

NOTES FROM THE FIELD
July, 2009

West Virginia Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being

External Qualitative Research Team

Linda Spatig, Paula Flaherty, Tracy Wasinger, and Jean Chappell

PROGRESS REPORT ON EVALUATION TEAM ACTIVITIES

Our *Eyes on the Process* article about the WV Partnership's formation and planning year is under review with the *Journal of Community Development*. It is not uncommon to submit a scholarly article such as this to several different peer reviewed journals before a good match between article content and journal mission is achieved.

We submitted a proposal for a presentation at the upcoming *Share The Vision* conference. The presentation will highlight our work associated with qualitative research methods we have used to explore prevention-related community change at the state and local levels in West Virginia. Our session will provide community practitioners in the state prevention system with a basic overview of qualitative evaluation research and will include a discussion of our emerging model of community change gleaned from four years of prevention-related evaluation research with the WV Partnership. As part of this session, participants will have the opportunity to address a county-level focus and begin to explore how qualitative research methods might be applied to their own community-level work.

Evaluation team member Tracy Wasinger is currently drafting a proposal for her dissertation research, which will focus on identifying a core set of principles and practices utilized by successful county prevention coalitions and how they align with existing community development models. She is collaborating with Project Directors and local coalition members from three counties in the state.

In addition to focus group interviews described below, Paula and Tracy generated new observational data for this quarter by attending a two-day Implementation Grant Meeting, a SPF-SIG staff meeting, a CDSs' debrief meeting, a two-day PRC staff meeting, a PRC staff meeting with Kim Walsh (new Deputy Commissioner for Programs at the Division of Behavioral Health), a State Partnership workgroup meeting, a Regional Learning Opportunity (RLO), and three county prevention partnership meetings (located in two counties). While data gathered through these observations are not the primary focus of this quarterly report, they inform the analysis and provide a higher degree of validity. The observations give us information that, when viewed in relation to the interview data collected for the quarter, allows us to be more confident that our report accurately describes the experiences and perceptions of those involved.

During this last quarter, team member Karen McComas left our team and new member Jean Chappell joined us. Jean is a Marshall University doctoral student in Education, focusing on Curriculum and Instruction. Currently, Jean is employed as Dean of the Allied Health Division at the Marshall Community and Technical College.

CURRENT QUARTER FINDINGS

The focus of our data analysis this quarter is on Project Directors (PDs) in the 17 Strategic Prevention Framework-State Incentive Grants (SPF-SIG) funded counties. Our goal was to understand PDs' experiences with and perceptions of their County Prevention Partnerships (CPPs) related to matters of structure, membership, formality, identity, ownership, participation, and sustainability. Additional issues we explored with PDs were related to their understandings and perceptions of the state comprehensive strategic plan, assessment and evaluation, environmental strategies, and their relationship with other SPF-SIG grant players (PRC and WV Partnership). Our analysis is based on four focus group interviews with PDs conducted by our evaluation team—one for each region of the state. The group interviews began on May 22 and ended on June 15, 2009. A total of 16 PDs participated. No sampling procedures were used to identify participants for interviews this quarter. We attempted to include the entire population of 17 PDs and were successful in achieving a 94% rate of participation.

With regard to local CPPs, we asked about structure and how the groups operated generally as well as how the CPPs related to their fiscal agents and other groups. More specifically, we inquired about the role of the membership with regard to participation and ownership issues as well as the role of the staff member(s) in relationship to the CPP.

The concept of environmental strategies was the next topic addressed. Our team explored issues related to CPP members' understandings of environmental strategies as well as CPP members' perceptions of the merits of using environmental strategies as a prevention tool. Finally, we inquired about the extent to which environmental strategies were being used in individual counties.

The third issue addressed in our focus group interviews related to PDs' assessments of the relationships their counties have with other SPF-SIG players—specifically the PRC and the WV Partnership. We asked PDs to identify perceived benefits and challenges related to their interactions with these groups of people.

Another topic of inquiry focused on PDs' views about the state comprehensive strategic plan and its potential impact on their work in individual counties. We asked PDs to share aspects of the plan they supported and aspects that concerned them.

Assessment and evaluation on the state-wide and local levels were addressed next with PDs being asked generally about their perceptions related to effectiveness. Project Directors were

asked to identify helpful aspects of assessment and evaluation as well as aspects that gave them concern.

The last issue addressed with PDs related to sustainability. Interviewees were asked to share their ideas about what local CPPs need in order to build and sustain effective prevention efforts in their counties with regard to material resources, human resources, and any other type of resource they could identify.

Local Coalition Structures and Operating Procedures

In this section of the report, we provide a snapshot of the funded SIG coalitions at this point in time, and from the point of view of the Project Directors, many of whom used the words “growing” and “evolving” during the focus groups in describing their local CPPs. In addition, PDs used these one-word descriptors when asked to characterize their coalition: “multi-faceted,” “diverse,” “energetic,” “comprehensive,” “challenging,” and “stuck.”

While some coalitions are autonomous organizational entities, others exist within the auspices of other community organizations. As noted in earlier reports, many local CPPs were created in response to SPF-SIG funding, while others were pre-existing community entities. In some cases, local partnerships have merged with other local coalitions with similar or complementary areas of focus. Even some autonomous, stand-alone coalitions have other organizations serving as fiscal agents.

While several PDs reported good relationships with their fiscal agents, two PDs felt too closely identified with or controlled by their fiscal agent. One PD said, “It was probably a mistake because I am now too embedded [with this organization] . . . so I’ve really been striving to get away from that.” Another PD described a more complex relationship with her fiscal agent that includes a higher level of control of her activities than she thought was appropriate or in the best interest of her county’s prevention efforts. In this situation there also seemed to be some confusion related to the CPP’s identity and mission as it related to the agency functioning as the fiscal agent.

It was obvious from discussions with the 16 PDs that local CPP structures and operating procedures vary widely. They run the gamut from operating relatively formally with official by-laws and operating procedures to functioning in a more casual, informal way with few if any formal procedures in place.

Informal Processes

Several PDs characterized their local prevention partnerships as informal with little in the way of formal operating procedures. They described these arrangements as “loose associations . . . [in which] decisions are made on a consensus basis.” As one PD explained, local coalition partners make decisions as part of informal meetings where, “we just agree on [issues] through discussion.” Two factors emerged in relation to county’s informal processes: (1) the size of the

county and/or coalition, and (2) the nature of the coalition's identity especially in relation to, or as part of, another organizational entity.

Small County/Coalition Informality

Some, especially those working in small counties and/or coalitions, described how their groups worked together in a non-hierarchical, team-like manner. They identified positive aspects of informal coalition arrangements, as the following excerpts illustrate:

We don't have formal workgroups . . . We're fortunate being such a small populated county, that we have as many people as we do. . . . So far it's created more of a team atmosphere where we don't have a hierarchy. I think for the most part it's worked out great. . . . We've kind of taken that [state partnership] approach . . . without the formality of it.

