

Notes from the Field
January, 2008
West Virginia Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being

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

The focus of our data analysis this quarter is on the PRC staff who work with SPF-SIG, trying to understand their experiences with and perceptions of the project. This includes both staff who are field-based, working as Community Development Specialists (CDSs) throughout the state, and those whose work is based in the Dunbar office. Our analysis is based on results from a mixed-method survey distributed to all PRC staff who have worked with the SPF-SIG and were still employed as PRC staff during the past quarter (October – December, 2007). Twenty-three (23) staff members (13 from the Dunbar office and 10 CDSs) responded to the survey. In addition, the analysis draws on data from interviews with eleven staff members—five CDSs and six Dunbar staff. For the interviews, we selected staff members who were active in the SPF-SIG work and had not been interviewed by us recently.

The surveys and interviews were aimed at getting a sense of how staff members view the SPF-SIG, especially in terms of their roles and responsibilities as staff for the project. We asked staff to assess their level of involvement in the work and about the extent to which they are satisfied with their roles and influence in the project, the extent to which they believe their voices are heard, and the extent to which decisions are made fairly. Also, we asked staff to identify and describe strengths or successes of the project, concerns about the project, and visions for the future.

Since many staff respondents have been working with the project for several years, we also asked about how their perceptions and experiences with the SPF-SIG have changed over that time. On the survey instrument, three time periods were identified: (1) Partnership Planning Year, (2) Phase 1 – the period of community level capacity-building/planning/RLOs, and (3) Phase 2 – the period of county level implementation of grants. A number of PRC staff members who were involved in the early phases of the project are no longer PRC employees and thus were not part of the current respondent group. To the extent that those individuals left because of concerns with SPF-SIG, these results could be skewed toward the positive, for example, by inflating levels of satisfaction with the SPF-SIG

We calculated means, medians, and modes for each quantitative item. 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.

Generally speaking, staff experiences with and perceptions of the project have fluctuated more than those of partners. Quantitative survey results indicate little change in the level of staff satisfaction with the SPF-SIG project overall, but respondents reported fluctuating levels of involvement in the work and fluctuating levels of satisfaction with roles and relationships within the project. In each of the following sections, a table with quantitative results is presented followed by a narrative discussion of that issue.

General Assessment of SPF-SIG

“To what extent have you been satisfied with the way the SPF-SIG has been going?”

All		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	4.12	4.09	4.09
Median	4	4	4	
Mode	4	4	4	
Dunbar		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	4.44	4.25	4.23
Median	5	4	4	
Mode	5	4	4	
CDSs		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	3.75	3.90	3.90
Median	4	4	4	
Mode	4	4	4	

Staff members’ general assessment of the SPF-SIG is favorable, with the overall mean score just over 4 (satisfied) on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being very dissatisfied and 5 being very satisfied. The uniformity of median and mode scores allows us to be confident that the mean scores are true indicators of central tendency.

Numerous staff members spoke favorably about how much learning has taken place during the development of this statewide collaboration that has involved the hard work of many people at local, regional, and state levels. One respondent described the planning period as

one of great discovery, rapid adjustments, and intense learning. Each of these factors was prevalent for the partnership, the PRC, and all of the participating coalitions. I think that everyone did a phenomenal job of adjusting to ever-changing circumstances, and that during that planning period a strong model was developed that will hopefully benefit states to follow.

Respondents were also pleased with the way communities gradually took the lead and “slowly moved from seeing the PRC as the teachers of the process. . . . I’m so impressed with the ownership that coalitions have taken for their projects.” Another staff member described “actually witnessing [a county participant] having an epiphany.”

Many, such as the respondents quoted above, focused on the positive outcomes—both at an individual and community level—of what one called a “deep learning experience.” There were comments about how the “entire state made a substantial move forward, in a positive and focused direction” and how much community capacity building occurred. On the other hand, one respondent expressed frustration with the slowness of the learning process—the “lag time” –in transferring learning or thinking to practice. Similarly, another talked about the difficulty of learning particular lessons—for example, about the draw-backs of top-down communication—over the course of the project: “I just think, again, it was communication and looking back that’s just a lesson learned. It’s not anything personal with anyone. It was just a lesson learned, but I think that was almost the nature of the beast with something so new and so huge and so groundbreaking.”

These difficulties may have resulted, at least partially, from the need to resubmit the grant proposal which in turn, compressed the timeframe for Phase 1, as one respondent explained: “The problem with that is it compressed the time frame for that first year and it created some other problems. We suffered and part of what was going on is we were trying to learn and do at the same time. . . . It takes a lot of skill to do that, to pull it off.”

Looking at staff as a whole (All), the level of satisfaction has remained steady throughout the three year period. The slight decline in satisfaction (from a mean score of 4.12 to 4.09) seems to be limited to Dunbar-based staff whose mean scores started out considerably higher than those of CDSs (at 3.75), but then declined slightly. The breakdown of scores between the two groups of staff shows that while CDSs’ overall assessment of the SPF-SIG became slightly more favorable over time, the Dunbar staff’s assessment became slightly less favorable.

