

Notes from the Field
SPF-SIG
July, 2006

External Qualitative Evaluation Team
Linda Spatig, Anne Swedberg, and Paula Flaherty

SPF-SIG Size and Scope

SPF-SIG is truly big! The size and scope of this multi-tiered project is remarkable, with many activities going on across the entire state. As the project has grown exponentially, it has become more difficult for us to “cover” everything, especially in a very deep or thorough way. During this quarter we collected data in all four regions of the state. We observed ten meetings including Community Development Specialist (CDS) debriefing meetings, Regional Learning Opportunities (RLOs), Prevention Resource Center (PRC) staff meetings, and WV Partnership workgroup meetings. We interviewed participants in four regions, including four CDSs, 15 project directors, and three community coalition members. We asked people about their SPF-SIG experiences and perceptions, seeking especially to understand their concerns and suggestions. This report is based on preliminary analysis of the 286 pages of observation notes and interview transcripts from this quarter.

SPF-SIG is different. It is generally understood that this is a different kind of grant—one that, unlike most other grants, emphasizes learning and planning based on data/evidence about community strengths and needs. Some view this difference favorably. As one project director put it, "I would explain it as different, but it's a good different because just being told to do something sometimes is difficult, but being able to learn what the community wants and build upon that is going to make a bigger difference." Many commented on how much they were learning, and many expressed appreciation for the county-level data that were available. One project director described the process so far as "a wonderful learning experience. . . . My personal philosophy is to never stop learning. . . . It appears that the people at the PRC are looking for ways to help us learn."

On the other hand, there is confusion, frustration, and skepticism about the process as well. One project director commented that "the process is what's wonderful about it, but in terms of how people have always done things it's counterintuitive and I think that is very, very frustrating for a lot of organizations - to not be told the end picture." Another project director identified people's lack of understanding as a SPF-SIG challenge: "That's what I see as the biggest barrier - not understanding this model and being critical. People are critical of things they don't understand." Interestingly, this project director was very supportive of the model because of its emphasis on community development and foundation-building.

I'm a firm believer in foundation. . . . If you . . . build a solid foundation, you're pretty much limitless as to where you can go. A lot of times people don't put forth that effort initially into the foundation and we pile all these wonderful

services and projects and funding on top of fractured foundations and then we wonder why they don't come to fruition.

Because of her strong commitment to the model she handled skeptical reactions from community members firmly and directly, as she describes below:

People roll their eyes. You just see the reaction, and I . . . said, "That's the typical reaction. A year of planning - what a waste of my taxpayer's dollars. But in essence, in the long run it's the best investment of your taxpayer's dollars because if we get really clear on what the needs are in the county we can go ahead and strengthen the existing programs for the youth in this county and for the people in this county. That's what the year of planning can give us instead of starting up another project . . . and then it goes away."

A coalition member with substantial grant experience and deep community ties in another county - one with particularly pressing needs - also expressed skepticism about the SPF-SIG model, describing it as having "so many hoops" in comparison to other grants that he wondered if it was worth putting scarce community resources into it.

SPF-SIG is varied. There are physical and demographic variations across counties in terms of size, rurality, terrain, population density, and so on. Also, there are substantial differences in the level of skills, knowledge, and experience among participants, both across and within counties. Some project directors have extensive training and experience with grant-writing, community organizing and development, and/or prevention-related work. Others are newcomers to this type of work. As one project director noted, "There are people who I think are very highly skilled and have kind of stepped into the process without skipping a beat and I think there are some people who are absolutely lost in what they're trying to accomplish and how they're trying to accomplish it."

Further, some project directors were hired at the beginning of the year, but others were hired recently and, having already missed the RLO kick-off as well as subsequent meetings, are struggling.

You have project directors who have been on since day one and then we go to the meeting in May and we have a project director who is just starting. . . . It's tough because you have different project directors at such different areas of even learning what they're talking about. . . . We go over things over and over in a meeting. . . because everybody's at different levels. (Project Director)

Another project director, noting the same problem, suggested the PRC assist project directors who come into the process late.

I'm seeing some real struggles with people that are just coming into the process in terms of new project leaders. . . . They're really struggling and I don't think they're going to be able to rely on . . . other project directors to bring them up to speed. I certainly don't have the time to do that because I'm trying to carry out all of my other things so I think that's maybe where the PRC needs to step up a little bit more and do an orientation with those folks.

The variably-experienced project directors are working in counties with differing levels of prior collaboration. Some project directors walked into strong, pre-existing county coalitions or partnerships – sometimes drawing close to a hundred community members to meetings, while others started from scratch – lucky to get four or five individuals to attend a meeting. One project director described her county coalition as “very new. It was implemented at the beginning of the [SPF-SIG] grant so it’s all brand new for our county. We’re building the coalition at the same time that this whole thing [SPF-SIG] is being done.”

