. Theory of Change development – obviously, this is the result
2. Data collection planning and instrument development – this will help our Evaluation & Learning Department decide what “instruments” (evaluation tools and techniques) to use and what data to collect when, where, and from whom
3. Collecting and using data to inform practice – in other words, how we use data about our program performance to change how our programs operate or to not change them because we can validate that they’re working

What's new about this Theory of Change compared to the previous one?

Our previous Theory of Change focused on Law and Leadership. We met kids in the Law Program, selected some for Leadership, and then focused on two outcomes: reducing recidivism (no new offenses) and academic achievement (high school graduation or GED).

This new Theory of Change:

- Articulates practices, principles, and values across *all* FLY programs
- Focuses on how interventions and target populations drive our program strategies, not the other way around
- Reflects where FLY is most confident in its ability to have an impact and offers a broader definition of our impact
- Places a stronger emphasis on racial justice, equity, and impacts on marginalized youth and communities
- Takes into account how FLY impacts communities and systems as well as kids

- Shows that community and systems partnerships are part of FLY's strategy for effecting change

The Theory of Change talks about interventions and programs. What's the difference between these?

People sometimes use the words “intervention” and “program” interchangeably. But to us, programs are the actual services we provide to youth, and interventions are the processes we use within those programs to help youth solve their problems and increase their well-being. Each of FLY’s programs is based on multiple interventions. For the most part, these interventions were researched, developed, and tested in the social work sector over decades before we decided to adapt them. (You can read about the specific interventions in the Overview Document.)

FLY’s unique approach to making change is how we use interventions in our programs *plus* some important principles that other agencies don’t necessarily use: our commitments to incorporating youth voice; to diversity, equity, and inclusion; and to community collaboration.

This is some—but not all—of our “secret sauce.” In fact, a lot of that “sauce” is our staff and the ways they love and encourage our kids and hold them accountable for making change in their lives.

Who was involved in developing the new Theory of Change?

FLY convened a TOC Revision Committee that included 14 FLY stakeholders: two board members, ten staff, and two youth. This committee was broken up into two subcommittees that met twice a month for five months to examine and unpack what makes FLY special and what could be turned into a formula to apply to our existing communities and to new communities as FLY grows. With some help from the Sobrato Family Foundation and Learning for Action (a strategic research and evaluation firm), the committee came up with the new Theory of Change.

How does this new Theory of Change fit with our new Vision and BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal)?

All of these statements reflect our diversity, equity, and inclusion work and commitment to serving marginalized youth and communities. They also call out our commitment to justice and systems reform. Staff will find details about the Vision and BHAG at this Dropbox link:

https://www.dropbox.com/preview/shared/FLY%20COMMUNICATIONS/Confidential%20for%20Staff%20Only/FLY's%20Vision%20and%20BHAG%209.26.18_FINAL.pdf?role=work

How does FLY’s Theory of Change affect our programs, our staff’s work, and how staff is evaluated?

FLY will continue our regular evaluation practices, and roll up the data into our quarterly dashboards, reviewed by agenda leadership, plus our annual Impact Report, which shows the data for each program and county.

For each program, the TOC Revision Committee developed Codification Principles, which were presented at September's Staff Retreat and will be shared with your teams again. These include our basic expectations for program work, which is primarily our dosage. (Each program also has scale/size and demographic targets, and other expectations, of course.) Then we measure specific program impact in terms of outcomes. We have also defined our program activities and the evaluation methods for determining if the activities result in the right impact (like reduced recidivism, complete of probation, and increased academic achievement for our youth).

What communications do we have about our Theory of Change?

- We have an Overview (five slides) that you can share outside the agency.
- This FAQ document is only for staff and Board but you can use the content as talking points for conversations.
- For staff, the Overview and FAQ are available at this Dropbox link: <https://www.dropbox.com/home/shared/FLY%20COMMUNICATIONS>
- For Board members, both documents are on the Board web page.
- A brief introduction to our TOC and a link to the Overview are also on our website at <https://flyprogram.org/about/>. (We may develop a separate web page at a later date.)
- If you need to give a presentation, please see Claire Wagner about using the TOC slide set.
- Training materials for new staff will be developed at a later date.

Who can I talk to if I have a question or comment about anything here?

- About the Theory of Change or the process of developing it: Rachel Vosters, rachel@flyprogram.org
- About this document or other TOC communications: Claire Wagner, claire@flyprogram.org