

WV Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being
Notes from the Field
October 14, 2005

During this quarter we continued to generate observation and interview data in relation to the work of the WV Partnership and the West Virginia SPF SIG. Specifically, we observed ten meetings and conducted fourteen individual interviews with PRC staff and partners. Based on preliminary analysis of those data, we are chewing on a few issues that might be worth consideration. As always, we welcome feedback from you.

Communication

From the beginning, the process-oriented WV Partnership has devoted considerable time and energy to communication. In addition to electronic and paper communication, there have been many face-to-face meetings including quarterly partnership meetings, regular meetings of the PRC staff for the SPF SIG, and meetings of the eight work groups currently connected to the WV Partnership and the SPF SIG. Managing the quality and quantity of partnership-related communication is a large, complex task.

Since its inception, the PRC has grown from a two-person entity to a 43-person organization; and at last count, the WV Partnership stood at approximately 28 members. With so many people involved in the WV Partnership and the SPF SIG, effective communication is a challenge. This holds true whether we're talking about people feeling comfortable enough to raise their voices and offer opinions in a quarterly meeting—some people continue to fall silent—or partners receiving and reading a copy of the draft implementation plan of the SPF SIG so they can contribute to a discussion of the plan's merits.

While some individuals experience the partnership as an opportunity to participate in open dialog where each voice is heard, others' comments sparked us to wonder if a lack of direct, clear communication within the partnership (partners and PRC staff) is an issue that should be considered. Some difficulties may have to do with the sheer volume of information that passes through participants' hands and the challenge of keeping up with producing and reading that amount of material. Are partners able to keep up

with the reading? Are there efforts needed on the part of the PRC or the partners to keep each other better informed? What could be done to facilitate this process? To what extent are participants taking advantage of online resources like the website and the many reports, notes, and minutes posted on it? Is there insufficient information or too much information? To what extent is the information clear and helpful?

Perhaps the difficulty with identifying shared vision/understandings – discussed in *Eyes on the Process* – is also related to communication. When participants express a desire for a broad vision of prevention, saying “prevention is prevention is prevention,” what exactly do they mean? Some wonder why the issue of prevention itself has not been discussed more directly and more often at partnership meetings. Several are concerned about what they perceive as a shift to a narrow focus on substance abuse prevention. Indeed, some wording in the strategic implementation plan seems to suggest a relatively narrow focus on “building the capacity of communities to implement and sustain effective substance abuse prevention,” but other language suggests a broader focus on “each county developing a comprehensive county strategic prevention plan.”

There is similar confusion about the roles of the partnership and the PRC in relation to the SPF SIG. Some explain that the partnership is supposed to function as an advisory body to the PRC, yet the strategic implementation plan was submitted by the PRC “*on behalf of the West Virginia Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being*” and there is talk of the partners taking more “ownership” of the partnership. These could be seen as mixed messages that make it difficult to sort out the extent to which there is agreement on what roles the partnership and the PRC do or should play in the SPF SIG.

Also there is concern about an imbalance in the communication between the partnership and the PRC, with partners having too little input and PRC staff having too much. Some attribute this to partners being uncomfortable or unwilling to express concerns in the large partnership meetings. Another, who believes the imbalance in communication is at least partially a result of the partners’ lack of access to important information, wondered how the partners could give advice without a current project budget in front of them.

Balance

In addition to the communication imbalance discussed above, there seems to be an imbalance in partner participation levels generally. While some partners have been actively involved in quarterly meetings as well as several work groups, others have attended only parts of some quarterly meetings. This unevenness may indicate a need for a better balance between focusing on individuals and personal relationships, on the one hand, and on organizational context and structure on the other. The people and relationship-focused processes characteristic of the partnership and the PRC were highly effective in drawing together a committed, skilled group of participants in the formation of the partnership. At this point in the group's development, however, some are hopeful that more attention will be given to developing organizational structure—one that affords individual flexibility but does not relinquish accountability.

Along the same lines, individuals spoke with us about adjusting the balance between strengthening relationships within the partnership and reaching out to build and strengthen relationships between the partnership and other individuals and organizations. As one participant explained, there is a need to “reach out” to other organizations, groups, and regions of the state, and to guard against becoming an elite, “members-only club” centered in Charleston. Another stressed the importance of the partnership truly being a statewide entity rather than just a Marshall University project. These participants want to ensure that the partnership is not static – that it continues to grow, to become more diverse and broadly representative of the state as a whole, and to enhance its capacity to obtain sustainable community results.

Finally, some participants suggested giving attention to the balance between honoring relational processes, on the one hand, and efficiency, product, and outcomes on the other. They hoped for more efficient meetings, more focus on action and task accomplishment, and finding “a happy medium” between process and outcome. As one participant noted, the successful processes activated during the planning year will not be worth much unless we keep an eye on the desired outcome of helping West Virginia communities get stronger.