Yeah, we've been very informal . . . where everybody is just kind of sitting around saying, "Well how about if we do this?" and "How about if we do that?" I mean it's worked. That has worked for us. I don't know if it would work if we continue to grow [larger].

We don't have any formal structure. Back in the first year of the grant we talked very seriously about a formal structure at one meeting. . . . We talked about do we want to go off and incorporate and the next month I had [only] two people show up for the partnership meeting and I'm like, "Oh we scared them or something." So I started making phone calls and the consensus I was getting is—because again, we are a small county—[that] the last thing anybody wanted to do was work on another non-profit that we were going to have to then worry about how do we keep it rolling, how do we keep it sustained Most of the people that are on our coalition are directors of agencies that are non-profit They were not at all interested in a formal structure.

Informality within Pre-existing Organizations

For some whose coalitions are part of a larger/umbrella organization, the informal processes have been a way of existing within an already-established umbrella agency with its own policies and procedures. As the following excerpts suggest, however, sometimes fitting into the structures and processes of a pre-existing group is less than ideal for generating coalition participation and ownership.

Our coalition is informal Our fiscal agent is . . . [a local] foundation. They handle all the fiscal side of things. They're not really involved in too much of the program. Actually the coalition isn't involved enough We don't have a set of by-laws. We don't have rules yet. We're working on getting that going now. I'm trying to make it a little more formal.

We don't have [by-laws]. We're under the FRNs so I think it . . . [is complicated]. . . . If you've got a bunch of people from one agency, do they all vote [or] does [only] one

person [vote]? . . . You've got a fiscal agent and they need things [done] a certain way for fiscal purposes. . . . [It has] squelched some community ownership. . . . We're trying to get back to the point where it is more of a community entity.

Evolving Toward Formal Processes

While some coalitions operate informally, as described above, others have moved toward more formal structures and processes. Generally speaking, this seems to have been an evolving process for coalitions that over time realized they could benefit from using more formalized CPP operating procedures. For some, the changes involved renegotiating—or at least perceiving a *need* to renegotiate—relationships with fiscal and/or umbrella agencies as well.

Ours was pretty loose for a while and everything was kind of consensus-driven and they didn't want officers [or any structure . . . but it became harder and harder to transfer it from staff-driven to board-driven. . . . So we put together an . . . advisory committee . . . and they developed operating guidelines, . . . We had elections and now we have officers. So [now] we work off . . . an agenda and it was really hard at first. . . . And I don't know whether it's . . . coincidental, but attendance at our meetings just keeps growing. Since maybe October of last year, . . . it looks to be about a 25% increase.

We started very loosely structured and consensus-driven. . . . We had teams to handle each one of our goals. . . . Then it was determined by the partnership that we needed a steering committee to meet separately . . . so they just took the team leaders and made that our initial steering committee. . . . That became our first 501(c)3 board. . . . We have by-laws, operating procedures, and officers.

We came through a process of . . . some growing pains. We structured our by-laws and things like that. I think that our coalition is working fairly well right now They're voting on more things . . . [and] trying to make that more of a democracy. . . . That's one of the things that I have been working on with our board – at least the last two years.

Benefits of Formality

For the more formally-operating coalitions, perceived benefits identified by PDs include: (1) having policies and procedures in place to handle friction or disagreement among coalition members, and (2) increasing participant engagement and buy-in, in other words moving away from being staff-driven groups.

It's the evolution of it. . . . It was really loose [initially] but it needed to be tighter if we're going to transfer it from staff-driven to board-driven. [Board members are] taking on more and more. . . . I had written that we were going to work on social hosting, but they didn't want to do that. . . . When it came down to a vote, that's not where they wanted to go. So it's interesting. . . . Finally we're shifting that balance of power.

I created the by-laws because this was just such [an] uncomfortable situation where I don't want to upset people and I don't want people to think that I'm doing things under

the table. . . . That's why I created the by-laws so that everybody would be on the same page from this point forward. There wouldn't be any more of that not knowing how things . . . were going to be run, so it was important for us. I think it probably will be important for everybody now, the more we get into it.

I feel like, it's like [doing] everything [informally] is fine as long as everybody agrees but as soon as somebody doesn't then all of a sudden you need something in place to deal with it.

Readiness for Formality

Several PDs described their coalitions as recently having reached a point where more formal processes make sense for them. As in the formally-operating coalitions described above, it seems that for these coalitions, it has been important for that decision—to move to more formal operations—to occur as a part of the coalition's own development. One PD commented about her coalition, "We're at a by-laws point."

We need by-laws now We printed the [WV]Partnership by-laws and put them in the packet just to give people like a jumping off point so that they could come back this next time and we could start.

Things have gone along fine really. I mean I don't have any complaints. I just think we're at a point now where we're ready to grow and so we're going to have to make adjustments in order to be able to grow.

We're in the process now of trying to figure out whether we [want to] become independent – do a 501(C)3 or we try to team up with another non-profit. So right now we don't have official by-laws but it's on the radar, a possibility in the next few months.

CPP Member Engagement

Project Directors agreed on the importance—as well as the difficulty—of keeping coalition members actively engaged in the work. In many counties, both those operating formally and informally, PDs reported uneven participation by CPP members, with some involved more actively than others. In one case, county size was seen as a key factor, as one PD explained:

I feel it's because it's a small county and we're meeting people to death . . . they're willing to do something if its specific and they know that it's going to take . . . one afternoon. But to look at the global things, they're just not ready [They] may not come to the partnership meeting but they're still engaged when we need something.

Core Members within Less-Active Membership

Generally speaking, PDs described their coalitions as consisting of a "core" group of actively involved individuals group within a larger, less active membership. As one PD said, "It's almost like we have a core group and then a larger group that's not as strong."

A lot of our most active members don't come to the coalition meeting. They show up at events that we have or they volunteer on a regular basis, but they don't actually come to the meetings . . . so we just have to play it by ear as far as being in contact with our . . . partners It's very individualized; I mean we don't just have one big coalition meeting that encompasses everything. . . . It's in smaller pieces.

It's a fairly small coalition. We probably average 12-15 members that show up to meetings but we have a pretty large . . . list of I would say another 15 that are very supportive of the coalition even though they're not at the meetings. . . . Some people aren't able to attend [our coalition meetings] so probably 30 very active members and then 50 more that aren't so active.

Youth

Two PDs mentioned youth members as the "toughest" to attract and to accommodate (schedule-wise) regarding inclusion as potential CPP members. In contrast, another PD shared a recent level of success with youth involvement in local prevention efforts:

I'm happy because we had a hard time with youth involvement and our youth involvement seems to have improved. We have a huge group now and they've been meeting every week for the past three weeks . . . so I feel like that has worked itself out. . . . They came and did a sticker shock . . . and then they wanted to start their own youth version of the coalition. They even took the t-shirts that we had and they wear . . . [them] to school, like . . . their uniform on the day of our meetings They just come up with things all the time that blow my mind so I'm thrilled.

