

Informing the Debate

Advancing Community Change and Sustainability



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Introduction

Grants of federal or state funds to encourage agencies and communities to initiate, increase, or change practice have been an accepted part of the governmental landscape since the 1930s. As social science has developed a better understanding of how people grow and change, programs to address economic and social problems have increasingly looked at multiple influences that impinge on social problems. Whether change efforts intend to make incremental improvements in systems and the services they provide or more significant changes in community patterns of thinking and interaction, current grant programs tend to emphasize intervention at multiple levels to improve outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.

Yet, over time there has been very little analysis of the state grant making process, across agencies, to better understand how agencies support collaboration and community change processes. Accordingly we decided to undertake an exploratory study of grant making by state departments in Michigan to better understand how the process can be improved to enhance success for community improvement initiatives. In doing so, we reviewed a sample of state grants programs whose aim is to initiate community change or improvement. These types of grants represent only a small portion of the work of state departments, as the major work of state government is maintaining basic services.

Policy Question

The overarching question for this analysis was:

What can state agencies do to assure that their grant-funded community change or improvement initiatives are more successful?

Developing a Framework for Assessing Community Change

Assessing the prospects for successful community change is challenging in any circumstances because of the many factors and competing interests that may influence a community's readiness for change. In the grant making process it is even more so, given the short time frame for review and limited information that agencies have upon which to make their decisions. Before developing a framework for assessing the prospects for success of change initiatives, we

reviewed research from the fields of systems change, community capacity building, community readiness for change, community development, and sustainability of change.

Systems Change

Funders are increasingly looking at systems change as an effective strategy to achieve better outcomes in health, education, human services and community improvement programs. A systems approach to community change (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007) suggests that:

The problems and possible solutions for community problems may be seen differently by different stakeholders because of their particular world views

Identifying and understanding **root causes** of a given problem is essential to lasting systems change

It is necessary to account for the interaction of various systems in the design of a program

According to the systems change framework, community collaboratives focusing on change must involve multiple stakeholders in assessment of the problem and program design. They should not strive for consensus but programs should be designed to accommodate differing world views. In addition, programs should be designed to identify and address root causes behind the social problems addressed.

Community Capacity, Community Readiness for Change

A number of researchers have looked at the capacities that communities must have to effectively bring about community changes. These include the skills and capacities of individuals and organizations (Chaskin, 2001; Foster-Fishman, et al., 2001), networks of relationships (Chaskin; Foster-Fishman), effective leadership (Chaskin), and participation by community members (Chaskin; Rog, et al., 2004).

Community change can occur at different levels and depends in part on the resources that communities have at their disposal at these different levels. To achieve a given outcome for a specific target population as well as to effect comprehensive community change, it is thought that one should target changes and at multiple levels. These levels can be conceptualized different ways, but we chose to adapt the framework developed by Kegler and associates (2000) because it allows us to describe programs that differ in the scope of change they seek to promote:

Individual – behavior changes, new capacities in individuals

Civic participation – includes participatory governance, resident involvement, opportunities and emergence of new leadership, involvement of informal community leadership, forming of social capital

Organizational – adoption of new policies/practices or enforcement of existing, development of new programs, institutionalization of programs, increased resources

Inter-organizational – links between organizations – new partnerships, more mature collaborations, new links with organizations outside the local community

Community -- changes in public policy, community norms, physical environment improvements

From work with comprehensive community initiatives, we know that change is difficult and often fails (Brown & Fiester, 2007; Kadushin, et al, 2005). Lessons learned from previous initiatives (Brown & Fiester) suggest that the following capacities and resources need to be in place and nurtured to maximize the prospects of success:

- A theory of change for the initiative shared among grant makers and recipients, including a shared definition of success for each level of change
- A sufficient time frame for planning and for allowing change to occur
- Adequate money disbursed for maximum effect
- Sufficient human resources, including knowledge and commitment
- Technical assistance to address initial and ongoing needs of grantees
- Recognition of conditioning influences that constrain action or create opportunities.

Other researchers working with community change initiatives have suggested that these efforts often fail because the collaborative or coalition lacks a concrete goal and focused participation among those who have a stake in the problem addressed (Kadushin, et al., 2005). In addition, community initiatives serving diverse communities can expect to encounter differences based on race, social class, or organizational culture. Failure to acknowledge and accommodate for these differences can jeopardize success of the initiative (Kadushin, et. al.).

Developing and evaluating indicators of change

A good plan for creating change and resources to carry it out will be unlikely to succeed unless one has a way to measure performance along the way. Program evaluation is helpful in understanding why a program succeeds or fails, but it is unlikely to give programs the immediate feedback needed to ensure that programs are on track and creating the necessary intermediate changes. The state must also point out to programs the indicators of community change that it expects along the way. (Mohan, et al., 2007; Williams & Webb, 1991).

