



A Practical Guide for Responsive Grants Applicants

*Helpful Information for Applicants to MeHAF's
Responsive Grants Programs*

Introduction – The Past Informing the Future

In 2013, the Maine Health Access Foundation launched a Community-Based initiative comprised of three grants programs to further our mission of improving the health of everyone in Maine, especially those who are uninsured and underserved. These programs each focused on supporting community health improvement projects with different goals, but common features.

The place-based¹, collaborative efforts funded by MeHAF under these programs were created to address system gaps and inefficiencies that impeded the ability of some of Maine's most vulnerable citizens to obtain high quality, equitable^{2 3} services and supports. These grants programs built in a 'planning period' to allow communities the time and space to build collaborative networks and develop workplans, then provided funds for implementation. Required elements such as multi-sector partnerships and community member engagement were intended to help communities work together in new ways to drive and sustain change.

This document highlights what we and our grantees learned through these projects about what works and what is challenging about community-centered system change to improve health and well-being. Each of the following sections briefly describes lessons learned about how key program components work, and how they contributed to big and small changes in the way services and supports were organized and delivered.

The three programs that were part of this initiative unfolded over the better part of a decade and informed the development of MeHAF's current Responsive Grants programs:

Healthy Communities: *Aimed to transform communities into supportive environments that enable people to live healthier lives. "Pre-planning" grants helped communities convene organizations and community members to come to consensus around a community-defined health issue that became the focus of subsequent planning and implementation grants.*

Thriving in Place (TiP): *Aimed to help older people and people with chronic conditions to maintain or improve their health as well as connect them with community resources to support their ability to remain independent and safe in their homes and communities.*

Access to Quality Care: *Access to Quality Care: Aimed to address the health needs of people without public or private health insurance coverage. The program encouraged health care and social services providers to increase coordination and communication to develop a system of care that delivered sustainable, high value services to those who lack health coverage.*

[1] A funding strategy used by foundations that focuses on improving outcomes within specific geographic communities (neighborhood, city, county, etc.) rather than a specific issue or cause (The Place-Based Strategic Philanthropy Model, Center for Urban Economics at The University of Texas at Dallas)

[2] In a presentation to the MeHAF CBI grantee community on March 27, 2014, John Powell defined health inequities as "health differences that are socially produced, systemic in their distribution across the population, and unfair." Presentation title: *Health & Justice*

[3] OpenSource Framework: Power and Equity. OpenSource Leadership Strategies. Presented to Learning Community 7/24/19.

Lesson One: Community Engagement

Efforts to address complex health and social service system issues are more likely to succeed if they engage community members in a meaningful way. This goes deeper than simply inviting a few community members 'to the table' of organizational representatives.

Meaningful community engagement happens when community members have a say in the design, implementation, and assessment of system change initiatives. "Meaningful" engagement requires taking the time to create real relationships and working to reduce the power differential between community members, organizations, and funders.

Thoughtfully engaging individuals who have direct experience with the health issue(s) of focus and have been underserved or stigmatized gives valuable perspective to a project. These efforts can result in community-driven and more effective solutions for lasting improvements to health and social systems.

Community engagement:

- *Contributes to community connections and the sense that all members of the community matter and are cared for.*
- *Builds local leaders who design strategies that are well-received by the community, are more effective in improving health and social service systems, and are more sustainable.*

Additional Reading and Resources:

- [ReThink Health: A Ripple Initiative: Resident Engagement Practices Typology.](#)
- [Parnell, B. \(2014\). The Power of Your Story: Getting and Keeping Communities Engaged.](#)
- [Eagan, N. F. \(2015\). The Art of Hosting Conversations That Matter Parts One, Two, & Three.](#)

Lesson One: Community Engagement

How it Works

Meaningful community engagement may look like:

- **Committing time and effort to building trusting relationships with community members by:**
 - Conducting ongoing outreach and recruitment
 - Drawing out and listening to people's stories
 - Asking for feedback on what is or is not working for community members, learning from it, and changing plans accordingly
- **Creating structures to enable community voice to flourish, such as:**
 - Work groups, steering committees, or action teams
 - Volunteer groups
 - Paid "community consultants" (appropriately compensating those with lived experience for their consultative services that benefit the project)
- **Supporting partners to promote engagement in ways such as:**
 - Flexible options for when and how to participate
 - Compensation such as honoraria, stipends, and paid consulting arrangements
 - Transportation assistance (e.g., rides to meetings, gas cards)
 - Meals during meetings or grocery gift cards
 - Child care or babysitting stipends
 - Interpreter services
- **Building confident leaders through strategies such as:**
 - Scholarships to attend relevant workshops and conferences
 - Individual or group coaching and peer learning sessions
 - Orientation and leadership training on topics such as meeting processes, collaborative decision-making, public speaking, and advocacy
 - Opportunities to attend or co-present at grantee convenings and community events

Lesson Two: Partnership

Healthy collaborative networks are characterized by trust, a common purpose, shared ownership, and a collective sense of responsibility for identifying and addressing system gaps. Those involved value their relationships with each other, know that they are making a difference, and share knowledge and resources with each other, thereby reducing competition among them. The most effective system change efforts stem from a coherent set of actions undertaken in a coordinated way among stakeholders.⁴

Building collaborative networks can be time intensive and challenging. However, the outcomes when intentional relationship building is done well are often more sustainable and longer lasting.

