



## Tips on How to Work With Community-Based Organizations

### Why work with community-based organizations?

As resources for local governments and public agencies dwindle and the demand for services grows, public entities will out of necessity turn to other sources in the community to fill in gaps or provide for unique needs. Among the partnerships and collaborations public entities will turn to are community-based organizations.

Community-based organizations interact daily with members of the community and are often located in neighborhoods. These organizations have unique and important insight into the challenges and opportunities facing children and families in their neighborhood. Frequently staff at community-based organizations speak the language(s) of the surrounding community and from the ethnic and cultural populations being served. People in the neighborhood trust community-based organizations to understand their unique situation and to offer sound advice and appropriate services.

There are also non-profit organizations that provide other types of services like community housing developers, visitor bureaus or non profit hospitals to name a few. While the purpose of the organization or the scale and nature of the work may be different from the social service type of organization, the financial management and reporting will be similar as will their greater knowledge of the community.

### Suggestions for Success

- 1. Determine which community-based organizations are the most appropriate partners.** Larger cities will have numerous community-based organizations that provide services to families in neighborhoods or that provide other non-social service/health related services. Do some investigating to determine which of these have the strongest connections to and the most respect from the population you wish to engage. In smaller communities you may have only a few organizations from which to choose or perhaps only a single organization available for partnering. If there are options, examine the pros and cons of working with an organization prior to making a commitment. This is especially true if the work you will be contracting for is of significant size or duration.
- 2. Examine the financial status of the organization.** If you will be using a community based organization to provide services or undertake a significant program, it is important to know if it has the financial capacity to sustain the effort. It is appropriate to ask to see the organization's financial statements. The statements will help you to understand the extent to which the organization would be dependent on your agency's funding to continue its work and can provide insights into the stability of the organization. You might also call foundations that fund the organization and talk to the program officer that oversees the grant the organization has. The foundation program officer will be able to tell you about the

performance of the organization in terms of delivery of services and financial management. If you are unfamiliar with financial management of community-based organizations, a foundation program officer can advise you of resources to help expand your knowledge.

Another important element to evaluate prior to contracting with a community-based organization is whether it has an appropriate level of liability coverage, including limits, standards and workers' compensation coverage. Your risk management department will know the appropriate levels. It is good to include an agency staff person with knowledge of liability coverages in the review of potential requests for proposals and development of contracts or agreements.

- 3. Be aware of the political and public connections the organization might have.** Many community-based organizations have relationships with public figures, ranging from informal connections to close political or other connections. It is important to understand these relationships when deciding how to work with a community based organization. In some cases, it is best to check with the agency's legal counsel depending upon the relationship between the local official and the organization. If your agency is using an application process to determine which organization to fund, it is important to use clear criteria for selection process and provide a summary of why each applicant organization was or was not awarded a contract.
- 4. Review your agency's labor agreements when evaluating whether to contract with a community-based organization for services.** In trying to cut costs, some agencies are looking to non-profits in the community to deliver services. One caution in this approach is that your agency's labor agreements may preclude contracting outside the agency for work that could be done by current or laid-off employees. It is best to ensure that the work of a community-based organization is not supplanting the work of your employees. If the work you will be contracting for is new and not covered under current contracts, generally there is no issue. You may be able to use a meet and confer process with the labor unions to be able to work with a community-based organization on certain projects. Short-term, one time money is easier for contracting-out projects. Therefore, before beginning a contracting process with a community-based organization be sure to check with the human resources department and/or legal counsel to be sure you are not violating an existing contract and to ensure that work jurisdiction issues are addressed.
- 5. The relationship you will have with a community-based organization is different from the one that you have with other contractors.** If you are contracting with a community-based organization to provide services of any type, the relationship will be a partnership. This will require a different type of contract management than if you are contracting for road repair or some other task. Therefore, a different set of interactions will need to take place.
  - a. Communication.** A clear plan for communication is needed. Establish regular contact times and determine who will be doing the communicating. A process for reporting changes will also be needed. This includes changes that are coming from your agency and changes happening at the community-based organization. It is important that the shifts in requirements or changes of staff be communicated as soon as they are known. This gives both parties the opportunity to prepare for the impacts of the change in personnel. Other important items to discuss on a regular basis are progress being made, insights

from the work, ideas for improvement and changes in the financial status of either entity. A communication plan helps establish the trust needed for effective partnership.

- b. Assessment and evaluation.** Have a clear assessment and evaluation plan in place. Build in regular reporting that accounts for more than just the amount of service provided. Include information about any significant changes in the organization including personnel and finances. Having a consistent format for applications and reporting across agency departments is helpful, since a community-based organization may have contracts with more than one department.

If the community-based organization has shortfalls in its performance, find out why. Look at such issues as changes in leadership, staff (including the need for more staff training), the financial situation, as well as changes in the surrounding community. It is best to see if the performance of the organization can be improved before ending a contract and seeking a new provider. Given the amount of time and resources invested in creating the relationship with an organization, cancelling or not renewing a contract often is last option to consider.

- c. Include staff from the community-based organization in planning the program or effort.** As you are developing the contract or considering making changes to the program, include staff from the community-based organization in the discussions and planning. They will bring a unique perspective and insight from the on-the-ground work. Including those affected by decision in shaping the changes will increase buy-in from those who will be performing the work.
- d. Build the capacity of the community-based organization.** Every organization benefits from training and support that expands its capacity. Community-based organizations seldom have the resources for such efforts. Investing in building the capacity of your community-based organization service providers will pay dividends in the long run. Services will improve, the trust between your agency and the community will improve, and you will be able to get more done with fewer resources once skills are enhanced. Some suggestions for capacity building are listed below:
  - i. Consider including staff from the community-based organization(s) in training for your agency's staff. For example, if your agency provides training to its staff in new customer service techniques, consider inviting staff from the community-based organization to participate. Or, if your agency conducts training for new staff, consider inviting new community-based organization staff to that training.
  - ii. If you are attending a statewide training related to the work the community-based organization, consider bringing someone from that organization with you to the training

- iii. Consider contracting with an existing, experienced and successful community-based organization to provide training and support to new or less experienced organizations.
- iv. Consider using your agency staff to provide training and support if the community-based organization is lacking in skills like budgeting or information technology.

**e. Develop a collaborative, collegial relationship.** Trust and mutual respect are the keys to a successful relationship between your agency and the community-based organizations with whom you contract. It takes time and effort to build trust but once it is there, the work will go more smoothly and problems will be easier to solve. Part of building that trust will be establishing clear communications and expectations. However, it is also important to create an atmosphere in which the community-based organization feels safe in sharing problems and difficulties. Since your agency is a source of funding, the organization may fear that if it shares problems with you this may result in negative consequences for current or future funding. A collegial, collaborative relationship can help the organization solve its problems and save a valuable resource in your community.

**6. Some things to consider about community based organizations.** In planning how to work with community-based organizations, consider the following observations:

- Each community-based organization has a mission that guides its work. It is important that the work you are asking the community-based organization to undertake fits within its mission.
- While community-based organizations can do many things very well, they also have limits. They have smaller staff size and more limited budgets than a public agency. In developing a request for proposals or a contract with a community-based organization, keep in mind their capacity. However, they do offer greater flexibility in how a program or project is implemented.