Well-defined performance targets, milestones, outcome indicators, and a good monitoring system are management tools that can help the state monitor progress and clarify for programs what is expected. Initial performance targets and outcomes established by the grant maker at the outset can help to clarify policy intent, program goals and performance expectations for funders, implementers and monitors. (Mohan, et al., 2007). Programs can then propose milestones for measuring progress toward the performance targets.

Performance targets are specific accomplishments that one commits to achieve in a particular program or intervention; they are usually stated in terms of what will occur for people who use the service or product. Unlike goals and objectives, they are specific, focused and observable.

Milestones or **markers** are like “road signs” that allow the program and the funder to measure progress toward a given performance target.

(Goodman & Wandersman, 1994; Williams & Webb, 1991)

Because community change is so much involved with collaboration among agencies and with community residents or customers, including some indicators of civic participation and

inter-organizational change in the performance targets would clarify the policy intent of community change.

The following examples illustrate some performance targets and milestones for collaboration and civic engagement:

Goal for collaboration: The community mobilizes collaboratively to address X community issue.

Performance target:

At least 80% of invited community organizations participate in monthly advisory meetings to provide guidance to the project.

Related Milestones:

70% of agencies contacted agree to serve on the Advisory Committee for at least one year

Members of the organizations attend monthly meetings at least every other month

A structure and process for providing input to project staff is developed and approved within 3 months

After 6 months, $\frac{3}{4}$ of agencies on the advisory committee say they had input into project decision-making

Goal for civic engagement: This program will undertake projects that the community regards as beneficial and needed.

Performance target:

100% of the projects undertaken will have been positively reviewed by prospective users

Related milestones:

Within the first month, a process is developed for identifying and notifying users of review meetings

Within 3 months, a process is developed for getting summary positive and negative feedback (i.e., discussion followed by voting, solicitation of “what would make this acceptable?” comments, public comment process, etc.)

Within 6 months, potential users are contacted and at least 40% participate in community discussions or provide written feedback on project planning

In addition, community change is a process rather than a product, and programs evolve based on changing conditions; thus it is important to set basic performance targets but allow considerable flexibility for programs to adapt to local conditions (Brown & Fiester, 2007). Input from all members of the community on the expected benefits and processes will allow for a broader understanding of the different perspectives in the community (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007).

Sustaining change

Sustaining a community coalition beyond the grant period is only one measure of collaborative success and may not be necessary to achieve some types of benefits to the community members. However, since we know that comprehensive change takes place over long time frames, sustaining collaborative activity can be an important element to achieving long-term community change (Brown & Fiester, 2007; Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007). Experience has shown that building community collaboratives is difficult work, with many going out of business when the money ends without achieving the intended results (Brown & Fiester; Kadushin, et al., 2005). Coalitions must have resources and commitment as well as the people and organizations with the various capacities needed to carry out the demands of the program. Lessons learned from comprehensive community initiatives suggest that providing technical assistance to people and organizations and creating learning across organizations can help to make projects more successful.

Collaboratives that have a previous history of working together, especially before money was handed out, and that include people and organizations from diverse sectors are more likely to function well and be sustained beyond the grant period. Including both professional and grassroots organizations as well as having significant resident involvement can increase the chances of success for programs in some sectors (Rog, et al, 2004; Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007). However, to ensure that diverse people and groups work together toward a common goal, it is important that coalitions have an agreed upon vision and clarity about the roles that various entities will play. Having diverse funding sources is another predictor of sustainability (Johnson, et al., 2004).

Technical assistance

Technical assistance is defined by the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, a private nonprofit working to improve educational systems and learning, as “the timely provision of specialized advice and customized support to resolve specific problems and increase clients’ capacity.” Often technical assistance is used as a follow up to training or in response to needs identified by the grantor or grantee during program implementation.

Individual leaders and organizations may not have the multiple competencies needed to carry out a complex community initiative. Foster-Fishman and associates (2001) identify capacities in four areas: individual member capacities to work collaboratively with others and build effective programs; inter-organizational relationships that promote a common vision, cli-

mate and power sharing; capacities of organizations to implement the programs; and knowledge specific to the program area.

Thus, technical assistance becomes an important factor in success. Although many times individuals can identify their own technical assistance needs, they may not always recognize the needs in a timely manner (Brown & Feister, 2007; Feinberg, Greenberg, & Osgood, 2004). Technical assistance appears to be more effective if it is both responsive to the requests of programs and strategically directed toward building the capacities needed to achieve success. It is best to offer technical assistance in doses over time with a menu of assistance options available to meet multiple training needs (Brown & Feister).

