Building Capacity for Violence Prevention

THE COLORADO TRUST

The Colorado Trust

The Colorado Trust is a private grantmaking foundation dedicated to the health and well-being of the people of Colorado. To fulfill its mission, the foundation supports innovative projects, conducts studies, develops services and provides education to produce long-lasting bene-fits for all Coloradans. Within the framework of human development, The Trust advances accessi-ble and affordable health care programs and the strengthening of families.

Building Capacity for Violence Prevention

Introduction

The Colorado Violence Prevention Initiative (CVPI) was a seven-year, $8.9 million effort of The Colorado Trust (The Trust) and its grantees to reduce and prevent violence in the State. There were four components of the initiative:

- Violence prevention community grants (1995-2001)
- Public education campaign in cooperation with Rocky Mountain Public Broadcasting System, KRMA-TV, Channel Six (1995-2001)
- Handgun violence prevention among youth (1998-2002)
- Safe Communities-Safe Schools Initiative (1999-2002). [1]

In 1995, The Trust contracted with OMNI Institute to evaluate the violence prevention community grants and public education campaign components of the initiative. This evaluation report shares lessons learned and documents major outcomes of the primary component of the initiative, community-based violence prevention grant-making.

Between 1995 and 1997, twenty-six community organizations and coalitions were selected from throughout Colorado to participate in the initiative. The Trust committed $6.2 million in grants to support these local violence prevention efforts. Grantees used CVPI funding to target youth violence, violence within families, sexual violence, or elder abuse and neglect in their neighborhoods, schools, towns, and counties. Below, the organizations that were funded through CVPI are listed:

CVPI Grantees

Adams 12 Five Star Schools

Archuleta County Education Center

Asian Pacific Development Center

Catholic Charities Mulroy Neighborhood Center

City of Longmont, Division of Youth Services

Cross Community Coalition

Early Childhood and Family Support Coalition

FACES

Focus Points Family Resource Center

Full Circle of Lake County, Inc.

Goodwill's School-to-Work

Greater Park Hill Community, Inc.

High Plains Sexual Assault Center

Inner Places, Inc. (The Spot)

Jefferson County BAG Coalition

LARASA

Metropolitan Organization for People

Mi Esperanza

Northeast Denver Housing Center

The Pinon Project

The Senior Safety Program of the Northern Colorado Medical Center

Seniors, Inc.

Summit County Youth and Family Services

The Valle del Sol Community Center

Widefield Community of Caring Coalition

Youth Violence Prevention Initiative of Eagle County. [2]

Two types of funding were awarded to grantees: 1) planning and implementation grants and 2) implementation-only. This funding strategy was developed to "meet communities and organizations where they were" in their capacity to develop and provide viable violence prevention strategies. Planning grants were offered to support a community-wide planning process, through which violence risk factors and community resources were identified. The planning process helped communities identify stakeholders and draw these stakeholders together to make decisions about prevention strategies for the community. Implementation grants were awarded after completion of the planning process, or, if a community had recently undergone a similar planning effort, an organization could apply for an implementation-only grant to support a new or existing project.

In addition to funding, community grants provided grantees with networking opportunities through the CVPI Statewide Network and a technical assistance package. Statewide Network Meetings were held semiannually to provide a forum for training and sharing grantee activities. Technical assistance offered the following services to grantees:

■ violence prevention and program evaluation training and resources through the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence of the University of Colorado at Boulder (CSPV)

■ facilitation and project consultation services, resource coordination, and technical assistance in organizational development through the Center for Public-Private Sector Cooperation of the University of Colorado at Denver (UCD).[3]

A UCD project consultant was assigned to each grantee to coordinate technical assistance services and provide feedback on project efforts. Project consultants also served as a liaison to the CVPI Management Team, informing the team of UCD managing directors, other project consultants, Trust staff, CSPV technical assistance providers, and the OMNI evaluation team, of the challenges and successes of the local project.

The primary objective of the evaluation was to assess the violence prevention legacy that this initiative had assisted community groups in creating in Colorado. To explore this, the evaluation examined three focal points of CVPI's violence prevention capacity-building efforts: organizational learning and skill development, local evaluation capacity, and project sustainability. In addition, the evaluation elicited lessons about technical assistance delivery and the initiative's learning environment, the "learning laboratory," that became a hallmark of CVPI. This report captures these lessons and outlines ten corresponding recommendations for The Trust's future consideration. Some recommendations were developed and implemented during the initiative by the CVPI Management Team, while other recommendations emerged from OMNI's independent assessment of CVPI efforts.

The CVPI Model for Building Violence Prevention Capacity

The design of CVPI was rooted in the fundamental belief that communities have "the intrinsic capacity… to define and solve their own problems."[4] The Trust believed its role as a funder was to honor local decision-making and to provide the necessary resources and opportunities for the development of organizational skills, leadership and a sense of efficacy in the arena of violence prevention. By creating learning opportunities, The Trust hoped to promote the organizational capacity necessary to sustain violence prevention in Colorado's communities beyond the life of the initiative.

