

Notes from the Field
January, 2009
West Virginia Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being

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

The focus of our data analysis this quarter is on the Strategic Prevention Framework-State Incentive Grant (SPF-SIG) County Prevention Partners, trying to understand their experiences with and perceptions of their local prevention projects. Our analysis is based on individual ethnographic interviews conducted between late March and late July 2008 with 14 County Prevention Partners who were involved – as coalition members – at the time with local, county-based prevention initiatives in ten different counties representing all four regions of the state. Seven of the County Prevention Partners (CPPs) interviewed were from SPF-SIG funded counties and seven others interviewed were from counties previously (but not currently) funded by SPF-SIG. The purposeful sample chosen for CPP interviews was comprised of individuals from counties (funded and non-funded) recommended by either Prevention Resource Center staff members and/or State Partners as having highly functioning prevention coalitions. The specific interviewees were recommended as involved, knowledgeable participants in the local prevention coalitions and not as persons who were thought to have necessarily positive attitudes about their work with prevention in their local communities.

The purpose of these interviews was to identify common themes leading to success within these recommended “strong cases.” And the CPPs were the next step in a logical sequence of interviews (that previously included PRC staff – Dunbar and community-based – and SPF-SIG Project Directors) that has helped us learn more about how the SPF-SIG project has rolled out in the state. Interviews with these various stakeholders have allowed us to gain a fuller picture of the county-based prevention efforts.

The semi-structured interview questions used by our team members with each CPP were aimed at getting a sense of how County Partners viewed their local prevention partnership and its work. The interview questions focused on general issues related to the CPPs’ county partnership, including what they considered to be the strengths of the partnership as well as concerns they harbored. In addition we asked CPPs about the working relationships among partnership members as well as their own hopes for the future related to the partnership. More specific issues related to the partnership’s prevention plan and the CPP’s satisfaction with the plan as well as changes they proposed. On a more personal level, we asked CPPs to discuss their involvement with the county partnership including issues related to voice and overall satisfaction.

During our preliminary analysis of the data completed during the current quarter, we recognized four overarching themes in the interviews with CPPs. First, It was clear to us that these CPPs as a whole are passionate about and committed to prevention work in their counties. It was also evident that strong teamwork exists within these local partnerships which feature broad community representation as well as democratic, cooperative processes. A third theme was the local partnerships' interest in and focus on youth as a key factor in prevention work in the local community. A final theme that emerged was the CPPs' recognition that resources – in the form of people, time, and money – are important factors in understanding past successes as well as predicting future successes of their local prevention efforts.

In a break from our previous *Notes from the Field* format, this report includes more of the CPPs' direct quotes and less of our analysis of their comments. We have chosen this quarter to let the quotes speak for themselves and to give you, as the reader, access to numerous direct comments by the CPPs in the hope that you will gain more firsthand insight into the CPPs' perceptions of the prevention work being undertaken in these “successful” counties.

Passion and Commitment

A high degree of passion and commitment by the CPPs was evident throughout their discussions with us. Not only did they think their prevention work was “well worth the effort,” but they also thought that “everyone who is in the coalition sees the importance of it.” Several CPPs spoke very clearly about the passion that they, their staff members, and other members of their local coalition have for the prevention work in their county.

I think the core group, the people who make up the board . . . are probably the folks in the community that are very much invested in making sure this works. So they're real, they're very passionate about it and you know, very dedicated to coming to the meetings and seeing all the pieces come together.

Our director, she goes forever, never quits. And we have a real strong core of people who are real passionate about this.

Our project director is so very committed to this job, I mean, I think she thinks of it as being way more than a job. Do you know what I mean? It is really her . . . this is really her passion. She is really so very committed to it. And I think that is a strength and a weakness in a sense because not everyone in the world is going to be as passionate about it. And that's I think one of the things that I also mentioned earlier . . . about finding that balance, what the coalition members are actually willing to be able to give to provide to be able to do in terms of their time.

In addition, several CPPs spoke of their personal commitment to prevention work in their counties; indeed some directly connected their commitment to their own experiences with addiction.