Level of Involvement

“How would you rate your level of involvement in SPF-SIG?”

All		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	2.61	4.18	3.64
	Median	2	4.5	4
	Mode	2	5	4
Dunbar		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	3.56	4.00	3.75
	Median	3	4	4
	Mode	5	5	4
CDSs		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	1.67	4.40	3.50
	Median	2	5	3
	Mode	1	5	3

This is an area of sharp fluctuations of a curvilinear nature. In other words, looking at the staff as a whole (All), as well as in two categories (Dunbar-based and CDSs), the reported level of involvement in the SPF-SIG increased sharply in the Phase 1 period and then decreased somewhat in Phase 2. The fluctuations for CDSs are particularly strong and this is something that was frequently mentioned in open-ended survey responses as well in interviews.

Many respondents, especially among the CDSs, expressed concerns about not being more actively involved during the partnership planning year. One explained, “As field staff, I was not involved in the early stages. I believe that, in hindsight, involving field staff sooner would have been helpful in the process.” Another commented, “I would have liked to have been more involved in the planning process from beginning days to the present.” Some noted problems that arose because of the lack of early CDS involvement. Respondents, for example, talked about communication problems that resulted at least in part because of under-utilizing CDSs, noting that “misinformation went out and community members and PRC staff were confused and let down.” Another, who also commented about communication problems, noted that the PRC itself was learning and growing throughout the process:

My involvement was very low during the partnership planning period. Lack of involvement from field staff during this phase led to some confusion in the field. CDSs, during Phase 1, have been involved at a higher level. Keep in mind that the WVPRC was and continues to develop its own capacity.

During the Phase 1 period, CDSs, along with staff based in Dunbar, began to find the work very time-consuming and demanding. As one CDSs noted, “Phase 1 . . . demanded a lot of my time. I was virtually working two jobs – regular CDS duties plus SPF-SIG duties.”

Role Satisfaction

“To what extent have you been satisfied with your role in SPF-SIG?”

All		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	3.93	4.12	4.18
	Median	4	4	4
	Mode	4	4	4
Dunbar		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	4.50	4.27	4.33
	Median	4.5	4	4
	Mode	4	4	4
CDSs		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	3.29	4.0	4.0
	Median	3	4	4
	Mode	3	4	4

Looking at all staff as a group (All), there has been a small, steady increase in role satisfaction. Breaking the group into two categories, however, reveals that the increase in satisfaction is primarily a result of a strong increase in CDSs' satisfaction as they went from minimal involvement in the partnership planning year to active involvement in Phase 1. Dunbar-based staff, by contrast, had a very high level of satisfaction during the partnership planning year during which they were actively involved; their satisfaction then declined during Phase 1, and rose again slightly in Phase 2.

In responding to open-ended survey responses and interview questions about role satisfaction, CDSs again expressed concerns about their lack of involvement in the partnership planning year. One said, "I was dissatisfied with my role during the planning period because I was not really contacted for involvement. . . I believe that field staff could have given some valuable input into the planning process." Another agreed, noting that community outcomes would have been stronger with earlier CDSs' involvement:

[CDSs] should have been more involved in the [planning] process because they work in the communities and know what is well accepted and how to approach things with them. Also, I think if we had been involved in the topic selection and ordering the counties would have gotten more from the Phase 1 RLOs.

One staff member raised concerns about PRC staff role confusion, especially in terms of communication with community participants. "Some confusion has existed as to 'who do I call?'. That is, local groups have been caught between calling CDSs and calling Dunbar staff. I have worked closely with my community groups to help them keep communication going."

PRC staff, both those based in Dunbar and those whose work is field-based, appreciate the way their work roles have become clearer and more satisfying even as their roles continued to evolve throughout the SPF-SIG project. One CDS noted: "Overall I have been very satisfied with my role during the SPF-SIG Phase 1 process and I feel it has redefined the role of the CDS. It seems the prevention partnerships receiving SPF-SIG funding better understand the CDS redefined role and utilize accordingly." Likewise, a Dunbar-based staff member commented:

I have been very satisfied with the role I have played so far. Like most staff, an understanding of my roles and responsibilities evolved over time and now I am able to focus on one area of responsibility rather than being so spread out and uncertain of what exactly it is that I'm supposed to be doing. . . I feel like I'm an integral member of the overall team and it is very comforting to understand my place in the bigger picture.

Satisfaction with Influence

“To what extent have you been satisfied with your influence in SPF-SIG?”

All		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	3.69	4.05	4.05
	Median	3.5	4	4
	Mode	3	4	4
Dunbar		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	4.33	4.25	4.23
	Median	5	4.5	4
	Mode	5	5	5
CDSs		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	2.86	3.80	3.78
	Median	3	4	4
	Mode	3	4	4

Looking at staff as a whole (All), satisfaction with influence increased and then remained steady. The breakdown into two staff categories reveals that while Dunbar staff had higher actual levels of satisfaction with influence throughout, their satisfaction has declined slightly since the partnership planning year. By contrast, CDSs were dissatisfied with their level of influence during the planning year, but their satisfaction increased sharply the following year and then declined slightly.