Prerequisite to organizational learning was the development of an environment conducive to learning. In CVPI, this became known as the "learning laboratory." As the name suggests, the learning laboratory encouraged innovation, reflection, and the improvement of projects based upon the lessons staff learned. Grant requirements supported the learning process by allowing organizations to refine project plans based on learning and the changing environment of the community or organization. Moreover, requirements such as program evaluation were promoted as learning tools that would help staff identify what was working or in need of improvement.

The CVPI approach required a technical assistance model that would match its commitment to learning and local problem solving. To do this, CVPI drew from different technical assistance approaches, bringing together those that promoted the dissemination of "science-based" with those that supported local decision-making.

The model of CVPI technical assistance joined two agencies and areas of expertise to assist Colorado communities. CSPV specialized in the science of violence prevention, whereas UCD expertise lay in facilitating local decision-making and community processes. Together, these approaches made violence prevention and organizational development resources available to communities, while supporting local decision-making about utilization. The Trust believed this two-pronged model would build the capacity of funded organizations to address violence through locally relevant and sustainable methods.

Another important feature of CVPI was the relationship of mutual learning that was constructed between the Management Team and grantees. The Trust expected that a working relationship would be developed between technical assistance providers and grantees such that "all may profit from the opportunity to learn from each other about violence prevention."[5] The CVPI model utilized technical assistance providers not as "experts" that would import knowledge into the community, but rather to create venues of mutual learning at the level of the funder, the managing agency, technical assistance providers and grantees.

The CVPI Learning Partnership
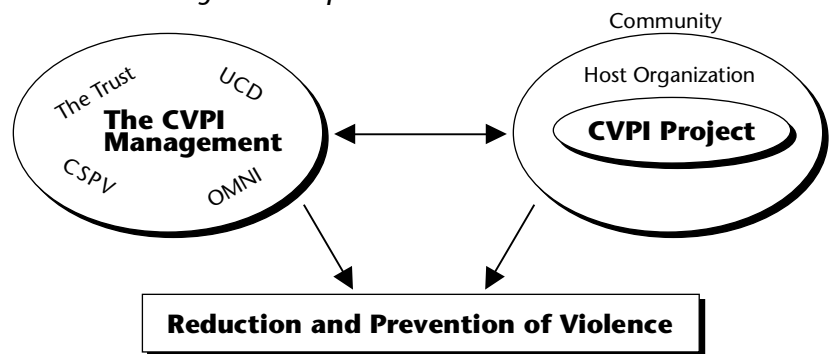
Lessons generated by this partnership focused on the CVPI model and its role in building local organizational capacity to provide violence prevention strategies.

Organizational Learning in the Initiative

The Trust recognized that organizational learning was important to capacity-building within an organization and believed it would be prerequisite to building and improving on the violence prevention efforts in Colorado's communities. Therefore, organizational learning was an important outcome that The Trust hoped to achieve through CVPI.

Semiannual interviews conducted with grantees over the course of the initiative indicated that organizational learning occurred in three major areas:

■ program design

■ communication

■ evaluation.

Grantees reported both skill development and project improvements related to these three areas. Moreover, project staff tended to find that the skills they developed working on CVPI projects were transferable to other work within their organizations.

A mail-in survey was administered at exit to supplement interview data. The survey explored specific skills developed during the initiative and perceptions about the impact these had on CVPI project improvements. In addition, analysis of other project data was conducted. These analyses indicated that, while technical assistance was an important factor in organizational learning during the initiative, it was not the only context in which grantee learning occurred. Furthermore, analyses revealed significant changes in the "trajectory" of grantee learning over time. The contexts and timing issues shaping grantee learning over the granting period illuminated areas and time periods around which technical assistance might be organized to maximize organizational learning. Findings from survey and interview data are highlighted below.[6]

Program Design

■ Knowledge about the violence domain, grantees indicated, was one of the areas in which skills were developed that most impacted project improvements.

■ In program design, grantees reported the following project improvements: more effective utilization of local resources and more adept methods of serving targeted populations.

Communication

■ Grantees reported increased confidence and ability to communicate program value to funders and the broader community as a result of initiative participation.

■ Grantees also believed they gained greater ability to generate public support for their programs as well as to manage stakeholder participation.

■ A number of grantees found that staff management was improved as a result of skill development in communication.

Program Evaluation

■ Interviews conducted over time suggested that skill development in program evaluation lessened the frustration and apprehension that many project staff experienced with program evaluation.

■ According to grantees, evaluation assumed a greater importance within organizations as staff skills were developed.

Other Findings about Skill Development

■ Grantees indicated that they believed skill development in the area of project management had the greatest impact on project improvements, with strategic planning and networking rated second and third highest in impact, respectively.

■ Budgeting, fundraising and the development of databases or instruments were the three areas that grantees rated, on average, as having received the least technical assistance. All three of these areas also fell in the group of skills which grantees perceived as having the least impact on project improvements.

