

**Notes from the Field**  
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**WV Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being**

*Qualitative Research Team*  
*Linda Spatig, Paula Flaherty, Karen McComas, and Tracy Wasinger*

The focus of our work this quarter is on the partners themselves—trying to understand their experiences with and perceptions of the WV Partnership. In addition to conducting individual, tape-recorded interviews with 12 partners, we conducted a mixed-method (both numerical and open-ended items) survey of all partners. Nineteen partners responded to the survey.

In the interviews and surveys we tried to get a sense of how partners view the partnership and its work. We asked partners to assess the level of their own involvement in the partnership and to identify benefits and barriers to their involvement. We asked them about the extent to which they are satisfied with their roles and influence in the partnership, the extent to which they believe all partners have a voice in the partnership, and the extent to which partnership decision-making is fair. Also, we asked partners to name and explain what they considered to be strengths or successes of the partnership, their concerns about the partnership, and their visions of the partnership. Since many of the partner respondents have been members of the partnership for several years, we also asked about how their perceptions and experiences have changed over that time.

We learned that for the most part, partners are pleased with the partnership and its work. Quantitative survey results indicate small increases in partners' levels of involvement as well as in their satisfaction with the partnership and their roles within it. We calculated frequencies, percentages, and means for each of the quantitative items. We purposefully did not conduct tests for statistical significance. The sample is too small to expect statistically significant differences between means, but that does not lessen our confidence in the observed numerical trends. This is primarily because of the extent to which the interview and open-ended survey responses are consistent with each other and with the numerical data. The fact that the three sources of data (quantitative survey items, open-ended survey items, and interviews) provide identical or very similar information gives us confidence in the validity of the findings discussed below. A limitation, however, is that it is perhaps the more actively involved partners who participated in the research by completing the survey. This, of course, would tend to skew the results toward the positive, for example by inflating the levels of involvement as well as levels of satisfaction with the partnership and its work generally.

**General Assessment**

Speaking of the partnership generally, one partner said it “is better than what I envisioned . . . beyond my expectations.” Many think the group has made good progress despite early growing pains. For example, one partner said the partnership got off to a slow start

but had grown “in the right direction” and “was a good beginning.” Another was “pleased with how the partnership has matured . . . and come together. . . [and] taken on more responsibility for the grant and its outcomes.” Partners talked about increases in understanding, closeness, comfortableness, and cooperation within the group, one saying that “the partnership represents a community.” Another noted that “silos have been broken down . . . as the partnership has grown and evolved.”

There seems to be a sense that the partnership and its work are important and valuable—that they represent a “huge leap for prevention” in the state. One respondent said, “In the last three to five years, especially with the development of the partnership, we’ve seen a lot more prevention [in the state] which is a good thing. I see that coming from the partnership.” Partners spoke of being proud to be part of the partnership, one commenting that it was a “pleasure and an honor for me to be associated with this diverse group all striving for the same outcomes.” Another spoke of the partnership’s role as “vital and well worth my time commitment.” Partners believe that state level capacity has grown (e.g., by having a structure and some systems in place) and that local level capacity has grown as well (e.g., from the Regional Learning Opportunities and the county prevention plans).

## **Partner Involvement**

### *Levels of Involvement*

Survey results show that ten of the respondents (53%) believe their level of involvement has remained steady over the course of their membership in the partnership; four respondents (21%) believe their level of involvement has decreased; and five (26%) said their level of involvement has increased. Of those whose perceived involvement has stayed the same, four rated their ongoing level of involvement as high (a rating of 4 or 5), four rated their level of involvement as medium (a rating of 3), and two as low (a rating of 1 or 2). The mean level of involvement for the early years is 3.21 and the mean level of involvement currently is 3.42, a small shift in the direction of more active involvement. This is especially encouraging in light of the fact that of the four who reported decreased involvement, one intends to become more actively involved in the future and the other three reported becoming less involved because of new jobs or responsibilities that conflict with their active participation in the partnership rather than any dissatisfaction with the partnership.