Method

Selection of sample

We first used the information on state agencies' web sites to determine potential grant programs. The initial criteria used to select the programs for review included the following:

It included legislative authorization and state agency participation

It allocated money from the federal or state government to local organizations or units of government to institute some improvement in community well-being

It had an RFP/RFQ process for determining allocations of state funds

The intent was to institute either incremental changes (creating new services or extending the reach of services to new populations) or comprehensive community change (changing the way of doing business in a community)

Programs addressed a variety of topics, such as education, health, environmental improvement and human services

For this analysis we reviewed seven state grant programs. Ten programs were selected initially. Two were eliminated from consideration because we discovered they did not meet one of our criteria. The director of the third program declined to participate because of staff time constraints.

Collection of Information

First we collected and reviewed any documentation about the grant-making process, including the authorizing legislation (if applicable), request for proposals (RFP), guidance to applicants, contract language, reporting requirements, and technical assistance materials. After reviewing all available documentation, we interviewed one key informant for each program to obtain information that was not available from written documents. The key informant was chosen by the program administrator for each state agency.

Approach to Analysis

Based on our literature review, we developed a protocol for review of documents. In Appendix A there is a copy of the framework we developed for analysis. Any information that was not available in the program documents was asked in the key informant interviews. In these interviews we clarified the accuracy of our understanding of the program parameters gleaned

from the documents. We also asked for more information about technical assistance provided by the agency, their views on successes and challenges of the grant program, and what they would change about the grant making processes.

The purpose of this analysis was not to assess specific programs' prospects for achieving their intended goals. Rather our intent was to describe the process grant makers use to review proposals and select programs for funding. We were interested in how the review process could be better formulated to assess the grantee's ability to create and sustain the intended changes. In addition, we looked at how technical assistance was used to enhance prospects for success.

Findings

In reporting on our findings, we will first describe the key characteristics of the different categories of programs reviewed. Then we will discuss how the different programs addressed key factors known from research and practice to have an impact on program effectiveness: collaboration, program theory of change, grant-making processes, technical assistance, and building community capacity and using evaluation for program improvement. Finally, we will present examples of exemplary practices employed by the programs we reviewed and common challenges to program success.

Description of Sample

The seven programs we retrospectively reviewed were all administered by different state departments. They differed in the scope of change they intended to promote and in the target of the intended changes (see Table 1 for a summary of these differences).

Scope of change:

Four programs focused on making incremental changes in communities – creating new services or opportunities, or extending existing services to new beneficiaries.

Two programs clearly focused on comprehensive systems change as a means to address the root causes of social problems they addressed.

One program was intended to improve services to individuals and families but also focused on improving the service system.

Target of change:

Two programs primarily targeted change efforts toward individuals and families

Two programs funded improvements in the physical environment as a means of creating benefits for community residents.

One targeted individuals but with system change components

Two programs primarily targeted changes in the services system as a means of improving outcomes for individuals.

Table 1: Scope and Target of Change in the Programs Reviewed

Scope of Change	Target of Change	Number of Programs
Incremental	Individuals & families	2
Incremental	Physical environment	2
Incremental/systems change	Individuals/families primary, system secondary	1
Comprehensive systems change	System primary leading to individual change	2

These grant programs also differed on several other factors, such as the length of time they have been funded, source of funds and authorization for the programs. A summary of these characteristics can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Selected Characteristics of Programs Reviewed

Scope of Change (# of Programs)	Target of Change	Age	Authorization	Source of Funds	Competitive or Statewide
Incremental (2)	Individuals & Families	10+ years	Legislative	One federal and the other state funds	Competitive, 1-year grants or 3-year grants
Incremental (2)	Physical Environment	10+ years	Legislative	One federal and the other state funds, both with local match	Competitive, 2-year grants
Incremental/Systems Change (1)	Individuals & Families primarily, system secondary	6 years with major change after year 2	Legislative	State plus local match	Competitive 3-year grants; then Statewide 1-year grants
Comprehensive Systems Change (2)	System primarily leading to Individual change	Less than 5 years	Legislative and state agency policy	State (with federal & foundation funds available to the community). Many of the competitive grants require local match.	Statewide; in one initiative the separate programmatic grants are competitive, duration varies by grant

Four programs have been running for ten years or more, so administrators have a body of experience that they can use to improve the grants process. Another has been under development for more than five years but was ended in one form after two years and then reauthorized under different legislative requirements with a very much reduced allocation. This new program is still in the developmental stage, but the previous agency experience has enabled them to improve the grants process. Finally two of the programs are less than five years old and are still in the implementation phase. Historically the older programs tend to focus more on incremental changes while the grant parameters for newer programs reflect more systems thinking in the grant development process. The following paragraphs describe the four categories of programs that we reviewed.

