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Fair Haven Community Health Center focused on involving people at all levels in decision-making.



One concern for United Community & Family Services was staff members operating in "silos."



Our expert examines the impact of organizational leadership capacity on nonprofits.

A NEED TO DEVELOP ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

Helping Nonprofits Increase Their Effectiveness

Times are difficult for all organizations, but perhaps most vulnerable are nonprofits that provide vital services to the multiple health needs of Connecticut's residents.

Today's economic conditions, challenging political and social environment, along with increased demands for services, make it imperative that nonprofits use limited resources to be more responsive, resilient, innovative and efficient. One way to accomplish this is by identifying and strengthening leadership throughout an organization.

Supporting and strengthening organizational leadership was the goal of the Connecticut Health Foundation (CT Health) Organizational Leadership Capacity grant project in September 2006. This is consistent with CT Health's Board of Directors adopting its "theory of change" in November 2005.

"This theory states that CT Health's investments are best used to foster 'systems change' to improve the health of Connecticut's residents rather than

focusing on impacting individual health and health behaviors," explains Patricia Baker, CT Health president & CEO.

"We believe strengthening leadership, vision, advocacy and strategic planning will enable health-related nonprofits in Connecticut to become stronger and more effective," she adds. "This, in turn, will increase opportunities to bring about health systems change and improve the lives of Connecticut's residents, which is our focus."

Eleven agencies received grants of \$50,000. Ten actively participated. Each reflected one of CT Health's three priority areas: children's oral health, children's mental health, and reducing racial and ethnic health disparities.

After attending an orientation session and completing an online leadership capacity survey, each agency formed a board and senior staff team to oversee the grant project.

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Fair Haven Community Health Center: A Plan For Growth

Improving communication to involve people at all levels in the decision-making process was a key reason why the Fair Haven Community Health Center, a not-for-profit primary health care organization serving this New Haven neighborhood, participated in CT Health's Organizational Leadership Capacity grant project.



Katrina Clark, Executive Director,
Fair Haven Community Health
Center

“We wanted to enhance communication among staff members, between senior leaders and staff, and between board and staff,” says Katrina Clark, the center’s executive director. Other needs included:

- Creating a succession plan for senior staff
- Updating the center’s strategic plan
- Increasing supervision and management skills of middle managers through training programs, classes and seminars
- Empowering executive and senior staff to make decisions

“We hoped that with the support of outside consultants, we would be able to address these issues,” notes Clark, better enabling the center to foster systems change and improve the lives of Connecticut’s residents, which is CT Health’s mission. By the end of the project, Fair Haven knew its goals were definitely achievable.

“There were some significant developments and improved processes during this time,” she says. One of these developments was the center’s first off-site, half-day staff retreat for all 120 employees.

“It helped us to communicate what was happening and provided a way to solicit their input and ideas for future planning.”

New York City-based Support Center for Nonprofit Management, which assisted CT

Health with the grant project, provided consultation for Fair Haven’s executive management team and training for the center’s board. Staff members also benefitted from job-specific training and certification to enhance their skill sets.

In addition, the center improved its staff meeting structure to solicit input from all levels and created its much-anticipated succession plan for senior staff. “All of this is strengthening the center, now and for the future,” adds Clark. And to further enhance communication and a sense of “one organization,” the center developed a new in-house newsletter.

“On a personal level, I learned a great deal from other participants,” adds Clark. “It was important and useful peer leadership training.”

Like other nonprofits and not-for-profits, coping with the economic downturn has tempered the center’s plans since the grant project concluded. “But at the same time, we’ve been undergoing some exciting expansion plans with federal stimulus dollars and feel we are just now beginning to come out of the hardest challenges we faced over the past year,” says Clark.

“I believe the organizational leadership grant has given us the strength and additional skills to meet some of these challenges we face, especially in terms of: communication issues; pushing us to increase our efficiencies; creating new structures that are more responsive; and creating more opportunities to involve staff and board in resolving issues.”



United Community & Family Services: Becoming “One”

Staff members operating in “silos” was just one concern that led United Community & Family Services (UCFS), a Norwich-based nonprofit offering primary care, dental care, eldercare and behavioral health services, to participate in the Organizational Leadership Capacity grant project.



Karen Eichstaedt, Director of
Human Resources, United
Community & Family Services

“Staff was disengaged from daily operations, beyond their individual departments,” notes Karen Eichstaedt, director of human resources for the more than 130 year-old organization.

“As a result, our senior leadership team recognized that we were not making informed decisions about the organization’s future.”

Eichstaedt also adds that “There was no sense of ‘one organization’ among staff and little focus on staff development, which is often the case at nonprofits. In addition, we lacked leadership development at the middle-management layers.”

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Ask the Experts

CT Health News asked **John Vogelsang** about the impact of organizational leadership capacity on nonprofits.



Vogelsang, senior fellow at the Michael Harrington Center for Democratic Values and Social Change at Queens College, was consultant to the Organizational Leadership Capacity grant project for the Support Center for Nonprofit Management.

What role does "leadership" play in determining the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations?