When building partnerships, you may consider:

- *Using outside facilitators or third parties at key junctures to enable all partners to participate fully in important discussions.*
- *Recognizing and adapting to different learning and communication styles to engage and help partners understand systems and their interrelationships.*
- *Learning together about local power dynamics and ways to influence them can be powerful in initial partnership building and create universal understanding around reaching decisions on project strategy and priorities.*

Additional Reading and Resources:

- [Holley, June \(2012\): *What is Network Weaving?*](#)
- [Fels Smyth, K. et al. \(2020\). *The Wellbeing Blueprint* \(v 5.5\). Greenfield, MA: The Full Frame Initiative.](#)
- [Cufaude, J. \(2005\). *The Art of Facilitative Leadership: Maximizing Others' Contributions*. *The System Thinker* 15\(10\), January 2005.](#)

[4] ReThink Health: "Conditions for a healthy system of health," (not dated). Fannie E. Rippel Foundation (www.ReThinkHealth.org)

Lesson Two: Partnership

How it Works

Partnership development may look like:

Keeping Partners Engaged Over the Long-Term

Once key priorities/goals/strategies are identified, partnerships can put more focus on aligned sets of activities tied to a shared set of goals. Ways to promote retention and engagement in partnerships include:

- Providing a regular forum for partners to learn and share information and resources with each other
- Celebrating accomplishments and recognizing partners for their contributions
- Offering partners learning opportunities on topics that benefit their organizations (e.g., marketing strategies, social media)
- Regularly communicating via multiple mechanisms (email, newsletters, social media)

Distributing leadership

Collaborative leadership entails knowing when to be deeply involved and when to step back. Sharing leadership and ownership of a project can lead to more success and may include:

- Traditional leaders letting go of power and control
- Allowing non-traditional leaders to take roles in design, implementation, and evaluation
- Sharing ownership of a project can lead to more success

Assessing Network Health

Regularly asking partners about their satisfaction with the collaboration and ways it might be improved can help build more authentic, long-lasting relationships. Periodic check-ins with partners can lead to positive outcomes such as:

- Increased communication and information and resource sharing
- Greater awareness of community resources among partner organizations and increased referrals across sectors
- Wider community awareness and endorsement of the project
- Increased trust among diverse and competing organizations
- Stable membership

Lesson Three: Sustainability

Sustainability in community health initiatives has been defined in two dimensions: the system changes themselves and the relationships formed as a result of the initiative that continue to drive social action to improve health over the long term.

Successful projects incorporate learning and evaluation into their implementation process to test what is working, what isn't working, and to use that information to make strategic decisions about moving forward.

A number of challenges associated with sustaining projects may present themselves. When system changes aren't sustained or are at risk, contextual factors are often in play, and system gaps can remain.

Some of the key barriers to sustainability include:

- *Difficulty in making systems work better when the system itself is destabilized. Things like health and behavioral health agency closures, loss of rural health services, staff turnover, and financial instability in community-based organizations put hard-fought partnerships at risk.*
- *Partners that are unable to step up and assume leadership or ownership of programs or critical functions.*
- *Lack of public funding for critical services and supports and lack of public uptake and scaling up of evidence-based health and wellness programs*
- *Challenges reaching the most vulnerable people. Despite extensive outreach efforts, people who are the most isolated and underserved often continue to lack awareness of available services and supports and how to access them.*

Additional Reading and Resources:

- [Wilkerson, R. *Active Living by Design*](#)
- [Wong, E., Norris, T., and Solomon, L. \(2009\). *Community Health Initiatives Sustainability Framework*. Kaiser Permanente Community Benefit.](#)

Lesson Three: Sustainability

How it Works

Designs to support sustainability may look like:

Maximizing the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Existing Resources and Expanding Capacity

Some communities, particularly in rural areas, find that volunteers and students can help increase access to much-needed supportive services, especially for people without the ability to pay for them.

Testing Solutions with Rapid Cycle Learning⁵

Simple, rapid assessment techniques such as attendance tracking forms, satisfaction surveys or interviews, community surveys, and focus groups enable projects to obtain immediate feedback from program participants and community stakeholders.

Listening to the Community, and Meeting Them Where They Are

Some initial attempts at filling a service gap may turn out to be a poor fit for the community. Real-time community feedback allows projects to pivot toward solutions that are more acceptable to the people they are intended to benefit.

Improving Information Systems

Better systems promote data sharing, enhanced process and outcome tracking, better communication pathways, and more.

Encouraging Partners to “Adopt” Activities

Recognizing the success of the project and using that as a catalyst to spur partners to commit to continuing the work even after the initial grant funding ends.

[5] Rapid cycle learning is an inexpensive way to obtain feedback to make real-time decisions and adapt as conditions change. Grantees engaged in a lot of experimentation and piloting that was a nice fit for rapid-cycle learning. Ben Mangan of UC Berkeley says that vulnerability and failure are the keys to scale impact. The evaluators observed promising use of rapid cycle learning and encouraged more. Foster, S. and Doksum, T. (2018). Community-Based Initiatives: Evaluation Highlights. Presentation to Learning Community Meeting, August 1, 2018. S.E. Foster Associates.

Conclusion-Evaluating to Learn

Throughout the Community-Based Initiative projects, MeHAF and the grantees focused on how things worked and what made a difference. Evaluation became more about discovery and learning than about monitoring and accountability. The evaluation methods and questions focused on grantees' commitment to collaborative partnerships with other organizations and the level of meaningful engagement of community members in the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects. We carry on that focus today and recognize that when relationships and trust are nurtured, MeHAF, as Maine's only explicitly health focused funder, does better at supporting grantees when challenges arise.

Understanding the tremendous diversity of communities in Maine helps MeHAF make realistic assessments of what is achievable and enables more flexibility with grant dollars. We hope that sharing the learning and experience of our Community-Based Initiative grantees will be useful in your own project development.