I don't want people to go through what I and a lot of my friends and people I knew went through, through addiction and I fight like heck to try to get young people to understand that. I don't know, like I said, it is probably not coming from a level playing field but I believe the people in rehab, we have several recovering addicts in our coalition and they really seem to have a lot of drive.

My sponsor put me into doing service work about six months after I got sober. And one of the things my sponsor told me after a few years was, 'Now it is time for you to serve the community at large. It is time for you to give back some of that mess that you helped create' . . . My original intention was not to be a board member. I just wanted to be a guy who went around and talked to kids' groups on occasion. And, lo and behold, here I am.

I'm a substance abuse counselor. . . and I had heard about . . . [the prevention coalition], and I'm real passionate about this, I'm a recovering addict myself so I wanted to lend a hand to do what I can do.

Other CPPs spoke more of a sense of *group* commitment to the prevention work in their local community.

So pretty much, whatever needs done, we all kind of pitch in and help out.

We're gonna do whatever it takes to keep it going.

People from the diverse parts or agencies seem to have a real strong commitment towards helping the community and I mean from the very beginning the focus has been to really do something to make a change in the community.

So forget the money, we'll continue without it. Beg our way through.

I think one of the strengths of the coalition is that we have a core group of people who are very committed to seeing this process move forward from the beginning to the end. And I say that because we have people who have hung in there from the very inception of the idea through the hiring and then the leaving of two of the project directors, and then have been very supportive of the new project director. We actually went through two project directors and the coalition did not disintegrate; we didn't just drop the ball and say forget it. People really felt like they wanted to continue on. Of course now, we have . . . [our current project director] who is very dedicated to the cause and I think will see it through til the very end.

We have a bunch of little terriers that never give up. Never give up.

The ones that are involved are very actively involved and are ready to do whatever is necessary to make sure that this coalition succeeds.

It's everyone's willingness to just get together and do this because we know it's the right thing to do. I mean everybody is just willing – whatever it takes.

Teamwork

Many of the CPPs reported that they were part of local coalitions that pre-dated the SPF-SIG funding. Several of those pre-existing coalitions focused specifically on prevention work and continued as such, while others were able to include the concept of prevention under a wider community needs focus. Several of the CPPs reported that they started out with just a few people, but were “amazed by how much . . . [the group had] grown.” Most reported that they “expanded the coalition which was good.” Almost all CPPs reported that their coalitions had broad community representation.

No matter how they got where they are today, many CPPs discussed their local coalition in terms of democratic, cooperative processes. While they did not typically use these terms to describe their processes, their stories described a collaborative group where members had a voice and decisions were made democratically.

We more talk about it, but then it comes down to what the coalition wants.

I mean . . . [our project director] definitely does not try to play the role of telling us this is what we need to do. She is very much in wanting to talk about things, work them out and try to come up with whatever might be, what sounds like the best solution right now.

I think we work together. There's no, no one is territorial. We all have the same goals. We work together. There is no one who tries to be in charge. It's a team approach.

I'm actually amazed. Truthfully. I can see all the, prosecutor's office, the probation officer, I mean everybody at the table now with actual ideas and working towards certain issues like underage drinking. . . I'm pretty impressed.

We often times have very lively discussions. People are not afraid of sharing their views, and some people would find that to be kind of offensive, that people don't agree and they say, 'No I am not going to support that.' But I think that is healthy. . . I think that allows for people to feel like they can express what their concerns are, and I think you build a stronger working relationship with people that way. And there will be some people who leave because they don't like it, but that is okay too.

I think when I first came around, not only me, but some other people felt like maybe it wasn't, our voices weren't being heard, but we've since discussed that and it really, they really take what we have to say, we sit down and everybody really comes to a consensus and I think they're taking all the tools we have, we have various people with either book smarts, or street smarts, it is a nice blend how we blend together, we have a couple recovering people in there, we have a couple people with a lot of formal education, and it is a nice marriage.