Incremental change targeting individuals & families

Both programs in this category award grants on a competitive basis to fund risk reduction services for individuals and families. One operates with federal funds that the state administers and awards one-year grants to organizations in local communities. The other awards three-year grants to any nonprofit or governmental agency from state funds appropriated to three departments and managed by a unit within one of the departments. Both programs have been in operation for ten years or more. Over the life of both programs, steps have been taken to rationalize and systematize the grant-making and management processes.

Incremental community change through improvements to the physical environment

These programs are designed to fund improvements in the physical environment that will benefit the residents of the communities they serve. Unlike the other programs reviewed, their focus is primarily on change at the community level that results in long-term benefits to citizens. Both are mature programs, having started more than ten years ago. They award grants competitively, although one of the two does not operate on a regular funding cycle but evaluates grants individually as they are submitted. Each is guided by legislative intent – one state and one federal – but with the state agency having latitude in how the program is implemented. Funding for communities is for a two-year time frame in which to complete the project. The intent is that the community will support the maintenance of the project long term.

Incremental change targeting individuals & families with system change components

This program began awarding competitive grants to local communities but changed after two years to a statewide allocation that was approved for each local community upon the completion of an acceptable work plan. At the time the program went statewide, the funds were cut drastically. The initial program actually ended and the follow up program was authorized under new legislation. The initial competitive grants were approved for three years, based on availability of funds. Currently funds are provided on a year-to-year basis with the allocations based on the availability of state funds. This program is at the intermediate level of maturity, as it began more than five years ago. It changed drastically when funding was cut, but lessons learned have been applied to the new program.

Comprehensive systems change involving targeted populations

Both programs in this category use a systems change framework to address the needs of a targeted group of community residents. Neither is competitive although one chose pilot sites based on their readiness to implement change. Unlike the other programs we reviewed, they do not fund discrete projects but rather the state agency funds community planning to address a specific issue. Each also funds a state infrastructure to support comprehensive systems change on the local level. The initiatives provide information and support to local communities around various state and federally funded grant opportunities to fund specific services. Some of the program grants for which communities apply are competitive. These are new programs still in the implementation stage of development.

Collaboration

Current thinking in research and practice is that many social and economic problems have multiple causes and require interventions at multiple levels. By encouraging and defining collaboration, grant-making programs can better promote the organizational and inter-organizational systems change needed in a specific locale to make effective improvements for individuals and communities. State-level collaboration among state agencies that have an interest in the problem can facilitate local collaboration and eliminate some of the barriers to local communities seeking assistance from multiple state agencies for different components of a single project.

In general, the degree of local collaboration expected was related to the age of the grant-making programs. Among programs in the health, education, human services sectors, the oldest programs tended to fund organizations to act independently or to use collaborators mainly as a referral network to meet other individual/family needs. The program of intermediate age has gradually developed and refined its concept of collaboration. Currently the program defines collaboration and asks communities to identify partners and their roles in the collaboration. The two newest programs in this category are the comprehensive community initiatives. Both have well-defined collaborative structures at the local level, and one also has a regional structure of partners. Consumer representation is part of the local collaborative structure.

Grant programs to improve the physical environment originate in community planning processes but the specific grants do not address local collaboration at all. Informally one of the two does work with local community councils to put together a development package around the grant. One program has a well-defined process for obtaining citizen input in project planning.

A state-level collaborative structure is most evident in the comprehensive community initiatives. Each has a well-defined state-level structure whose specific mission is to support change at the local level. State-level structures include several committees and work groups, each addressing a specific aspect of the problem. One of the older programs does have a rather unique state collaborative structure: funds for the project are appropriated through three departments and administered through a joint decision-making process.

Both agencies making grants to improve the physical environment do participate in state-level collaborative groups focused on community development. However, neither grant program has a specific state-level collaborative.

Program Theory of Change

A theory of change is simply an explanation of how the activities funded by the program are expected to achieve the intended results. A theory might be as simple as: “to stop smoking, people must be more aware of the negative health consequences of smoking and know techniques for quitting.” This theory suggests program activities such as education around the health consequences of smoking and teaching smoking cessation techniques.

For community change initiatives, a theory of change would probably suggest activities to make changes at multiple levels, including increasing civic engagement, improving relationships between organizations, or changing community norms or policies. A unified theory of change helps to clarify the policy intent and program goals, and keep organizations focused on the activities most likely to achieve the best results.