### *Benefits and Barriers of Involvement*

Partners identified several benefits of being involved in the partnership. First, their participation benefits them by providing opportunities for networking and collaborating with others in prevention. They particularly noted the benefit of interacting with individuals from such a wide variety of organizations and agencies. The interactions benefit partners because of the new information and knowledge they are able to acquire from discussions with and presentations by other partners as well as the Prevention Resource Center (PRC) staff, and the regional and local community participants who have increasingly been participating in partnership meetings. In addition to the

opportunity to gain new knowledge, partners benefit by having voice in the process. The partnership is a venue in which partners can contribute or provide their own expertise—an opportunity “to utilize some of [my] knowledge,” as one partner put it.

Finally, participating in the partnership is a benefit for some, but not all, partners because of its overlap with their regular job responsibilities. One partner described the partnership as a “mini component of what all of us do anyway” and several partners talked about how each role (their jobs or professional positions and the partnership) reinforces or strengthens the other. One mentioned attending partnership meetings and then “taking back what I learned to my job.”

On the other hand, some partners do not see a close relationship between their own jobs and professional experiences and the work of the partnership. Some of the partners for whom the fit between their jobs and professional experience and the partnership work is not close, view that as a barrier to their active engagement in the partnership. For example, a partner explained his “limited” involvement in the partnership by saying that “a lot of things that go on there [in the partnership] are [about] drugs and alcohol which is not my area of expertise. . . . I don’t have the foundation that a lot of the other people have in there dealing with drugs and alcohol.”

Another barrier to involvement is that many partners are in jobs or positions that are demanding in terms of time, scheduling, and work load. Over half of the partners named this as a constraint on their participation in the partnership. This is particularly difficult for members who do not live or work near Charleston where most meetings are held. Also, one partner expressed a desire to “participate/observe more at the regional level but not having the ability to juggle my schedule to do so.”

Finally, a few people mentioned their confusion or lack of understanding (of the SPF SIG and/or the partnership itself) as a barrier to their participation. This does not seem to be a widespread, current barrier. It was identified as a barrier in the *early* years of the partnership as well as by a few partners who are new to the partnership.

#### *Satisfaction with Role in Partnership*

Ten partners (53%) reported that their satisfaction with their role in the partnership had remained the same throughout the time of their involvement. Seven partners (37%) reported an increase in satisfaction with their roles; one reported a decrease in satisfaction; and one did not answer the question. Of the ten partners whose satisfaction stayed the same, five reported high (ratings of 4 or 5) levels of satisfaction throughout and five reported medium (rating of 3) levels of satisfaction throughout. The mean level of role satisfaction reported for early in the partnership is 3.39 and the current role satisfaction mean is 3.89, a shift in the direction of greater role satisfaction.

Partners spoke favorably about what they perceived as an increase in partners’ willingness to take more of a leadership role in the partnership. One partner explained that “early on we may have been “led” more by PRC staff as we were all uncertain as to

what our roles were/what we were actually trying to achieve.” Likewise, another partner spoke of the shift toward partners taking more responsibility for the group and its work:

I think that staff sometimes ends up making some decisions, especially early on. . . . Sometimes the partnership members just let them make the decisions because it was easier and because we were unsure of our role and purpose. I believe this situation has improved so that the partnership has . . . finally taken more responsibility.

In the same vein, another partner talked about how partner and staff roles had “evolved” over the course of the partnership:

[Earlier] it was a staff-driven initiative, [but] we have started doing more things. At the quarterly meetings we are analyzing situations, we’re making recommendations, and we’re moving forward in that manner. . . . That has been a good growth step to the partnership. The partnership began to engage more and participate more. . . It is always very easy to fall back on staff members. . . [but] you are not building people’s capacity if you’re just doing all of the work for them.