Vogelsang: An organization's success depends on leadership throughout. At the senior level, leadership has two major internal roles:

- Communicate an overarching vision and sense of mission; cultivate trust and respect; increase optimism; and encourage staff to develop and effectively use their skills for achieving the organization's mission.
- Care for the operations and structures that support the work; foster accountability; monitor stress; maintain communication of critical information; provide flexibility for serving constituents; and lead development and diffusion of successful practices.

At other levels, leadership is enacted by:

- Participating in peer learning processes to develop responses to constituent issues
- Exercising authority delegated by an organization's senior management to cultivate multiple and innovative strategies for their work
- Being a key link in the outreach and feedback process between the organization and its constituents

How does empowering leadership throughout the organization impact its culture to be mission-driven?

Vogelsang: There is more clarity about authority, role, and responsibilities, and others' skills and how to collaborate with them.

Decisions are made by the person most qualified, rather than because of the person's position within the hierarchy.

There are ongoing outreach and feedback processes that connect the internal change and operations with constituent needs, and what makes the organization valuable in its community.

Who should be included in the process of assessing organizational leadership capacity?

Vogelsang: If leadership is to spread throughout the organization, the first step is to involve all levels of staff and the board in identifying their strengths and how they can develop and use them more effectively to achieve and support the organization's mission.

What are some examples of how an organization used what it learned through assessment to improve its overall leadership capacity?

Vogelsang: Senior leadership is better able to move resources where they can be most effective. They can see what is influencing the immediate situation and the alternative courses of action.

They provide other levels of leadership with a flow of challenging ideas that stimulate rethinking old ways of doing things. They can work with different and often contradictory perspectives and have constructive conversations about bringing conflict into the open.

They provide mentoring, coaching, continuous feedback, and link individuals' needs to the organization's mission. Boards are more committed to the organization and its constituents.

The CEO/directors are leading by example. Staff has developed into spokespeople for the organization. They also are working better together.

Leadership (Continued from front page)

Assisted by the New York City-based Support Center for Nonprofit Management, each agency developed a work plan to build leadership capacity and worked with consultants to help with its process.

CT Health also offered peer learning groups in 2007 and 2008 on a variety of topics selected by the grantee. Topics included empowering middle managers, succession planning and assessing organizational culture. Peer-to-peer learning allowed grantees to identify challenges and receive feedback from one another and the session facilitators.

When the project ended in December 2008, grantees also prepared a final report and completed a post-project online survey. "The results show that both project and individual grantee goals were met," notes Baker. Specifically, grantees:

- Improved the leadership capacity of their boards, and senior and middle management
- Instituted ways to foster leadership development
- Maintained or increased diversity among board members and staff
- Developed better-functioning and sustainable organizations
- Integrated what they learned and developed through the grant into their organization's daily activities

While lessons learned from this project and actions taken vary with each grantee, comments by one, Ellen Andrews, executive director, Connecticut Health Policy Project, offer insight into the overall benefits:

"We have a new appreciation for the need to constantly assess leadership, to make time and devote resources to address challenges and build capacity. It is very difficult ... to devote attention to organizational and leadership issues ... But the success of this process has demonstrated to the staff, board and volunteers the importance of devoting time to this work."

Project Participants

- Bridges ... A Community Support System (Milford)
- Center for Medicare Advocacy (Willimantic)
- Connecticut Center for a New Economy (Hartford, New Haven)
- Connecticut Health Policy Project (New Haven)
- End Hunger Connecticut (Hartford)
- Fair Haven Community Health Center (New Haven)
- Families United for Children's Mental Health (Colchester)
- Generations Family Health Center (Willimantic)
- Ledge Light Health District (Groton)
- United Community & Family Services (Norwich)



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United Community & Family Services (Continued from page 2)

“By working on our leadership skills, we hoped to extend that downward to middle management, who then might engage their teams,” she explains. That hope was realized through the grant project.

“We learned that feedback from staff is critical to growing. We also learned how to analyze situations more critically, make better decisions and function as a team.”

This not only made meetings more productive, it also strengthened communications among the UCFS senior leadership team and throughout the organization. Making UCFS more effective and efficient also better enables it to foster systems change and improve the lives of Connecticut’s residents, which is CT Health’s mission.

“Now, we are training our mid-management team in leadership and management,” adds Eichstaedt, one of several actions resulting from UCFS’ participation. Others include:

- Developing a formal agenda for each weekly meeting with set times for each item and designating an individual to ensure the agenda is followed
- Holding a retreat where the senior management team recognized and addressed their individual communication needs

- Conducting a retreat where UCFS’ middle management team of 30 identified issues that needed addressing
- Addressing conflict among senior leadership and how it is perceived by others in the organization

“We also are opening up to a more participative style and inviting members at all levels to participate in the decision-making process,” adds Eichstaedt. Most recently, she notes, the management team committed to a statement of beliefs and values about participative management, and is developing plans to facilitate participation.

How did UCFS’ challenges compare to those of other nonprofits participating in the grant project? “All the organizations we worked with in the project had similar challenges,” says Eichstaedt. “It was great to see CEOs and directors being honest about their own shortcomings.”

And the “lesson learned” here was clear to everyone, adds Eichstaedt. “In whatever shape or form it presented itself, we all got it: Leading requires risk, courage, compassion and persistence.”