Among the programs we reviewed, few had a well-articulated theory of change. One of the two programs targeting individual behavior did require that grantees use specific evidence-based intervention models. Presumably evaluation has demonstrated that these strategies are effective. On the other end of the spectrum, the two comprehensive community change initiatives do use models based on research about the root causes of the specific social problems they address. These models include strategies to specifically address these root causes. Because they are new programs, there is little information about the best way to bring about the desired changes. What is not known is whether the community coalition approach will lead to better outcomes for individuals or the community. The other programs we reviewed did not specifically articulate a theory of change, particularly for collaboration or systems change.

The two programs to improve the physical environment have implied theories of change that improvements in the physical environment will bring benefits to the residents of the local community. In both cases, the actual community benefit from the projects is not directly in the control of the agencies funding the project because it will occur in the future, beyond the time frame of the grants.

Grant-making Processes

In addition to having a well-articulated theory of change, one of the ways that grant makers focus the energies of their grantees is to be clear about the outcomes that are desired. While the grants reviewed targeted change at the individual, community, and service delivery systems levels, the stated outcomes were exclusively at the person/individual or project level. Even where the agencies were requiring extensive community-level collaboration and coordination, there were no outcomes related to those actions.

In recent years the ability of state departments to provide adequate resources to grantees has been severely curtailed by dwindling financial and staff resources. Programs with federal

funds have not been immune from reconsideration of allowable costs. While this has rarely resulted in fewer grants being funded, it has affected the ability of the human services agencies in making monitoring site visits to their grantees. The agencies funding physical improvements do regularly visit the locales to review the potential sites and also to see if the projects are being implemented as designed and used as planned.

Standardization in the various grant programs is achieved through different means. The most standardized is the most mature human services program which requires grantees to identify a goal and then select from among a group of exemplary/promising curricula to meet that goal. The least standardized was also a human services program that specified the use of evidence-based practices but did not offer guidance regarding curriculum or measurement tools. The physical environment projects are primarily guided by construction-related rules and regulations as well as local community plans. Standardization in the two community change projects comes largely from defining the overarching model and also the processes used to accomplish actions, but not in the particular ways to carry out the intervention.

Table 2, below, summarizes the similarities and differences among the four categories of initiatives.

Table 2: Process of Grant-Making

Category of Initiative	Outcomes	Adequate capacity & resources	Improved Design for Implementation & Accountability
Incremental/ Individual & Family	Outcomes are provided Use of evidence-based practices is specified in both programs but defined in only one Outcome measurement tool (s) provided	Less individualized technical assistance (TA) from state agency personnel; efforts underway in one program to document performance so TA can be targeted For one program, less state funds resulted in termination of some grants; two grantees dropped out because couldn't raise local match	One of the programs has invested in bringing standardization to the outcomes, programs and evaluation tools that local grantees select The other program has a 3-year grant cycle with only a budget and work plan required in the off years
Incremental/ Individual & Family w Systems Change	Outcomes are exclusively at the individual level Use of evidence-based practices specified but not defined No measurement tools provided	Organizational commitment largely assessed by previous experience and ability to raise match funds	There are no performance measures nor are grantees required to develop measures or milestones Financial monitoring is made difficult by grantees' ability to carry forward funds
Incremental/ Physical Environment	Outcomes are specific to the construction or rehabilitation project For one program, legislation defines economic benefit as the long-term outcome but it is not routinely measured No measurement other than was the project completed	Require large financial commitments from local communities either in form of local match or taking part of money in loans Both make site visits during application process, review the adequacy of the site under consideration and talk with community members about project and to clarify expectations	Monitoring occurs through site visits and fiscal reporting (construction invoices and completion of the work plan) The programs visit the sites after completion of the project to assure that the contracted purpose is continued
Comprehensive Community Change	Outcomes are exclusively related to the prevention of the social problem for the target individuals Extensive research on problem used to develop intervention model Comparison of program results with pre-intervention data	Reallocate, reuse or integrate available funds along with allocating new money Systematically work at all levels to assure project success One of the projects piloted the approach in communities where collaboration was already in place Both programs count on individuals', families', organizations' and communities' willingness to participate Both programs work with community to involve residents and consumers	Currently both initiatives focus on results rather than performance targets One does have performance targets at the individual grant level and the other has been asked by the legislature to define the evaluation criteria Standardization comes primarily from a highly structured process that the grantees are to use (i.e., local councils) One of the evaluation goals is to inform grantees of service improvements

Technical assistance to build capacity for change and sustainability

Successful implementation of complex grant programs often requires considerable individual, organizational and community knowledge and skills. Programs that build community collaboration require good leaders who have both the knowledge and relational competencies to help partners develop common goals and work together effectively. Technical assistance can help communities to develop the necessary competencies.

