

United Way of Bucks County: Collaborating to Create Community Solutions

Marissa Christie 29 November -0001

Executive Summary

After 65 years of using the same process to make funding decisions, United Way of Bucks County made a dramatic change. Diverse stakeholders were asked to help identify gaps in service and then develop innovative, collaborative approaches to fill those gaps. Only the most promising ideas would be funded. By focusing on communication, collaboration, and community solutions, United Way was able to transition smoothly to the new process and newly funded programs are thriving.

Article

For decades, United Way of Bucks County's process for funding agencies and programs was the same.

Every two years an assessment was conducted -- largely by surveying existing partners -- about community conditions and needs. UW staff used the data to create a request for proposals (RFP).

Proposals had to somehow relate to education, income, or health. Only existing member agencies could submit proposals. A group of community volunteers would first score the proposals, then work hard to divide existing funds across as many requests as possible. It was rare for a proposal to receive no funding at all.

Some great things happened. Many exceptional agencies and programs were funded. The qualitative results of most funded programs were strong.

However, there were problems with this process. First, with such broad categories, nearly any program (with a little creativity) could comport to the standards of the RFP. As a result, dozens of unrelated programs were funded. It was impossible to define common outputs, outcomes, or overall impact on the community.

Second, it was a closed system in two ways. With the same funded partners providing the majority of the data during the assessment, few changes were reported in each cycle even as community conditions changed. This was neither deliberate nor surprising. Funded partners offered information about issues they address and know best.

In a closed system, there was no eye on collaboration. Funded partners were not asked to work together, nor with any outside agencies or groups. In some cases, we were unwittingly funding redundant programs. In other

cases, we missed opportunities to share information and best practices that could improve results county-wide.

Finally, available funding was stretched so thin that the required paperwork for grantees was onerous as compared to the size of the grants we could make. The amounts granted were, in most cases, too small to really help partners change lives.

If we wanted to change lives in a meaningful way -- to provide the best possible care and opportunity to vulnerable people in Bucks County -- we would need to change our process.

New Funding Strategy

In 2015, we announced that we would dramatically change our funding strategy, breaking with 65 years of tradition.

Instead of funding the broad categories of education, income, and health, we got more specific. We would invest in early childhood education and care; affordable housing and homelessness; emergency assistance with basic needs; information and referral systems; benefits navigation for at-risk seniors; and hunger and food insecurity.

United Way staff no longer created an RFP in isolation. We convened groups called Community Solutions Teams (CSTs) to identify gaps in service and develop a workable

solution together. Teams included nonprofit representatives, members of local government, businesses, the faith community, community leaders, volunteers, and United Way donors. CSTs helped develop the RFP and team members not applying for funding also helped score proposals.

Rather than asking nonprofits to compete for funds, we asked them to collaborate and work together to build more effective and efficient programs. We also upped the ante on our investments. We would invest in fewer programs overall, but the minimum grant jumped from less than \$10,000 to \$50,000.

Finally, any nonprofit agency could participate in the process, including new partners. They could attend meetings, share their experiences, contribute to the RFP, and even apply for funding.

Of course, collaboration is not new. Successful nonprofits and thought-leaders will tell you that collaboration in general, collective impact in particular, is the way forward. It's the only way to overcome deeply rooted and complex problems. No one group or entity can single-handedly create population level change.

What was different for our United Way was the community response to a major shift. Many (if not most) United Ways that change their funding strategy receive negative press, have significant push-back from partners, and end up

alienating donors. Our transition was relatively smooth -- well received by local media, donors, and nonprofits.

We chalk that up to a "3-C" strategy: a focus on Communication, Collaboration, and Community Solutions.

Communication

Over a year in advance, we identified groups of stakeholders and sent them targeted messages. We contacted donors, funded partners, current and potential CST volunteers (including local businesses, nonprofits, faith based organizations, and government departments), and local media. We also used open community meetings, social media, and our website to spread the word.

Thanks to proactive communication, we received positive press in advance of the shift; we still work with the majority of our previously funded partners (even those that no longer receive grants); and over 240 people representing 78 different entities joined our teams.

Collaboration

By opening the process to include more stakeholders, we were able to build stronger collaborations. We gathered more information on existing programs and assets in the community.

CSTs took full advantage of diverse experiences, complementary knowledge, and new ideas as they

zeroed-in on community challenges and possible solutions.

Community Solutions

Rather than review proposals to fund existing programs, we asked CSTs to focus on unmet needs and then propose new, innovate ideas; true "community solutions."

For example, the CST that looked at hunger and food insecurity was able to identify three unmet needs: 1.) Low-income households struggle with transportation to food pantries; 2.) Many food relief sites can't provide consistent access to fresh, healthy produce; and 3.) Many families avoid unfamiliar produce if they're unsure how to prepare or serve it.

The solution, a collaboration between United Way of Bucks County, Bucks County Opportunity Council, Rolling Harvest Food Rescue, St Mary Medical Center, Philabundance, and many community volunteers, is a free, mobile farmer's market called Fresh Connect that now serves more than 600 people per week at two sites.

United Way provides \$100,000 to fund the program, but each member of the consortium contributes significant resources, including in-kind support, equipment, professional support services, volunteers, and an incredible amount of experience, expertise, and passion.

Our community is better off because collaboration has

lead to something greater than the sum of its parts.

Next Steps

While we are pleased with our progress so far, our Community Solutions Teams and investments are still in their infancy. As we move forward, we will continue to adapt and look closely at what steps we need to take to improve outcomes and efficiencies.

We will continually ask ourselves and our CSTs several questions:

- Is each funded collaboration filling the gap identified by the team? Is it delivering its intended results?
- Is there anyone else who needs to be part of our CSTs? Who else brings the passion, resources, and expertise to help guide community solutions?
- Have community conditions (need or available resources) changed since the last funding cycle? What impact do these changes have on a) our focus areas or b) our funded solutions?

If (and when) we need to make changes, we will return to our "3-C" strategy. We will be transparent in explaining why change is needed, work collaboratively with our partners, and provide our community with solutions that can create and sustain population level change.

Author Bio

Marissa Christie is the President & CEO at United Way of Bucks County. She is a passionate problem-solver and always strives to help people access opportunity. Her BA is from American University in Washington, D.C. and she is currently pursuing an MS in Nonprofit Leadership at La Salle University in Philadelphia, PA.