They just simply started sitting down and discussing the problem and what they could do particularly in the schools and that was because that's where they were seeing a lot of the problem at that time or at, I mean the problem was all over the county but at least the school district saw the problem and was willing to at least sit down and start talking about what they could do about it. . . . [Then] it broadened out away from the school district to it being all encompassing through the whole county.

And I realize that, that I don't have the answers but I do know enough about it to discuss it and to listen and to figure out together what we might do. We as a group, what we might do, might not be successful but we're going to learn something in the process.

But, I mean it just grew really quickly. I mean it went from a few people, you know, initially, obviously there was this "here we go again with another grant and you know, we're going to hammer this out and it will be nothing but reports and it will go away" but when it got out that what we were trying to do and what we were trying to accomplish that, you know, we bring something to the table, you bring something to the table and somebody else brings something and then when you actually started communicating, everybody wanted to be at the table. And it really started to grow. I mean it really ended up working pretty well.

There's no real mind games and no jealousy or no underlying meaning . . . what happens is that, whoever does something best actually gets to kind of carry the ball for that part. You know, those of us that know how to do marketing and PR, we do that and the other people don't worry about it because they do their part. You got people doing training, doing marketing, people doing the funding and all that. Because the amount of people and excitement level since we've instigated it, people are willing to leave people alone and not be territorial about it.

I just really think that if I have a real problem with something or if I think something needs done, they listen. And we can always discuss it but I just think that they really listen to anybody Cause . . . [the Project Director will] call me and ask me for advice

on how she should do something or what do I think and so I don't think we're just there as people to show up to a meeting. I think we're used in other ways.

Everyone's opinion is respected.

This teamwork is especially noteworthy in light of the broad range of people involved in these local coalitions. As a matter of fact, over half of the CPPs emphasized the broad representation they have on their local prevention partnerships.

I think . . . [our county] has made great strides in getting a far more diverse group of folks who come to the meetings, that are a part of the process, than my prior experience has been with these kinds of groups. I mean I think they get, they have succeeded in getting a wider group of individuals involved.

Wow, we have people who work in social services; we have teachers; we have policemen; we have a lawyer; we've got an ex-drug addict, and that would be me. But we have all kinds of people; we have a pastor. We have a mechanic. We have some kids, because those are the people we are trying to reach so we need them for their input. But we've got, I think we've got a pretty decent cross section of the community for our board.

We do have a lawyer on our board that gives his time and advice . . . we have concerned parents that have been somehow affected by, you know, we have a parent whose child was killed because of someone driving under the influence of a substance. We have another gentleman on our board who runs like an AA and a rehabilitation center for people that have been substance abusers, whether it be alcohol or drugs. We have another person on our board who runs a community clinic Yes we do have reps from law enforcement.

We have people from the board of education; we have people from the local college campus; and some of the private academies; we have people from the faith-based community; we have youth; we have people from DHHR; from the family resource network; we have people from the law enforcement and various drug task forces; we have people from businesses; we have people from pretty much every segment I would say.

I think we have some real good business people, which I think is very important as far as the grants and everything. We have law enforcement, which works out really well to a point where they can talk about the legal aspects. We have an attorney on our coalition who can help with legal problems. It is kind of a nice blend of people . . . the number crunching is not my main thing, so I'm glad we have people like that so I don't have to do it. And we have a couple women who have had children who have been, we had one

lady whose son was killed in a drunk driving accident. A couple women are just there because they are passionate about it. They don't have a lot of experience firsthand but they have had family members who have experience with addiction, a nice blend.

We have a police . . . [person], myself from an employer's segment, various people from hospital settings, you know the, the prevention services such as Presteria, youth groups, it's varied. It's pretty, pretty diverse. Pretty well attended by you know a diverse group. So that's a plus I do believe. I think the other thing too is that the involvement from the youth sectors, like we have a representative who attends from the school system that I feel that that's kind of a weak section. I really really, somehow or another would like to see us be able to kind of work more strongly into the school system.