In general, state grant programs have had very limited resources for technical assistance to communities in the grant-making or program implementation processes. Agencies have responded to this lack by developing alternative strategies: 1) developing toolkits and other materials to share on line; 2) developing and linking associations of grantees who can share learning and support each other; 3) partnering with a professional organization who funds the technical assistance workshops; 4) making grant materials very simple and self-explanatory so that communities can complete the grant process with minimal assistance from staff.

The exception is the comprehensive community change initiatives which are providing extensive technical assistance to local communities in the early stages of implementation. Each initiative has a contract with an outside organization to provide training workshops; they also have staff within the agency who provide technical assistance on various aspects of the project. One has several state-level work groups assigned to identify technical assistance needs and disseminate effective practices.

One of the two programs to improve the physical environment does work informally with communities helping them identify resources to complement the grant in an overall community economic development project.

Building community capacity and using evaluation for program improvement

If programs are to become more effective and if communities are to sustain them, the community or organizations undertaking the program must improve their own capacities over time and make adjustments to the program to improve performance. Program improvement requires that implementers have information about their performance at regular intervals, either through program evaluation and/or the use of performance measurement.

Among the health, education and human services programs we reviewed, the authorizing legislation and the state agency tended to define the long term outcomes but leave the definition of immediate or intermediate outcomes to the local communities. The exception was one of the incremental programs serving individuals & families which specified use of a research-based curriculum. None of these programs used a performance measurement system to monitor progress.

The programs to improve the physical environment focused their performance measurement on successful completion of the construction/renovation project. The extent to which the projects helped to achieve the intended outcomes stated in the plans for community improvement was left to local communities. One of the two programs did ask grantees to report on lessons learned with the intent to share this information with other grantees.

Only a few of these programs had statewide evaluations and only one specifically feeds back information to local communities for program improvement. One department did use the results of initial evaluation to make adaptations to the grant-making process.

Summary of findings

Exemplary Practices

In our review we found that every grant program was engaging in some practices that are particularly innovative, supportive of local communities, and likely to improve the chances of success for grantees. Table 3 contains examples of exemplary grant-making practices and the rationale for identifying them as such.

Table 3: Exemplary Grant-making Practices

Exemplary Practice	Why we think this is exemplary
Developing tools to help communities select a research-based intervention model, deliver it and evaluate the outcomes	This is a time- and resource-saving approach that one state agency developed. In many areas, particularly health, human services and substance abuse, there has been extensive research on what works for whom. Community grantees with limited resources benefit from being pointed at programs that work and effective ways to evaluate their outcomes.
Developing a state level collaborative structure to support required local collaboration.	State agencies can (inadvertently) operate as silos, making it difficult for their local entities to work together. By spending time getting agreements at the state level they can eliminate frustrations and barriers that are likely to otherwise sap energy at the local level.
Building a statewide database capable of tracking population characteristics and service delivery	Many local programs collect their own data but rarely use it to assess progress. By collecting information in a statewide database, they can gauge their own progress compared to the rest of the state. This is particularly important if the problem is complex and/or there are lots of related factors.
Supporting community collaboration; supporting cross-site learning.	Encouraging and defining effective collaboration and identifying what collaborative relationships could accomplish in an initiative can promote desired organizational and inter-organizational systems change. Peer consultation with other programs working on similar problems is an effective means of extending increasingly rare state-level technical assistance.
Assisting local communities in putting together a package of state grants for community development projects.	Community development projects are not usually funded by a single source and not every community has someone who is aware of all the relevant funding sources. In addition, the requirements for each are highly technical. Assistance from the state level enables communities with fewer resources to more effectively compete for state development funds.
Implementing a process for civic participation in project planning, including people most likely to be users of the service.	It is amazing how rarely potential users are included in the planning of projects or asked what services they would use. This approach increases the possibility that concerns and interests of community participants are taken into account at the planning phase.
Working to include and change ALL components of the system.	Particularly with programs targeted toward comprehensive community change, there are two categories of components that should be considered. First, are all the factors that are known to be associated with the problem, for example lack of education, prior substance use, etc. The second set of components have to do with the level(s) at which the intervention is expected to have an impact; for example the individual, inter-agency relationships, the community. Omission of any factor or level can seriously and negatively affect the success of the program.

Change is never easy and public grant programs are constantly challenged by lack of resources and staff to administer programs (Brown & Fiester, 2007). Given these limitations, we did identify other common challenges that could be addressed:

Programs lack a clear theory of how their activities will result in the intended changes.

Without an understanding of how program activities should bring about the expected results, programs do not know what to focus on and departmental staff lack information with which to assess the appropriateness of the proposed activities.

