

“Notes from the Twelve”

Field Notes from West Virginia’s SPF SIG Phase II

January 18, 2008

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The purpose of this ongoing study is to:

- **identify the successes and challenges of the SPF SIG program**
- **identify the best ways to deliver substance abuse prevention programs in WV**
- **learn what makes a productive collaboration and a good and useful program**

This report features the experiences of project directors from the 12 WV counties funded for SPF SIG implementation as of March, 2007. These counties are Barbour, Cabell, Kanawha, Lincoln, Logan, Marshall, Mingo, Morgan, Ohio, Pocahontas, Randolph, and Wood. The report is based primarily on interviews with 13 individuals, including one interim project director and two co-project directors, conducted between November, 2007 and early January, 2008. Transcripts from three earlier interviews (August, 2007) were included among additional documents reviewed for this report.

During interviews, project directors discussed the relationship between their local prevention partnerships and their local educational systems; the main strengths of their SPF SIG projects so far; concerns about their SPF SIG projects; and the degree to which they felt their voices had been heard throughout this process. I should note that by the time this report is presented, some of the issues discussed during the course of this data collection already may have shifted or changed. As with all descriptive accounts, this report represents one moment in a dynamic process.

In the course of my interviews and visits, several project directors expressed an interest in receiving feedback as to how their prevention strategies, successes, and struggles might connect with work being done in other counties in WV. The question, “How are we doing compared to the rest of the state?” cropped up from time to time. I hope that this report can provide some insight into that question.

Relationships between Local Educational Systems and Local Prevention Partnerships/Coalitions

Out of the 12 counties that received SPG SIG implementation funds starting in March of 2007, some wrote plans that focused uniquely on developing youth assets and thereby reducing youth consumption and its consequences. Other county plans included broader and more general goals, such as raising community awareness amongst all ages, including youth. In every case—but especially in the case of county prevention planning where youth represent a single focus—a strong working relationship between the project director, project staff, and key partners in the county school system has been instrumental in implementing prevention efforts.

Benefits of an Ongoing Relationship with Local Schools

At least two partnerships include directors who had ties to the local school system before SPF SIG came into the county. These ties have facilitated access to the schools for the purposes of SPF SIG implementation. In one case, this prior relationship is connected to an ongoing EUDL (Enforcing the Underage Drinking Laws) program that has existed in the county for about eight years. The program has broadened its reach as a result of the county's participation in the SPF SIG. The project director's access to the schools is critical to the success of both efforts:

I go into a lot of schools during Christmas programs and they all think I'm nuts, they looked at me last year like I had two heads but I said, "Parents aren't going to PTA, they're going to their kids' school programs." You've got two shots—one is at Christmas and one is in the spring." I meet with the principals and I ask them if I can come in. Last year I had two [schools], this year I had six. I went to six different elementaries and I talked to parents of fourth, fifth, and sixth graders to start the conversation. I took our winner [of a poster design contest sponsored among elementary school children] with us and she came and said, "This is why I designed this and this is why it's important." Having that kid talk to those parents probably did more than me talking to those parents.

In another case, the project director's relationship with the school system has contributed to fostering a brand-new initiative, a growing alliance between both the school system and the community.

I was employed by the school system for about six years in various different capacities, around mobilizing community resources. We're located on the school system property, we have school system i.d. badges, so...we've got a foot in the community and a foot in education, solidly planted in both areas. We're really bridge people...the school system has been a significant part of our partnership from the very beginning. And of course the superintendent now is incredibly supportive of our efforts too, he's meeting once a month with us now...this is what community education is about, is mobilizing resources around community needs.

Upper-level Administrative Support and School-level Resistance

In another county where the county's upper-level school administration has supported the SPF SIG prevention partnership, introduction of a prevention curriculum into the county's elementary schools appears to have been well received. On the elementary school level, "things are going

well.” However, at the middle school level in this same county—where a new administrator has requested that the project director work with guidance counselors rather than teachers—the project director encountered resistance.