The one partner who reported decreased satisfaction attributed the decrease to the fact that she had to become less involved when her work responsibilities were increased. Overall there seems to be a positive relationship between levels of involvement in the partnership and levels of satisfaction with role. In almost every instance, members who reported active involvement also reported being pleased with the role they play in the group. For example, one partner said that “the more engaged in my workgroup I became I felt my participation [in the partnership] was more meaningful.” Conversely, those who reported lower levels of involvement also reported being less satisfied with their roles.

#### *Satisfaction with Influence in the Partnership*

Thirteen partners (68%) reported that their satisfaction with their own influence in the partnership had stayed the same over the time of their involvement. Five partners (26%) reported increased satisfaction with their influence and one partner (5%) reported decreased satisfaction. The member whose satisfaction decreased was an individual who had experienced a job-related decline in involvement. Of the thirteen whose satisfaction with their influence remained the same, nine reported high (rating of 4 or 5) levels of satisfaction and five reported medium (rating of 3) satisfaction.

The mean rating for satisfaction with influence in the early partnership is 3.53 and for current satisfaction is 3.79. Again, we see a small shift in the direction of greater satisfaction over time of involvement. Also, we noticed the same pattern mentioned above - that those who reported high levels of involvement also tended to be satisfied with their influence in the partnership—though in this case the relationship was not quite as strong in that it did not hold for almost every case.

Partner satisfaction with influence in the partnership seems to be related to efforts that have been made to invite and encourage partners' active participation throughout the history of the partnership, as the following comment illustrates:

Since the first retreat we have been able to be open with our thoughts, concerns, suggestions and these have been listened to by the partnership and staff of PRC. Reflecting back on the numerous meetings both of the partnership and work groups, our influence has to be significant.

Another partner perceived similar opportunities for exerting influence, but emphasized partners' responsibility for taking advantage of those opportunities. He acknowledged that he had "not participated as fully as I might" and as a result, had less influence: "I have the influence that I merit for the level of effort I make."

#### *Satisfaction with Fairness of Partnership Decision-Making*

Thirteen partners (68%) reported that their satisfaction with the fairness of partnership decision-making had remained about the same and six (32%) reported increased satisfaction with fairness. Of those whose satisfaction with fairness stayed the same throughout their involvement in the partnership, 11 reported high (ratings of 4 or 5) levels of satisfaction throughout; one reported medium (rating 3) satisfaction throughout; and one reported low (1 or 2) satisfaction. The mean level of satisfaction with fairness for early in the partnership is 3.95 and for current satisfaction is 4.42. This is a shift in the direction of increased satisfaction with fairness over the course of involvement in the partnership.

Many partners commented about the fairness of partnership decision-making saying, for example, "I think fair and egalitarian processes are in place" and "Everyone seems to have a fair voice when it comes to the decision-making process." Several pointed out that partners themselves must accept responsibility for the extent to which they take advantage of opportunities to exert influence, as the following comment shows:

The way meetings are conducted and the communications between meetings has kept partners apprised and engaged. In my opinion, if anyone feels the process has been unfair, that is probably their own unwillingness to read the materials and attend and participate during our meetings. The opportunity to be part of the decision-making process is there but one must take advantage of it.

#### *Extent to Which All Partners Have a Voice in Partnership*

This question elicited the highest survey ratings. Sixteen partners (84%) reported that partner voice had remained the same throughout the partnership; two reported that partner voice had increased; and one reported a decrease. Of those who reported that the level of partner voice had stayed the same throughout the partnership, a strong majority (14 of the 16) reported high levels (rating 4 or 5) of partner voice throughout and the other two reported medium levels (rating 3) of partner voice throughout. The mean for partner

voice for the early partnership is 4.21 and for current partner voice is 4.32, a small shift in the direction of greater partner voice. One partner spoke about this increase generally, saying, “I think the partners as a whole have . . . found our voice.”

Some partners noted that it can be difficult to participate actively in the large quarterly meeting sessions. For example, one partner talked about the “anonymity in a big group. . . . You can just sit there and even if you have something to say sometimes it is easier just to sit there.” Several emphasized the importance of small group break-out sessions at quarterly meetings and of work group membership as helpful in enhancing participation in partnership discussions and decision-making.

