

Progress achieved by the Initiative Foundation's Healthy Organizations Partnership Program

A strengthening communities initiative

Background

In late 2009 Central Minnesota's Initiative Foundation was awarded a \$1 million Strengthening Communities Fund grant by the U.S. Administration for Children and Families in 2010. The purpose of this grant was to build the organizational capacity of faith- and community-based nonprofits working in the Foundation's 14-county service area.

The Foundation used its award to fund three separate capacity building programs:

- A 10-month, intensive capacity building program intended specifically for new and emerging organizations, called the Start Strong Program
- An 18-month capacity building program designed for slightly more experienced organizations (i.e., organizations that had been in operation at least two years), called the Grow Strong Program
- A 12 month capacity building program targeting well established nonprofit organizations, called Stay Strong

Over the course of its funding period, the Foundation engaged a total of 60 organizations in these programs. Participants in each cohort received small financial awards, and (as appropriate) targeted training, technical assistance, ongoing peer support, and individualized coaching.

By the end of the program all of the participating organizations were expected to have developed a work plan with specific capacity goals, and to have made some measurable progress in at least three of the following areas: organizational development, program development, collaboration and community engagement, leadership development, and evaluation of effectiveness.

Purpose of this report

In 2010, the Initiative Foundation contracted with St. Paul, Minnesota-based Wilder Research to assess the success of its Strengthening Communities work. To accomplish this, Wilder reviewed the data contained in participating organizations' baseline organizational assessments and progress reports and asked all grantees to complete a detailed follow-up questionnaire upon completion of the program. This report summarizes Wilder's findings.

Key findings

Overall, the data submitted by participating organizations suggests that participants in the Initiative Foundation's Strengthening Communities Initiative made significant progress in building their organizational capacity:

- Approximately three-quarters of participating organizations met or exceeded their target capacity building goals
- Over 80 percent increased their organization's workforce (primarily through significant additions to their volunteer labor force)
- Approximately 70 percent formed new strategic partnerships
- Approximately 60 percent significantly increased their annual budgets

A majority of participants also reported that they added new or improved services and significantly increased the numbers of individuals they served as part of the initiative.

In general, participants in all three cohorts appear to have benefitted from the initiative. However, the strongest gains in many outcome areas were experienced by the new and emerging organizations in the Start Strong Group—a not unexpected pattern, since these fledgling organizations generally had “more room to grow” from baseline to follow-up.

Slightly more mixed results were seen among the established organizations of the Stay Strong cohort, some of whom suffered significant setbacks as a result of recent changes in the nonprofit funding environment. For example, 11 of 33 Stay Strong organizations reported significant cuts in their annual budgets due to the loss of public funding.

Issues to consider

The mixed experience of the Stay Strong organizations suggests that there may be an emerging need for more risk assessment and contingency planning work with established nonprofits.

Some of the organizations participating in the Strengthening Communities Initiative also felt that their outcomes could have been strengthened if they had receiving more guidance on setting realistic goals and been given more time to complete their action plans. (It is important to note here that some grantees’ timelines for accomplishing their goals were cut short unexpectedly when the Administration on Children and Families ended its support of the Strengthening Communities Initiative earlier than originally anticipated.)

Several organizations also reported that they found the reporting requirements of the grant burdensome and difficult to accomplish (although they recognized that these requirements may have been imposed by the federal funder, rather than the Initiative Foundation).

Taking these issues into consideration in planning future capacity building efforts may help the Initiative Foundation to strengthen and enhance its already strong programs in this area.

Overall, however, the strong positive outcomes and glowing feedback provided by most Strengthening Communities grantees clearly indicate that the program was highly valued by participants, who felt strongly that it helped them achieve their goals. Indeed, the sentiments of most participants seem to be best encapsulated in the words of one enthusiastic grantee, who wrote:

Keep it going! This is a great resource for those smaller "capacity" type projects that are hard to fund in other ways. Can we get another?

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Progress achieved by the Initiative Foundation's Healthy Organizations Partnership Program Report*. For more information about this report, contact Jessica Meyerson at Wilder Research, 651-280-2688.

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