■ Some skill areas appeared to have higher return for the investment of technical assistance resources. That is, some areas of technical support had a higher impact rating, relative to the amount of technical assistance that grantees believed they had received, than others. Knowledge of the violence domain and project management were two such areas.

The Context and Trajectory of CVPI Organizational Learning

■ There were four contexts in which grantee learning occurred during the initiative: technical assistance, the community, experience gained from project implementation, and program evaluation. Most skills and lessons learned during the initiative occurred in more than one of these contexts. However, no single context provided lessons across all of the major areas of learning.

■ The community offered lessons that were distinct from those driven by technical assistance. For example, the community was more likely to offer lessons in collaboration and sharing of resources, the importance of empowering the community, and the role of information dissemination in supporting project efforts.

■ Technical assistance, on the other hand, drove learning in project administration, evaluation, and future planning and sustainability.

■ Not only did grantee learning vary by context, but also over time during the grant. Learning tended to result in a greater number of project refinements in the first six to eighteen months of project implementation. The greatest number of learning-driven changes to projects occurred in the first six months of the implementation process.

■ The trajectory of grantee learning may reflect normal developmental stages of project implementation. Several competing explanations for the decline in the number of learning-based project refinements over time emerged from project data.

▮ The trajectory may reflect the normal course of learning, wherein learning is initially more far-sweeping and greater in intensity, gradually slowing as more knowledge is gained; or

▮ This may be the normal life cycle of project implementation, in which the focus of staff shifts from program development and expansion to sustainability as funding draws to a close; or

▮ The trajectory of learning may reflect fewer different areas of learning with concentration over time in select project areas.

Outcomes of Local Evaluation Capacity-Building

Building local evaluation capacity emerged as an important goal of the initiative as grantees increasingly linked evaluation capacity to future project sustainability. While the initiative was designed to provide evaluation assistance, and to encourage grantees to utilize evaluation as a learning tool, the importance that evaluation assumed for grantees in terms of generating public support and securing funding had been relatively unanticipated. In response, greater levels of evaluation assistance were provided through CSPV. Surveys and interviews suggested that evaluation technical assistance was needed in several areas: 1) technical aspects of outcome evaluation, 2) understanding the relevance and utility of evaluation data, and 3) skill development among staff to carry out evaluation. Below, the major outcomes of CVPI local evaluation capacity-building are discussed.

- The three primary outcomes of local evaluation during the initiative were:
  - Change in staff attitudes towards program evaluation;
  - Increased or enhanced skills in a range of evaluation-related activities; and
  - Use of evaluation data to improve program design.

- Grantees generally found that program evaluation was assuming a greater priority within the organization and that there was less apprehension about program evaluation. Those interviewed attributed these changes to The Trust's flexible requirements, the focus on learning, and the technical assistance provided.

- Interviews revealed that grantees had used or planned to use evaluation data to secure future funding, publicize the funded project to the community, raise community awareness about violence issues, improve programs, and, in some cases, improve staff performance.

- Analysis of project plans, however, revealed that the majority of project goals and activities were not formally evaluated. Interview data supported this finding, indicating that evaluation strategies were not fully implemented during the granting process.

- Yet, there were indications that the use of informal evaluation techniques was more widespread than formal evaluation within the initiative. These informal strategies were often intended as one-time data collection opportunities, whereas formal strategies attempted to measure the success of an activity over time or the achievement of a project goal.

- A follow-up study conducted with former grantees suggested that local evaluation capacity-building may have begun with informal practices that later, with time, became more formalized within programs.

- Much as they did during the initiative, former grantees observed that time constraints impeded evaluation. They found evaluation was time-consuming and divided staff time from service delivery. Moreover, former grantees found that interpretation of data was a much longer process than expected. Despite this, grantees continued to value evaluation as a learning tool. The most frequently mentioned use of evaluation data at follow-up was "change in service."

Project Sustainability and the CVPI Legacy

An overarching purpose of CVPI was to promote the development and enhancement of the state's violence prevention efforts. Measuring the sustainability of CVPI projects, therefore, was an important way to determine what legacy The Trust had assisted these communities in creating. Yet, sustainability, as it is traditionally conceived, was somewhat at odds with other initiative objectives. In the learning laboratory, where experimentation was encouraged, sustainability had little value if it meant the continuation of prior efforts without attempts at improvement. Moreover, experimentation and project improvements might result in cutbacks or the discontinuation of services. As a project consultant explained during an interview, the learning environment required grantees to set aside their normal paradigm of sustaining programs.

In a 1999 evaluation report, OMNI put forth an alternative way to conceptualize sustainability. Five patterns of change were identified that characterized the changes that CVPI projects underwent as the The Trust grant was expended. These change-types were

used to define the combinations of sustainability outcomes that might occur for CVPI projects at exit. For example, projects might be sustained through the originating agency, or components of the project might be adopted by other community organizations, or some programs might be cut so that core parts of the project might be sustained. However project sustainability might take shape, it evidenced the capacity of projects, host agencies, and/or communities to rally support for sustaining violence prevention services developed and refined during the initiative. The sustainability outcomes of the initiative are discussed below.