Ownership of Local Community Prevention Partnership

Perceived ownership of CPPs is difficult to assess. This is partly related to the wide variety of county coalition structures and considerable variation in coalition functioning across the SPF-SIG funded counties, discussed above. Also, ownership is defined differently among the 16 PDs interviewed this quarter. Two PDs made a distinction between ownership of SPF SIG per se and ownership of more general prevention-related issues in their communities.

So although SPF SIG has certainly been the absolute foundation for all of this, and certainly all the guiding of any strategy that's been implemented . . . [and] any money [that] has been spent . . . has come out of SPF SIG, they don't own that. I bet you they don't even know what SPF SIG means, even though it's spelled out on everything. . . . But they are invested in solving the substance abuse issue and [feel] . . . ownership and that's huge. . . . So I would say they own the issue and the responsibility for working towards solutions, but they don't own SPF SIG.

Yes, they own the coalition. They own the issue and they identify themselves with the prevention coalition, but . . . they probably have no idea what SPF SIG is or they have no idea what is required for the grants to do these things that we do.

Addressing the issue of coalition ownership, a few PDs discussed sorting out the distinction between their roles and responsibilities as staff members, on the one hand, and the roles and responsibilities CPP members are willing to assume, on the other.

It's like with our board of directors, they don't want to make programming decisions. They feel like that's what they pay us for is to make the programming decisions and they take care of the financial issues. And then as part of our programming, we help . . . with the coalition [(which operates under board of directors)] . . . to try to keep organized and keep people motivated. That's what we do.

I think ours is a combination [of staff and partner ownership] because the direction, the ideas, and the concerns . . . come from the partnership and from the broader community as well, but I think they look to us for the direction to . . . jump in on the right projects and things and try to get . . . [the right] people to the table.

They know how much money we get and they know where that money is directed . . . but they don't want to decide whether or not we get a billboard . . . or take a full-page ad in the . . . [local newspaper].

Overall, PDs' comments suggest that progress is being made with regard to increasing coalition member ownership of the local coalition itself as well as ownership of local prevention issues generally. As noted above, for some counties, moving to more formal operating processes resulted in greater coalition member engagement and ownership. Not surprisingly, PDs described variations in ownership and buy-in with "core" members more invested than others.

I think for the most part . . . [the coalition] is doing very well because it's not all about me and what I'm doing anymore. It's about what we, as a group can accomplish.

[T]hey've [coalition members] begun to take some ownership of some of the problems within the community because . . . they [came] to the realization of the magnitude of the [substance abuse problem].

Our core members do [feel ownership of the coalition], which would be 12 people probably. Those people most likely do, but they don't want . . . to run the day-to-day small details that need done. So they have ownership but they don't want total ownership.

Once we blended things together and explored the connections – how youth relates to counseling relates to prevention and found the common threads, that's when people got excited and were excited about being together and have since become more engaged and own it even more.

Ours [CPP members] are definitely part of the process. I don't think there's any member that doesn't feel like their voice is heard . . . It's got[ten] to the point where they're just running it.

Relationship with Other SPF-SIG Players

Local, regional, and state-wide prevention efforts continue to grow in size and complexity. In terms of the SPF-SIG grant in particular, besides the local PD and her/his CPP members, there are many other players in this system—State Partnership members, PRC staff (Dunbar- and field-based), other PDs and CPP members throughout the state, and participants in unfunded counties. Through conversations with PDs this quarter, we learned more about PDs' own and their CPPs' relationships with these various people and organizations, especially with the WV Partnership and the PRC.

West Virginia Partnership

While a few PDs responded that their CPP members were “certainly all aware of the State Partnership” and “there are members of my coalition who feel they're at least aware and connected,” many reported a “disconnect” between their local coalitions and the WV Partnership. Even in a relatively small state, it is difficult to build and maintain relationships between local communities and state-level entities, as the following excerpts demonstrate.

I'm sure most people have no idea what . . . [the WV Partnership] is. We're trying to start, we're trying to help people . . . understand the structure and how we're connected with a larger state picture. But at the same time I would love to see some sort of representation from our area on the [WV] Partnership.

As far as the [WV] Partnership goes . . . we're all aware of it and what they do, but it's just like a larger-than-life entity. . . . There's a little . . . disconnect there.

The [WV] Partnership is a faceless entity. We offer the opportunity to attend [WV Partnership meetings], but most of our folks are not in the position to travel outside of the county. They are themselves agency individuals [with] tight schedules [and] they do well to participate in our coalition meetings.

Opportunities to interact face-to-face were mentioned as effective vehicles for building and sustaining relationships between local coalitions and state-level participants. Several PDs reported “loving” the state prevention system retreat at Stonewall Jackson Resort as an opportunity to connect with others in the state. Likewise, a PD suggested to others in her focus group that attending the WV Partnership meetings “makes a big difference” with regard to feeling a sense of connection.

They're not just a group of really rich snobby people that talk about us and then . . . make meaningless rules to make our lives unhappy. . . . They seem to be concerned and

they seem to be interested. . . . So for us it made a big difference to go, and I think it helps them [WV Partners] too. They put a name with a face.

In response to those comments, a PD said, “I know we can go to [WV] Partnership meetings . . . but there’s too much work to be done to do that. So it’s better to file some information [with] . . . [our regional liaison] and let her get it down to them.” Several PDs who did not attend WV Partnership meetings suggested that the meetings “come out of Charleston because having a meeting in Charleston turns some people off in our area.” Along the same lines, a PD commented that the “State Partnership needs to get in the counties up here a little bit more.”

In addition to seeking closer relationships with the WV Partnership as a whole, or with individual WV Partnership members, some PDs stressed the importance of building relationships with local arms of agencies that are represented on the WV Partnership. Several comments by PDs indicated they would like WV Partnership assistance with their own recruitment of knowledgeable, committed, local prevention partners. They spoke about the importance of WV Partners taking prevention “information back to their agencies . . . [in order to better] create that state-wide [prevention] network.” One PD noted that many of her local CPP members “work for agencies that are represented on the State Partnership, yet they have no idea about [the work of the State Partnership].”

We have people from the Board of Education . . . [on our local CPP], we have people from law enforcement, we have magistrates there, we have people that ultimately answer to Department of Criminal Justice or [the] court . . . [system]. We have attorneys there. . . . And those people that they answer to are on the State Partnership. But yet they . . . didn’t have a clue.

If I’m the [WV] partner, am I going back . . . and telling that direct link below me, “Hey, I was at the State Partnership meeting [and] this is what’s going on, this is what we’ve decided, and these are the actions that we’re taking” and then let[ting] it spread down through the agency? . . . I just feel like that as a partner they have more of a responsibility [to do that].