Also, partners acknowledged that it is their own responsibility to take advantage of opportunities to voice their views:

If I choose to speak, I have the opportunity to do so. . . . If I choose not to that is a decision I have made. . . . Partnership decisions may not always be the ones I want; but I have the ability to voice my concerns, suggestions, and recommend actions.

The relatively high scores in this category, as well as in the fairness category above, may be related to partners’ favorable assessment of the leadership exercised by the current partnership chair. A partner complimented “Mr. Lacy [who] has done a good job of trying to quiet the most vocal and encourage broad-based participation.” Another partner agreed that “Mike is real sensitive to making sure everybody does have an opportunity to speak, that nobody . . . dominates.” Likewise, a partner commented, “The meetings are very well run,” specifically noting that “everybody is given the opportunity to not only participate but to lobby for what they’re wanting out of the partnership.”

### **Partnership Strengths and Successes**

Partners expressed positive views of the partnership and its work generally, as discussed in the first section of the report. In addition, they specifically identified numerous partnership successes or strengths that we grouped into three categories—the formation of the partnership itself and establishment of state-level processes; the development of local community capacity; and the PRC staff and the effective system of internal partnership communication it maintains.

#### *Partnership Formation and Process-Establishment*

Partners view the partnership formation itself, by bringing together a diverse group of individuals and organizations involved in prevention-related work throughout the state, as a major success. They are particularly pleased with the sustained engagement of a “core membership,” as one partner described it. Partners also noted an increase in partner teamwork and commitment over the life of the partnership.

Several partners spoke favorably about the relatively recent participation of regional and community representatives in the group, as well. The participation of local community representatives allows partners to “hear first hand what is going on,” and, according to some partners, has “spawned more interest and . . . debate” at quarterly meetings. For one partner, the increased participation of Community Development Specialists (CDSs) is “one of the strengths of our process . . . Their reports at the meetings . . . really bring it home [about] what’s happening out there in the real world. I think [it] is real important.”

Also, partners spoke favorably about the partnership’s growth organizationally, with the construction and modification of by-laws, formation of work groups, periodic retreats, regular quarterly meetings, and the focus on data-driven decision-making throughout. One partner wrote that the partnership was “a bit disorganized originally (as may be anticipated) but now . . . has VASTLY more organization . . . and seems to be moving forward.” In a similar vein, another partner spoke favorably about the partnership’s organizational growth, noting that “the procedures for operations have been clarified and better established.” Another commented, “As we have become more formalized in how we make our decisions, the process seems to be more consistent.”

Partners attribute the organizational growth to PRC staff as well as to strong partner leadership provided by the chair, as the following comment illustrates: “Management is real important to me, along with planning and communication, and . . . [the PRC is] a great example of how to do things.” This partner went on to praise partnership chair, Mike Lacy, who runs an “excellent” meeting: “They’re streamlined. They’re in and out. . . I truly enjoy going to those things. The information we get prior to the meetings, we get on time. So I give it very high marks. . . I try to [learn from] the way Mike Lacy runs this group. Another partner commented, “As chair of an organization, things either get done because your chair can manage that or can’t. Mike has done a good job with that.” Other partners described Mike’s work as chair as “excellent,” “great,” “strong,” even “awesome,” and several mentioned a desire for him to continue in the position.

Finally, partners noted the partnership’s success in obtaining funding (SPF SIG) and developing a “granting process” and “setting up a system for getting prevention dollars to communities . . . I definitely feel like we are accomplishing things.” Another partner agreed, saying “[It’s] really starting to make a difference.”

### *Local Capacity Development*

Partners are pleased with what the partnership has achieved at the regional and local community levels, especially through the Regional Learning Opportunities (RLOs) and the distribution of SPF SIG monies for planning and implementation grants. They spoke favorably about the data-driven county comprehensive prevention plans. For one partner, the “greatest success” of the partnership to date is “actually having county strategic plans and putting the grant funds in the hands of the communities to implement those plans.” One partner, in speaking about the same thing, referred to the importance of “local capacity building.”