A few individuals expressed uncertainty about their influence in the SPF-SIG project. For example, one noted, “I don’t know that I have an influence. I think at times we can voice our opinions, but they are just opinions—sometimes heard, sometimes not.” For the most part, however, staff comments show an appreciation for opportunities to influence the SPF-SIG work, especially through direct services to community members. One Dunbar-based respondent explained:

I think that most people like to think that their work makes a difference to somebody. Without a doubt, I feel like I’ve been a positive influence to the process. . . .At this point, I feel like I’m a “go to” person and I appreciate the fact that project directors and others feel that they can come to me for information/clarification/assistance.

Likewise, CDSs expressed satisfaction with their influence in terms of providing assistance to community members, as the following excerpt illustrates: “Overall, I’ve experienced satisfaction with the level of influence I’ve had in my counties via SPF-SIG. I’ve been able to assist in coalition building and [bringing] counties together.” Another CDS was pleased to have had “opportunities to work with community members and organizations that [I] had not been able to work with in the past.”

Relationship with WV Partnership

“To what extent have you been satisfied with your relationship with the WV Partnership?”

All		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	3.67	3.90	3.81
Median	4	4	4	
Mode	4	4	4	
Dunbar		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	3.88	3.73	3.75
Median	4	4	4	
Mode	5	4	4	
CDSs		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	3.43	4.11	3.89
Median	3	4	4	
Mode	3	4	4	

As a whole, staff members report moderate levels of satisfaction with their relationship with the WV Partnership. The most notable shift over time is the increase in CDSs’ satisfaction from the planning year to Phase 1.

In spite of limited opportunities for direct experience with the WV Partnership, many staff members spoke favorably about it, noting that the level of partner commitment is commendably high even though partners have “full-time ‘real’ jobs.” Nevertheless, “they [partners] find time to devote to quarterly meetings and other events or projects.” Also, one staff member commented on the increased social capital in the partnership, with “the group . . . gelling around ideas, instead of interpersonal relationships. . . but those interpersonal relationships have strengthened.” A staff member with extensive experience with the project expressed admiration for the partnership as it has grown over time, becoming more formal and more democratic at the same time:

I was pretty much here from the get-go. . . . I would definitely have to say it has improved. Just seeing the partnership grow and expand and truly be a pretty cohesive group. . . It just really seems like there is true commitment. . . . a lot more buy-in, a lot more doing day-to-day work. . . . Now it’s just Robert’s Rules all over the place, which originally they didn’t want it to be formal, but we found once you get a body that big you’ve got to have some order. And that’s been helpful . . . Partnership-wise there’s definitely more ownership, there’s definitely more buy-in because the things are more formal and tangible and you can see decisions being made moreso than you could in the past. So I would say the democratic process has increased with the partnership.

Several noted a lack of opportunities to get to know the partnership. One CDS, for example, said, “As field staff, I haven’t had much of a relationship with the overall partnership. I enjoyed the few times I have interacted with them, however.” For field staff especially, the retreats were important opportunities to become acquainted with the partnership and its work, as one CDS explained:

I had an opportunity to attend the August 2006 Partnership meeting at Glade Springs, WV. That afforded me time to get better acquainted with partnership members. They seem genuinely concerned about the prevalence of drug/alcohol abuse throughout our state and showed a willingness to help any way they can.

Likewise, a CDS described her relationship with the partnership as “distant,” but identified the retreat as a turning point, commenting:

I think that having the CDSs come to the . . . retreat in Glade Springs. . . was pretty eye-opening for everyone because I really think up until that point the CDSs really didn’t know how decisions were made, and I think they got a pretty good taste of what the partnership was all about. In my opinion, . . . that was kind of a turning point.

Along the same lines, another CDS talked about the importance of attending partnership meetings as a key ingredient in developing a more meaningful relationship with the partnership:

Now one of the things that did occur that made me feel more included was when we began attending partnership meetings. The partnership was interested in what the CDSs had to say and I think [had] that recognition that we had our finger on the pulse of the community. So being able to translate that for the partnership really gave me more of a feeling of being a part of it. So while that didn’t occur initially, it did when we started attending the partnership meetings.

For some staff, attendance at retreats and partnership meetings has been less satisfying. One spoke of feeling like a “bystander,” and another commented: “Going to the partnership meeting – I guess I’m not very satisfied with that because I go and I sit there . . . in the back row. . . like a quiet little church mouse.” Yet another staff member who expressed frustration about the nature of staff-partnership roles and relations, focused on workload and recognition issues:

Possibly it’s just the nature of the beast, but I can’t help but feel invisible at times. This is difficult, especially when I consider how much work I have to put into the process. I sometimes get the impression that the partnership comes to the table without much of a clue as to what’s been going on since the last time we met. When they make decisions that are in line with the work that . . . the PRC . . . has been doing, it does add a certain amount of validity to the process, but it’s disheartening to have to sit back and assume the “staff” . . . role when the actual work is taking place here.

On the other hand, staff expressed appreciation for the respect and appreciation the partners show for them and their work. One noted feeling “that the partnership members treat staff as involved participants – not just as staff to carry out their instructions.”