Finally, several PDs discussed an issue related to the WV Partnership sub-granting workgroup’s annual responsibility of allocating funds to counties. PDs expressed a desire for more opportunities for dialog between SPF-SIG funded counties and the workgroup.

If you’re going to cut something out of the SPF-SIG budget, before you cut it out, it would be very beneficial to call the project director and say, “Hey, we need to cut something out of this budget.” . . . Maybe the project director would say, “Well, I agree.” I would think we might know better than they or at least have a different opinion than they about what to do. So a little bit of . . . [communication] would be good.

[I]t disengages your county partnership. . . . [Y]ou’re running this [grant application] through them and . . . [local CPP members are] saying to you, “This is what we think

would really work in our county” and then you send it down . . . [to the sub-granting workgroup] and the thing that was their pet project in your county is the thing . . . [the sub-granting workgroup is] saying, “We can’t fund.” . . . You [maybe] had other things [you would be willing to] . . . cut to allow that. . . . [The] courtesy of a conversation is better than . . . saying, “Everything that’s crossed out, you’re not doing.”

PRC – Dunbar-based Staff

Several PDs reported that they and their CPPs have a “very good relationship with the PRC,” “a strong relationship with the PRC,” and that there is “a kind of rapport there.” They “feel very connected” with the PRC and believe “the PRC in general has been completely supportive” and “really listen[s] to what we say and [tries] . . . to be responsive.” Despite the numerous positive comments, some PDs believe their CPPs have “mixed views about the PRC.”

There’s distrust from the early SPF-SIG years. Things changed and some of our members don’t trust the PRC . . . because it might change [again] next year, so I think some one-on-one contact would go a long way to easing this.

Some of them love it [the PRC], some of them are indifferent, and some of them associate the PRC with the frustrating aspects of SPF SIG, [especially] the evaluation and environmental strategies and the emphasis on that which they see as at odds [with] what’s actually effective in communities. We have these discussions all the time, but people associate those things with the PRC and so that sometimes has a negative connotation for some members of our coalition. But others are very grateful for their involvement [and] for their activity.

A PD who has been involved with SPF SIG since its inception, but not always in a PD position, pointed out the strong role local PDs play in strengthening or harming relationships between the local coalition and the WV Partnership and between the local coalition and the PRC.

It all depends on how the staff [PD] . . . communicates [with the local coalition]. . . [about] the role of the state [partnership] and the PRC. . . . In the past some staff . . . mostly used the PRC to pin some problems on. . . . Rather than try to explain things, it was easier to point fingers and say . . . “The PRC is making us do this. The State Partnership sub-granting work group is making us do this.” . . . Of course that’s going [to] set up some negative feelings . . . so I think the staff plays a major role in building that relationship.

PRC - Community-based Staff

Many PDs report having “an excellent relationship” with their CDS and believe they are getting “a lot of support from the CDS” in their region. They described CDSs as helpful, “a constant resource,” and a “wealth of information” who offer “encouragement,” “run interference,” and who find answers for them in a timely fashion. One PD went so far as to say she wouldn’t be able to do her job without the assistance of her CDS, but also mentioned that she was “still kind of unclear at this point, what she [CDS] thinks her responsibilities are with the PRC.”

In focus group discussions about connections between local coalitions and the PRC, comparisons between the CDS network and the PD network emerged spontaneously. One PD noted that “the CDS network works very well together as a [state-wide] team, [but] the Project Directors do not.” PDs expressed a desire for more interaction with their state-wide PD team and wanted to get out of their “county silos” in order to share ideas *across* regions rather than just *within* their geographic regions. Semi-annual Implementation Grant Meetings (IGMs) were viewed by some PDs as not conducive to sharing among PDs because they occurred too infrequently, because of the non-sharing nature of the agenda, and because only a few counties tend to be chosen to share their ideas with the rest of the group. Also, PDs expressed a desire for statewide training comparable to the Sustainable Communities Training in which CDSs recently participated.

Where were WE in that training? We weren’t there. . . . They [CDSs] are being trained to address certain issues that they come across in our county. We’re not. . . . [It would be good] if we could be trained on the same things at the same time. . . . A team works together better. . . . If they want to have a true state-wide prevention system, [we] need to function that way. It needs to function state-wide.

Environmental Strategies

Data from this quarter indicate that some CPP members are still confused about environmental strategies. In addition to varying levels of understanding, PDs reported varying levels of support for environmental strategies within counties and across the state. At least one PD included herself in that as well, saying, “A lot of us don’t get it [and] I think even the ones that do get it don’t believe in it.”

Understanding

Several comments from this quarter’s data demonstrate the CPP members’ lack of understanding of environmental strategies and their role in prevention efforts. One PD put it simply and directly, saying, “I don’t think they [CPP members] understand it.” Some PDs spoke of their coalition members as moving toward greater understanding. Finally, PDs drew a distinction between implementing particular strategies, on the one hand, and using “environmental strategies” terminology, on the other.

They’re [CPP members] looking for that one-on-one contact. . . . For us it’s always going to be an issue I think. Every month I’m going to have to explain why I took that [environmental] approach.

People are starting to get it [environmental strategies]. We’re just starting to get it and bringing in that . . . program has helped a lot because it gave us something more tangible.

I just think it's something that we've been doing but no, I don't think that people really know to call them environmental strategies. I don't think that the name has been put . . . with the effort.

On the other hand, several PDs reported that their coalition members have a good understanding of environmental strategies and are comfortable with that approach to preventing substance abuse.

That's all we've ever done. . . . We didn't have anybody with any background or information in programming. . . . So, really the only thing we've ever implemented is environmental strategies. I mean you have very little staff, there's not much money . . . [environmental strategies provide] the biggest bang for your buck so it made perfect sense for where we were in our county.

Support/Resistance

In addition to the varied levels of understanding about environmental strategies, another issue PDs raised is the extent to which CPP members are willing to support this way of approaching local prevention efforts or conversely, are inclined to resist implementing environmental strategies in their local counties. One PD expressed concerns about a lack of "local-level community support . . . [for] environmental strategies," commenting that "when they hear the definition and examples [of environmental strategies], most people look at it and think that's not going to work." Perhaps because of this skepticism about the effectiveness of environmental strategies, some community members participate only reluctantly, if at all, in such efforts.

We struggle with environmental strategies too, you know. Some of the main examples they always give you are billboards and . . . we talked about [how] our county has two billboards . . . and they're both on the same stretch and that's five miles apart so how [many] people are you really reaching with a billboard? So we've become very creative with what we're calling environmental strategies.

The barriers to really clicking with the environmental strategies, part of it is because of history There's not necessarily a great confidence in its effectiveness. The focus [in our CPP] is on community development—inspiring the community to connect whether it's through focus groups or the traditional community development techniques and then the will coming up from there. They see that as distinct from environmental strategies. This would be the coalition's perspective I think from folks I've talked with.

