

Notes from the Field
SPF-SIG
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External Qualitative Evaluation Team
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Progress Report on our Activities

Linda conducted a preliminary analysis of RLO-related data generated as of August, 2006, and wrote a summary report of findings that was included as part of the application for Phase II implementation monies from CSAP. The report was e-mailed to partners last week.

Our *Eyes on the Process* article about the WV Partnership's formation and planning year is still under review with the *Journal of Community Practice*.

We submitted a proposal for a presentation about using qualitative research methods for program evaluation to the Appalachian Studies Association, an interdisciplinary, national professional organization dedicated to the study and support of the Appalachian region. The proposal is under review at this time. Partner Jean Ambrose, PRC director Wayne Coombs, and Kim Cowley (MU doctoral student and former member of the external qualitative research team) are collaborating with us on this.

Anne completed a partial draft of an article about the PRC as an example of an organizational learning community. This manuscript picks up where the *Eyes on the Process* paper leaves off – with the importance of understanding what is involved in administering a statewide initiative such as the SPF-SIG, especially in terms of the lived experiences of staff in this kind of organization. We hope that Diane Wellman, and perhaps other PRC staff, will collaborate with us on this work.

Paula completed a draft of her dissertation proposal which is a study of the RLOs (Regional Learning Opportunities) as an instance of place-based pedagogy with adults. She is collaborating with Edison-based PRC staff, Community Development Specialists, Project Directors, and coalition members in this work which is expected to be completed by May, 2007.

Paula and Anne generated new data for this quarter including observations of four RLOs and an RLO debriefing meeting, seven county coalition meetings, a partnership retreat, a work group meeting, and a site visit. In addition, they conducted four individual or focus group interviews with PRC staff, project directors, and county coalition members. Based on these new data, the Notes from the Field for this quarter address three issues that have emerged: (1)

understandings about Phase II implementation funding, (2) growth across county partnerships, and (3) PRC staff roles in RLOs.

Phase II Funding Responses

We have observed changes in participants' understandings about and responses to Phase II implementation funding that may not be available for their counties. In one region, the views of some project directors who were pessimistic about the sustainability of county coalitions that were not funded for Phase II changed dramatically over the course of the quarter. In a focus group interview in early August project directors made these comments:

I know people sit here and say, "Yes, these projects are going to continue if I don't get an implantation grant." [But] I'd be very surprised six months down the road if they are continuing. Yes, you have a plan. It's in all likelihood going to sit on somebody's shelf.

I agree with that and I believe . . . there will be nothing new started because there's not going to be any money to do it, but that plan – that wonderful plan – that you have is going to sit. . . . You're going to have a wonderful plan but because nobody has the time nor money to do anything with it; it will become outdated and you're just throwing your money down a rat hole.

By the end of September, project directors from the same region were singing a different tune. In an RLO session in the last week of the month, a project director who had earlier stated emphatically that his county coalition would not continue because he wouldn't be there after year one, said, "We're going ahead with this no matter what!" He went on to talk about plans for a regional coalition that could share costs. Likewise, another project director spoke about how her county's efforts would continue whether or not they receive implementation funding. She described utilizing talents and connections to build support for the coalition's work and was emphatic that the group would continue. She knew there would not be a project director giving 20 hours a week if he or she wasn't employed, but believed that coalition members were committed enough to each take a piece of the work next year so they could continue to go forward.

What is responsible for such dramatic changes in outlook? We cannot make direct statements about causation, but observation data from the same region over this period of time may provide some insight into the changes in perspective. Beginning early in August, we noticed considerable direct attention given to encouraging counties to continue their coalitions with or without SPF SIG funding. In fact, it seemed that the Community Development Specialists (CDSs) *expected* as much. At an RLO meeting one CDS complimented participants and their community work, saying, "My sense is that many of your county partnerships are really getting it . . . and I have observed the strength of people to connect." The small group discussions that followed these

comments focused on two questions: (1) What have you learned so far that you can use beyond this process? and (2) How we can build our local partnerships so they are sustainable? (If your county does not receive an implementation grant where else might you seek funding for your community wide prevention plan?)

In response to the first question, project directors identified what they had learned about who should be at the partnership “table” and the importance of a broad range of participation; the need for efforts to build awareness of drug-related community problems; and how to write grants using real – rather than hypothetical – information. When one project director, in response to the second question, adamantly stated a desire for implementation money, a CDS reminded him and others in that group that they had strayed from the question at hand and encouraged them to get back to the idea of how we will sustain our efforts in the counties, noting, “Even if you get implementation funding, it will be over in four years.”