Regional Learning Opportunities

Comments about the Regional Learning Opportunities (RLOs) were overwhelmingly positive, with people describing them in such glowing terms as “excellent,” “perfect,” “fantastic,” “brilliant,” “helpful,” “fun,” and “informative.” Many spoke about how much they were learning - about the SPF-SIG, about grant-writing, and about their own counties – especially from the data provided and from sharing with other communities. A project director particularly enthusiastic about the grant-related resources commented, “The PRC’s website has been great. And the information they have on there has been really helpful. The county data that we’ve gotten has been great because we don’t have to go out. . . . That’s already compiled for us. And that’s been really helpful. And I think just the PRC staff are extremely helpful.”

Not unlike the variations across project directors and community collaboration discussed above, variations in RLO facilitation also exist. For example, we noticed that an RLO session that was a bit more tightly-structured and directed than some of the others seemed to be particularly productive and enjoyable for participants. The session was high-energy with little down-time. The CDSs were able to “connect the dots” for participants. Moreover, we noted the “unabashed passion and participation of the CDSs, project directors, and community members. . . . [The CDS] presentation was short and sweet. . . . [but] the conviction and commitment . . . from so many people . . . [and] the networking and thoughtful discussion . . . [seemed] truly useful to the participants.” (RLO fieldnotes).

Project directors also spoke about the knowledge and encouragement they gained from interactions with individuals from other counties:

I’ve learned a lot. . . . listening to the other ones talking and you can relate to it because it makes you feel better that other people are having the same problems. Sometimes I get overwhelmed and I hear other people talk and it’s like, “Oh well, I’m not doing so bad after all.” So it really helps that you can ask them . . . [and] they give their opinion and what they’re doing in their [community coalition] meetings.

Suggestions for RLO modifications addressed both process and content. Process suggestions related, for the most part, to timing and pacing. While some RLO sessions (such as the one described above) were briskly-paced, there were quite a few complaints

about the pace of some RLOs as slow, as the following interview excerpts illustrate:

I think everybody's really eager to get to the meat and potatoes of the whole deal. We want to identify the problems and I think there's a bit of concern that things are moving so slowly. It just seems like they're moving slowly.

I really hope they pick up this pace because I went through all that material prior to coming to the RLO. . . . I just like to come prepared. . . . All that information that they presented was available to me prior to [the meeting].

I'm just ready to move on because I feel like we've been working on this. . . grant narrative. . . like a four month long process. I'm used to doing it in a shorter amount of time. So I've almost felt like that part could have been sped up a little bit. I'm definitely ready to go on.

Several project directors suggested changing to half-day RLOs, but others offered ideas about modifying the full-day sessions. One director, who believes each RLO is better than the last, suggested tweaking the pacing and organization of the sessions:

I do have one critique and that is the time that is given. . . . I just am very careful of people's time and I think there's a lot of time at that meeting that could be used more productively. . . . Maybe they should have given questions . . . so we could talk about these things [over lunch]. . . . Maybe they've worked out starting on time. They were starting a little bit late. . . . I think, too, that more time could be used on the homework assignment. The second part of the meeting, they give you the new data set and give you time to work on that and process it and that seems always rushed, and the first part of the meeting is the portion of the meeting that tends to have all of this free time. . . . I think that it should be shortened and the latter part of the meeting lengthened. It would give more people time to look at the data, see where their county falls in, see the discrepancies and then share it with other counties and have that discussion.

Another project director who would like more RLO time spent on cross-county discussions noted:

I . . . like actually the homework assignments that we've had and the data. That has really helped, especially for people who don't know where to start in their community. . . . But I think that we spend so much time discussing those aspects that we don't really get to hear what other coalitions are doing. There's really no moment where we say, "So what are you doing in your community?" I think some of those things definitely do unfold in the discussion that happens in the small tables, but we don't always get a chance to hear exactly what activities are happening or aren't.

Suggestions for changes or additions to RLO content were less numerous. One project director mentioned a lack of attention to data on seniors:

We're probably one of the oldest states in the nation so we need to consider that. .

. . . We don't have a lot of data on our senior population, and . . . we're to look from womb to tomb. It seems that all of the conversations always come back around the adolescents even though what I perceived in the consequence data is we're having more trouble consequentially with our adults than with our youth. . . . but the discussion is always about youth because that's where the data directs you.

Another project director wanted more focus/information on the gaps between needs and available services in each county. Aware that such information may not be readily available, she stressed the importance of locating or developing an instrument to assess gaps between needs and services as well as redundancies in services – across the state. For this project director, this is an important missing piece of the county prevention picture – and from the RLO content.