We've had some difficulty with . . . our sobriety check points and . . . beer stings and all this because we can't get law enforcement to schedule these things with us. And we tell them . . . we have grant money to pay you. I know for you guys [in other counties] it might just be a matter of paying for the salaries, but not for us. We have to be there and we have to pressure these guys . . . or it doesn't happen. And so we've had some

difficulty with that. [With] most of the environmental stuff we have to be the ones to carry it out and that makes it difficult.

Transitioning

Amidst the concerns related to varied levels of understanding and support, some PDs expressed hopefulness and spoke of their CPP members' understanding and use of environmental strategies as growing stronger – as being in a transitional phase.

We're having the same difficulty in that transition [to environmental strategies]. And I call it transition because I think that's what it is Our county is very political. . . . We have learned that if we need to get something done, that if we pull a political strong arm then we can. . . . But they [CPP members] are in transition . . . from what they think their good ideas are compared to what the environmental strategies [are], what the data-driven process is. And so, it's all about perception I think, so we're trying to find an easy way to change that perception and make the transition easy.

Similarly, another PD described her work with CPP members around the issue of environmental strategies as “a continuing conversation that takes place at the coalition meetings but also on an individual level.” She emphasized a collaborative effort on her county's part when she said that “we're trying to work through [this] together.”

According to some PDs, at this point in time environmental strategies involving political action are particularly unappealing to some community participants.

As far as policy and that kind of thing, we're not ready for that. . . . Agency directors that are on my coalition are not going to lobby for policy change because they can't or they're busy lobbying for their own agency. . . . They're not interested in that.

Along the same lines, a PD described her CPP members as “distant to the concept of any kind of law changes” but she thinks they're “headed in the right direction” by “start[ing] small with a social marketing campaign and with sticker shock and some other things like that.”

PD Understanding and Role

One Project Director put the onus on PDs to work with their CPP members to increase their levels of understanding, acceptance, and ultimately support of environmental strategies.

I think it's up to the staff [PDs] and to the folks that have been educated on environmental [strategies] to sort of build the enthusiasm among those that maybe are less educated about what that is. You know, not all of our partners are at the same level. They come and they go . . . and some are on work groups and some come to our monthly meetings and some don't, but it's up to us to build the enthusiasm and education . . . [about] what environmental strategies can do.

Also, in our discussions with PDs this quarter, it was evident that several view environmental strategies as one important part of what should be a balanced approach to local prevention efforts. They were of the opinion that besides environmental strategies, several different types of strategies should also be included in order to create an optimal prevention initiative.

Education is still important you know. Information dissemination is still important. We can't put those things to the side and just focus on the environmental stuff. Although the environmental stuff is important . . . I think we just need to have the peppering of all the different things.

We're about fifty-fifty, 50% programming and 50% environmental, right now and I'm excited about this upcoming year that we seem to be spending more time on environmental [strategies]. . . . Programming has a place, don't get me wrong. I think it's very important and we'll continue doing that, but I'm excited about expanding our environmental approaches.

Success Stories

Lastly, PDs shared successful experiences with environmental strategies. Interestingly, most of the successes involved sticker-shock activities about which coalition members have begun to receive indications of positive outcomes.

The sticker shock has been a huge success in our county. Huge success. We have merchants calling us saying, "Can your kids come back?" And we went into . . . [two grocery stores in two towns]. They wanted us to come every other week over the whole summer.

Over this past school year our county went from an 80 or 87% buy-rate down to a 33% buy-rate. So we're trying to get specific dates and figures from him [ABC personnel] but he really attributes it to what we're doing. I mean that was the first kind of tangible positive . . . thing.

We did sticker shock last year and when they did the [inspections] we had a zero buy-rate. . . . We'd like to take all the credit, but we're sure that . . . there were other factors involved [as well].

State Comprehensive Strategic Plan

For the most part, PDs seemed engaged with the state comprehensive strategic plan process. One or two PDs expressed a lack of understanding as evidenced by comments like, "I don't know for sure what you're talking about." One PD was familiar with the plan, but expressed a need to be better informed about it: "That's been my issue with PRC for months. If they want this to go through, they need . . . to explain [the] plan . . . to us really [well]."

Positive Views

Overall, PDs believe the comprehensive strategic plan “makes sense,” “is logical,” and that the PRC and WV Partnership have “been very intentional and comprehensive – truly comprehensive—in their thought process” with developing the plan. Project Directors said the plan, which “raises the bar” and provides “credibility,” gives them increased confidence in the WV Partnership’s and PRC’s commitment to addressing prevention issues in the state.

We certainly have some nice relationships with a lot of our government and legislative [representatives]. . . [but] we don’t really have any true standing. Whereas if we were certified . . . [then] we [would be] the “go-to” coalition. Then all of a sudden we [would] have to be brought to the table.

[The development of the plan] is very systematic; it is well-explained. . . . Whatever else there may be, that core commitment, which has been consistent is what gives me the confidence that even if funding doesn’t come through and the comprehensive plan doesn’t take place, it’s an important part of the process for the state as a whole to be involved in addressing the issues. And of course the funding is what will activate this particular plan.

In some counties, the comprehensive strategic plan is positively perceived by local CPP members and PDs remarked that the potential for replication of local efforts and general confidence in the work of the PRC and WV Partnership play an important part in that:

Overall the perception [of the state plan] in our community is actually very positive because they see what we’re doing and they like what we’re doing. . . . We’re the only ones doing this kind of prevention work and they see the positive outcomes and they understand that this would be good for the state if we could replicate this in other counties since there’s only 17 of us now. . . . Right now the feedback is very positive.

Concerns

While overall PDs responded favorably to the comprehensive state plan as well as to the processes being used to develop it, some expressed concerns. In particular, they raised questions about how certification and funding decisions would be made and expressed concerns about increased within-county competition they anticipate.

How Funding Decisions will be Made

In some counties, individuals have expressed less positive views of the state plan. Individuals and organizations are especially uneasy about how coalition certification and funding decisions would be made.

That’s been a big subject of our coalition meetings. . . . It’s our understanding that the . . . PRC and [WV] Partnership . . . would come up with this plan and your county would have to be officially recognized, your coalition, to be eligible for any state prevention grants. . . . Some people were very upset about that and some people aren’t.

It would be nice to have some kind of assurance that when the 17 counties that have been working so hard, that those agencies would continue to have that funding in those counties – at least a little bit—and not have it taken away.

The funding, or lack thereof, is the sticky wicket that makes me a little apprehensive on whether we have a future because I can write three and four grant applications every two or three months . . . [but] that's not going to keep us alive and a little bit of money from fund raising locally, you know it's a little here and there. [It's] not enough to employ somebody. And at a minimum, unless that state plan provides for funding a coordinator, [we're] not going to go anywhere. Another five or six years worth of work which was great foundational work [is] gone to waste. So I think the plan makes perfect sense . . . It's so logical and it makes just a tremendous amount of sense but the only part of it that makes me nervous is the funding part.

