Session Title: Community Partnerships not “Business as Usual”: 8 Tips and a Few Observations

Co-Presenters: Tim Size, Executive Director, Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative
Peter Layde, Professor of Emergency Medicine, Medical College of Wisconsin
Kim Contardi, Program Manager, Healthy Wisconsin Leadership Institute, Medical College of Wisconsin

Peter Layde began the presentation and introduced himself as the academic partner on the Wisconsin Health Workforce Data Collaborative. This partnership has numerous players involved who have accomplished a great deal. This collaborative has several goals, including providing workforce data and analysis; forecasting the need for nursing and non-governmental public health workforce; and to maximize access to federal resources.

Tim continued the presentation... he believes strongly in principles and that community partnerships are not business as usual. He has learned most from many mentors and experiences in the field. He discussed his tips for collaboration, the first of which was that partnerships should be “authentic” (see power point slides for detail). He emphasized that in community-academic partnerships, there are mixes of who is involved and the balance is not always completely equal. People do not want to spend time on a partnership if it is not purposeful. As a reviewer, Tim believes that overemphasizing boldness and innovativeness can be detrimental to a grant proposal. People must balance this with logic and planning.

In terms of the second tip that every group is not a partnership, Tim emphasized the importance of trust in partnerships. Contexts change dramatically and these changes impact partnerships and trust dramatically.

The third tip he shared was that partnership is about social entrepreneurship.

Tip number four was that sustainability starts yesterday, meaning that this should be at the beginning of a partnership and part of the entire process. This needs to be built into the infrastructure of the budgets of partnerships.

The fifth tip is that communication is a core competency for partnerships. There are key issues around communication when trying to get a group of people to work together (see power point slides for details). The goal is to find a common ground among much complexity.

The sixth tip was that strategy is both an art and science. One cycle through this circuit could last longer than a year. This depends on the length of the partnership. He stressed that we all have constituencies and it is important to recognize those and know where one falls in that group.

Tim’s seventh tip for partnerships is to create a balanced portfolio of work. Most partnerships end up being either high risk and low value or low risk and low value in their work.

His final tip is that partners seek win-win situations. Too often people disagree with others instead of saying “I could agree with you if...” in order to move forward.
Tim believes in collaborative principles and collaborative business principles and models in order to make a difference and be successful.

Kim Contardi began her presentation with an activity for participants to identify a possible partner and brainstorm how they can move forward together to collaborate. Worksheets to guide this activity were provided in the packet of handouts for participants. She described Arthur Himmelman’s work describing how organizations engage with one another using specific strategies. She walked through the strategies matrix and explained each and how those relate to community collaborations. These strategies include networking, coordinating, cooperating, and collaborating. The goal is for collaborators to become partners rather than competitors. She stressed that one strategy is not better than another, but that the risks and work might be more difficult in collaboration, but the value might be higher as well.

Participants engaged in the activity by aligning themselves with certain strategies within the framework. This is an exercise that can be used with participants’ coalitions in order to move ahead in their work. Groups discussed their responses to the questions at each of their tables.

One volunteer shared that it depends on which agency you are working with when determining where one falls in the framework. Another shared that there are new assessment tools available for successful collaborations. She suggested searching online for these tools of evaluation.

Kim stated that Tom Wolff has a book that provides wonderful resources and tools for collaboration and coalition building. The website with his information is: www.tomwolff.com

Another tool is available from the Wildness Resources Foundation. In addition, another participant stated that reconvening the first meeting of a collaboration for those who were not able to attend the first meeting helps bring those people up to speed about what they missed. This also requires collaborative leadership skills. The RWJF developed a document about the leadership skills necessary for those involved in establishing and sustaining collaborations called “Collaborative Leadership”.

One participant asked what happens to a coalition if the individual with whom you worked with initially leaves and someone replaces them who is not looking to collaborate. Tim stated that that can be an issue in any collaboration and one that must be dealt with by developing relationships with several key people in the organization, not just one person. Tim stated that the issue of communication and being proactive when someone is new to a collaboration is key to developing that partnership with many in the organization.

Peter Layde promoted the Community Team Leadership program for those who are interested in developing collaboration leadership skills. Another recommendation is that the new state health plan guide collaborative teamwork.