Throughout September we heard county coalition members and project directors speaking with increasing optimism about sustaining their partnerships beyond the planning year, even without implementation money from SPF-SIG. And by the end of the month, we heard strong assertions about continuing. At the same time, CDSs continued to express encouragement and high expectations that all counties would continue with their projects. At the RLO at the end of September CDSs spoke about the plan to continue RLOs next year, even for unfunded counties. They talked about how the members of the state partnership “have West Virginia’s best interest at heart,” “really care,” and “asked tough questions” (at the retreat in August). They reminded participants that the regional partnership will still be here next year and that they (CDSs) didn’t know yet if they would be working harder with counties who get grants or those who don’t get them. They urged all counties to start “scrambling for other funds now because your plans will never be funded completely through CSAP funding. Your plans are so comprehensive and wonderful. You need to diversify your funding.”

In this instance (one region we focused on), PRC staff (both Edison-based staff who designed the RLO materials and CDSs who worked directly with participants at the RLO meetings) explicitly focused on sustainability of county coalitions regardless of year two implementation grants. Because they had been a part of the partnership’s decision-making process, CDSs were able to give regional participants clear and convincing explanations. Further, CDSs’ affirmations of the county coalitions and their work, and their reassuring statements about continuing support and assistance at the regional level seemed to enable participants to feel more optimistic about the possibility of continuing their county-level partnerships even without SPF-SIG money.

Growth in County Partnerships

While some county coalitions still seem unfocused and loosely connected, there is noticeable growth in others. In some, both the quantity and quality of participation have improved. In one county, for example, at a meeting earlier in the quarter it seemed the

project director had pre-planned and conceptualized issues rather than having the group members collaborate with her in that process. She moved down the agenda quickly and there was little input from the group. It was more like a “reporting session” than a “collaborative planning opportunity.” Later in the quarter, observations of the same county coalition revealed a different dynamic, with participants who are knowledgeable about their community asking questions, engaging in spirited discussions, and even gently challenging the project director on occasion. Compared to the earlier meeting, it was more collaborative in nature rather than a one-sided delivery of information.

In another county, we heard about progress in handling disagreements among participants. The project director explained that because of strong bonds within the group, members “can be open, they can discuss things, they can disagree about things. . . . They continue to build relationships with other people outside based on things they’ve talked about, but if there are disagreements . . . they seem to have this sense of trust and those kinds of things don’t go outside the meeting.” The ability to frankly and yet collaboratively tackle controversial issues, such as how local law enforcement officers handle instances of underage student drinking, seems an important step toward effective, sustainable prevention.

In a more general sense, we are getting the idea that there is growing hopefulness in some communities. As one PRC staff member said about county coalitions, “The people that I’ve talked to, [in] the coalitions. . . say, ‘We see hope. It’s a baby step process but we have a framework. We can start here and it’s a stepping stone.’” This staff member believed that having knowledge about how to get data and use it to make a case for addressing community problems was enabling some participants, for the first time in a long while, to feel optimistic about possibilities for their communities and about their own potential roles as contributing community members.

PRC Staff Roles

In this final section we return briefly to the issue of how PRC staff members are experiencing their roles in administering the SPF-SIG. The good news here is that staff seems to be of strong spirit and mind, individually and collectively. One CDS, for example, spoke of being “heartened” with the RLO process and about participants’ growing commitment to making a difference with substance abuse in their counties rather than just focusing on getting year two funding. Seeing good things happening in communities and believing that they (PRC staff) are contributing in a positive way to that work seems to enhance their sense of personal and professional self-worth.

Another PRC staff member talked about how the SIG, while difficult and stressful for the organization—increasing staff members’ work loads dramatically, has been good because “everyone has stepped up to the plate,” and as a result, the staff and the organization have grown. One PRC staff member talked about how the grant has “made the CDSs feel more valued in the community; they feel their roles are stronger. . . .

People value them more. So it's been good in that respect." She went on to note that the grant had brought the PRC closer together. This may be a result of pulling together to accomplish a difficult task and also a result of the regular RLO debriefing sessions that have enabled non-Edison staff to interact face-to-face.

An issue the staff is wrestling with, especially in relation to the RLOs and their work with county coalitions, has to do with the extent to which it is acceptable for PRC staff not to be "experts" on content they are discussing with the county participants. As one CDS asked, "How appropriate is it for us to learn and grow in front of the group?" There are varying understandings of this, as another CDS noted: "There is disagreement on our team about this. . . . Does the audience view my learning *with* them as floundering?" This may be an interesting issue to follow, especially if RLOs are a part of the second year implementation.

PRC staff members are still putting out fires and timing is sometimes still a problem with CDSs not getting information and materials soon enough to prepare adequately for the RLO sessions. Perhaps related to those factors, the staff (both Edison-based and field-based) is feeling stressed and exhausted. One CDS spoke of being mentally and physically exhausted and another said that as a group, the CDSs are "speaking. . . from our weariness." In light of this, discussion at the recent RLO debriefing focused on how they (PRC) could best learn from this hard experience, the "need to be patient with the process," and how they could better support each other.