Increased Competition

Project Directors also expressed concerns that the comprehensive strategic plan would generate increased competition among organizations seeking funding to support their programs. One PD spoke about trying to avoid having another group “swoop” in after the current coalition has done so much groundwork, saying, “I'll compete if I have to.” Others joined in, expressing concerns about within-county competition for certification and funding.

[W]e all recognize that we're going to need some hard and fast things [by-laws, procedures] in place so that if you have three or four competing bodies in your county, you're going to be able to hold up. Not only have you been through this four or five year process but also . . . you've done the work . . . We've got capacity built. We're not just some pop-up thing that . . . [says], “Ta-da, here we are, we want your vote.”

Somebody . . . [said] something about how sad it would be if another agency, I'll leave nameless, decides to run for that money because they want to start doing what we're doing. . . . They're [other agency] on our coalition so I was like, “Now wait a minute.” It kind of hurt a little bit because I'm thinking, “Okay, just how competitive will this be?” So I realized then I have to take this very seriously, not that I want to compete but it feels like I'm going to have to compete.

It does seem to make us competitive. . . . I think we all have that sense of, okay we have to get our ducks in a row so that we will be able to . . . take on the responsibility of being able to do the right thing. But there are going to be other organizations or agencies or people or whatever that are going to look at it as, “We want to be able to spend that money. We want to be able to do what we want to do.”

In our county it's not an issue, but in other counties I think they have more than one type of coalition and there's some issue there about who is the official one and if we're not that means we're done pretty much.

Evaluation and Assessment

In focus group discussions about SPF-SIG assessment and evaluation, PDs used several one-word descriptors more than once: “hard,” “challenging,” and “necessary.” Besides the one-word descriptors, an interesting metaphor was used by a PD who likened evaluation to a “mountain that we can’t even see over the top of and can’t guess how we could conquer.”

Local County Evaluation – A Weak Spot

One PD described the evaluation done on the state-wide level as “pretty good.” She added that she has “seen a lot of this, the internal and the external” and “she thinks it’s been good especially seeing the reports, the external reports. They’ve been helpful.” But rather than a state-wide focus, PDs for the most part were interested in discussing their experiences with evaluation at the local level. One PD seemed to sum up the overall feeling of her comrades about assessment and evaluation on the county level by commenting, “It’s our weakest spot.” Although one PD spoke positively about having a very part-time evaluation contract with a local person, others PDs expressed concerns related to assessment and evaluation in their counties.

One of the issues PDs raised most often was that there “wasn’t enough emphasis put on” local-level evaluation. One PD said that local evaluation is “the poor stepchild of the SPF SIG.” Another PD shared her view that evaluation “has real value . . . but we just aren’t getting enough.” A third PD commented:

We’ve done a lot of *talk* about evaluation but that’s all. As far as . . . giving us a concrete plan of how to evaluate our individual organizations or programs . . . I just feel like . . . none of the evaluation information that we’ve been given has been very helpful in that. . . .The things that we do individually I just don’t feel like it’s evaluated very well and I don’t know how to fix that.

Another PD differentiated between qualitative and quantitative evaluation and commented: “It’s really just quantitative that’s being collected and I think that . . . something that we’re lacking on local levels is the qualitative.” Whether quantitative or qualitative in nature, collecting local data is a major challenges identified by PDs.

The [local] coalition members either lack the time or the skill to contribute to evaluation and largely it’s an issue of time because they’ve got their own grants and their own agencies to deal with evaluation. We attempted to engage university students or design internships, [but] that’s not come to fruition largely because we would have to pay for those students to be able to even travel to our county and providing travel . . . is not an option for us presently. [Also], the staff . . . are intimidated by evaluation.

Perhaps the larger issue than evaluation for us is just tracking data collection and not having the tools or feeling like we don’t have the time to prioritize the creation of those tools because we’re trying to do the programming and we’re trying to anticipate additional funding and we’re trying to address the issues that are right in front of us. So,

it continues to be something we recognize, something that we're struggling with, and something we're trying to engage other people to help raise the comfort and skill level.

Another major challenge associated with evaluation at the local level, especially as viewed by PDs in one particular region, is centered on PRIDE survey issues such as lack of active consent, inconsistent administration, old data, and potentially worthless baseline data if there is a move to a new measure. One PD conceded that the PRIDE survey was "by far the best . . . we've been able to do for . . . quantitative evaluation to compare to something previous." Another PD shared that same view: "The PRIDE survey was . . . excellent." They discussed the fact that the PRIDE survey was not administered this year in one county because of a lack of active consent by parents. The PD in that county surmised: "That means all our baseline data from PRIDE is going to be worthless." After discussing the PRIDE survey data's perceived worth but inconsistent availability, PDs expressed concerns about finding other ways to collect local youth-related prevention data. A PD commented that "there's no real data now without PRIDE and my concern now is trying to get relevant data." Another said, "my concern is that our data is so old and . . . in our county there's not going to be an opportunity to recreate the PRIDE survey without some state-level intervention."

Difficulty in Measuring Environmental Strategies

Several PDs spoke about the difficulty of measuring prevention outcomes generally. Others expressed a view that within prevention work, it is especially difficult to evaluate the effects of environmental strategies.

Prevention is hard to evaluate. It might be ten years before we see . . . results of what we're working on today. It will be when these little eight year olds we're dealing with now turn 18 that we'll know if we . . . made a difference.

One thing that I found challenging in reporting and trying to evaluate things that we do is measuring environmental [strategies] . . . Those kind of things have been a challenge. You don't know when you do sticker shock and you put stickers on the cases and you put out 15000 stickers, . . . you don't know how many people are going to see that.

It's hard to get the statistics . . . when you talk about sticker shock. . . . How has it reduced the buy-rate? . . . It might be a year before I'm going to get those numbers to figure that out, so it's real hard to do an evaluation piece on environmental strateg[ies].

PRC Assistance with Evaluation

Several PDs described how Dunbar-based PRC staff assisted them with such evaluations:

I can remember saying to Andy, "Short of my sitting in front of every convenience store in my county, . . . and watching every case go out, I don't [know what to do]". . . Then we figured [it] out. He's like, "I'll make you an algorithm" and I'm like, "No one's ever told me that." That was a new one.

We had the same issue with the billboard campaign and how many people and the sex and race and all that. . . . So we came up with our . . . decision and we spoke to Andy about it and we now have a way that works. And it's a number that we can use and we use our demographic data to break it down by race and sex.

I really do think [local evaluation] is our weakest point. I think that the PRC staff has been supportive. . . I'm always calling Monica and saying, "Alright how would I evaluate that?" And she'll give me some hints to get me through to the end of it. . . . It's hard.

Sustainability

When PDs were asked about what they believed was needed for effective local partnerships to be sustained, they spoke about the importance of financial resources, human resources, training, and the Strategic Prevention Framework.

