

SUPPORTING CHANGE & BUILDING CAPACITY IN COMMUNITIES



A FEW LESSONS LEARNED FROM AN EVALUATION OF THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION'S TOBACCO POLICY CHANGE PROGRAM

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Findings are shared from an evaluation conducted from late 2009 to early 2012, for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Two members of AEC were senior evaluators on RWJF's Tobacco Policy Change (TPC) evaluation.

TOBACCO POLICY CHANGE EVALUATION

We have compiled a few key recommendations and lessons learned from the final evaluation report, based on conversations with grantees from community-based organizations, main stream tobacco groups, technical assistance providers, RWJF staff and consultants, and a few long-time observers of the tobacco movement. We are making them available in hopes that some of the important insights, reflections and recommendations from the many voices that contributed to this project can be heard more broadly.

These findings are helpful to evaluators, funders and program planners engaged in and supporting community-based social change work, by providing insights into:

- Tensions around supporting advocacy and policy change from a community perspective.
- Issues about grant decision-making and the selection process.
- Challenges with identifying legitimate community connections.
- Issues around funder support of coalitions/partnerships of diverse organizations.
- Identifying and building on community leadership and infrastructure.
- Supporting a community-led process.
- Technical assistance and outreach.

TPC: SUPPORTING CHANGE AND BUILDING CAPACITY

Background

TPC was a demonstration project focused on increasing the momentum of health policy work in communities most harmed by tobacco. The TPC program came on the tail of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's long-term (10 year) effort that was largely touted as fundamental in shifting tobacco policy, and in passing important legislation to reduce tobacco use and exposure. However, statistics have shown that some communities (low income, LGBT, rural, minority, and overwhelmingly the Southern region) continue to have higher than average rates of smoking, and higher than average rates of smoking-related illnesses at the population level, despite the tobacco control policy reforms that were brought about largely as the result of advocacy efforts sponsored by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The Foundation found that representatives of the communities most impacted had been underrepresented in the major tobacco control campaigns, and recognized that this lack of representation was a potential factor related to the high prevalence of tobacco use and exposure in certain communities. TPC was designed to invest in expanding and diversifying the tobacco control movement, by cultivating partnerships with mainstream tobacco control actors and a group of activists largely new to tobacco control who represented impacted communities in order to affect policy change that would reach into these

communities. An important goal of TPC was to build the capacity in these communities to take action on other health issues and general matters of concern in communities, so that there would be something left "on the ground" when funding inevitably ended. It is through the dual lenses of changing policy and building community capacity that we evaluated the program. We are sharing some of the more broadly applicable recommendations that emerged from a survey and numerous interviews that were held with grantees, technical assistance providers and observers of the tobacco policy movement. (These participants in the evaluation also provided the below quotes.)

These recommendations are provided as a call to action for the funding community as a whole. We see these recommendations as a means to highlight potential strategies to be considered in supporting community driven social change work.

See <http://actionevaluation.org/tpc-evaluation-exec-summary/> for link to the evaluation report's Executive Summary, and more background information.

KEY LESSONS FOR ADDRESSING DISPARITIES, AND BUILDING CAPACITY FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE

Resource Management and Decision Making - reallocating and prioritizing Marginalized

Addressing policies in marginalized communities requires a shift in focus from professional advocacy groups to community-based actors. Resources need to be allocated in ways that enable disenfranchised communities to advocate for their own interests and rights. Grantees and technical assistance providers implored funders to direct resources to where they would most make a difference, and consider the type of infrastructure and capacity needed in communities to implement programming and eventually have an impact in communities.

Interviewees also raised a concern that has long been the elephant in the room: they felt strongly that in order to eliminate disparities, it was important to consider who was making decisions and whose interests were being prioritized, to make sure that priorities were in alignment with those of the community.

“If you really have a commitment to eliminating health disparities, then you’ve got to begin to look at the whole institutional racism and systems change and access, right? It will start in their boardroom. It will then secondly start with their staffing makeup. It will thirdly start with their strategic goals that they set for themselves, and then it will work itself out in terms of how they disperse their budgets. And then it will play out in terms of how they implement change in a relevant way in target communities that need it the most. That’s the only way I see it can working.” (Technical Assistance Provider)

This suggestion requires careful, real world, honest accounting of the interests and power dynamics at play in decision-making around resources. Planners need to ask themselves,

Identifying legitimate, credible community connection

Grantees and technical assistance providers stressed the importance of considering how organizations will impact the landscape in their communities over the long term.

