

West Virginia Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being

Notes from the Field

May 6, 2004

Based on observations and interviews conducted to date, Anne, Tracy, and I put our heads together and came up with a few ideas we thought might be worth mentioning. It is our attempt to provide timely but relatively informal formative feedback that is helpful to PRC staff and SIG partners involved in the WV Partnership.

Cautionary Note: These comments are based on a small amount of data collected fairly early in the process. We have observed two meetings and interviewed eight participants (some PRC staff members and some partners) so far, but only two interviews are fully transcribed at this point.

Based on the literature on effective community collaboration with which we are familiar (and we plan to familiarize ourselves with more of this), it seems that the WV Partnership is making good progress toward building a statewide collaborative prevention/promotion program for youth in our state. Our first Notes from the Field address three collaboration-related issues: inclusiveness, team-building, and shared vision. We also comment on a few miscellaneous issues that emerged during the initial fieldwork.

Inclusiveness: Getting stakeholders to the table and having them feel included in a real way in the collaboration process.

Many different organization representatives are affiliated with the SIG process already and participants seem to agree that membership should be broadly inclusive with even parents and youth playing a role. A couple of participants suggested that other organizations be brought into the partnership (e.g., Tobacco Prevention Coalition, American Cancer Society). This is something the WV Partnership may want to consider.

The climate of the partnership meetings, which has been warm and inviting with considerable attention to “creature comforts”, is conducive to feeling welcomed and included. We are thinking here of things such as the name cards, gift bags, and “continuous” snacks that were provided at the retreat meetings.

Another sign of the desire to include everyone in the process was the frequent invitations – from PRC staff, the retreat facilitator, and some partners – to participate, to make decisions, to express views on issues. There seems to be a genuine desire to include all the group members’ perspectives. Especially at the retreat, there was considerable time and attention given to each of the organizations represented – in terms of explaining who they are and what they do. This probably made participants feel even more included in a real way in the process.

We noticed that a few individuals said very little during the first day of the retreat. Not knowing everyone very well yet, we are not sure what that signifies. It could mean anything from quiet, more introverted personalities to skepticism about – or even resistance to – the collaboration process or the SIG program generally. By the end of the second day of the retreat, there was considerably more widespread participation in discussions. Also, on day two of the retreat we heard individuals begin to use language that reflected more of a sense of involvement and ownership, for example saying “we” instead of “they” in referring to the SIG.

Team-building: Providing opportunities for trusting relationships to develop among the stakeholders/collaborators

There has been a great deal of time and attention devoted to this – especially at the retreat. The lengthy personal introductions and the Native American Medicine Wheel activity that invited participants to talk about their personalities and values are two examples of activities that enabled participants to get to know one another better and to trust each other more. Also, the meeting rules or “considerations” – stressing the importance of listening to each other – and the acronym police – “ticketing” individuals for using short-hand communication that might exclude individuals unfamiliar with the jargon – created an inviting, inclusive environment and structure *and* facilitated the development of comfortable, trusting relationships among group members.

Participants appreciated the team-building that occurred at the retreat, but some expressed uneasiness about the amount of time devoted to it. Whereas PRC staff and partners involved in the SIG are excited about and

devoted to the work involved in this statewide effort, they are also very busy people with full schedules and many prior commitments. The success of the collaboration will likely require careful and ongoing attention to achieving a balance so that adequate time and attention is provided for relationship-building *as well as* for accomplishing tasks necessary to meet and perhaps go beyond the SIG requirements. Achieving this balance may depend upon successfully balancing structure and flexibility in the operations of the partnership.

Shared vision: Making sure people are on the same page in terms of goals

The two prior issues -- including as many stakeholders as possible in a real way in the process and encouraging the development of trusting relationships among those people -- address the collaboration *process* per se and set the stage for what may be the hardest part of this -- the development of a shared vision of the statewide community well-being model the group hopes to build.

In our observations of meetings we noticed how difficult it is to communicate effectively -- about what the SIG project really involves. Whereas most individuals seem to agree with a “holistic” approach to prevention/promotion, it is not entirely clear to us that everyone means the same thing by those terms. In addition, participants who spoke with us expressed concerns about possible conflicting beliefs about addiction itself and the extent to which it is seen as a disease, on the one hand, or as the result of particular psycho-social, or even social-structural factors. They worried that such conflicts could be particularly problematic in terms of making decisions about distributing funds to communities if the “big” SIG program is actually funded. While it may be controversial and uncomfortable at times, WV Partnership participants may want to make a conscious effort to fully explore these issues with each other with an eye toward ensuring that differences in perspectives not derail the long-term goal of a statewide system to promote community well-being.

Another suggestion -- mentioned to us by participants -- is for the PRC to make regular -- perhaps weekly -- contact with partnership participants between meetings. With meetings taking place on a relatively infrequent (quarterly) basis, the whole process seems a little “uneven” -- especially to those not among the PRC staff working with it on a daily basis. More ongoing, communication -- even with a few informal e-mail updates

between meetings might enhance the group's ability to develop shared understandings.

Overall there seems to be considerable optimism about the possibility of achieving a shared vision. Participants talked with us about how West Virginia is already doing a great deal of intra-agency, collaborative work and is in a strong position to develop an effective statewide prevention system. Individuals also mentioned that the small size of the state and the fact that so many people already know each other and have worked together successfully will enhance the SIG process. Many strong relationships and networks are already in place.

Other Issues

Leadership: We are intrigued by how the leadership of the partnership is playing out and evolving. It seems fairly complex – with the PRC staff continuing to provide considerable guidance on the basis of their prior experience with and knowledge about the SIG. In addition, the PRC staff may have more experience with the process of cross-agency collaboration itself. On the other hand, participants spoke with us about how the partners – not the PRC staff – are in charge of the WV Partnership, that it was the partners who initiated and planned the retreat, and who might at some point even serve as a governing or advisory board for the PRC. Finally, the outside facilitator hired for the retreat provided leadership, and some partners seem to be more actively involved in leadership roles as well.

SIG Funds: At the time of this writing, the federal SIG money given to West Virginia in September, 2003, for the planning year work has still not been received by the PRC. Depending on how much longer this situation persists, it could constrain the efforts of the group by making it difficult to financially support meetings, the development of needed materials, and so on.