We had two out of four [counselors] show up. The one, the lady walked in complaining. I had the other one come in and he just looked at me and said, “I am not implementing this program.” He said, “I have got too much on my plate, I have got a scout’s meeting to go to, how long is this going to take?”

The project director noted that there can be differences between the culture of the county-level school administration and the culture of the counselors and teachers who work at the school level: “There is a huge disconnect from the board of education to where the schools are...it’s like two different worlds...sometimes I wonder how one has anything to do with the other.” Consequently, the project director is shifting tactics.

The project director is slowing down the projected timeline for introduction of a prevention curriculum into the middle schools and is approaching the middle schools on a school-by-school basis, one at a time, recognizing that each individual school will have its own school climate and therefore determining what approach will best suit each middle school. Finally, because of job changes at the county level, the project director is in the process of building a new relationship with a new school administrator in the area.

Impact of Job Shifts within School Administration

Adjusting to shifts among key personnel in the schools is something that several project directors mentioned. Much of the project directors’ work depends on a strong relationship with the school system and, as one project director said, “You can’t bluster your way into the school system. They’ve come a long way in allowing groups like ours to even think they have a possibility of getting in, being able to help with something.” In discussing the loss of a Safe and Drug Free Schools coordinator who had been integral to the local partnership’s prevention planning, this project director noted:

Here we had geared up and written into our plan—a big chunk of it was because he [the Safe and Drug Free Schools coordinator] had suggested it and then it came to a screeching halt because he changed jobs and they didn’t fill his position until late July. So it was all put on hold and it was very frustrating.

At this early point in the SPF SIG implementation process, when an individual in a key position such as a Safe and Drug Free Schools coordinator or school superintendent changes jobs, and when that individual has been an active and supportive participant in local prevention efforts, her/his departure can slow things down considerably.

Relationship with the Safe and Drug Free Schools Coordinator

Safe and Drug Free Schools Coordinators are mentioned as key participants in most counties’ prevention efforts. In the words of one project director, the county’s Safe and Drug Free Schools coordinator “was instrumental in getting the [prevention] programs into the school system.” In counties where the relationship with the Safe and Drug Free Schools coordinator does not appear to be strong at this time, but where a school superintendent or other upper-

level administrator supports the work of the prevention partnership, this relationship becomes less critical.

In one county where the prevention partnership's relationship with the public school system is an offshoot of the current SPF SIG process, a supportive Safe and Drug Free Schools coordinator procured the release of students during the school day so they could participate in peer-based prevention education. The coordinator also provided access to transportation and other accommodations that permitted student involvement in prevention training. According to the project director, this kind of support is representative of a promising new relationship with the local school system:

We brought all 60 [students from the county's middle schools] to [Town C] to a church there and did the training with them for two days and so we feel, just getting those students released from school was a great thing. We feel like the school system thinks the work we're doing is meaningful and they're interested in working with us. We feel like we've decreased some of the division already.

In another county, the project director's relationship with the Safe and Drug Free Schools coordinator has slowed temporarily due to a school administrative climate characterized as "very political" at the moment. Upper-level administration appears to be reshuffling and because "things are kind of stormy right now" the Safe and Drug Free Schools coordinator is less active.

Providing Support Staff from the Prevention Partnership

Based on what project directors have reported so far, it seems that especially where the local prevention partnership has provided its own support staff to work in the schools—usually, staff with backgrounds in prevention, education, counseling, or community mobilizing—prevention efforts have been fairly well received by the school system. In at least one case, the project director is the primary prevention trainer and/or liaison.