Several partners expressed concerns about how community participants are doing. One partner said, “We need more information from recipients” and another expressed a desire also to know how unfunded counties were doing. One partner emphasized the importance of that information in assessing partnership accomplishments: “To get a fair assessment, for me to. . . say confidently [that] what we did was completely right, we need to hear about the people who were the recipients.”

### *PRC Staff*

Many partners talked about the capable, well-educated, and dedicated PRC staff as a strength, a key element in the partnership’s successes to date. One partner spoke about the PRC’s strong role in guiding the partnership as well about how that role had shifted, as discussed above:

[A strength is] the commitment of PRC staff to guide us through this process as they too were learning with us. They had to stay steps ahead of us to accomplish this. . . . Staff continue to do an excellent job in presenting/educating us with the needed information; but the members [partners] I believe are now comfortable with “taking charge.” I also feel there is a partnership with the staff.

Partners are particularly pleased with the system of internal partnership communication established and is maintained by PRC staff. One partner said, “I think the staff does a very good job of getting . . . things out to us in a timely manner and keeping us updated on what’s going on and giving us a heads up as things come along.” Similarly, another partner commented: “The reports are shared. . . . Communication [about] everything is sent back out to us. If you don’t have it, it is your fault because whoever is in charge of that does a great job of getting everything back to us.”

Partners also praised the Community Development Specialists (CDSs) for their SPF SIG contributions. One partner recalled the favorable impressions of CDSs she formed at a partnership retreat:

I was extremely impressed with them [CDSs] at the retreat. . . . I found them highly knowledgeable about their subject matter. . . [and] about the communities they’re working with. I found them very skilled. . . . They also had a little heart going with all the other kind of good things they did. . . . I was. . . awed by the competence and commitment and the learning that had gone on and the ability to communicate that.

Another partner spoke of the pre-SPF SIG network of CDSs in West Virginia as an “advantage” over other states with incentive grants: “That’s a real strength. . . to our SPF SIG process. I don’t know how you would do it in a state where you . . . give out 20 grants to 20 different entities and not have a whole lot of coordination between them.”

Whereas partners appreciate the valuable role played by the PRC, they seem to agree that it is important to continue what they perceive as a gradual shift from PRC to partner

leadership of the partnership. One partner, for example, named “over-reliance on PRC to provide direction and leadership” and “reliance on Community Development Specialists” as concerns about the partnership.

### **Concerns about the Partnership**

While partners are generally pleased with the partnership and their roles within it, they expressed several concerns about the partnership—identifying some as concerns in the early life of the partnership and some as ongoing or more recent concerns. Overall, it appears that partner concerns have shifted over time. Earlier concerns about “getting it” (trying to understand the planning grant and then the SPF SIG) and building the partnership have taken a back seat to current concerns about sustaining the partnership after the SPF SIG ends—“life beyond SPF SIG,” as one partner put it.

Partners reflected on earlier times in the partnership when they were concerned about establishing a partnership identity and trusting each other enough to work effectively together as a group. They also recalled concerns about disorganization and lack of focus in the partnership, the slow pace in the planning year, and the low level of partner engagement. For many partners, these concerns are no longer issues, or at least not as pressing as they were earlier. For example, a partner who said that his earlier concern was “no clear direction,” wrote: “That view has completely changed. We still have our challenges, but I get more of a sense of purpose now.”

There continues to be some concern about partners who are less than actively engaged. As one partner put it, “I think the partnership is still struggling, to some extent, in [getting] the full engagement of all members.” Also, partners spoke about moving from concerns about getting the “right people around the table” and engaging them in the process to concerns about the extent to which partners are willing to go to the next level of trust and collaboration. For one partner, “moving to the next phase . . . includes [partners] divulging more information on their state agency finances and possible merging of those funds to support [a] substance abuse prevention system statewide.” Another partner, in referring to the same idea, talked about finding ways that “we can blend and braid the funding that is there.”