■ Although the majority of CVPI host organizations were well-established, 14 of the 18 that participated in a 1997 survey had experienced a great deal of growth in the past five years. CVPI projects were often seen as extensions of this growth. Many grantee organizations were seeking ways to sustain these new areas of growth.

■ Approximately one-half of grantees interviewed did not believe a strategic plan for the development of new funding sources existed within their organi-

zations. Moreover, grantees indicated that the diversity of fundraising strategies was limited. The majority reported only utilizing one or two approaches to securing funding. In addition, respondents tended to find that their organizations did not reward staff for fund development or provide training in this area.

■ By exit, however, survey data revealed that grantee confidence about their organization's ability in the following sustainability-related skills had grown:

▮ Using multiple fundraising strategies

▮ Bringing in a diversity of funding sources

▮ Maintaining stable funding streams

▮ Managing rapid growth

▮ Managing a scarcity of resources

▮ Approaching problem-solving with creativity and innovation

▮ Training staff in public relations and marketing

▮ Rewarding staff in public relations and marketing

Not much change occurred in the rating of creative problem-solving, although grantees reported being most confident in this area prior to the initiative.

■ Grantees exited the initiative with greater confidence to perform a number of functions related to sustainability. Although it is not clear whether specific technical assistance resulted in grantees' higher confidence, or whether it was the overall experience they gained through project implementation, this increase in confidence suggested that CVPI projects were in a better position to be sustained after the initiative than beforehand. While individual project goals and activities may not be sustained, greater organizational capacity may result in greater resilience of the overall violence prevention project.

■ There were five different change-types that emerged as projects completed the funding cycle: **project cuts:** CVPI funded projects that were scaled back in scope

discontinuation: the elimination of CVPI funded programs or entire project

diffusion: other community organizations or institutions adopt CVPI funded programs and assume responsibility for their violence prevention activities

expansion: growth in the scope of the CVPI project or targeted population

no change: the project would continue as a part of the host organization, without an increase or decrease in the scope of services and/or service area. These change-types provided some preliminary information about what would remain in communities after funding was expended.

- Some form of change occurred at 16 of the 21 sites that participated in exit interviews. Yet, "no change" was the most common sustainability outcome of the individual programs within larger CVPI projects. Expansion was the least likely outcome to occur at exit, with cuts, discontinuation, and diffusion occurring at similar rates. Please refer to the table below.

Number of CVPI Sites Experiencing Each Change-Type

Change-Type	Number of Occurrences
Cuts	8
Discontinuation	8
Diffusion	9
Expansion	3
No Change	13

- Despite the preponderance of change that occurred at exit, it was often unanticipated by project staff. Changes such as diffusion and expansion were welcomed; however, cuts and discontinuation often surfaced uncertainty and frustration from staff.

- Community support and funding seemed to be the determining factors in the sustainability of many program activities, according to staff reports and interviews.

- A follow-up study conducted with the first nine grantees that exited the initiative found that no change was still the most common sustainability outcome since exit. Expansion had occurred somewhat more frequently than at exit, and no further project cuts had been made. Notwithstanding, program and project discontinuation had occurred as frequently as expansion.

- The follow-up study introduced another sustainability outcome: evolution. Two formerly CVPI funded programs had redirected their violence prevention efforts and reconstituted the types of services provided.

- At follow-up, community support and funding remained two of the most important determining factors in sustainability. All former grantees reported that increased public concern about violence had garnered support for their projects. Four of the former grantees mentioned staff stability or turnover a major determinant in project sustainability. The negative impact of staff turnover on project sustainability had emerged from exit interview data as well.

- Ten of the 12 respondents that participated in the follow-up study were "optimistic" or "very optimistic" about the sustainability of former CVPI-funded projects.

Lessons Learned about Technical Assistance Provision

CVPI grantees indicated that the level of technical support provided through the initiative was unprecedented in other funding relationships. They tended to be very impressed by the initiative's "on-going commitment to consultation" and dedication of technical resources.[7] Major lessons learned about CVPI technical assistance during the initiative centered on diagnosing site needs, understanding differences between rural and urban communities, and leveling disparities in technical assistance accessibility. Important lessons about the role of technical assistance in local evaluation capacity-building and project sustainability also were documented in the final evaluation report.

Diagnosing Site Needs

Throughout the initiative, the Management Team continued to learn about the technical assistance needs of grantees, particularly the difference between those required during planning versus implementation phases of the projects. Specific areas of technical assistance offered to grantees evolved over the course of the initiative as the Management Team responded to grantee needs. Although technical assistance was intended to be responsive to local needs, grantees observed that a more proactive approach to diagnosis was needed at times. Key lessons that emerged from this model of technical assistance are explored below.

■ Responsiveness to grantee defined agendas and needs must be balanced with up-front identification of the technical assistance needed to support different project phases, including planning, implementation, and grant exit.