Funding

First and foremost PDs reported that in order to sustain and grow their local preventions efforts they need a consistent funding source. One commented, "We just need consistent money from year to year to stay the same." That same PD went on to say that "it's not the amount that hurts some counties; it's not knowing whether it's going to end next year." Another PD looked to the state for that consistency in funding:

I think just commitment from the state because . . . at times the partnership in our county will say, "Yeah we really want to get that started," and we know we've only got a couple years to run it We just need the commitment that we're going to be working on prevention efforts in some capacity in each county. . . . Say you start a youth group and then you lose your funding and you lose your director [We need] a commitment even that there will be some sort of prevention effort.

Another PD connected the lack of consistent funding to her experiences with staffing: "You can't make plans This grant is going to end and if I get offered . . . [another] job eight months before the grant ends I'm probably going to take the job."

People

Aside from financial support, the answer we heard most often concerning what counties need to sustain their prevention efforts was staff – "a paid coordinator," "a full time director." One PD further clarified by saying, "It can't be an FRN director, or the . . . [local social service agency] director, or the county commission because they have too many outer influences to be someone whose job is to work prevention efforts."

Project Directors also mentioned numerous times that CDSs were a key piece to sustaining local prevention efforts. CDSs were described as "mentors," and important "resources." One PD stressed the need for more CDS saying, "We need one in every county." Other issues that emerged as part of our discussion of CDSs as resources for sustaining local prevention efforts

was a need for CDSs to better define their roles in the counties and a desire on the part of a few PDs to get better acquainted with the entire CDSs' network in order to be able to draw upon their multiple and varied talents. Several PDs also were concerned about the high turnover rate among CDSs.

Two PDs saw youth involvement as important to coalition sustainability. One mentioned that she works with an "aging" group in her county and she "would like to see. . . the other [younger] generation step up and understand the importance of it [prevention]." Another shared:

You were talking about youth and I think that's the key to the culture because there are so many cultures. With adults you're generally dealing with a certain social group . . . but with youth, you kind of get that whole potpourri of all different cultures combined together. That's why that component has to be so important to make sure that it's in the mix because that's where you reach just about every family in your community is through . . . [the] school.

Among other people mentioned by PDs as important to sustaining their local prevention efforts were committed, enthusiastic, active local coalition members whom they described as "truly understand[ing] our roles, our objectives, where we need to focus, money ties, and our initiatives."

Training

Project Directors, especially those who took the positions recently, expressed a desire for more PD training. One PD who is relatively new to the job spoke emphatically about the importance of PD training as a way to reduce the high turnover rate in that position. Another PD concurred: "We've been saying that for a year, you know, do it every quarter." Yet another new PD suggested more standardized Regional Learning Opportunities (RLOs) as a way to provide training:

I mean that's what I don't understand about the Regional Learning Opportunities . . . I think they should be moving around the state instead of us deciding what ours are and picking them out . . . There should be specific RLOs that all the regions are getting."

Also, PDs suggested training for CDSs to help them better conceptualize their positions and more sharply define their roles and responsibilities within the local-, regional-, and state-level prevention systems.

Strategic Prevention Framework

Project Directors, especially in two regions, spoke of the importance of the data-driven planning that is central to the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF). Project Directors believe that using the SPF process enabled their coalitions to be effective.

It was really important for us to have learned the SPF process. Had I never learned the SPF process and then taken that back to our coalition . . . we would never have gotten the Drug-Free Community money. . . . That SPF process repeats itself in all these prevention [programs] Our community coalition would not have been at the point we are right now without having learned the SPF process. . . . I would even feel that way if we hadn't been funded.

I've dragged I don't know how many people through that [Strategic Prevention] framework [and] they now look at things differently. . . [We've] changed the way people look at pressing root causes in trying to [remedy] a situation.

I've seen the [Strategic Prevention] framework picked up by other people and used [with] other issues. . . . They were doing something on a childhood obesity thing and they were using so much of the work that they had learned from the SPF SIG in how they were going to approach that issue.

REFLECTIONS ON THE FINDINGS

In this last section, we consider the interview data featured above in light of our evolving model of community change tentatively titled "Getting (it) Together: Collaborative Community Change." Also, in this section, we examine data from this quarter in relation to recent research on effective community collaborations. Hopefully these reflections are helpful to participants, especially partners and staff (both state and local), in considering how the model, as well as the new information, might be useful in guiding future partnership activities and decisions.

"Getting (it) Together" Model

The data-driven model is grounded in observation, interview, and document data generated over the course of our study of the WV Partnership. As we generate new data each quarter, we consider modifications to the model to accommodate the new information, thereby continuously strengthening the model's internal validity.

People: Get the "Right" People to the Table

The first of the model's four components involves getting the "right" people to the table. From the outset the goal has been to create groups (first the WV Partnership and later, local community partnerships) that are broad, inclusive, and representative. Partners and staff attempted to locate and include people who are in the "right places" in their own organizations;" people who "get it" (that is, people with commitments to community, to collaboration, to learning, to evidence-based practice, and to community-based problem solving); and people with skills, knowledge, and experience—not only in prevention-related work but also in coalition and capacity-building. Finally, there have been ongoing efforts to include people who are trusted in their own organizations and communities, and to include a balance of personalities—with a mixture, for example, of visionaries and "worker bees."

This part of the model may need modification based on our findings this quarter about what it means to achieve broad, inclusive membership not only *within* a particular partnership (e.g., WV Partnership, CPP), but also what it means to get broad inclusive participation in interactions *between* partnerships—at multiple levels (local, regional, and state). Focus groups this quarter suggest that creating a viable comprehensive strategic statewide prevention system requires more than getting the “right” people to the table within each group or partnership. Clearly, that is still a critical task and something local PDs addressed, for example in discussions of efforts to strengthen youth involvement. In addition, however, attention may need to be given to the question of who (which people and groups of people) should be involved—and in what ways—with those in *other* parts of the system. In focus group discussions this quarter, we learned that local PDs want to be included more fully in the growing statewide prevention system network. They talked about breaking out of “county silos” in order to strengthen connections with each other as well as with other participants in the evolving statewide system.

In light of this information, participants may want to consider structures and activities—and of course, funding to support them—that could strengthen connections across or between the various partnership players at state, regional, and local levels. In recent e-mail discussions with each other, PDs are already generating ideas about how to begin that process, proposing a state-wide meeting of PDs at Flatwoods, WV.

Engagement: Get People Engaged with Each Other and With the Project

A second model component concerns getting people actively engaged with each other and with the work of the partnership. The model notes the importance of both the quantity and quality of participation, at the same time acknowledging the difficulty in achieving universally active and authentic engagement among participants. Throughout the project, some partners and staff (at both state and local levels) have been involved considerably more often and more deeply than others. Also, the model posits a positive relationship between levels of involvement and perceived learning and satisfaction with the work.

Interview data from this quarter are consistent with this component of the model. Project Directors spoke of smaller core groups of actively-involved coalition members within larger, less-active groups. Just as we found to be true in the WV Partnership, at the local community level those who are most actively involved, the “core” members, are those PDs described as having a sense of investment in, and ownership of, the partnership.