Again, this situation varies on a school-to-school basis. Project directors find themselves adapting their strategies and approaches depending on the degree of warmth (or coolness) with which their efforts are received. In a county with a long-standing relationship with the school system, a project director described some of the differences between schools:

The cultures in the high schools [in the same county] are completely different. We have one high school...[where kids] get busted because not everybody in their high school is doing it and they stand out like a sore thumb. That high school ... they kick off week-long educational events every time we do an obstacle course or we do a contest or something like that. They're very open to us coming on campus...In the other high school, I work with one driver's ed teacher and one health teacher...It's not, "Hi, hi, come on, we can't wait to see you," it's "Sign in blood, you're allowed to go to this room and don't go any place else." The third high school is kind of, "Well, give us your stuff and we'll think about it." The one driver's ed instructor there utilizes the materials, though he's not allowed to have me come in and do the information.

Sharing Staff Positions with Local Agencies or Businesses

Depending on how the prevention plan was written, staff delivering prevention services directly to the schools may be either full or part-time employees of the local SPF SIG prevention partnership. In some cases, a prevention partnership “shares” its staff with another agency or even a business in the county, thereby creating a full-time position that can offer benefits and therefore attract personnel with the desired training and background. Such a position has the potential to outlast SPF SIG funding if the co-funders decide to continue their support after SPF SIG funding dries up. Thus, in one county, the prevention partnership is sharing a staff position with a local health system:

The ___Health Systems has really stepped up and is housing the prevention specialist...and the prevention specialist is part of our team here. So they're taking ownership and intend to keep that position funded. They said that from the get-go, that they intend to show it's successful and keep funding coming in for it.

In another county, a local business provides support:

We partnered with [a local business] for a half-time employee because we really wanted to get someone that was really great to do this but our funding wasn't really great. So we partnered with [a local business] because [this business] had been looking for a training manager. So we partnered with them, they agreed to match the salary...and provide benefits...so we got a great [person] with a master's degree who's a counselor and it's just been a perfect fit.

Strengths of the SPF SIG So Far

Personal dedication

One quality shared by all the project directors I spoke with—and this is my observation, not theirs—is commitment not only to their projects, but to the well-being of their communities. This personal sense of mission and/or dedication represents a powerful force in all of the counties' efforts. As one project director said:

I think this job is all-consuming. Now I'm in movement mode and I've got to see if everyone else is ready to move, too. I think the coalition is starting to move ...but we can't move until everyone is ready to come with us. We're either going to move forward all together or we're going to fall on our faces all together. It's exciting but [I'm] nervous.

Furthermore, while at least three of the prevention partnerships experienced a high degree of turnover in the position of project director during the initial planning and 7-month implementation period (SPF SIG Phase I), equally dedicated interim directors filled the breach until a replacement could be found, even if it meant holding down the equivalent of two jobs.

Several project directors report a strong sense of gratification with their work, saying “I love this job,” or “This has been a good experience for me personally,” or “I've enjoyed this job a lot more than any job I've had [in a long time].”

Role of Community Development Specialists

Mention of Community Development Specialists frequently comes up in conversations about “what works” or what enables county-level SPF SIG planning and implementation. The comment, “I think one of the strengths of the SPF SIG project in our county is our community development specialist,” has been echoed by several project directors.

Teamwork on Local Partnerships/Coalitions

At least four project directors mentioned their local coalition/partnership and the “willingness for teamwork and collaboration” of their members as strengths of their projects. Two project directors further credited “the fact that we had our coalition in place before we started” as strengths.

Participation of the Faith Community on the Local Partnership/Coalition

One SPG SIG coalition that has made substantial progress in engaging the faith community in its prevention efforts now has a regular gathering of pastors that convenes an hour before the monthly coalition meeting. The pastors meet at 11:00 a.m. to share ideas and discuss concerns before the regular coalition meeting convenes at noon. So far, this group is made up of a core of approximately five pastors, although each month a new participant is likely to turn up. Among the reasons for this degree of involvement is the key leadership role of a local pastor who also has a background in substance abuse prevention and counseling. When he approached the SPF SIG project director in the wake of a coalition meeting that brought up an issue he felt needed to be addressed, the project director initiated an effort to reach out to other pastors in the county.