Some expressed a desire for stronger relationships in order to build capacity for change in the state. A CDS commented: “I think we need to work to have a closer relationship with them [partners] because this will help bridge the gaps between state and local communities.”

Fairness

“What is your level of satisfaction with the fairness of the way decisions have been made concerning the SPF-SIG?”

All		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	4.33	4.29	4.00
	Median	4	4	4
	Mode	4	4	4
Dunbar		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	4.63	4.36	4.00
	Median	5	4	4
	Mode	5	4	5
CDSs		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	4.00	4.20	4.00
	Median	4	4	4
	Mode	4	4	4

Generally speaking, staff members report feeling satisfied with the level of fairness with which SPF-SIG decisions are made. A slight decline in levels of satisfaction seems to be related to shifting perceptions among Dunbar-based staff.

A number of staff comments about the issue of fairness centered on funding decisions made by the partnership. One staff member, who identified “fair with allocation of funds” as a strength of the project overall, particularly appreciated the fact that the process allowed “the smaller counties [to have] a chance for decent funding.” For another staff member, the central fairness concern was not as much the *way* county projects were selected as much as the decision to fund so many projects at such a low level.

While I think that WAY too many coalitions were funded, I do believe that decisions were generally made in a fair manner. One aspect I don’t see as ‘fair’ is the number of coalitions that were selected for implementation. How can we

make substantive change in the numbers when the focus is so broad and funding is so limited? . . . The amount of work that this makes for staff is less than fair, the restrictions that such limited funding place on implementation counties is unfair, and for all of the hoops that everyone has to jump through—to meet state and federal guidelines—the amount of funding that is being received is not a fair trade-off.

Also focusing on implementation funding decisions, others responded to the “fairness question” by raising concerns about partner and staff roles and relationships in the process. One wrote:

The planning phase was pretty equitable but the implementation decisions . . . were much more competitive. I felt that there was some level of resistance between . . . work group members and PRC staff and as a result a lot of work that had been done by the staff to help make informed funding decisions was discarded. . . . I do feel that overall the . . . workgroup made good decisions on the projects that were funded for full implementation.

Still others expressed high levels of satisfaction with the fairness with which SPF-SIG decisions have been made. One identified fairness as “one of the strengths of the SPF-SIG process to date. It seems every effort has been made to be as fair as possible.” Another commented, “I think the leadership of the partnership goes out of its way to make sure that the process is fair. I’m completely impressed with how the chair handles that process. I think he operates with the ideal of fairness out on the table where everybody can see it.”

Several linked the high level of fairness to the use of data to make decisions. One commented, “The partnership has done an excellent job of moving to data-driven decision-making. The interesting part is the discussion about what kind of data matters.” Likewise, another described partnership decisions as “based on data and that is something concrete that we could look at and see changes in. I think it was the fairest way.”

A respondent who was generally satisfied with the level of fairness, returned to the issue of level of CDSs’ involvement: “I believe that the process has been as fair as it can be, but being more involved in it would have helped me to communicate the process better to the local communities. I feel that, as field staff, I did not always have enough time to digest information before I had to disseminate it locally.”

Voice

“To what extent has your voice been heard in the SPF-SIG project?”

All		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	2.69	3.63	3.58
	Median	2	3	4
	Mode	2	3	3
Dunbar		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	3.50	4.00	3.80
	Median	3.5	4	4
	Mode	5	5	5
CDSs		Planning	Phase1	Phase2
	Mean	2.0	3.3	3.33
	Median	2	3	3
	Mode	1	3	3

As a whole, staff report moderate levels of satisfaction with the extent to which their voices are heard in the SPF-SIG work. While CDSs were dissatisfied during the planning year, their satisfaction increased substantially in Phase 1 and remained steady thereafter. Dunbar-based staff, on the other hand, reported higher absolute levels throughout the project, with satisfaction increasing in Phase 1 and then declining somewhat in Phase 2.

Staff spoke about the opportunity to be heard as part of in-house, PRC staff discussions, as the following excerpt illustrates:

While everyone hasn't always agreed along the way, I do believe everyone had a chance to voice their opinion and offer suggestions and alternatives in decision-making. . . . I have felt that I was able to speak up through the process- even if I didn't agree with Wayne or others. I never felt that I couldn't speak or disagree.

Community Development Specialists spoke favorably about increased opportunities to speak and be heard at monthly staff debriefing sessions: “That allowed us to share successes and challenges experienced, and to voice any concerns that we may have had.” Another field-based staff member shared similar appreciation for opportunities to communicate, but noted uncertainty about the outcomes of such participation:

Overall, field staff voice has been heard and valued. . . as seen by the debriefings and CDS attendance at the state partnership quarterly meetings. However it is unclear as to how these vehicles have influenced the SPF-SIG project, particularly with the partnership.

Along the same lines, another CDS said, “the field staff met monthly to reflect on the process, but I'm not sure how much of a ‘voice’ that added to the statewide effort.” Yet

another mentioned the importance of timing, returning again to the lack of CDSs' involvement in the initial phase of the project:

I think we are listened to when we speak, but sometimes it comes too late in the process to make a difference. We should have been asked in the beginning. It has improved over the last three years, but I still do not know that we are truly valued for what we could bring to the process.

