

Opening Session - SPF-SIG Final RLO (Phase I) – Jan 22-23, 2007
Preliminary Analysis of Responses

Submitted by
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1. *What were your expectations about the Regional Learning Opportunities (RLOs) before they began? What were your hopes, beliefs, assumptions?*

Analysis of CDSs' responses: CDS seemed to have a mixture of apprehension and excitement regarding the Regional Learning Opportunities (RLO) before they began. They were excited about the opportunity and “challenge [inherent in learning] something new” and looked forward to “learn[ing] and grow[ing]” together with the county-level participants at the RLOs. At the same time, some Community Development Specialists (CDS) were apprehensive about their own “knowledge of the...subject matter” and “unsure of who [their] audience was going to be and unsure of what the audience’s needs were.”

The CDS seemed split regarding their expectations of the teaching/learning model that would be employed for the RLOs. Some referred to sharing their own expertise and/or information with the participants while others referred to delivery of material that was “given by the PRC.” All in all, they seemed to expect that “partnerships would be formed” and that the PRC/CDS would “grow and become stronger.”

Analysis of Project Directors' Responses: While some Project Directors (PD) came into the RLO process with an open mind and no “preconceived ideas,” many did say that they expected something akin to a “blueprint/guideline” to assist them through the SPF-SIG process. One PD went so far as to say that “we were told that the PRC would hold our hands through the process.” It is clear that many of the PDs expected “step-by-step directions” for each component of the county plan they were to develop with examples of each “so that we could use them as guides.” In addition, many PDs mentioned that they expected more “substance” from the RLO sessions. They expected more opportunities to learn about the SPF-SIG process as well as prevention in general.

A few of the PDs mentioned that they expected “everyone else to know more” than they did regarding “prevention planning.” Above all, the PDs expected to learn about all the components of the SPF-SIG process and how to, in the end, access implementation funding.

Analysis of County Prevention Partners' Responses: The County Prevention Partners (CPPs) who attended the RLOs had expectations primarily related to prevention planning within their own counties and how to access SPF-SIG Phase II funding related to that.

These planning expectations included process-related issues (how do we actually do it?) as well as content-related issues (becoming more familiar with SPF-SIG requirements specifically and prevention generally). One CPP shared that he expected to “learn how best to create and implement strategies and information.” More specifically, the CPPs also expressed expectations of the RLOs related to learning “how to do a data driven grant” and learning “about the hoops we had to jump through to get grant money.”

Another important expectation of the RLOs was related to the CPPs interest in coalition building. They reported numerous times that they hoped the RLOs would help them “initiate,” “build,” and/or “strengthen” prevention partnerships in their home communities.

Lastly, the CPPs fully expected that there would be opportunities for counties to learn from each other through sharing of ideas.

2. How did it actually turn out? What were the RLOs like?

Analysis of CDSs’ Responses: The CDSs reported numerous times that the RLOs were a “learning opportunity” for just about everyone - in one way or another. When describing how the RLOs turned out, they used the word *learning* quite often and in many different ways - “learning together and from each other,” “we were learning too,” and more generally as “fun and educational.”

In relation to their sense that learning was paramount to this process, the CDS reported some significant challenges related to the RLOs, the biggest of which was variability among the participants regarding skills and experience. One CDS reported that the presentation “material that was used did not meet everyone’s needs” and that presented a real challenge especially within an “uncertain and changing” process. Another CDS reported that participants who were more knowledgeable and skilled “did not assist with presenting information and [therefore] were not fully engaged.”

In spite of these challenges, several CDSs reported that relationship building was a positive outcome of the RLOs – through CDSs’ teams “becoming stronger,” “counties working with each other,” and general “relationships formed within the [RLO] group.”

Analysis of Project Directors’ Responses: The PDs’ analyses of how the RLOs actually turned out were varied. There were an equal number of comments that related to the RLOs as being very helpful to the SPF-SIG process as there were comments that described the RLOs as being a waste of time and confusing with no real direction given to the participants. PDs described RLOs as “very helpful,” “informative,” and “useful.” One PD even said that the RLOs were “the most helpful feature of the project.” In a

contrary fashion, other PDs characterized the RLOs as “lots of wasted time,” “not focus[ed] on what we had to do,” and “not a good use of time.”

While it is too early to fully understand these contrasting views, most probably the varied experience, prior knowledge and skill levels, and preferred learning styles of the PDs and CDSs came into play to make the process as well as the content utilized in the RLOs more appropriate and desirable for some than for others.

What seemed to unify both camps was the value everyone placed on the networking that occurred among counties as part of the RLO process. There were numerous comments from PDs that the “great networking” within and between counties allowed folks to “learn from each other and help each other.”

Analysis of County Prevention Partners’ Responses: Again, networking opportunities among the counties surfaced as very important – this time for the CPP members. They indicated that meeting “people interested in prevention,” hearing what other counties were doing, and getting ideas from them was an important part of the RLOs for them. One CPP described the RLOs as a place to “shape ideas”, while “stay[ing] on track” and “learn[ing] the components of the plan.”

In spite of the positive networking experiences, CPPs indicated that there were significant challenges associated with their attendance at the RLOs. They alluded to their “overburdened” schedules and described the RLOs as an “additional load to carry.” This was further complicated by the fact that several of the CPPs viewed the RLOs as “long” and “dragged out,” “a bit disconnected,” and “not as clear as expected.”