In addition to stressing the importance of continuing to build partner engagement and collaboration, partners expressed concerns about keeping the partnership momentum going. For one partner, for example, the biggest concern is “being able to keep up the momentum and the interest and the people. . . . You always have people coming and going, although this has been a pretty stable partnership.” Speaking to similar issues, another partner expressed concerns about keeping partners “enthused. . . [and] excited about what’s going on. . . . Can we keep people involved? Can we get them interested in the state plan? Can we just keep them going? . . . That’s my biggest concern.”

Without question, the number one current concern of partners is how to strengthen and sustain the partnership, particularly after SPF SIG funding ends. Virtually every respondent spoke or wrote about that. One partner put it this way: “My biggest concern about the partnership is the future and what future there will be when the grant funds run out. What role will we really serve? What purpose will we have? . . . I’ve seen too often that when the money dries out so does the program.” Others expressed similar concerns:

After the grant monies go away, will our prevention efforts survive?

Sustainability of the partnership and continuing to grow in order to include all who need to be part of the partnership is the challenge I see now.

The challenge is sustainability.

Broadening scope beyond SIG.

Partner interview and survey responses suggest they are ready for the partnership to move forward with playing a more prominent state role. They perceive a need to focus more directly on policy development and on the development of a comprehensive state prevention plan.

Another aspect of the desire to have a more prominent role in the state is to improve communication beyond the partnership. While partners spoke highly about communication within the partnership, they expressed dissatisfaction with communication beyond the group, stressing the importance of increasing partnership visibility and getting the message out. According to one partner, “We need to educate all systems within WV of what our role is.” Another said, “We need to toot our own horn a little bit. . . . [and] somehow communicate that . . . vision, communicate that responsibility, communicate our goals, our spirit of what we’re trying to do. . . . in a consistent, easily digested manner.” Similarly, another partner said, “My personal and professional wish is that this group would be more vocal.”

### **Vision of the Partnership**

As noted above, partners have concerns about the future of the partnership, especially given the size and scope of the project overall. One partner expressed concerns about “having bitten off so much that we can’t get our arms around it [all].” Generally speaking, though, there seems to be a sense of optimism among the partners. In part, that may come back to having confidence in the individuals sitting at the partnership table. As one partner explained, “It’s people that make change.” And, according to another partner, the “people we have around the table at the partnership for the most part are folks who will have someone’s ear to make things happen.”

More specifically, virtually all partner respondents envision and hope that in the not too distant future the partnership will develop a comprehensive state prevention system that

is simple, non-duplicative, and data-driven. One partner said that it should be “interwoven with other prevention initiatives as well as other components of the continuum of care –intervention, treatment, etc.”

The purpose of the envisioned policy and plan development is so that the partnership can be a “force for community change,” can develop and support projects that make a difference in communities. Partners clearly want their efforts to “result in providing service to folks who need it” and to “improve the quality of life in our state.” One thing that has not changed since the planning year is partners’ unwavering commitment to West Virginia and its people and communities.

Finally, interview and survey data suggest that some partners envision the partnership in relatively narrow terms, with the focus on substance abuse prevention. One partner, for example, spoke of developing a “statewide substance abuse prevention plan” and the possibility of the “partnership growing into a state advisory committee on substance abuse.” Another wondered about the future relationship between this kind of advisory board and the already-existing state division on alcohol and drug abuse.

On the other hand, some partners understand the mission of the partnership differently and spoke of maintaining or returning to a broader focus on “promoting community well-being” generally. One partner said, “Well-being is more than just dealing with substance abuse prevention. . . . I think we need to look at . . . the complete social, emotional, physical, intellectual well-being of people. . . and [be] the influence to create awareness. . . of the importance of well-being in all our communities in West Virginia.” For at least one partner, an important next step for the partnership is to “figure out what our role is” beyond the SPF SIG. Perhaps that process will enable the partnership to find a way to include some, or all, of both the narrower and broader visions held by partners.