

Question 6. When considering the design and implementation of this project, what lessons did you learn that might help other grantees implement similar work in this field?

Choose the right venue and right timing for giving and gathering information: We learned that the SLV County Commissioners Association was not the proper forum to ask for feedback on our strategies. It was a great venue for providing project updates and improving our visibility with other regional groups. We sought out the smaller SLV Council of Governments for critical feedback when necessary. Use meeting time for discussions and strategizing and to use written reports to provide factual information. Provide timely information to manage expectations. Introduce new partners and new employees to decision-makers. Put new pictures of people and events up on your website to draw interest.

Act like you’ve made it: In the grant application we referred to the development of our partnership as a “project”. When we hosted our site visit we received feedback that labeling our efforts as a “project” was counterproductive to creating an ongoing Partnership. “Project” implies a time-limited effort; “partnership” implies ongoing collaborative efforts and relationships.

Be clear about your level of authority: We were originally going to make a “proposal” for an Environmental Health Program. We realized that we were empowered to present a complete plan and that is what we did. This prevented delays and removed the objection “should we do this?” We let them know our goal and kept them apprised of our progress. When ready we presented them with a well thought out program and then asked them to approve the contract which detailed the operational and funding commitments.

Vary the format, share unique histories and needs: Make time for both informal and formal talk among partners and with decisions-makers. Informal discussions helped us anticipate and overcome objections to our plans. Over the first year, take time for each partner to share the history of the area in their jurisdiction. Highlight similarities and differences that come up between the jurisdictions. Celebrate your successes.

Appoint and involve liaisons to other groups: Include the decision-maker liaison in your meetings. Encourage their participation. Address their questions, concerns and bright ideas thoroughly. Provide bulleted “sound bites” on progress and expectations for them.

Provide Leadership Training: Rural counties have little or no opportunity to provide career advancement training, even to key personnel. The infusion of expert-led learning sessions in leadership and collaboration skill sets and processes, made possible by the grant, was precious.

Take the time to lay firm ground at the outset: How well do partners already work together? Build a team by spending time together on issues that you care about. What is the level of decision-maker support for sharing? Is there a foundation of trust? Cultivate *champions* among the decision-makers. Tell them you are looking for a liaison. Focus on building stability in the first year (while you build relationships). Stabilizing documents include a formal communication plan, meeting schedule, operating agreement, mission vision purpose, SWOT and Inter-Governmental Agreement. Garner support by asking others to review plans, strategies and documents. Communicate progress, issues and expectations on a regular basis. Take an inventory of what is already shared and what you want to share; and create a rough timeline.

Establish a strong leadership team: Is there a logical leader for the effort under consideration? Does it feel like the group can reach consensus under that leader? Appoint a motivated leader as Chair and hire a coordinator with skills in strategic planning, planning events and meetings, communication, writing and organizing. The two should be prepared to work closely together. Keep members empowered by expecting their participation and asking them questions to guide Coordinator and Chair. Be willing to air out issues that emerge either privately or in meetings.

Hire a skilled and experienced coordinator for the sharing efforts early-on: Someone needs to be responsible for the day-to-day details of keeping the momentum going forward, take the time required to think things through, touch bases with partners and decision-makers. This individual can also take the pulse of members, and massage out kinks before they become major obstacles with attentive direction from leadership.

Don't underestimate the time it takes to reach a tangible sharing arrangement: Change moves slowly, and the natural energy of the effort must be honored in order to move things forward. You can't rush it, but you do need to give it attention and "sunlight" (i.e. regular communication) in order for it to grow. Each County and informing-partner organization has its own values, needs and requirements that must be addressed for Partnership success. Don't underestimate the need to build and follow a communication plan.

Plan for stability/sustainability across changes in staffing, changes in leadership, changes in programming: How can the sharing arrangement sustain those kinds of change and still continue forward? Stay flexible: people and priorities change. Trust in the Chair and Coordinator are key so they are empowered to make day-to-day decisions on priorities, agendas, draft documents, etc. Trying to include everyone in every little decision will stall the process. (Figure out who wants to be involved in all those little decisions and make them the Chair.) Require the Coordinator to keep everyone up to speed, especially when someone misses a meeting. Have the Coordinator develop an "orientation" for new Partners and new Commissioners. Once the partnership is stabilized, develop a monitoring and evaluation plan. Create evaluation checklists and a calendar of when to use them. Every year, review organizational documents and contracts.

Don't promise things you can't deliver: A cost-benefit analysis doesn't reflect the whole picture of improving public health – we need to also convey a clear VISION to communicate to decision-makers. Describing "success" as not just a return-on-investment; responding to existing and emerging regulations, trends, and needs is crucial to sustaining that success.