Also, participants expressed an interest in learning more about coalition-building per se, since that is such an integral part of the SPF-SIG model. One project director said, “I guess what I look to hear in a lot of the RLOS – and maybe that's coming down the line - . . . is more about how do you build partnerships in a community. We're doing a lot of statistical analysis, but when you get down to it, how do you take a diverse group of people and find some common thread that [motivates] them to work together?” Another talked about communities learning about coalition-building from each other: “There are networks all across the state that should be talking to each other. And if there's one county or one region that's going gangbusters, what's their secret that the rest of us need to know about?”

A more general content-related concern that surfaced several times over the quarter was a desire for more flexibility in terms of what issues could be addressed as part of the RLO sessions. One project director described a recent RLO session:

There was a subject brought up and someone wanted to know. . . can we cover this in our future RLO and the answer was probably not because we are so locked in to what is to be covered in future RLOs to keep ourselves. . . where we need to be in the process and we don't have time at RLOs to add anything. I don't know if I like that answer. . . . [If] we as [county] partnerships identify needs that are not being addressed in the RLOs they need to be addressed in some other format.

Coalition-Building:

Some successes. During this quarter, there has been considerable attention given to coalition-building at the county level, on efforts to get the “right” people to the table and engage them in meaningful ways in the process. As one project director explained: “It's important to have a representative coalition. . . . People who are in recovery have really been invited and sitting next to people who are on the other side of prevention working together. . . . I think that is key – the initial people that were on the coalition were the type of people that were involved in several organizations and were not shy about reaching out . . . to bring people in.”

As mentioned above, the coalition-building process varies across the counties. In some counties – both small and large, urban and rural – the strong history of prior collaboration among individuals and groups is an enabling factor for project directors. One director reported receiving “very positive support from the various community organizations. That hasn’t been a problem. . . . I just haven’t had any resistance with that whatsoever. . . . They [coalition members] are interested. They’re motivated.”

Another project director talked about how she went about strengthening and broadening an already-existing coalition.

I beat the streets. I called everybody who was on the list. . . There were 12 people on our list; I met with seven of them before the next meeting, face to face. I reached out. I made a group email list. I sent them information. I really worked hard on establishing rapport in those first twenty-some days before our next meeting. It worked because our room was over-crowded for that May meeting. . . . I really focused on, put a lot of energy into developing the rapport, getting clear with the new folks, bringing the new folks on. . . . I asked them, ‘What’s your vision for this project in this county? What role do you see yourself or your agency playing in this project?’ I think if you just respect people and ask them what their vision is, then they start to share. Instead of me going in and just providing information, I was *gathering* information. . . and they responded well.

Another project director who primarily uses email to communicate with coalition members, spoke about a “community of the computer. . . . It’s been the way I’ve been able to keep people updated and informed. . . . I’m seeing what that can do to hold an organization together. It’s been instrumental; it’s been vital.”

Some communities are involving youth in a variety of innovative ways. In one county, a partner who heads up a youth council attends SPF-SIG meetings and “brings different kids to the partnership meeting every time she comes. . . . And then they get excited.” In at least two other counties, focus group interviews were conducted with diverse groups of young people, including “alternative education” students. In yet another county, young people played a major role in a local community forum by leading the group in a World Café style discussion using questions developed by coalition members and edited by the young people.

[Our CDS] had trained the kids on how to do table facilitation, and so they were actually the ones asking the questions and writing. . . . At first . . . they were shy to come up and talk on the mic. . . but towards the end you saw them just walk right up and talk. . . . Everyone said that it was just great to see how much the kids took ownership of this. (Project director)

The same project director also spoke about the importance of making connections with young people who are not the ones typically “involved in everything else.” To accomplish this, she and other coalition members got permission from a local school principal to talk with kids during school lunch. “He was able to give us a room. . . so we were able to get kids involved that probably wouldn’t have been if they had had to rely on rides. . . so it’s great to be able to get a more rounded perspective. And just to see

those kids, their self esteem grow, too, as they were able to be a part of something.”

There is also evidence of cross-county collaboration, such as that described by a CDS who observed a conversation between two individuals from distant parts of the region who were together at an RLO.

Those two were talking out loud and . . . they were exchanging information as to “How do you go about finding out such and such”. . . So you had one representative from one end of the region networking [with someone] from the farthest [other] end of the region. That told me this bridging was occurring. It’s not just within counties, it’s between counties and also among the regions. . . There’s this invisible lattice-work that’s already occurring and that’s exciting.