■ In order to diagnose need and coordinate resources effectively, project consultants need information and training about the availability and utility of resources and skill sets offered by other technical assistance providers in the initiative.

■ Consultants and technical assistance providers will be more successful in diagnosing grantee needs when productive and collaborative relationships have been built with project staff. Staff may otherwise be reluctant to expose areas of program or organization weakness.

Differences between Rural and Urban Communities

A central lesson regarding technical assistance provision was the difference between rural and urban orientations and communication styles. The CVPI Management Team learned that these differences can create barriers to effective technical assistance delivery and to mutual learning.

■ While in urban communities it is normative to interact with individuals who know little about one's particular neighborhood or community, in rural communities long-standing relationships and personal history inform interactions. Relationship-building between technical assistance providers and grantees, therefore, assumed even greater importance in rural regions.

■ An essential element of relationship-building involves learning about the grantee's community history and the local experts that serve the community.

Leveling Disparities in Technical Assistance Accessibility

Three factors created a disparity in grantees' access to technical assistance services: distance between the funded site and Denver-based project consultants, dif-

ferences between planning and implementation and implementation-only grant awards, and grantee perceptions about the accessibility of technical assistance.

Distance

The evaluation found that those grantees located the furthest from Denver tended to receive less technical assistance than Denver-based projects. A 1997 survey of planning grantees found that 82% of the grantees that requested increased contact with project consultants and CSPV were from outlying areas of Colorado. In interviews, project consultants also noted that travel time created some inequity in the technical assistance that CVPI projects received, since the time spent traveling to a long distance site cut away from the time available to provide direct services. Moreover, project consultants observed that the ability to "drop-by" and visit a project was an important aspect of relationship-building from which long distance sites did not benefit.

Distance between the funded site and the technical assistance provider impacts the intensity of technical assistance service delivery and the time available for relationship-building and exposure to resources.

Implementation Versus Planning Grantees

Some differences in technical assistance provision seemed indicative of the grant structure. Grantees that were first awarded planning grants, followed by implementation funding, had a greater span of time than implementation-only grantees within which to work with project consultants and CSPV. There was more time to build learning partnerships, as well as to receive technical assistance. In addition, interviews suggested that project consultants believed that implementation-only grantees were more established organizations that required less technical assistance. Yet, interviews with grantees suggested that while project needs varied by planning and implementation phases, the level of technical support needed was not necessarily different.

■ The effectiveness of technical assistance delivery increased over time, due to the relationship-building process and its impact on learning. The longer

the time period that grantees had to work with technical assistance providers, the greater benefit from technical support they were likely to realize.

■ Assumptions about organizations, based on grant award types, may have impacted the delivery of technical assistance services. A more formal needs assessment of technical support can help inform the coordination and timing of technical assistance.

■ Technical assistance providers' expertise may be better matched with one project phase than another. In these cases, the ability to diagnose need and, therefore, respond to site needs may vary according to strengths in planning or implementation stages.

Perceptions about the Accessibility of Technical Assistance

Over time, issues around the accessibility of technical assistance seemed to diminish. Interviews with the Management Team and grantees alike indicated that

1) the relationships that developed between technical assistance providers and grantees and 2) the emergence of new models for technical assistance provision made services more accessible to grantees. What follows is a summary of the lessons learned about grantee perceptions of accessibility and their impact on the utilization of technical support.

■ Communicating the availability and limitations of technical services to grantees early on and through central communication channels can promote appropriate and equitable resource utilization.

■ Distance and rural/urban differences between project staff and the technical assistance provider seemed to impact perceptions about the accessibility of technical resources.

■ Organizational infrastructure can complicate technical assistance delivery; technical assistance may not be delivered or filter to the most appropriate staff persons. Moreover, technical assistance that targeted a single individual was more susceptible to

the impact of staff turnover. Interacting with a cross-section of organizational staff may be helpful in maximizing resource utilization.

■ Although resources are always limited, sometimes they may be under-utilized. Under-utilization may reflect a gap between services provided and grantee needs. It may also indicate an inability of technical assistance providers and grantees to translate technical resources into project utility. Resource utilization may require training. In CVPI, following statewide trainings up with individual site visits seemed to offer an effective and efficient means of making resources more accessible.

Lessons Learned about Providing Evaluation Technical Assistance

Some lessons that the Management Team learned about the provision of technical assistance in the CVPI capacity-building model pertained specifically to the delivery of evaluation technical support. Local evaluation capacity was targeted by the initiative in an effort to sustain opportunities for organizational learning and to respond to grantees' need for data in securing public and funder support. Some of the central learnings about evaluation technical assistance are highlighted below.

■ Technical assistance played an important role in clarifying Trust requirements around program evaluation.

■ Site visits, in particular, seemed to help demystify evaluation and make strategies and resources more accessible to grantees.