I think one of the most effective things that . . . [our] county has been really good at, just based on my experience working with some of the other counties in the SPF SIG program, has been actually getting involvement from like, law enforcement and you know, our prosecuting attorney. I mean getting everybody to sit around the same table. . . . It's been pretty neat watching the, you know, people sitting around the table watching that grow and different ones become involved and I think that's, that's been a key component is really getting, getting somebody from education there, getting somebody from law enforcement, getting somebody from the FRN and have, not just having them sit at the table but also have them be actively involved.

The collaboration of everybody. Like I said just everybody's willingness. I mean, the Sheriff's Department, the County Commissioners, you know, law enforcement, the local prosecuting attorney, I mean everybody has a stake in the claim and we all work well together.

Focus on Youth

A focus on youth members of the community was apparent in many of the interviews with CPPs. While the specific attitudes and opinions about youth involvement in the prevention efforts were varied, there seemed to be agreement among these county representatives concerning the need to involve, serve, and plan with and for young people.

So I guess helping a kid is one of the things that we would like to accomplish as a coalition kind of goal. And, I think that's really truly, I say that as kind of an offhanded kind of remark, but I really think that is what is in the heart of the coalition members, whatever they can do to help children get to the point that they are making good choices.

We have found statistics to show that . . . [our] county is the number three county in the state for alcohol abuse amongst teens, so we are trying to educate and get some prevention and some alternative activities for youth.

Yeah, we work with all the way up through the high schools but we are trying to get the word and educate them when they are young, try to get their way of thinking to change before they get into their more formative years where they are surrounded. Most of the kids in elementary are not, although they are exposed to substances, it is not in their face everyday like it is when they get to junior high and high school. We believe that if we can educate them in their elementary school days that maybe they can make a better choice when they do have the opportunity everyday to use.

I don't believe that just telling the kid - the old 'just say no' isn't going to work. I believe that we have to, I would like to see more events like we had, where we are actually hands on with the youth, that we can show them a different way of life and just try to get to some of the problems that they are facing one on one as opposed to just saying don't drink and don't use drugs.

[Our coalition]want[s] to be a real catalyst for positive community change and to also really be able to position . . . [ourselves] to be a source of information for prevention and I think that's something that everybody really, really is on the same page about. They really want to be sure that they are doing the things that children really need in order to get them in the position to be able to make good decisions – to make positive choices, to know what's going on in the world . . . and not be able to be caught up in the quick fixes and the drug things that kind of, you know, are out there always waiting to do things.

The more things that we can do as a community to bring about awareness and the more kids we get involved, it's, you know, that's how you get to a lot of people is through their kids.

In their interviews, many of the CPPs spoke specifically about *how* they were involving youth in their prevention efforts.

The support that . . . [project director is] getting from the kids is just amazing. Just to not be out drinking and not be out doing all the things that . . . [are] normally given thing[s] here in this county. Just getting them involved – they're wanting to get other kids involved to do other things other than go out drinking. . . I think the amount of total kids that she's worked with or got involved has like tripled. Tripled the number of what we expected.

We've had the program in the park . . . [run] for six weeks and it was for little children. We had arts and crafts and we took them to the zoo and Friday we're having a swim in the . . . pool and we're providing for that. We've also had an after-prom party.

What we do is, we put most of our emphasis on children, on reaching kids at young ages to stop them from getting involved with drugs and alcohol, as well as smoking. . . So, we have school programs that we run . . . Different clubs . . . bring drug awareness to children. We also have dances for the kids in different age groups to give them something to do with supervision, something clean on a regular basis . . . We have two of those each month. . . We have, actually, we just started a coffee house where kids can come and they can play their music, or sing their songs that they have developed for themselves, or just be around musicians and learn about musicianship. So, these are some of the things we do. . . The kids are the important part.

One of the things we did . . . which was very successful, we had an alcohol free skating event at our local ice skating rink. [We] partnered with the park so that we paid for, I believe it was 150 children to get into the park for free to use the ice skating rink, and the park kicked in [for]another 100 [kids]. We had a local group that . . . [has] developed a rap song about making good choices and alcohol free lifestyle and things like that. They presented there, and they did their performance there. We had another youth organization that is a dance team and they performed there in addition to the kids having the opportunity to skate for free. It was a way of getting an alcohol free kind of message out to kids in a fun activity. And it went off beautifully.