Participation of Youth on the Local Partnership/Coalition

One project director noted that the local prevention partnership has found a way to engage youth effectively but “differently,” describing youth participation as similar to that of a work group or sub-committee that communicates with the coalition from a slight distance:

It’s kind of like the SADD groups are like a youth sub-coalition. They’ll tell me what they want and I’ll bring it back to the coalition or they’ll tell their advisor. Their advisors are members, but with our meetings being [*during the school day*] they can’t get away because they’re both teachers—but usually the kids will tell me or they’ll email to me what it is they want to do...and we’ll go from there.”

Participation of Law Enforcement on the Local Partnership/Coalition

One county that reports success in engaging law enforcement officers with local prevention efforts has invested in their training:

I took four guys with me to the national conference in August. That was invaluable—the national leadership training through OJJDP...those guys came out of there going, “You know what, we’re not all by ourselves. This is great, we have information.”...One of the guys...can’t wait to go back, he’s just chomping at the bit...it’s made our communications, our ability to work with law enforcement and their processes [*easier*].

With active assistance from these “law enforcement liaisons,” the project director currently is working on drafting a social host law.

Availability of Funding

When asked, “What do you consider to be the main strengths of the SPF SIG project in your county,” one project director responded unhesitatingly, “Funding! Funding!” In discussing the impact of SPF SIG, a second project director mentioned funding indirectly, noting that “Having the SPF SIG to help us do this is huge. We couldn’t do the kinds of contests we’re running. We couldn’t do the additional information, the information-sharing, we couldn’t do the media buys that we’re doing with the social marketing aspect.” A third project director made a similar observation, remarking that “the biggest benefit I’ve seen for us, number one, it offered us more funds to do what we do,” but adding, “number two, it linked us to other people in the state.”

Successes in Managing the Reimbursement Grant Process

The constraints that a reimbursement grant can impose on a small county with limited fiscal resources resulted in one county turning to local banks for assistance, with positive results. The project director noted:

We have a couple of banks that have come on board to help us fiscally, to supply the money up front—because it’s a reimbursement grant our organizations out here don’t have a lot of cash...the first seven months with ___ Community Bank and now it’s with ___ National Bank who’s agreed to come on board. Essentially they’re both doing it the same way where it’s the lowest interest rate they can give us, they’re giving us the total amount of the grant, revolving the account essentially, that we draw from as needed. And then at the end they total up all of the interest that would be due and they donate it back.

Another project director who reported continued struggles with the reimbursement process mentioned consideration of a similar plan.

Regional Engagement

A regional association appears to be growing between counties located in proximity on one side of the mountain in Region 3. This association includes—but is not limited to—Randolph, Barbour, Upshur, Lewis, and Tucker Counties. These counties started to work together during the SPF SIG planning process (Phase I); their efforts now have carried over into Phase II, even though not all of these counties have been funded for implementation.

In the first part of 2007, this group of both funded and unfunded counties continued to attend Regional Learning Opportunities (RLOs) with the help of travel money that was available to all counties in the state. Financial support for travel to RLOs was eliminated towards the end of the year due to a combination of increased budget restrictions as well as under-use of travel money in other parts of the state.

Uniquely in this western portion of Region 3, the loss of travel funds was mentioned as a loss to prevention efforts overall: “Taking the mileage money out of the RLOs...that’s affecting the non-funded counties, that’s going to be affecting state-level change.”

At the same time, project directors spoke of continuing to support prevention efforts and to share resources where and when possible. One project director talked about efforts to bring youth together, not only from different towns within the county, but also across county lines. The project director mentioned having heard youth from Town A say, for example, “I’m not working with those [Town B] kids,” or, “We would have had a good time if those [Town B] kids weren’t there.” By mixing together students from different counties as well as different towns, the project director hopes to build “better cooperation and willingness to learn from each other” between youth from different communities. In essence, such an approach to prevention has the potential to enhance cultural competence:

I think we’re going to end up working with [County Z] and combining all of the groups [PRIDE and RAZE teams] together and doing something with all of the kids between [our county] and [County Z] to where it’s not [Town A] versus [Town B]. It’s all different kids thrown into the mix, hoping that maybe that barrier gets to disappear and they get to mix in....maybe that will help them realize that everybody is different and what county you’re from or what school you’re from doesn’t matter, everybody has good ideas.