Some Challenges. For some project directors, it has been difficult to go beyond getting people to sign a piece of paper and attend a meeting, and engage them in the actual work of the coalition. As one project director noted, “We brought them to an overall meeting. . . Last meeting it was fewer but still acceptable. . . That’s the part of it that I think is the big unknown is whether – except for a small what I call working group - [people will get] involved in the details. . . That’s where we are right now. I hope it [the working group] just grows, but who knows.” A CDS, concerned about increasing the level of collaboration in communities, contrasted county partnerships that “look good on paper” with those truly engaged in the collaboration.

Several project directors spoke about the difficulty of involving partners beyond the heads of local agencies. As one project director noted, “I really wanted to broaden . . . my coalition to get a better cross-section of the community involved. . . We need more community members maybe at the grassroots level.” Along the same lines, another project director said, “We’re trying to get a better mix. We’d like to not see the same people involved with the same stuff all the time but get a true participation of more citizens of the community. . . That’s hard. . . in any community.”

In other counties, lack of prior collaborations and even outright conflict among county residents/activists are barriers to building SPF-SIG coalitions. One CDS described the “sad” situation in one county where “they can’t pull those partners together. . . The only thing [the project director] hasn’t completed yet is [their] organizational assessment, and that is because there’s not a partnership.” Even where there is not overt community conflict, coalition-building is a struggle in some counties. One project director said, “I would say the biggest [roadblock] is pulling in a lot of partners. . . It’s just hard to pull people in for one big meeting [and] . . . keeping the people involved. You might pull them in for this meeting or that meeting, but keeping them involved throughout the entire process.”

Changing CDS Roles

As the SPF-SIG continues to grow and change, CDSs’ roles in the project continue to grow and shift—faster than some expected. Clearly, CDSs view SPF-SIG as a major part of their job responsibilities – “right up there as . . . a top priority” – as one

CDS noted. Another commented that SPF-SIG had “brought us [CDSs] to a new level and a higher level within the community . . . which is a good thing.”

On the other hand, at least one CDS worries that spending so much time with the SPF-SIG is problematic in that it leaves out people who need services but are not SPF-SIG partners. Also, CDSs are experiencing job-related anxiety, speaking of “rushing like mad,” “getting on our running shoes,” “putting in overtime,” being “extremely busy,” and feeling “behind,” “too tired to care,” and “burned out.” One CDS who is trying to keep a “thumb on the pulse of the counties” noted: “The volume of phone calls that I’ve been making to all of my counties has probably tripled—I’m not exaggerating on that. . . . I do a lot of teleconferencing.”

Interestingly, one CDS spoke about the importance of “buffering” stresses on the Edison-based PRC staff because they are “under their own stressors as far as what they do pertaining to the grant. . . . They [Edison-based PRC] have been so supportive for us out in the field—we thought ‘Okay, this is our way of reciprocating.’” Another CDS spoke appreciatively about the RLO debriefing meetings for CDS, noting how those sessions brought the CDSs much closer.

Project directors’ comments about CDSs were generally very positive, with many expressing appreciation for CDSs’ assistance and support. One project director described her CDS as “great to get in touch with. I know she’s very busy but she is always available to answer any questions that I have and has been very helpful.” Another project director spoke of being “really impressed” with the CDS and other PRC staff: “They have been the biggest help. If they don’t know the answer to a question, they find it. We’re never in the dark. They follow up on everything in a timely fashion. They don’t make us wait forever and have to call back and follow through with them. They’re even better about keeping us on track than we are!”

There were a few requests for greater CDS involvement and assistance. One project director, for example, talked about “miscommunication” with her CDS and a desire for the CDS to be more closely involved, to attend some county coalition meetings, and to meet face to face to talk.

Final Thoughts

One thing we notice in reviewing data from this quarter is the way developments at the regional and county levels seem to parallel the development of the statewide partnership during the planning year. In addition to the obvious similarity of focus on planning and learning, we see parallel concerns with getting stakeholders to the table and engaging them actively in the collaboration process. We see efforts to recruit/involve non-traditional stakeholders such as grass-roots community activists and youth – just as was true for the partnership during the planning year. We see parallel coalition-building resulting from prior personal and professional relationships as well as from direct, explicit attempts to build rapport, respectful dialog, and clear communication among participants.

Also, we note seemingly parallel tensions and uneasiness about organizational structure. At the state level, this uneasiness focused on establishing the roles of, and relationships among, the partnership, the PRC, and the governor's office; at the county level the task seems to be to sort out the roles of, and relationships among, project directors, local coalitions, CDSs, and fiscal agents.

Finally, we note similarities in the experiences of the SPF-SIG staff actually implementing the project. During the planning year, it was the Edison-based PRC staff who shouldered a heavy burden of work, responsibility, and stress. As the project activity has moved out to the regional and county levels, so too has the work and anxiety of staff.