Collaborating on Multi-Agency Projects: Strategies and Lessons Learned

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Parallel Session 3: Convergence through collaboration and coordination

Providers of rural advisory services oft times operate on limited resources and sometimes lack specialized expertise. Collaboration with other government and or nongovernmental organizations, individuals, and or industry groups allows for sharing of resources to address common goals to create greater impact. This presentation will cover strategies used to implement two community garden projects to address issues related to food and nutrition security in two low-income, urban neighborhoods in the United States.

Strategies. Project # 1: Extension was the project lead partnering with the city. Project #2: A local government agency was project lead partnering with 10 other agencies. Both projects had adequate funding and partners were reputable agencies representing the different core competencies needed for implementation. Project responsibilities were divided among collaborators according to expertise. A signed and dated memorandum of understanding which provided an overview of the project and outlined the responsibilities of each organization was executed. Agreement on how each partner will be recognized on promotional and educational materials for the projects was easy. Project #1 utilized a participatory approach to determine needs and project goals, whilst Project #2 used a top-down approach.

Implementation on Project #2 was very challenging due to the large number of partnering agencies, each with differing protocols, some being flexible, while others must be strictly adhered. Challenges included: (i) ***Decision-making***: While some members of the team were able to make decisions on the spot others had one or multiple layers of authority to navigate and report back with decision. This caused delays in execution of activities. Thus, early planning was of paramount importance. (ii) ***Evaluation***: Each agency had varying targets to be measured to determine program success. A draft evaluation plan was developed prior to project implementation but didn't include outcome measures related to nutrition and wellness due to restrictions on data that can be collected/shared by the health agencies involved in the project. (iii) ***Communication:*** Protocol for internal and external communication varied. Determine communication methods and which works best for the project team and for the target audience. (iv) ***Leadership:*** The representative of the organization initiating the project may not necessarily be the best to lead the team, if lacking project management skills. (f) ***Funding and accountability***. Procedures for accessing funds was difficult. Agree on a simple method of accessing /handling funds with appropriate checks and balances in place.

Two Lessons learned. (i) Prior to project implementation develop a manual specific to the project that integrates the policies and procedures of collaborating agencies. If necessary, have document reviewed by legal counsel of each organization. (ii) Each agency's mission will likely influence data to be captured to measure program success. Determine evaluation measures and restrictions on data early in the project and take appropriate steps to address prior to implementation.

Conclusion: Partnering with other agencies is an effective approach to addressing community needs while raising the profile of each organization in the community. However, best practices guidelines specific to RAS agencies' collaboration with government, industry, and civil society would be beneficial.