

West Virginia Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being  
Notes from the Field

Submitted by  
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During this quarter (October 14, 2005 – January 6, 2006), we continued to conduct participant observations and ethnographic interviews related to the work of the West Virginia Partnership and the West Virginia SPF-SIG. In addition to observing ten meetings and conducting four interviews with partners and/or Prevention Resource Center (PRC) staff, we conducted phone interviews with a random selection of 15 community members who attended informational meetings about the SPF-SIG planning grants. Based on preliminary analysis of these data, our report follows up on several issues from the October quarterly meeting, discusses new issues related to PRC staff roles and responsibilities related to the SPF-SIG, and then summarizes what we learned from the phone interviews with community members.

“Old Business”: Follow-ups from Last Quarterly Meeting

*Partnership Role/Relationships.* With assistance from several partners, PRC staff members have been exploring this issue – especially in relation to the executive order. There seems to be a consensus emerging about the “hybrid” relationship between the PRC and the partnership, with each *advising* the other, depending on the nature of the issue or task. The hybrid relationship is evolving as partners and PRC staff continue to work together. For example, based on partners’ requests for budget information, there are plans to discuss the SPF-SIG budget at the upcoming quarterly meeting of the partnership. Prior to this, budget details have not been presented to the partnership as a whole.

There continue to be concerns expressed about the relationship between the partnership and the state government. Some believe that if the partnership wants to go beyond the “power to plan” – and to develop and *implement* a statewide, comprehensive plan that is sustainable, it must begin to develop a relationship with state government – perhaps convincing the governor and legislators of the worthiness of the project. This will be particularly important if state dollars are needed in the future.

*Partner Roles/Participation.* Our sense generally is that the scope and level of partner participation is increasing. Partners were noticeably more involved in the most recent quarterly meeting – described by one partner as “one of the best ones we’ve had.” The small group sessions, providing opportunities for the expression of ideas and concerns, were appreciated by partners one of whom noted that it was “the first time in awhile that we [partners] had been asked for our input.” Also, there has been a move toward having partners, rather than PRC staff, chair

SPF-SIG workgroups. Some partners believe this kind of more active partner participation needs to be formally required or structured. It has been suggested, for example, that more should be required of partners than attending half of the quarterly meetings each year. One idea mentioned was that each partner be required to be a member of at least one workgroup. Also, a partner suggested that Mike Lacey and Wayne Coombs (as chair of the partnership and head of the PRC) periodically review the list of partnership members with an eye toward making sure each one is engaged and has a clear sense of her or his role. Partners even expressed a willingness to travel to meetings held outside Charleston on occasion in order to expedite participation by those who do not live near the capital.

*Shared Vision of Goals/Mission.* This issue was discussed during the last quarterly meeting and a new workgroup was formed to address it. We are not aware of any activity since that time, but we heard from several partners that they still consider it an unresolved issue that needs more attention.

#### “New Business”

*PRC Roles/Responsibilities.* The Partnership and SPF-SIG-related work for PRC staff seems to be ever increasing in quantity and complexity. Meanwhile, two more full-time PRC staff resigned during this quarter. One partner expressed concerns about this noting that the sustainability of the PRC is critical to the sustainability of the partnership.

A PRC staff-related issue that has emerged recently is the importance of the Community Development Specialists (CDS). One partner went so far as to say that the SPF-SIG would “rise and fall” with the CDS. Some wondered if the CDS have adequate training, mentoring, and support for their major roles in the project. One commented that the CDS may not have been brought into the process soon enough – that perhaps the CDS should have attended at least some – or some parts – of the quarterly partnership meetings. Finally, there is a concern that the new SPF-SIG work will draw CDS away from other important community services they are currently providing. One partner said, “I’m concerned whether or not they’ll [CDS] be able to do that plus everything else. . . . You sort of have to balance things. You can’t start taking all the resources and putting them into planning.”

*Community Informational Meetings.* In order to get some idea of how community members experienced the SPF-SIG informational meetings held in November and December, we conducted phone interviews with individuals who had attended meetings. We randomly selected a sample from the meeting sign-in sheets. The sample included names from all four regional meetings.

6 (out of 20) from Group 1/ Moorefield - (33%)  
11 (out of 33) from Group 2/Huntington - (33%)  
18 (out of 67) from Group 3/Morgantown – (27%)

9 (out of 41) from Group 4/Summersville – (23%)

Because we were unable to make contact with some individuals, the actual sample – at this point- is not as evenly distributed across groups. Interviews conducted and transcribed to date include two from Group 1, one from Group 2, five from Group 3, and five from Group 4. While this is not a large enough sample to draw firm conclusions, the data provide some ideas about community members' perceptions and concerns.