Staff also spoke about having a voice in community work. One commented, "I had a strong voice in the community capacity-building process and will continue to have a strong voice."

Strengths

"Please assess the strengths of the PRC's work with the SPF-SIG."

Staff identified many strengths and successes of the SPF-SIG, specifically in relation to the PRC's role in staffing the project. We grouped the perceived strengths into three categories: (1) getting the right staff members involved, (2) focus on learning, and (3) the scope of the project.

Getting the Right Staff to the Table

Just as a key ingredient for the formation of a strong statewide partnership was getting the "right people" to the table, a key ingredient in successfully staffing the project seems to be the nature of the individuals involved in the work. Again and again, respondents commented on this, describing their colleagues at the PRC as dedicated, caring, hard-working, persevering, and talented. Speaking of the staff in general, one respondent said, "These people have worked extremely hard. They've been really diligent, put a lot of time and a lot of . . . their brains and hearts into this thing. They're really pushing themselves."

In many cases, Dunbar-based staff praised the field-based staff and vice versa. A CDS commented: "We have a great WVPRC home office staff that provides invaluable expertise in so many areas. Truthfully, I could not be effective in my counties without their ongoing support." A Dunbar-based staff stressed the importance of the CDSs, saying, "the already-established field staff relationships with local groups/people have been invaluable to the process." Another commented:

There's not a single person involved in the PRC that doesn't care what they're doing and at the local level, too. . . . That's part of having the Community Development Specialists who reside in these communities. They're part of the community. . . [They] know what people expect. . . . If you want to get the people to work together on something in a county, it's not as easy as just saying that. Every county is a little different. . . . You've got to know all that kind of stuff.

Having both a “home office staff” and a field-based staff, the PRC has been able to maintain direct day-to-day involvement in all levels of the SPF-SIG work, as one respondent noted: “The in-house staff had day-to-day involvement with the SIG from all angles and our field staff is directly involved with the community groups that are implementing the SIG. This has given us a unique advantage in my opinion.” In addition to a balance of in-house and field-based individuals, the PRC staff is perceived as including both “folks who [can] think outside of the box to dream up the concepts and the practical folks to make it work.”

Respondents also described the PRC staff, both those based in Dunbar and those who are field-based, as committed to the state of West Virginia and to a systematic, data-based approach to community capacity-building. The staff described the PRC’s commitment to a strengths-based approach that emphasizes networking and collaboration. The following is a sampling of survey and interview excerpts illustrating comments about PRC staff’s values and commitments:

We are strong in the promotion of our vision. Our staff are passionate about what we do, how we do it, and how our work influences the bigger picture. . . . We’re dedicated to continuing this work long after SPF-SIG has ceased.

The WVPRC has been successful in developing a social network throughout the state. I believe that network draws upon citizenry strengths and talents to increase human capacity and information-sharing and ultimately, programs’ sustainability.

[There is a] passion to use scientific driven decision-making and to building a prevention network in West Virginia. . . . Emphasis on capacity-building both internal and external.

The PRC . . . has worked hard to build relationships at the state and local level. We still have a ways to go, but we are at the forefront of this work. States look at us for a way of doing things. I think we should be proud. We have many strengths. . . . We are also small enough that we know each others’ strengths and can build off of that.

Focus on Learning

Respondents perceived their colleague’s willingness to “look at the process as a learning experience” as a strength of the project. As one staff member said, “The project has provided us with significant learning. It has also helped us focus our effort much better. . . . We have been able to change focus and directions . . . We have been able to redefine ourselves over and over to fit the needs of SPF-SIG.” Another said, “We had to develop our own capacities. . . . Not only the CDSs had to increase their understanding of the strategic prevention framework, but also the . . . folks that work in the main office had to. It’s been a learning process for all of us.” Occasionally the learning and change has been stressful, but respondents see it as a strength that staff members “are not afraid to make

mistakes” and were willing to go into “uncharted territory not knowing what the results would be.”

Respondents also noted the learning among others that has been facilitated by PRC staff, in Regional Learning Opportunities and more generally. One commented: “The PRC has been instrumental in increasing the knowledge of the community coalitions, partnership members, and full-time agency staff members about substance abuse programs and effective strategies for combating these problems.”

Scope and Complexity of Project

Another strength identified by staff respondents is the broad scope of the SPF-SIG work—including the establishment of a state-level partnership, establishing or strengthening community prevention partnerships in many of the state’s counties, and the development of connections within and between the various groups and levels, as the following excerpt illustrates:

We’ve been able to obtain additional partners in prevention in the counties that I work with. . . . We have partnerships in many counties that weren’t there before. We have new or renewed energy, there are new players, new participants, new prevention-minded individuals. [Also,] . . . through the partnership there’s a statewide effort. It’s opened up statewide funding sources for the counties that may not have had a direction before.