Programs have not defined indicators of community collaboration or performance measures to track the progress of change.

Program managers and staff tend to focus their efforts on implementing program components and dealing with day-to-day problems. If creating changes at the organizational or community level is essential to success, staff must understand what is expected and have periodic feedback about their progress.

Lack of consistency in funding from year to year and the timing of legislative decisions about appropriations are barriers to good planning and grant making.

The legislative calendar and some program calendars do not coincide, making it difficult for them to maintain staff and other program functions from year to year. The lack of consistent funding from year to year also makes it difficult for agencies to set funding priorities.

Often the ratio of resources allocated to units served is not sufficient to achieve the intended outcomes.

The desire to fund a broad range of services in many or most communities can result in providing insufficient funding to any one program to be effective. In hard times when funding decreases, one cannot maintain the same level of effectiveness while cutting funding across the board.

Lack of departmental resources for program monitoring and technical assistance limits their ability to assure adequate program implementation and program improvement.

Few state programs have administrative staff available to sufficiently monitor programs or provide technical assistance to improve program quality. With insufficient monitoring state agencies have no independent verification of adequate program implementation and are limited in their ability to identify technical assistance needs of grantees.

Policy Recommendations

Grant making to create community change is only a small part of what state agencies do, as the bulk of their work concerns operating basic state services. Within this small subgroup, we looked at programs promoting various levels of change, recognizing that not all programs require system-level interventions. As these programs had different goals regarding community change, some of these recommendations may be more applicable to some programs than to others.

Development of authorizing legislation

Clarify the policy intent, goals and funding priorities in legislation. Programs that are “a mile wide and an inch deep” are unlikely to produce any meaningful results. Given the limited resources available for funding state programs, legislation should be clear and focused about

what is to be accomplished and should set overall priorities as to how funds should be disbursed. As funding increases the agency can expand programs according to these priorities.

Development of the RFP/RFQ

Present a basic theory of change for the applicants that links program activities with intended results. Most programs fund a range of allowable or even required activities and have expected results. Linking these activities with the results can help clarify how the program is supposed to work and help grantees understand where they should focus their efforts.

Define all key terms in the RFP/RFQ. Each field has its own jargon or way of interpreting words. Providing definitions will cut down on confusion and assure that potential grantees will all respond similarly. For example, one RFP reviewed gave a **sample process objective**: “By month three of the project, the partnership coordinator will be hired;” and a **sample outcome objective**: “By the end of year one, at least 75% of the agencies represented in the Partnership will commit to continuing their participation in the group.”

Require grantees targeting change for individuals and families in health, education or human service programs to select from a menu of research-based intervention models. Few issues in health, education, or human services lack a body of research about causes and what works for whom in preventing or treating the problem. Using proven strategies is the most effective use of limited funds.

Develop outcomes, indicators and/or performance targets for change at the organizational, inter-organizational or community level if the program model targets change at those levels. Community-level changes are less likely to occur if the people implementing the program are not focused on creating and sustaining those changes. Developing these measures will help local grantees understand where changes should occur if the program is to be successful; they will also facilitate state monitoring of progress.

Define a process for community involvement if civic engagement is especially important to success. Participant involvement in new programs is always important; however, for many programs, the involvement of consumers of the service is sufficient. For those programs that fund changes and improvements in the physical environment, it appears that the community as a whole may be more directly affected. They should be involved in the planning process to ensure community acceptance.

Create state-level collaborative bodies around specific initiatives to facilitate cooperation among local agencies. If collaboration is a central part of grant activities, collaboration at the state level can help local communities by eliminating barriers to local collaboration and creating policy changes needed to facilitate change.

Proposal review process

Contact grantees directly to verify information in applicants’ proposals and to clarify the department’s understanding of the project plan. Many agencies are bound by rules that require them to evaluate proposals strictly on the information presented in a written proposal. This system is advantageous to organizations or communities that have greater resources and

can utilize professional grant writers. Sometimes agency staff and administrators who will carry out the program are not even aware of the plan proposed. If the focus is on getting results, we should try to fund the best programs not the best writers.

Technical assistance

Form partnerships to provide technical assistance more cost effectively. We know that technical assistance builds the capacity of communities to collaborate and sustain change. Given the limited state agency staff available to provide this assistance, some agencies have filled this gap by creating partnerships with other agencies (volunteer or paid) and promoting cross-grantee learning.

Provide state-level staff to assist local communities in preparing integrated funding packages for community development projects. Community development projects are not usually funded by a single source and not every community has someone skilled in navigating the complexities and highly technical requirements of these different grant programs. Assistance at the state level could help communities with fewer local resources be successful.