### Community Development Specialist Roles

It is clear from the interviews that Community Development Specialists (CDS and Family Resource Network (FRN) staff played major roles in getting out the word to communities about the SPF-SIG and the informational meetings. In many cases, CDS and FRNs also have been playing major roles in communities as they work with individuals and groups in putting together and submitting letters and proposals for the planning year. Community members clearly appreciate the CDS whom they described as “helpful”, “willing to share resources”, and “tremendous partners for a lot of the programs and activities that we have.”

### Purpose of Planning Grants

There seems to be understanding and appreciation of the fact that the purpose of first year's grant is primarily for research on local community/county circumstances and for planning to meet identified (data-based) concerns. Some are aware that even if the SPF SIG money doesn't come through, they can use the research and planning to get other funding. One respondent explained it like this:

It's about giving people time to step back and do the research that needs to be done to see what really are the needs. . . . The mistake that we so often make is we find a grant so we try to develop a program around it whereas this is going to make us develop. . . a sense of what needs to happen and go out and look for funding which is really the ideal model. . . . This is going to give us the time to really plan it out and then when we're done, starting looking for the funds.

On the other hand, some were less clear about first year goals. One respondent asked, “When they use the term ‘a data-driven plan’ . . . what does that mean exactly?” He went on to suggest that providing some sample budgets would help people understand “how this is to play out in the first year.” He was also confused about technical assistance. “They talk about technical assistance, but don't go into very much detail in terms of what will this technical assistance look like.”

## Collaboration

Interviewees appreciated the grant's focus on collaboration, many noting that the SPF-SIG has already resulted in strengthening and broadening the scope of their group's community collaboration. One respondent described the collaborative focus as a "wonderful" departure from the usual "cat fighting . . . over funding . . . with every little agency trying to get a piece of the pie." Another, who admitted that she typically sees the same people at every community meeting, spoke about "venturing out" to new individuals and organizations who are actually "stepping up and coming forward and saying 'hey, look, I want to play with you guys and see what's going on'."

Several expressed concerns about the difficulties of collaborating – especially with groups that are known to do less than their fair share when collaborating. One interviewee commented: "We don't want to exclude any community organizations, but there's always a problem with some . . . as far as what they're getting done and the amount of resources they have. Some may want to tag on that don't really offer that much except that they want to be a part of it."

Also, respondents noted the difficulty of forming new collaborative relationships in such a short time period – in order to meet the January 6 submission deadline. One interviewee identified this – "scrambling during the holiday season to understand what each partner intended and how to come together for the grant application" – as the only problem encountered with the process to date.

Our general sense is that while community members believe collaboration is the best approach, they are fully aware of the difficulty of accomplishing it successfully. For example, one interviewee spoke of collaboration as getting "different agencies to partner together and develop a network and a support system . . . so that what does come out of our meetings is sustainable." She went on, however, to identify several barriers to successful collaboration including making the time in busy schedules to communicate with each other, different understandings of "what collaboration is and what it's supposed to look like", and the challenge of being truly inclusive – not just collaborating with those with whom relationships have been established earlier. Another interviewee concerned about whether there will really be "a *we* in *us*, and a collaborative effort and . . . not just one person running the show and doing what they want to do" commented about the importance of statewide monitoring to make sure the intended (proposed) collaboration was actually happening.

## Regional Learning Opportunities

Community members with whom we spoke viewed the Regional Learning Opportunities (RLO) in various ways. While they clearly did not want to meet for the sake of meeting – "just to put another meeting on their calendar," they

appreciated the opportunities they would have to learn about and from other communities. Also, interviewees hoped that the RLOs would provide direction and cohesiveness – “getting everybody on the same page”- and they requested that sessions be structured around content that is genuinely helpful to communities in writing their grant proposals and designing their programs. One respondent commented that the content should be “pretty specific and it has to be valuable stuff. I go to a zillion meetings and I question the value.” At the same time, some expressed concerns that the sessions might be redundant, featuring content with which they are already familiar. Likewise, one noted that his biggest concern was that a “one size fits all” approach would be taken. These comments suggest that it will be a challenge to develop and implement RLOs that are uniform enough to provide the direction and cohesiveness community members seek and are tailored enough to be genuinely helpful rather than a waste of precious time, money, and energy.