For another respondent, just as important and impressive as the scope is the intensity or complexity of the project:

For me, [a success] is the breadth of applications. In other words, how far reaching it is in terms of the number of counties and thereby the coverage to the people of the state and communities. . . . And the second thing is the depth or complexity of it—that we were able, within less than a year, to incorporate a logical planning process at the county level in so many counties—a pretty technical, involved planning process. People understood it and carried it out.

Concerns

“What concerns do you have about the PRC’s work with the SPF-SIG?”

Staff respondents expressed concerns about the project in relation to three areas: (1) communication, (2) county-level participation and perceptions, and (3) sustainability. Quite a few also identified the under-utilization of CDSs as a concern, but those concerns have already been addressed in sections above on role and influence satisfaction.

Communication

This is a major area of concern for many staff members. The size and the complexity of the project have made clear communication a challenge from the beginning. As one CDSs noted, “I can say that the first year was confusing and I think that it was just such a new process for everyone that there was faulty communication and I think that the CDSs took a lot of the hostility because we were on the front line and we were trying our best to communicate the information we had received.” Likewise, another CDS said, “We got off to a rocky start because of the time-tables. . . The communication just overall at first was bad. But I think it has improved ten-fold over the last year and a half.”

Dunbar-based staff concur that communication has been a challenge, especially early in the project. One described the “huge communication challenge. . . keeping communication flowing from the state to the local level. . . There’s often communication gaps. I’m sure that many of the misperceptions and misunderstanding that have existed at the local level are at least in part because maybe we could have communicated better.” Some viewed the communication difficulties as a result of the scope and complexity of the project, as the following excerpt illustrates:

I really think the biggest challenge was for everybody to understand what SPF-SIG was all about, the partnership members, the staff, the communities. I just think there was all this misinterpretation of information and nobody really understood it. It took a long time to get everybody on the same page and understand. . . It seems like a very complex grant.

Another respondent who discussed communication in relation to the scope of the project explained: “Our community development specialists are spread out all over the state. And it’s hard to . . . [have] clear communication. We talk about the electronic communication [but] while you may think you’ve written something that’s completely understandable, on the receiving end it may not have been. . . And that’s always been difficult. . . The geography of how we’re distributed across the state just makes it difficult sometimes.”

For some staff, particularly those based in the field, the timing of communication was a concern. One CDS commented: “Sometimes. . . [we were] at a disadvantage in the field. Because often times . . . I don’t know that we got information in a timely manner to be able to move it to the communities.” Along the same lines, CDSs spoke about last-minute communication about RLOs: “We don’t have any clue what’s going on and so we’re up in front of these people at an RLO, either (1) no clue what the . . . topic’s about because we just got it the night before or (2) someone asks a question and we’re like, ‘we don’t know.’”

This situation, in turn, is thought to have strained relationships between field-based staff and their communities. One CDS said that the frequent changes, especially in the early period of the project, were particularly problematic in this regard: “Communication issues led to misunderstandings. Communities may have negative feelings toward the

PRC resulting from lack of communication and this may affect future relationships.” A central office staff perceived it the same way: “I always felt like I was correcting myself with outside entities involved with the SIG because something had changed from the last time I had spoken with them. [It] made us look like we didn’t know what we were talking about. This impacted in-house staff and CDS staff because the same thing was happening between these two groups. I think our levels of trust and relationship-building have suffered as a result.”

Some expressed concerns about the nature of the communication between county project directors and their county prevention partnerships. One CDS wondered whether a particular project director had “done a top notch job of getting the information back to the county.”

One staff member described “the whole communication thing . . . as a puzzle that’s been worked on by lots and lots of people, but not at the same time. So I’m not sure that other than your main key players that anybody has a complete grip or grasp of the whole process.” Related to this, staff raised concerns about the inclusiveness of staff communication networks – especially in relation to decision-making. One staff commented: “I think there have been some communication issues internally and externally throughout the process where things aren’t really clarified. There’s kind of like a key group of people that do the majority of it. It’s kind of like, even though [the rest of us] give input, it’s kind of like things are already decided in a way.” Another mentioned decisions being made in the office and other folks in the office not having a part in the decision-making process and not receiving information about how and why particular decisions were made.

Finally, staff noted concerns about unclear communication about funding decisions and the impact that lack of clarity had on communities’ levels of participation in the project generally. One CDS explained:

There was just some confusion surrounding the methods that would be used, how they would [decide] who would be funded, who would not be funded. I think it stems back to communication or lack of and misunderstandings. . . . The perception from the beginning was that if each of these counties could . . . make a case for the issues in their communities that they could possibly be funded. . . . Everyone left the original information meetings with the mindset thinking if we can go out there and gather this data and make a solid foundational case that this is what our community needs, we can get funded. And then later on in the process it came out that they were utilizing the SAWB Index and the community capacity scores and the scores of how many RLOs were attended with the homework completed, who was on the partnership in each county. So I think that kind of took people by surprise and they were confused.