Another project director mentioned sharing prevention programming and training across county lines, building capacity within the region as a whole:

We made sure that the people that got trained as trainers were certified to go to those non-funded counties to do training there. That way those counties won’t have to pay [*for the training*]...we’ll do it free....Regionally we deal with the same issues, if we can figure out some kind of regional approach and everybody starts to address those issues with a single mind-set, I think we could manage a change....at the end of the process, not only will it build up [my] county but the counties around [me], also.

Concerns about the SPF SIG

Building a Sustainable Partnership/Coalition

The need to build a coalition or partnership that will outlast the SPF SIG raises concerns about sustainability—and sustainability is something that is on the mind of every single project director.

Generally speaking, project directors whose coalitions still are forming are more worried about sustaining them than project directors whose coalitions and partnerships pre-date the SPF SIG. “If I don’t figure out how to develop a really good, strong partnership in the county to keep the programs going, it’s just going to die off,” said one project director, while another noted with concern, “I truly believe if I left tomorrow this wouldn’t last much longer.”

At least one prevention partnership continues to struggle with the question of whether its fiscal agent holds decision-making power, or whether the partnership does.

One project director felt that sustainability was an issue that might be dealt with through RLOs or some other focused and ongoing training forum, noting that “We need a sustainability *month* [of training],” rather than a one-day RLO or workshop.

Fundraising

Not all partnerships have started to look for additional funding sources at this time, although all recognize the importance. For some project directors, it is an issue of time. The time it takes to identify potential funding sources and write grant applications is time not spent on ongoing implementation efforts, which take precedence at the moment. This issue of time—the amount of time the project directors can spend on fundraising as well as implementation efforts—is linked to the number of paid staff working for the prevention partnership as well as to whether positions are funded as full or part time.

Additional training in the area of fundraising is a need that was identified by at least one project director, whether that training comes through participation in RLOs or some other forum. A region planning a RLO focusing on community fundraising has had to move to a larger venue to accommodate the large number of interested participants.

In the ongoing effort to disseminate skills into the community, one county's project director is hosting grant-writing workshops in an effort to build local capacity and thus overall sustainability, not only of her program but of other community efforts as well. Thus, as part of their learning, participants in her workshops are actively writing grant proposals:

One of the things I'm doing right now in capacity-building in our community is leading grant-writing workshops, a series of eight workshops, taking six people through the process of grant writing. They're each coming up with a grant. Some of them are related to us and some of them aren't...there's a guy who is a local business owner who is writing an arts grant so he can get programs into the schools...there's a guy from Parks and Rec who's writing for more facility support...whether these are to keep the SPF SIG going or the bigger picture going.

Managing Time Needed for Reporting

Time—and the lack thereof—was a concern that also cropped up in project directors' conversations in connection with completing monthly reports and the CLI. As one project director observed (and others echoed), "It's not like we have a huge staff that can do all these things." While all of the project directors are keenly aware of the importance of reporting, they are concerned that the amount of time connected to submitting detailed reports remain manageable.

Possible Disconnect between Federal Goals and Local Prevention Planning

After examining the newly revised monthly report and the CLI, one project director voiced concern that the local prevention plan did not appear to be doing the kinds of things that the federal government appears to be looking for with SPF SIG. This project director recognized that the kind of reporting called for on the CLI and monthly report was "unsuitable for the types of strategies and efforts that we planned for and are currently implementing...it wants to know how you're affecting your target population. Well [we] don't know because [we]'re raising awareness and trying to get people to think—number one—that it's a problem in our community and—number two—that there are efforts and ways to reduce it."