■ Nonetheless, data indicated that the level of evaluation assistance provided did not fully support the customization of evaluation plans that the learning lab seemed to promise:

▌ In part, the provision of evaluation technical assistance proved challenging due to grantees' varying levels of experience with program evaluation.

▌ Perhaps a larger issue was the fact that grantees were often unsure of the evaluation assistance available to them. Surveys of project consultants and grantees indicated that grantees desiring more or better assistance around evaluation were sometimes paired with a consultant who did not adequately link them with CSPV services.

▌ It was unclear to what extent CSPV's small staff size may have constrained the availability of evaluation technical assistance.

Providing Technical Support in Project Sustainability

Technical assistance began to focus on project sustainability in the final year of the initiative. Little data was available about the impact of this technical assistance, since the data collection cutoff for the evaluation occurred during this time. Nevertheless, there were a few findings about technical assistance in the area of project sustainability; these are outlined below.

■ Grantees found that skill development in program evaluation and organizational development increased their competency in addressing some key factors in sustainability.

■ The gaps in technical assistance that grantees most often identified were marketing, fundraising, and media relations. Data suggested that these skill sets were among those that grantees perceived most difficulty in achieving competency.

■ Grantees indicated that they wished they had focused on project sustainability earlier in the grant. Some suggested technical assistance could play a role in encouraging this focus and identifying needs earlier.

The CVPI Learning Laboratory

Many grantees found the learning lab approach a rewarding funding experience. Also, grantees tended to find that this approach created a different relationship to the funder, one of more clear partnership. Yet, grantee experiences in this learning environment were not always smooth. The very qualities that promoted learning, including flexibility, experimentation, and guidance, at times created conditions that inhibited learning.

Best Practices and Lessons Learned

In early 1999, OMNI identified four push-pull factors influencing organizational learning in the CVPI learning lab:

- trust-exposure,
- collaboration-resistance,
- flexibility-lack of accountability, and
- guidance-confusion.

The diagram below depicts how these dynamics operated in the learning lab.

Factors that Support and Hinder Organizational Learning

The lessons learned about these dynamics and the factors promoting and inhibiting grantee learning are discussed next.

Trust and Exposure

An expectation of the learning lab was that the grantees would engage in a process of on-going project improvement. Project improvements, however, required an openness to new ideas and a willingness to change. This posture could prove difficult to adopt and maintain.

- Trust was crucial to the learning process, both in terms of trusting that funding would not be cut as a result of mistakes and trusting that learning would outweigh the potential losses involved in risk-taking.
- Grantees feared making mistakes or acknowledging limitations that might reflect poorly on their programs or agencies in the eyes of the community and funders. The fear of exposure delayed and limited the use of initiative resources.
- Trust appeared to be linked to clarity about initiative objectives. Over time, grantees came to understand that "looking good" for The Trust meant reflecting on their projects and making appropriate adjustments. Grantees indicated that more communication about the desired outcomes of CVPI would have facilitated earlier use of technical assistance and shortened the time spent adapting to the learning lab.

Collaboration and Resistance

Both grantees and project consultants recognized the importance of collaboration and teamwork for organizational learning. Over time, a team approach tended to develop between project consultants and grantees. Project consultants often described their role as a "coach" that helped troubleshoot problems and build grantee confidence. In turn, grantees valued the opportunity to work with "project consultants," as opposed to having options dictated through a "grant

monitor." Moreover, grantees found the collaborative relationship appealing, because they felt it was mutually beneficial. Grantees reported that just as they were learning from the project consultant and technical assistance, they perceived ways that the Management Team was learning from grantees. This solidified the sense of partnership.

Collaboration, however, was not an easy process. Perceived power differences between grantees and technical assistance providers, or those within communities and organizations, made grantees and other partners resistant to collaboration.

■ The lack of collaboration between project consultants and grantees impeded timely utilization of initiative resources. Resistance to project consultation was often rooted in perceptions that consultants worked as agents for the funder. Resistance generally faded as relationships were built and grantees came to see consultants more as "mentors" than "monitors".

■ It was common for grantees to find resistance to collaboration within their communities or organizations. This resistance proved an obstacle to project implementation and organizational learning. Local politics not only pitted stakeholders against one another, but also programs and agencies vied for support. Mirroring the initiative-level and the time it took to build relationships between project consultants and grantees, grantees found relationship-building within their communities and organizations a time-consuming but necessary process for achieving project goals.

■ The "outsider" status of project consultants tended to slow the collaborative process, especially in rural sites. At the same time, however, project consultants were perceived as neutral parties within the larger

community, having little investment in any particular outcome. Facilitation by project consultants helped grantees convince factions within their communities or organizations to work together.

■ Some grantees adopted a similar neutralizing strategy themselves by playing the role of the "outsider" among existing, disparate violence prevention efforts. Rather than creating a new competing program, these grantees served temporary, coordinating functions. Several grantees found this strategy generated trust and could, thereby, mobilize change in their communities.