Program monitoring and implementation

Develop a system to collect information about program implementation and outcomes. Some programs have funding that can support an outside evaluator or even a database in which to collect information about program implementation and outcomes. However, even if money is not available, programs should at least be required to collect standard information about program users, services provided, and outcomes or results. Standard data might permit retrospective evaluation of program implementation and outcomes.

Require that annual reports include information on standard measures of progress. Programs that are funding incremental change at the individual level should be using a model whose effectiveness has been validated by research; they should report results from the standard measurement tool for their chosen intervention. Programs focusing on community change can ask for information on progress toward performance targets or indicators of the intended outcomes.

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Appendix A – Program Review Table

Ways to evaluate grant/funding initiatives

Organizational capacity and commitment

- How does the grant-making process assess grantees readiness to carry out the project?
- Do they ask for prior history of doing similar work and/or what they have accomplished in this area?
- Do they ask for commitment and experience of key personnel in carrying out similar programs?

Verification and clarification of information

- Do they interview grantees in advance to verify organizational capacity to do the work and/or veracity of the grant as written?
- Are potential grantees interviewed? Or is selection made by paper review only.

Collaboration

- Do they require involvement of a collaborative entity at the local level? By-off by the community collaborative? A workgroup that is part of the community collaborative? A new collaborative group not affiliated with the community collaborative?
- Is there an expectation for a parallel structure at the state level if requiring local collaboration?
- Are program goals and performance expectations for community collaboration and change specified in the grant.

Grant parameters

- Was/is the original grant competitive vs. selective?
- Is there boiler plate in enabling legislation or the appropriation act that specifies the parameters of the effort?
- Does legislation and/or agency regulations clearly specify program policy intent, program goals and priorities, and performance expectations.?
- Is there a requirement for an annual report to the legislature?

Technical assistance

- If evidence based practice is specified, are examples provided?
- Is ongoing technical assistance provided to grantees?
- To what extent are political considerations part of the decision making process?(e.g., going statewide immediately, adding in a factor above and beyond review process)

Unifying theory of change ²							
Level at which change is targeted ¹	How clear and feasible are the grant expectations for outcomes and actions?	Are they working from evidence-based practice or literature?	Recognize, measure & track a full range & continuum of outcomes (i.e., capacities & behaviors)	Build communities' capacities around data & evaluation	Use evaluation as a tool for improving practices & nurturing change	Promote learning across sites and among partners	Who wants to use the products or services?
Individual							
Civic Participation (participatory governance, resident involvement, opportunities for new leadership)							
Organizational (adoption of new policies & practices, development of new programs, institutionalization of programs, increased resources)							
Interorganizational (links between organizations, new partnerships, more mature collaborations, new links with orgs outside local community)							
Community (public policy, community norms, physical environment improvements)							

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Supporting change: Sufficient and appropriate resources ²						
Resource 1: A long time frame for change			Resource 2: Adequate money disbursed strategically			
	Are the planning times reasonable?	Transition from one phase to next based on milestones rather than arbitrary time frame	Monitoring system in place.	Is funding related to performance?	Does the appropriation process cause problems?	Do leveraged funds negatively affect other work?
Level at which change is targeted¹						
Individual						
Civic Participation (participatory governance, resident involvement, opportunities for new leadership)						
Organizational (adoption of new policies & practices, development of new programs, institutionalization of programs, increased resources)						
Interorganizational (links between organizations, new partnerships, more mature collaborations, new links with orgs outside local community)						
Community (public policy, community norms, physical environment improvements)						

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Supporting change: Sufficient and appropriate resources ²							Conditioning Influences ³			
Resource 3: Human effort, knowledge & commitment			Resource 4: Technical Assistance							
Level at which change is targeted ¹	Acknowledges the personal characteristics of change agents ² : sense of community (degree of connectedness), level of commitment, ability to solve problems (translate commitment into action), access to resources ³		Acknowledges the personal characteristics of change agents and prepares them using 1) leadership development, 2) organizational development, 3) community organizing, 4) fostering collaborative relations among organizations ³		Understands the knowledge needed by evaluators and others to do their jobs ²		Provides TA at a pace that works for people involved ²	Has an overall framework that allows for menu of TA ²	Has a process that allows community participants to ask for help & TA consultants to assess their needs accurately ²	Recognizes contextual factors that constrain action or create opportunities
	Individual	Civic Participation (participatory governance, resident involvement, opportunities for new leadership)	Organizational (adoption of new policies & practices, development of new programs, institutionalization of programs, increased resources)	Interorganizational (links between organizations, new partnerships, more mature collaborations, new links with orgs outside local community)	Community (public policy, community norms, physical environment improvements)					

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