County-level Participation and Perceptions

Quite a few staff members expressed concerns about the nature of county participation and perception. For some staff, the primary disappointment was that at the end of Phase 1, there were not 53 data-based, county prevention plans in place. One staff member attributed that to several factors including a lack of strong county leadership and conceptual confusion about a complex process:

I was disappointed that all 53 of the planning counties did not finish their plans. They don't have a finished product that they could then turn and apply to other places for money or resources or funding. . . . I think sometimes it might have been who they hired as the project director. Maybe that wasn't their strong point. . . . Maybe counties never got it. . . . That was a big undertaking for counties to go through those RLOs and come up with this plan. It was a totally different way of doing things and some people may have been overwhelmed and not understood in the beginning what they were getting into.

Many staff members expressed concern about unfunded county participants who believe that funding decisions were not made fairly. This concern overlaps with the communication issues discussed above in that some staff attribute counties' negative perceptions to a lack of clear, timely communication about the funding decision processes that were going to be used. One CDS commented:

My counties [that] didn't receive funding, they feel that they were misled. They feel that they didn't get the communication that they needed in a timely manner, and they would have written the PRC off, wouldn't have gone on to work on other projects with them had it not been for the previous relationships that I had founded.

Along the same lines, another CDS said, "Counties thought that everybody was going to have a fair shot and they may have gotten a fair shot, but in their minds they didn't." Further, a Dunbar-based staff member commented: "The perception that some communities have of our work—that is my greatest concern." The staff member attributed those negative perceptions, at least partially, to the "lack of involvement from selected PRC staff . . . [a] second concern."

Staff also expressed concerns about the level of county buy-in to the ideas of capacity-building and data-driven decision making. One respondent listed "sustainability of effort and the scientific driven decision-making process and not a return to 'activity driven' decision making at the community level" as a concern. Along the same lines, another staff member commented:

Those counties that were not funded or did not receive a request to make an application. . . they place little value to capacity and they place little value with data driven decision making. . . . That has probably been my biggest disappointment with the SPF-SIG process. I was in high hopes and had

expectations that those counties that were low need counties would at least value the process of data-driven decision making. I don't see that happening.

Sustainability

A major concern for staff members is the sustainability of the SPF-SIG work when the grant funds end. As one central office staff said, "My greatest concern is how can we keep this statewide effort going after SPF-SIG." Another expressed similar concerns, specifically mentioning the challenge of sustaining the work of unfunded counties: "For those counties who did not receive implementation awards, how can we assist them with continuing the process? Some county groups have already disbanded."

Also, staff expressed concerns about sustaining the work in funded counties – especially since funding levels for implementation grants is so low. One staff said, "Another challenge I'm worried about is . . . that we have too many implementation grantees. We can't give them enough money to really make a significant impact. . . . We have seventeen now and most states have five to ten."

There was general agreement that additional funding would need to be secured in order to sustain the work begun with SPF-SIG. One respondent noted the importance of finding a way to

sustain these programs after the SPF-SIG funding dries up. . . . Somehow there's got to be some money brought in after that point from some source. . . . We are going to feel compelled to try to come up with something and there are any number of ways we can work on that. One of the things I think would really help would be to develop some funding stream through state government. . . . It just makes such perfect sense to do that and that would be a little bit of money that you need to sustain these local programs.

This kind of institutionalized support would be more effective in sustaining the project "as a system," as this respondent called it. By contrast, if each county must rely solely on grant money, the programs may go away quickly as one grant after another dries up.

Sustaining the work requires having resources specifically designated for staff who work with the projects. Respondents talked about the importance of paid, county-level project directors or coordinators without whom, some partnerships are already "dissolving" or "disbanding." Also, respondents talked about the importance of supporting PRC staff many of whom have carried a heavy work load—even to the point of physical health problems, as noted in the following excerpt:

I believe that the rigors of the SPF-SIG have taken their toll on WVPRC staff in general. Employees have experienced health problems that I think are directly related to the stress experienced from this endeavor. I also believe some employees are completely burned out with the SPF-SIG process.

Again and again, staff members expressed a feeling of being spread too thin and not having time to do a good job with the work responsibilities. Speaking to these same issues, one staff member cautioned: “We need to try and not get overwhelmed and burned out because this is such a passion for so many of us.”

In relation to supporting and sustaining the work of PRC staff, several staff identified strained relations with DADA as a major concern. One respondent noted:

The biggest disappointment that I’ve seen with this is the lack of coordination with the Division on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse. . . . They seem to be distanced somewhat from the partnership. . . . It bothers me that [we] can’t do more for the staff because of the limitations which are imposed by DADA through their kind of cutting back on funding.

Along the same lines, another respondent said, “My biggest concerns here are the controversy between the PRC and the funding agent. That poor relationship that exists right now. . . interferes with the actual accomplishing the goals and objectives that we have here at the PRC. . . I think that is our greatest challenge.

Another concern related to sustaining the work was the importance of resources to support marketing. One staff member said, “A weakness might be that we need more marketing in the state to tell people who we are and the things we can help them with. I think that’s a huge weakness, and I think that’s only due to the fact that we just don’t have the manpower or the money to promote ourselves the way we really need promoted.”