Flexibility and Lack of Accountability

Grantees often used the term "flexibility" interchangeably with "learning lab." Flexibility in grant requirements allowed grantees to adjust project plans over the course of implementation. Many grantees found this gratifying; not only did grantees feel they had the opportunity to make meaningful project improvements, but also they felt that local decision-making was honored.

Grantees took advantage of the initiative's learning lab approach and frequently deviated from the original proposed course of implementation. In contrast to many previous funding relationships, where grantees might be more strictly held to the proposed course of implementation, CVPI grantees were encouraged to try new directions and create new opportunities in the prevention of violence. Furthermore, as a number of grantees explained, the flexibility of the CVPI approach permitted them to shift gears when adherence to the proposed plan would have resulted in a dead-end for violence prevention in the community. According to grantees, the ability to refine the course of implementation was an important contribution to creating viable violence prevention projects in these communities.

Despite the extent to which grantees took advantage of the initiative's flexibility to implement lessons learned and respond to administrative and funding changes, such flexibility represented a shift from previous funding relationships and required an adjustment in grantee posture. Not all grantees were equally successful in making this shift.

■ Achieving a balance between flexibility and accountability was central to the learning process. When there was less clarity about expectations, a lack of grantee accountability was likelier to result.

■ Those that found the learning lab's flexibility an impediment to implementation tended to have less confidence in the strength of the organization hosting the project, than those who found flexibility an asset.

■ For some organizations, grants led to rapid change and growth that could be difficult to manage. In these cases, flexibility may not have provided enough structure and direction for struggling organizations.

■ When flexibility was perceived as the absence of funder requirements and accountability, some grantees struggled to get project implementation off the ground. Without externally imposed requirements, these grantees experienced difficulty obtaining organizational backing and/or managing organizational change such that internal standards of accountability could be set.

Guidance and Confusion

Guidance provides direction and invests the learning process with a sense of purpose. In CVPI, project consultants, and CSPV on a somewhat more limited basis, "guided" grantees through planning and implementation in the learning laboratory. Technical assistance providers created a channel of communication

between the grantee and funder which helped grantees understand the big picture of the initiative, while creating a larger understanding among the Management Team about how the initiative played out locally.

Technical assistance providers also observed that they played an important role in helping establish the learning orientation of the initiative. The provision of technical assistance not only made learning resources available to grantees, but also created a mechanism through which grantees received encouragement and mentoring. In their interactions with grantees, technical assistance providers communicated and demonstrated what was meant by the abstract concept, "learning lab."

■ One important form of guidance emerged out of the normal course of project consultation and technical assistance delivery. As "outsiders" in the community and within organizations, project consultants and CSPV asked questions about program operations that staff generally took for granted. Grantees and technical assistance providers found that this often created consciousness-raising opportunities to reflect on program design.

■ The facilitation of grantee learning required a commitment to both letting grantees make their own decisions and helping grantees build organizational capacity. At times, ambiguity arose about the level of direction that technical assistance providers should provide grantees when gaps in organizational capacity or project design were not recognized.

■ The majority of grantees enjoyed the ability to self-direct their own learning process; however, there were times that grantees felt frustrated and confused by a lack of direction from project consultants. Specific and targeted skill development may not occur in a timely manner when project consultants do not intervene and grantees do not foresee needs. When self-direction was not balanced with guidance, grantees experienced confusion about the purpose of technical assistance and the learning lab, and felt alone in their efforts. While little direction from project consultants early in the

grant promoted a sense of equality and collaboration, once relationships were solidified between grantees and project consultants, a lack of guidance undermined the very sense of collaboration it initially helped establish.

■ Given the learning orientation of the initiative, approaches and objectives of CVPI were refined over time. Despite the evolving nature of the initiative and the lack of clarity this sometimes created, grantees and the Management Team alike found that modeling the learning lab in the management of the initiative was an effective way of communicating goals. Grantees saw the principles of the learning lab reflected in the initiative-level evaluation and Management Team efforts to improve. Over time, this model provided guidance and helped minimize the confusion and ambiguity that grantees experienced around the learning lab.

The Learning Laboratory and Local Evaluation Capacity-Building

Grantees believed that The Trust's flexible approach and focus on capacity-building facilitated staff's ability to see the usefulness and value of program evaluation. Some observed that the learning lab allowed them to build staff confidence and skill levels, because they were not pressured to demonstrate project impact. Others found the learning lab allowed them to define measures of project success that were locally meaningful. These grantees appreciated the fact that they did not have to "fit" their own evaluation interests to meet Trust requirements. Still others were relieved to be able to meet Trust expectations without implementing outcome evaluation strategies that they did not have the internal capacity to carry out.

Flexibility in evaluation requirements, however, also created a level of uncertainty and confusion among grantees. At exit, some grantees were confused about

how successful their project had been. Others were uncertain about how to continue building on evaluation efforts begun during the initiative. Some had collected evaluation data, for example, but were unsure about how to interpret findings. In hindsight, many grantees wished they had been required to begin evaluation implementation earlier in the funding cycle, so that it might have been completed upon exit.