One of the things that we did was we had an art contest if you will, that was among the 4th grade students . . . I don't know if it was done during school time or if the students brought the posters back in, but we selected three winners and those pictures that the children drew, which was of a lifestyle when you have a clear mind, following along with that theme, they will be made into billboards and put [up] in . . . [our] county.

Several of the CPPs spoke in specific terms about their collaboration with the local school district, while others described their hope to be more involved with the local education entity.

They just simply started sitting down and discussing the problem and what they could do particularly in the schools and that was because that's where they were seeing a lot of the problem at that time . . . I mean the problem was all over the county, but at least the school district saw the problem and was willing to at least sit down and start talking about what they could do about it.

Our meeting today was at the Board of Education because they wanted specifically to talk about some issues that existed between the board and . . . [our prevention

coalition] in regards to teaching curriculum and after school programs that they were doing. So they actually met at the school district because it . . . would be easier for the school personnel to come to the meeting.

I think the other thing too is . . . the involvement from the youth sectors. Like we have a representative who attends from the school system that I feel that that's kind of a weak section. I really really, somehow or another would like to see us be able to kind of work more strongly into the school system. . . My hopes would be that we would be strongly involved and connected in the school systems . . . We would actually have a wing or person who would really work within the schools to bring programs, whether it be grade school, middle school, high school, into that direction because I think it's definitely needed.

What I can say is, the school system has been very supportive in the sense of, for instance, we had the Keep A Clear Mind program that was for 4th graders, and they allowed us to do that in the school. And supported that.

Two CPPs spoke about getting direct youth input into the work of the county prevention partnership.

We brought in a focus group of students . . . and if I remember correctly I think we brought in, maybe, there might have been two focus groups and we brought them in, two different groups at the same time. I think it was middle school students and high school students. And we basically asked them, I think, if I remember, this has been a while back, if I remember right, we, you know, had discussed what we had found statistically and what people were worrying about and what adults thought the problems were and then we asked the kids and basically the kids said "no that's not it" . . . Yeah, what they, what the parents were worried about versus what's really happening is not totally accurate. So it was very beneficial that we got a handful of students' input.

The one thing I think there is a short, short fall in adolescent representation and I voiced my concerns about that to our Executive Director as well as some of the people involved. I really, given the fact that we meet during the day and often at lunch time, it seems that's the consistent meeting time, it's almost impossible to get students out but I would feel better, you know with my background . . . We would be able to proceed and move forward better if we had more input from adolescents.

One CPP, who has experience in multiple counties brought up the issue of a deficit-based approach to prevention versus an asset-based approach to prevention, especially as youth were involved in the initiative.

[This is] one of my kind of reservations about SPF SIG. I felt like, I don't know how familiar you are with . . . [positive youth development] stuff but it talks a lot about changing the paradigm of how you look at youth, etc., etc. When you constantly talk about how many kids are abusing drugs, it makes a really negative view of kids. You know what I'm saying? . . . They tend to be taught much more about building strengths rather than eliminating weaknesses. Do you see what I'm saying? . . . They're . . . more talking about trying to get kids, you know, get kids involved and stuff and how can we make this stronger versus how can we eliminate weaknesses . . . When you constantly talk about kids as problems, when you see one walking down the street you start thinking, well how many problems does this kid have, you don't think how many strengths does this kid have. And I think that might have been, there was kind of a division of that thinking here.

Resources as Key

The CPPs recognized a variety of types of resources as important to the overall strength of their local prevention efforts. Money, manpower, and time topped the list. The three are inextricably linked and difficult to explain separately here. One CPP mentioned the fact that the right people brought particular skill sets important for success of the prevention initiative, while another CPP bemoaned the fact that the local coalition members, on the other hand, were probably the busiest people in town. And although these members were very interested and did their best to attend prevention meetings and other related functions, they had a myriad of other activities that took up their time. Another CPP focused on the lack of a project director, in her now unfunded county, as her biggest resource issue. Money-wise, several CPPs spoke of their concern related to "continuity and sustainability." One said it all "comes down to dollars and cents."