In addition to funding, sustaining the work at a high level of quality may require organizational structures and procedures that feature more performance accountability and feedback than staff currently experience at the PRC. In relation to this, one respondent commented, “Accountability is not a dirty word, but a necessary element.” Another spoke of the need for the PRC to move toward greater accountability in order to maximize staff effectiveness: “Some [staff]. . . just kind of go with the flow and that’s going to be a [problem] in an organization, especially a flat one, where there’s no checks and balances, no performance appraisals,. . . no real means of seeing exactly [how] they’re doing.”

Vision

“What is your vision for the future of SPF-SIG and beyond?”

Staff reported visions not unlike those expressed by partners a few months ago. We grouped the staff visions into three categories: (1) positive sustainable outcomes for counties and the state, (2) increased visibility for prevention work in the state, and (3) broader prevention focus.

Positive, Sustainable Outcomes

First, staff hopes to see good outcomes for the counties that were funded through the SPF-SIG. One respondent said, “data indicating positive change would be a nice perk.” Another expressed it this way:

I truly do hope . . . that the activities and the things that these . . . communities that are going to have implementation grants [do] shows an impact so that we can say, . . . yes, this does work in West Virginia. . . I really hope that we have an impact that we can really say we made a difference.

A Dunbar respondent expressed hopes for all the counties – both funded and unfunded- that had participated in the SPF-SIG: “I’m hopeful that many of [the counties] will hold onto what they learned during that planning year to sustain them and help them to find funds and/or resources to continue the work.” Along the same lines, a field-based staff member commented, “My vision is to use the knowledge gained during the past two years to aid my counties’ coalitions in doing the best prevention possible.”

Some expressed hopes that the West Virginia Partnership and its work would be sustained and strengthened. One respondent’s vision is “that the partnership will continue to look for ways to fulfill its mission to promote “community well-being” by looking for funding sources to assist with prevention within local communities.” Another spoke of hopes for continued efforts and relationships as well as outcomes:

I want to see that the processes that we’ve put into place that were supported by the grant will continue. . . not just sustainability of effort but sustainability of outcomes at the local level and at the state level. . . . The partnership and our [PRC] relationship with it, I’d like to see continue far beyond the end of SPF-SIG, and . . . also our relationship that we have with the county prevention partnerships as well.

Broader Prevention Focus

Staff respondents envision prevention work in West Virginia becoming more broadly focused. One respondent was hopeful that the WV Partnership would engage in efforts that go “beyond substance abuse to a community-based promotion of mental health with the focus on social determinants.” Along the same lines, another respondent said, “I’m excited about the partnership’s recent decision to look at other areas of ‘well-being’ including mental health promotion. I would like to see us look at physical well-being, too.” One respondent, also envisioning a broader prevention focus, hoped the PRC as an organization would move in this direction as well: “I would like to see the PRC pursue funding in other areas of well-being – particularly healthy lifestyles.”

Also speaking of the PRC’s role, a respondent spoke of the importance of staff envisioning broader prevention roles for themselves:

We need to disengage from that . . . narrow vision . . . relative to community well-being. . . . My vision for the staff is that the staff will begin to contemplate a . . . more diverse role for the PRC. Our function, our role, would be to promote community capacity building and all that, but within a broader . . . health context.

Increased Visibility

Finally, staff respondents expressed hopes for greater visibility for the prevention work being done by the WV Partnership, the PRC, and the local county prevention partnerships. One staff member said, “I’d love to see the partnership have a bigger voice, more recognition on a statewide basis and I’d love to see people in the partnership take a more active role . . . to talk about the partnership, spread statewide what’s going on. Another commented:

These people are doing great work and great things for the state of West Virginia. . . . We have a great story to tell here, and that’s something that I think we need to concentrate on a little bit more. . . making sure that other people outside of our little family of the partnership and us [staff] understand the importance of this, the impact of it, the nature of it. . . get some publicity about it.

Such increased visibility may be important in future attempts for recognition and funding, as one respondent noted: “If you’re going to the legislature and going to say we need money, we need support,. . . you’re going to get a better reception if . . . you have built this reputation. If nobody outside Marshall [University] and the partnership knows anything about us, which is true, then we need to do that. We can’t be shy about that.”

Connecting Threads/Concluding Thoughts

In closing, we would like to thank the staff members for taking time to write and speak openly about their views. The survey and interview data are thick with ideas and information about how staff members have experienced and perceived the SPF-SIG work. In this report we have attempted to give a sense of some of the issues that emerged as salient to understanding staff experiences and perceptions.

In thinking about the data set as a whole, it occurs to us that several threads run throughout—namely, concerns about the involvement of CDSs, the focus on learning, and issues related to communication. One way to think about the connections among those threads features the notions of inclusiveness and engagement. It seems that as individuals – whether partners (thinking back to our earlier analysis of partner experiences and perceptions) or staff—become more included and more actively engaged in the project, learning increases and communication is clearer. In a manuscript prepared at the end of the partnership planning year (*Eyes on the Process*), we noted the

importance of getting the right people (i.e, partners) to the table and engaging them meaningfully in the work. These factors seem to be equally important for staffing this kind of reform effort. As we continue to study and learn from this project, our own understandings shift and grow, but it seems at this point that participant engagement, communication, and learning are key elements and that they are integrally related to each other and perhaps to the potential for positive outcomes of the work.