“I would be thinking: How will this organization be if we fund them for ten years down the road? Not just in the next six months to a year. What are they going to do ten years from now? Will they really make any difference? Can they make an impact in the areas we think are most important to this country? And I think if foundations answer those questions, they might make better funding decisions down the road.” (Community-based grantee)

Both grantees and technical assistance providers suggested an assessment of coalitions and partnerships that takes into account

organizations’ history and credibility in the community, and their ability to articulate a vision.

“I think it’s important for the funder to ask, “Okay, what have you done?” It’s very important to see what they’ve done in the past; what are they currently working on? ...And asking the simple question: “How do you feel this will benefit your community?” (Community-based grantee)

Many interviewees emphasized the difficulty in assessing accurately who had the capacity level and legitimate connection to communities to effect change.

“Anybody can make themselves look good on paper. When you get down to real funding decisions, I think it’s worth every penny to do a site visit before final funding decisions are

KEY LESSONS FOR ADDRESSING DISPARITIES, AND BUILDING CAPACITY FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE

Community infrastructure and leadership mapping

One of the evaluation's strongest findings was the difficulty of identifying indigenous leadership and infrastructure in communities. The TPC evaluation called attention to the need to build on community organizations and associations and organizing capacity. Technical assistance providers called for an assessment and mapping of community organizing infrastructure and leadership capacity within the community, which could then be bolstered and built on. They noted that the first step for philanthropic funders was working with communities to identify this leadership capacity and the type of investments that will help ignite and strengthen the work.

"When we fund these communities there's no community assessment done. What's the civic engagement arena? What does it look like? What does the city participation look like in these areas? Who's getting anything done? ... And once you have an idea of who's there and an idea of what policy-based organizations

are advocates in these communities [and] actually do the work on the ground, and engage them in a collaborative fashion. That's an investment that is worth its weight in gold. Just like the work that's just recently been done with the county assessments--now that work is invaluable... If you layer over that the same kind of assessment of the community with what exists in these communities as it relates to potential advocates and organizations, community based organizations, and the type of work that's being done there, then you have a blueprint of every county in the country." (Technical Assistance Provider)

To develop this type of community mapping process, informants discussed the need to identify and collaborate with individual community leaders who serve as catalysts and connectors, provide impetus for change, and in whom the community trusts. This suggests a significant effort early on in

Create Space and Time for a Community-Led Process

It was clear that a one-size fits all approach to establishing benchmarks and expectations, regardless of the efficiency needs of the foundation, was not effective in the long run. Respondents discussed the need to provide the time and a framework that would allow for a community-led process of identifying problems and solutions to develop, as this is crucial in establishing trust and creating ownership of the work.

Part of this process involves providing support for programming that is culturally relevant and crafted around the realities and context of the communities being targeted.

Resources need to reallocate to where the prevalence rate is and make sure that there's a comprehensive program that is reaching these folks.

That means linguistically appropriate materials, community-driven outreach and education.

In addition to providing ample time for the process to develop, respondents felt it was also necessary to give local community groups the flexibility to determine the key issues that they wanted to address and how they wanted to move the issue forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING DISPARITIES IN MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Governance and Decision-making

- Bring together stakeholders that support work on the margins; design and implement the program to give legitimate decision-making power to these groups; acknowledge the time this process takes, and allow for it.
- Ensure that program priorities are reflected in decision-making criteria; work through important but difficult to define terms such as “partnership” and “diversity;”, ground discussions in examples, and prioritize discussing topics that are difficult, sensitive, likely to cause conflict.
- Make sustainability a priority, and consider when longer-term concerns and shorter-term policy goals might be mutually exclusive.

Grant Amounts and Timelines

- While the critique will always be that there is never enough time or money, establishing unrealistic expectations can tax make progress difficult, and significantly tax organizational capacity.
- Consider funding fewer groups with more resources over a longer period of time.
- Be aware that matching fund requirements can prove to be an obstacle to funding new groups, rather than an inducement to sustainability.

Outreach

- Bring new blood into a movement, especially groups grounded in community work -- this is less likely to happen through “business as usual” outreach strategies.
- Instead of relying on established electronic networks for RFP (request for proposal) distribution, consider innovative ways to encourage new groups to apply and to attract new grantees. For example, foundations can hold workshops or events of interest to communities they are interested in supporting.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING DISPARITIES IN MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Technical Assistance & Capacity Building

- Prioritize opportunities for co-learning and knowledge sharing. Groups with limited resources and working in geographically distant locations have few opportunities to learn from colleagues, share experiences, and develop relationships that can later be leveraged.
- Technical assistance providers need to be culturally competent. Consider developing a pool of consultant providers, and letting grantees select the one who best meets the needs of their particular context.
- Prioritize supporting sustainability and realistically building groups' ability to expand their funding base.
- Ensure that technical assistance provided is culturally relevant, and that the pathway a community needs to follow to build power and political will within a community is honored and supported.