

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

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In order to generate qualitative data for this quarter, we conducted interviews with nine Community Development Specialists (CDS) and three Charleston (aka Edison-based) PRC staff members. Also, we conducted participant-observations of eight SPF SIG-related meetings (listed below). Based on preliminary data analyses, these notes present findings grouped by six topic areas.

- Quarterly Partnership Meeting
- Policies and Procedures Workgroup Meeting
- Regional Learning Opportunity (RLO) Kick-off
- SPF SIG Staff Focus Meeting
- SPF SIG Staff Meeting
- RLO Debriefing Meeting
- Intervention Workgroup Meeting
- CDS Team Meeting

RLO Process/Model

An experiment. Regional Learning Opportunities (RLOs) have been described formally in terms of “assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation” components addressed in a manner consistent with principles of adult learning. As one PRC staff member noted, “for adults to really be engaged in learning, it’s got to be immediately useable; it’s got to be relevant for their lives; they have to participate.” More informally, RLOs were described as a “big experiment” with few parameters and unpredictable outcomes—a fluid and ever-evolving process. Individuals expressed varying degrees of comfort with the process. Most people saw it as an opportunity for learning, and as is often the case with new experiences, felt both excitement and apprehension. Community members may be struggling the most with this approach; several frustrated individuals have asked “to be told what to do.” One interviewee described “county panic” especially among those accustomed to more “traditional grants” and those who “crave more knowledge than we can give.” Such frustration is a concern for some CDSs who worry that it could hinder their relationships and work within their communities. On the other hand, a CDS noted that “if I’m comfortable, I can assist my communities in being comfortable” and “once they get comfortable with it, they’re not going to want to give it up.” Another PRC staff member concurred, commenting that as staff members model the process “some of it’s going to rub off” and communities will then “take it on themselves and adopt it themselves.”

Open participation. Another concern focused on the premise that the RLOs were open to everyone—if new individuals come midway through the year and don't have the benefit of prior RLOs, they might be at a disadvantage in applying for an implementation grant. Perhaps more importantly, having newcomers participate—especially if on a non-regular basis—could detract from the learning and progress of regularly-attending participants by causing RLO time to be spent on catch-up for new or non-regular attendees.

CDS role. All nine CDSs with whom we spoke talked about how the SPF SIG, and the RLOs in particular, are impacting their work with communities. Some saw themselves as a “bridge” between groups as they worked to facilitate county and regional collaboration. The CDSs seem to work in the spaces in-between—between local communities and the WV Partnership, between PRC Edison staff and communities, between counties/communities within each region, and so on. At times, CDSs experience a sense of isolation and disconnectedness, as one noted: “The other thing with the CDS [is that] we're disconnected ourselves. We don't see each other every day . . . and when we do it's only for brief periods of time and we usually have a lot on our plate to talk about.”

Also, CDSs see their SPF SIG roles in terms of trouble-shooting, “putting out small fires” and in terms of moving toward providing more consultation and technical assistance and fewer direct services. This was confirmed by an Edison-based PRC staff member who described the CDSs as “learning facilitators.” Some CDSs view such involvement as requiring a shift in focus. Some anticipated an increase in scheduling conflicts, while others were more sanguine, noting that they would just have to be more selective and not over-extend themselves.

Communication

Face-to-face contact. Communication is a major issue for CDSs who gather once a month for team meetings but who spend a great deal of time on their own and covering big distances in their counties. Face-to-face communication with each other – and with other PRC staff—is a rare commodity and they appreciate it whenever they can get it. While the CDSs recognize that their geographic locations make it difficult to interact face-to-face with other staff, they noted that email communication often leaves something to be desired because it is an “indirect type of communication;” . . . it is sometimes difficult to understand the tone of a message;” and it does not allow for the same quality of dialogue, discussion, and brainstorming that is possible with in-person communications. Also, the nature of the CDSs' jobs is such that they are not always in an office to receive email since they are moving about the counties.

Input. In addition to desiring more direct contact with PRC staff at Edison, CDSs yearn for more input into PRC decision-making, especially when it directly affects their work. One CDS commented that the Edison-based PRC staff “have done a phenomenal

job, but when you're not included in a lot of the decision-making, you don't see what's going on day to day. It does sometimes get frustrating.”