The project director observed a sort of slippage between the local prevention plan and federal expectations: “It seems to me there is disconnect. When we first were exposed to CLI training last summer, they started referring to everything as ‘what your intervention is.’ They used the word ‘intervention’ and we had always used ‘effort,’ ‘approach,’ much softer and broader things. I’d love to be intervening for individuals or small groups but we’re not there yet.”

Struggles to Engage Youth Participation

Youth participation continues to be an issue, perhaps more so for SPF SIG partnerships that did not structure their plans around youth alone, and therefore have not been targeting this age group exclusively. Partnerships that focused only on youth from the beginning do not mention a lack of youth participation in their prevention partnership, perhaps because they see, work with, and listen to youth on a regular basis—even if youth do not routinely attend partnership meetings.

Struggles to Engage the Participation of the Faith Community

Several project directors noted that they either have not managed to find key participants from the faith community who wish to participate on their local partnerships, or that the local faith community has yet to see a role for itself in substance abuse prevention.

Relationship to the WV Partnership for Community Well-Being

The relationship between the SPF SIG project directors and the state-level Partnership consistently is described as “distant,” even with the addition of four regional liaisons to the Partnership. Project directors report different degrees of information-sharing and communication with their liaisons, with some liaisons perceived as very communicative and others as communicating on a limited basis.

In some cases, project directors assumed a leadership role on their local partnerships because of a desire to create meaningful change in their communities, even though they did not have prior experience with grants: “I don’t have experience with the grant process. I don’t know if that [state-level process] is normally how it is...I don’t have anything to compare it to.” For this project director, the encounter with state-level expectations and processes was so uncomfortable that, “I kind of determined the grant stuff wasn’t really for me.” In the end, however, this individual stuck with the process because “I like the SPF SIG and I really like the progress we’ve made.” In fact, project directors have continued to learn and adapt as they encounter new information and experiences. Their learning represents another instance of capacity-building, as they serve their communities with the skills and knowledge they have gained in this process.

One project director suggested scheduling a WV Partnership meeting during the two-day period that the Share the Vision conference is being held, a time in which project directors from around the state convene in Charleston:

I think it should be a 2-3 hour meeting tied in with Share the Vision. There should be a [WV] Partnership meeting [during Share the Vision]...since lots of people will be around for Share the Vision...[The WV Partnership could] say, “We want to give two hours to

what you think is important.” And have the regions identify model practices and core concerns about the whole process...I think they should set up a thing where their desire and stated goal is to listen to the community groups’ agendas.

Another project director mentioned wanting to meet with Partnership members, but on local turf rather than on the Partners’ turf: “I think they need to come out of Charleston. I think they need to move around the funded counties and have meetings.” Someone else said, “I still have no idea of what they [the Partners] do...I think there needs to be more of a working relationship there.” Yet another person observed, “I don’t think there are clear paths to the state level.”

Concluding Thoughts

It seemed to me that some of the project directors who participated in this study are hungry not only for information about, “How are we doing?” but also for ongoing/increased communication and connection with others engaged in this effort throughout the state. After reading an early draft of this report, one project director reflected, “As I struggle along with the CLI, I am particularly aware of the isolation I feel from the rest of the state’s efforts. I’m jealous of the counties that have connection to each other!” Despite RLOs, IGMs, and other meetings that have been held over the past (almost) two years—despite the connections that have been fostered by the SPF SIG process—factors such as the uniqueness of each county’s plan mean that no two projects are alike and that project directors sometimes may feel alone in their efforts.

The people who I talked to in the course of preparing this report are highly motivated; they want their projects to succeed and they want to see change take hold in their communities. I am grateful to them for taking the time to speak with me so willingly and so openly. By talking frankly about their struggles as well as their successes, they prompt important discussions and provide everyone with an opportunity to learn from their experiences.