Also, our discussions with PDs suggest that coalitions’ organizational structures and operating processes have a bearing on the quantity and quality of member engagement. We learned that it may be important to allow time and opportunities for those structures and operating procedures to evolve. Many PDs talked about how their coalitions had moved from having relatively loose, informal structures and processes to having more structured, formalized ways of operating. This kind of evolution occurred at the state level as well with structure and processes gradually becoming more formalized as the partnership grew and developed. Also, data from this quarter suggest that the optimal structure and processes may not be the same

for every partnership. Project Directors especially called attention to differences between small and large-sized counties and coalitions in relation to these issues.

Finally, the engagement part of the model may need modification so that it includes engagement between/across groups as an important ingredient. As noted above, PDs desire to be more actively engaged with other parts of the prevention system in the state.

Vision: Facilitate the Development of a Shared Vision

The third component of the model involves facilitating the development of a shared vision and plans to achieve it. Identifying this as an important but difficult task for groups committed to democratic, collaborative processes and structures, the model recommends using purposeful, explicit strategies to enable the construction and ongoing re-construction of visions and goals.

Data from this quarter strengthen the model's assumption that developing shared visions—of the group's identity and purpose—is an ongoing process that requires time and attention. In focus group discussions, PDs spoke many times about how their coalition members' visions or understandings of substance abuse prevention, especially vis-à-vis environmental strategies, are evolving or in transition. Along the same lines, when PDs spoke about the ways their coalitions were structured and the processes they used as a group, they often referred to changes or transitions in CPPs' and their own understandings or visions of the group itself, especially in relation to other state prevention players.

Resources: Obtain Resources Necessary to Support the Vision

The fourth model component stresses the importance of obtaining adequate human and capital resources necessary to achieve the group's mission. The model highlights the need for funding to support administrative staffing at both state and local community levels.

This quarter's focus group data confirm the importance of financial and human resources to support the partnerships' work. Project Directors spoke strongly about the importance of ongoing, assured funding beyond SPF SIG. They especially emphasized having money to support paid staffing for local coalitions. Their comments about the need for more staff training raise yet another important human and capital resource issue. These findings strongly support efforts already being made by state and local partners and staff currently in the process of seeking more secure, ongoing funding for a comprehensive strategic statewide system.

Change: Achieve Individual and Collective Growth

According to the model, the first four components culminate in individual and collective learning and change which are not only *ends* but also *means* to begin the learning/growing cycle anew. Our study of the project over time has provided evidence of considerable individual learning as well as collective change—which in a sense, is at the heart of what the WV Partnership is all about—enabling communities to grow and become healthier as they are increasingly able to effectively identify and solve their own problems.

Data from this quarter are a continuation on the same theme. They provide considerable new evidence of individual and collective change. In relation to environmental strategies, discussed above, PDs spoke about changing ideas and understandings—amongst themselves as well as CPPs. Also, PDs’ strong assertions about how much individuals have learned and how much practices have changed as a result of using the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF), document learning and change. Finally, PDs’ requests for more training for themselves and their acknowledgements about the need for stronger local evaluation suggest that these kinds of learning and change, at both individual and collective levels, will continue to occur.

Synergy

Finally, we consider this quarter’s data, as well as our model of community change, in light of research suggesting that “partnership synergy” is a key ingredient of successful collaborations (Lasker & Weis, 2003). Based on prior research by themselves and others, the authors define synergy as “breakthroughs in thinking and action . . . produced when a collaborative process successfully combines the complementary knowledge, skills, and resources of a group of participants” (121). In other words, synergy is what results when a diverse, broad group of people and/or organizations collaborate in such a way that what they can do *together* is greater than the sum of what each could do as *individual* people or organizations.

While we did not use the term “synergy,” the idea is consistent with our model which—even in the title—stresses the idea of a partnership thinking (“getting it”) as a group (“together”) rather than just as individuals. As Lasker and Weiss put it, “When a partnership achieves a high level of synergy, the group as a whole . . . is able to think in new and better ways about the problems it is trying to address” (123). They go on to say that high synergy also allows partnerships to “take more comprehensive actions to address those problems and develop stronger and more supportive relationships with the broader community” (123).

According to Lasker and Weiss, three factors important in creating partnership synergy are: (1) “*who* is involved” (emphasizing the importance of broad, diverse participants that go beyond “the usual suspects”); (2) “*how* partners are involved” (stressing processes that encourage partners to “contribute their knowledge, resources, and skills); and (3) the *leadership and management* of partnerships (recommending collaborative, power-sharing approaches rather than traditional forms of leadership). As discussed above, the first two of these three factors are major components of our model and of our current quarter’s data as well.

Interestingly, in Lasker and Weiss’s research, and our own prior research with this project, the units of analysis are individual partnerships. In other words, when we developed our model we were thinking of getting the right people to the table and getting them authentically and actively engaged in a partnership—whether at the state or county level. Data from the current quarter, however, about getting the right people involved in cross-county, or cross-region, collaboration, suggest the need for extending those ideas—especially when thinking of larger, multi-level, collaborative efforts such as the West Virginia Comprehensive Strategic Prevention System.

In relation to the third key factor, collaborative leadership and management, Lasker and Weiss argue that leadership and management of “community engagement partnerships” (e.g., WV Partnership, local CCPs) is more difficult than in “lead agency partnerships,” and that it is more complex, typically involving a number of people providing leadership in varying ways– both formally and informally. Drawing on considerable prior research by themselves and others, they describe leadership that enables synergy:

[P]eople who seem to be the most successful in these roles are not traditional leaders who tend to have a narrow range of expertise, speak in a language that can be understood only by their peers, are used to being in control, and relate to people as subordinates rather than partners. Instead, synergistic partnerships benefit from having boundary-spanning leaders who have backgrounds and experience in multiple fields, understand and appreciate different perspectives, can bridge diverse cultures, and are comfortable sharing ideas, resources, and power. (130, 131)

This is an issue we may need to examine more closely in our own research, both in future data collection and in refining our model of community change. We have touched on the issue of leadership periodically throughout our study of/for the WV Partnership, but it has not been an ongoing or central feature of our analysis. In relation to the current report, examining the focus group data about evolving coalition structures and procedures, as well as about coalition ownership, in relation to the idea of collaborative leadership, raises interesting questions. For example, what kind of leadership is being practiced in a coalition and how is that related to the kinds of coalition structures and procedures that have evolved? The issue of collaborative leadership, especially in relation to increasing partnership synergy, is something partners and staff (state and local) may want to consider more explicitly as well, especially as they continue to work toward building effective community partnerships.

* * * * *

We are deeply grateful to Project Directors who generously contributed precious time and effort to help us this quarter. Without their willingness to speak freely and fully about their experiences and perceptions, we would not have been able to produce the report.

Reference

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