Timing. The timing of communication seems to be particularly worrisome to some CDSs. Several noted that having been more a part of the SPF SIG process from the beginning would have made it easier to promote the project in their communities where they perceive themselves to be “on the front line” to “catch it all whether it’s good, bad, or ugly.” Along the same lines, CDSs were uncomfortable about getting information so late that it left them with little if any time to prepare for presentations or activities in which they were expected to play a role. As one CDS noted, “It’s a last minute “Here it is; go and do.’ I would prefer more input earlier on. . . . It seems like everything has been pushed to the end in getting to us and we have to pick up this ball and run. . . . I’m not disagreeing with what they’re doing; it has just been everything seems to get pushed to the last minute. . . . It just keeps changing. To their credit, they do ask for feedback, but it’s usually so late in the process that I don’t have time to really sit and seriously consider it and have a dialog with anybody.”

PRC Organization/Culture

There was general consensus that the PRC is a unique organization with a culture that emphasizes learning—for itself and the communities with which it works throughout the state. One interviewee said, “We are a learning organization. We’re translating that to the actual communities.” This approach may be valuable for meeting individuals’ needs within the PRC as well in communities, as is evident in the same interviewee’s subsequent comments: “I have never worked for an organization where we have the type of freedom that we have within this organization or do things as fluidly as we do them, and that’s what meets people’s needs.” Another agreed: “I love being at an organization where I can learn, where I can make mistakes, and where they want to be free thinkers.” Others were less enthusiastic; one noted, for example, “There’s no point in stressing out over [how our organization works] because it does work. . . and we just accept that that’s the way it is.”

Non-participation of Mason and McDowell Counties

Several staff expressed disappointment that two counties were not participating in the planning grants. Some seemed to view it as a missed opportunity for capacity-building in non-participating counties. Two commented that it was “a shame” that something couldn’t have been done to prevent this from occurring, especially since this was not a competitive RFP process. Another commented, “I think those two counties not being involved somewhat derails the PRC from its original plan of being a statewide initiative because it is no longer a statewide initiative.” Others felt everything possible had been done to facilitate the applications. A number of factors came into play, but miscommunication may be the main culprit. In Mason County, miscommunication about

which agency was doing the application resulted in missing the January 6 deadline. A request for an extension to submit their application was denied.

Expressed concerns

Expectations for funding. In addition to those mentioned as part of the above categories, several themes cropped up as concerns. One concern is related to the eventuality that communities who participate in the RLOs all year may not be funded. Even though staff is informing communities about the purpose of the planning grants and the possibility of not receiving a SPF SIG implementation grant, some staff anticipate major disappointment for communities who work hard and have high hopes for funding. One CDS noted, “That’s going to really upset a lot of folks. I think it’s going to be a major, major problem for us in the field who have to continue these relationships. At that point, it has the potential for disaster.” A related concern was if non-participating organizations apply for the grant and receive the funding instead of those going through the year-long planning process. On the other hand, one PRC staff member shared what a community member said about future funding at the RLO kick-off: “It doesn’t matter if we get funded or not; by the time we get this done, we’re going to have the best document we’ve ever had to try and get other funding.”

Resistance. Other concerns were about community resistance. One interviewee recommended that the PRC “speak a universal language and be consistent” as a way to prevent and reduce resistance to the process. “We have to be consistent and give it time for the whole process to occur. To change our task would be a mistake.” This view was shared by another staff member who commented, “Any time you do anything different, you’re going to get a lot of resistance. It’s people’s nature to look at things that way, and usually what becomes tough for people is to weather that resistance and not take it personally – but just kind of keep plugging away.”

Engagement. One PRC staff member’s main concern was the possibility that community members would not actively engage in the process. He said, “We’ve tried to set this up to be . . . engaging and supportive and open to people . . . not only being influenced by the process, but influencing the process. If they don’t participate and don’t engage in it, *we’ll* . . . lose because we won’t have their participation, but *they’ll* lose also from just staying isolated from it.”

Reimbursements. Several staff noted the problem of organizations being unable to serve as lead agency for the grant because of the up-front funding required. Organizations with small operating budgets may not be able to cover expenses while waiting for reimbursement from the planning grant. One person suggested some type of “buffer” fund or an expedited reimbursement policy. Also, two CDSs indicated that community members were concerned about the amount of paperwork required (12-14 pages) for even a small monetary reimbursement that was slow in coming.

Excitement

Many interviewees expressed excitement and optimism about the SPF SIG and its potential for learning, for forming new and stronger community and regional partnerships, for building community capacity generally, and for sustaining outcomes and processes. A sampling of comments follows.

- “I’m just excited to be part of it. . . . I love the building capacity issue.”
- “This thing’s got tremendous potential for huge gains and huge successes.”
- “[I’m] looking forward to data-driven decision making and then looking at the data in five years down the road to see if we’ve made a difference.”
- “[I’m] excited to see the data in front of me, [and will be] excited to have those plans at the end of the year.”
- “[I’m] excited that people are going to learn the components of putting together a group and then how to sustain that group.”