I think you know . . . [our coalition] picked some good people initially who knew a lot of people who could reach out on that kind of one-to-one basis and bring them in.

The . . . coalition is made up of a lot of people who are very dedicated to what they do in whatever that is and they're extremely involved in the community and one of my things is I wish I could spend more time sitting down and just talking to them about a lot of these things that come up. Just having more brainstorm sessions. But the problem is I'm busy with other things, [and] they're busy with the whole assortment of things on their plate, and to expect them to do that, to go, to do even more would be unrealistic you know because you're dealing with people who, like me, who desperately need to take my vacation right now. But it's sort of the nature of a lot of communities is the folks who really have the passion for it are doing so many other things.

We have no one who is free enough to look into things as . . . [our previous project director] would and . . . [she] would look into things and keep us informed and I think that was important. And she would let us know when there was, well we'll say that Share the Vision conference or different conferences and she also went to the Regional Learning Opportunity meetings.

A weakness on the coalition part is that there is just not enough manpower. There's not enough money to go around to hire the people to come in to really keep pounding on those doors . . . We stick our foot in where we can and get in there and get a good hold and get the teachers in the school and everything working together but if you had ten more people, you know what I mean?

I suppose the concern is that they feel a kind of a rush to get things done because the grant has a certain life and of course they're concerned about, you know, sustainability and how they're going to accomplish that so that's part of our discussions.

We're going to have to figure out some mechanism for, how are we going to sustain this, you know, are some of the people who were involved in this partnership going to help financially to sustain what we're doing because what we're doing is important and it needs to continue but the community is going to have to take a lot more, at least financial, responsibility for it.

A group of teenagers in NY sent . . . [me] a check for \$4,500 that they had different fund raising activities for a year long and they sent that to us. That's where we get it. Mini grants and project donations. We don't have that much money but what we have, we use.

Our coalition has raised additional funds far and above any of the other coalitions and so we're really looking at issues of continuity and sustainability in the ways that I'm not sure other coalitions are doing and that's a real positive thing.

I think my concerns initially are making sure we have money in place so that if we, as we transition, that we've got the money up front to support, you know, salaries and office needs prior to getting the spin down of the money with reimbursement.

But it all, you know once again, like I said, it kind of comes down to dollars and cents and the difficulty in just being readily available and having the resources by which to be able to further that.

We just don't have the personnel or the money. I mean, we have the ability, but we don't have the money, we don't have the personnel, we don't have the time.

Concluding Thoughts

We are grateful to CPPs for taking time out of their busy schedules to participate in the interview process and to speak in an open and forthright way about their views. The data this quarter are replete with ideas and information about how they have experienced and perceived the SPF-SIG work in their communities. In this report we have attempted to give a sense of the main issues that emerged as important to the CPPs related to successful community-based prevention work. And with a slight change in format, while doing our best to preserve anonymity, we included many more of the CPPs' direct comments than usual so that you would get a more intimate feel for what they had to say.

It is important to note that data collected from this group of funded, as well as unfunded counties, were generally more positive than previous data collected at the community level. We're not sure why that is except to note that these county coalitions were recommended to us as highly functioning and perhaps that, in itself, gives the CPPs a higher degree of satisfaction with their work. Indeed, they mentioned passion and commitment among themselves and their prevention partners, as well as the ability to work cooperatively with their fellow partners and staff. Many agreed upon *youth focus* as a shared vision. And all the while, they seemed acutely aware of the importance of adequate resources.

Granted, this report sheds a light on the experiences and perceptions of CPPs at one particular point in time, but we will continue to apply these and future findings to our evolving model of effective community change previously brought forth in our *Notes on the Notes* in mid-2008. In that report we identified several factors important for effective, sustainable community change: getting the right people to the table; getting them engaged with each other and the project; creating a shared vision; and obtaining resources necessary to support the vision. This quarter's findings seem to further support that model of sustainable community change.