■ Time was critical to the development and implementation of local evaluations in a variety of ways. A major factor in building local evaluation capacity was the fact that the grant funded staff time. This allowed more energy to be directed into program evaluation. Time was also an important consideration in the delivery of technical assistance services and the learning period required to build evaluation skills.

■ Both the Management Team and grantees tended to find the granting period too short to make evaluation data available for use in project improvement and fund development.

■ Data suggested that more could have been done to communicate evaluation expectations and to hold grantees accountable for the implementation of evaluation plans.

The Learning Laboratory and Project Sustainability

In analyzing exit interviews, it was clear that project sustainability had a decidedly emotional component. There was great enthusiasm about project accomplishments when programs were expanding or sustained in their current form. Yet, the end of the grant came abruptly for some. Having to discontinue or cut back services when exiting the initiative, some grantees felt abandoned or stopped short of realizing the organizational capacity they had intended to build

during the initiative. These grantees expressed confusion about the initiative's objectives and the legacy that The Trust hoped to leave in their communities. Initiative lessons about project sustainability are discussed next.

■ Grantees identified several ways that CVPI participation contributed to project sustainability:

▮ selection by The Trust created greater awareness about violence and the funded project in communities

▮ the learning lab approach allowed grantees to adjust their programs to best meet the future and unanticipated needs of communities

▮ grant extensions allowed project staff more time to make project improvements and mobilize the community

▮ technical assistance aided in building capacity in areas linked to project sustainability

▮ networks that formally and informally emerged as a result of CVPI promoted the exchange of program information.

■ Despite grant extensions, project staff found the granting cycle too short for optimizing organizational capacity. Grantees indicated that the grant did not provide them adequate time to build community partnerships, create project visibility in the community, and secure future funding.

■ A short granting cycle can make the goals of organizational learning and sustainability appear somewhat at odds with one another.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Evaluation findings suggested that the following were strengths of the Colorado Violence Prevention Initiative:

■ Investment in community-based grant-making and local decision-making

■ Commitment to violence prevention statewide

■ Allocation of technical support and resources

■ Collaboration within the Management Team and partnership with grantees

■ Networking and relationship-building within and external to funded communities

■ Flexibility and innovation of the learning lab

■ Promotion of project improvements, learning and organizational development

■ Utilization of evaluation as a learning tool and the demystification of evaluation.

The following recommendations attempt to draw on these strengths, while minimizing any detractors from initiative objectives. A number of recommendations were based on grantee suggestions and the observations of the evaluation team. Other recommendations were originally identified by the Management Team.

Recommendation 1: The length of the granting period should be determined in conjunction with initiative objectives. A learning-based initiative may require more time than other types of initiatives.

Recommendation 2: Additional funds should be allocated to dedicate staff time to evaluation.

Recommendation 3: Local evaluation requirements should be built into the granting process.

Recommendation 4: The Trust should encourage managing agencies to develop partnerships with individuals and local organizations, reflective of differences in regional and rural orientations in the State, for the purpose of contracting project consultants.

Recommendation 5: The monthly reports of project consultants should be standardized to facilitate the tracking and follow-up on technical services.

Recommendation 6: Tracking systems should be implemented to help manage and coordinate technical assistance services within a complex, statewide effort like CVPI. For example, grantee requests for technical support and the types of services provided should be tracked over time. This would permit the Management Team to examine the allocation of resources and grantee utilization.

Recommendation 7: The Management Team should address key evaluation findings and develop action steps. These plans should be revisited and shared with grantees regularly. Such practices model evaluation and organizational learning for grantees.

Recommendation 8: The managing agency should be asked to provide a plan for the on-going training of project consultants in substantive areas related to the initiative and the phases of project planning, implementation, and exit.

Recommendation 9: The CVPI Statewide Network served a number of important functions for grantees. Clustering grantees by substantive project issues and violence domains could expand the opportunity for learning at these meetings.

Recommendation 10: The development of technical assistance products would provide a means of extending and advertising the technical support available to grantees.

Footnotes

1. For more information about the four components, please see The Colorado Trust's web page: **http://www.coloradotrust.org/Initiatives/ColoradoViolencePreventionInitiative.html.**

2. Please see Appendix A of the full report for a brief description of funded projects.

3. In addition to providing technical assistance services, UCD was contracted by The Trust to serve as the managing agency of the Initiative.

4. This quote was excerpted from The Colorado Trust's Vision Statement. The philosophical approach to The Trust's provision of technical assistance is further described in *Promoting Health by Building Community Capacity, Evidence and Implications for Grantmakers*, a Colorado Trust publication (Easterling, Gallagher, Drisko, and Johnson 1998).

5. Excerpted from *The Colorado Trust Violence Prevention Initiative Planning and Implementation Request for Proposals*, (January 1997).

6. Data was gathered from 20 individuals staff members from 15 different grantee organizations. Wave 1 of implementation-only grantees did not participate in the survey due to timing of its administration.

7. From *Indicators of Project Success* (OMNI Institute, 1998).