3. How would you describe what YOU learned as a participant in the RLOs?

Analysis of CDSs’ Responses: Very prominent in this section were comments by CDS concerning what they learned/observed about teaming and partnerships. One CDS suggested that “networking definitely occurred” among participants at the RLOs and that “counties have taken on a different look due to this process” being transferred to the community level. CDS seemed to come to a new level of understanding of the value of relationships as a “major component of improving and building coalition[s].” One CDS said that he learned through the RLO process that “counties will develop good...partnerships.”

Personal learning was reported by one CDS who said he had become more insightful about individual county needs by gaining new understanding of “different ideas and views on subjects.” Several CDS reported they felt that they were more aware of the uniqueness among the counties and “how different counties addressed problems”. As a result they felt they were better able to apply the SPF-SIG process in multiple settings.

Another important issue that emerged for the CDS was related to the idea of trust. One CDS reported in a general fashion that the RLO experience taught her “to trust the process” while others spoke more specifically about learning to “share experiences in an open and safe manner” and about the value of “building trust with other organizations.”

CDS also reported skill improvement on their part as they learned more about facilitation, grant writing, logic models, and effective use of data.

Analysis of Project Directors’ Responses: Consistent with the dramatic diversity that exists among the SPF-SIG Project Directors, the learning this group reported associated with the RLOs was equally diverse. Highest on their list of things learned were topics associated with RLO content modules: logic models, assessment/evaluation, grant writing/funding opportunities, planning, and SPF-SIG/prevention plan expectations. More specifically, they described receiving, gathering, and assessing the SPF-SIG data as a significant learning opportunity and described it as a window into the needs of their specific counties.

At the same time, they reported they gained an important sense of shared perspective on the process through the networking that occurred as part of the RLOs. They commented that “networking and ideas from others was great” as they learned “what other counties were doing.” They enjoyed getting to “know and become friends with folks with the other counties in [their] region” which allowed them to “brainstorm together” and realize that others were “in the same boat.”

Analysis of County Prevention Partners’ Responses: CPP members reported benefiting a great deal from the networking process inherent in the RLOs. Not only did they gain a new awareness of other counties’ activities, they were also able to “share their own ideas with other counties” and their prevention partnerships. As part of that process, they became keenly aware that other counties had the same concerns and problems as they did.

Building upon the networking concept, the CPPs indicated that their personal learning related to the RLOs was strongly process-based. They reported gaining a better understanding of the value of the shared resources within the group, the fact that “nobody has all the answers” and that counties were “very different in how they approached things.”

One CPP member said that this is “a whole new way to gather information in the preparation of a project.” Supporting that idea, another CPP member said that she learned “ways to research data and information to be used in the future for planning other avenues.”

CPPs reported new learning occurred for them in a variety of content areas: planning, capacity building, team building, program evaluation, requirements for the SPF-SIG process, and “various prevention information.”

4. *If you were on the planning team for the Phase II RLOs, how would you change them? Or would you?*

Analysis of CDSs' Responses: Numerous CDSs suggested a need for more adequate preparation time and “direct input from participants” through making use of county- and regional-based resources. They suggested that outside agencies as well as SPF-SIG staff and/or county participants could be invited to address technical assistance needs. CDSs also suggested that the RLOs be held every other month or the monthly RLOs could be condensed into a shorter time period.

Content-wise one CDS suggested that the Phase II RLOs should continue emphasizing the “necessary steps in implementation” – comprehensive planning, working with data, strategic planning, developing and sustaining a coalition, and evaluation.

Analysis of Project Directors' Responses: The process aspects of the RLOs were paramount in Project Directors' minds when they suggested that future RLOs should be used to “problem solve, share county successes and failures and involve community partners more.” They were very interested in receiving more regular feedback about their progress as part of the process. In terms of the actual format for the day, PDs didn't always agree. Some thought the day should be split between group sharing/learning and “delivery of new knowledge/topics,” while others wanted “more of a training [with] less unfocused talking about what other counties are doing.” Interestingly, a third comment was that the format for the RLOs should not be changed at all.

Several PDs thought that participants in the RLOs should be “surveyed” about their interests and needs and be able to have input into future RLO design so that the RLO content would align with participants' needs. One PD suggested “to change topics to grow as coalitions grow.” They also thought that others should be invited to be presenters in addition to the CDSs.

Timing and scheduling played a big part in how PDs thought about the Phase II RLOs. They warned that the “time constraints of communities” should be taken into consideration and that the RLOs should be shortened to half-day sessions so that there is no wasted time. In line with that, they suggested that future RLOs be more “focused and informative.” One PD suggested that the RLOs include either breakfast or lunch. PDs also wanted RLOs that were “closer to home” and “more accessible” to everyone so that they wouldn't have to drive so far.

PDs indicated that they want more specific and “clear” guidance in the future related to the SPF-SIG requirements. They suggested that this be in terms of more frequent feedback on their work/plans as well as through “samples of the end products.”

Analysis of County Prevention Partners' Responses: CPPs' comments in response to this question were very similar to what the PDs had to say. Content-wise, they suggested that "people [and regions] submit topics and have more input into what the future RLOs will contain." In addition to mandatory SPF-SIG topics, they wanted to see more in-depth coverage of prevention and addiction issues. Other topics that were specifically mentioned were "more help on preparing for the county planning process," "team building activities," and "sharing of model programs."

CPPs agreed with PDs and thought that the RLOs should be shorter, perhaps condensed into half-day sessions. They felt that the Phase I RLOs did "not [contain] enough information to make an entire day" and in some cases the time wasn't used wisely.

The CPPs have a great desire to know exactly what the SPF-SIG grant requirements will be. One CPP suggested that they receive "a diagram of the process or basic skeleton of overview of desired outcomes."