Beacon Initiative Case Study

The Problem

The San Francisco Beacon Initiative is a public-private partnership that promotes youth and family centers in San Francisco public schools. The goal of the Initiative is to offer opportunities, services and activities that promote the healthy development of children, youth, families and communities. Eight Beacon Centers housed in public schools across the city provide youth development opportunities before and after-school, on weekends and in summer.

The Beacon Centers have a dual purpose – to serve youth and their families through their programming, and, to act as community centers, seeking to engage the community as active partners in utilizing and enhancing the resources of the Centers as well as enhancing the communities they serve. Many of the Beacon Centers had originally created "community councils" to assist with that engagement – some of the councils had since lost momentum and met infrequently or not at all. The Beacon Initiative enlisted the help of Community Focus to assist the Centers with the revitalization of their councils and with other community engagement activities.

What We Did

After conducting a needs assessment at each Beacon Center, we recommended concentrating our site-specific community engagement technical assistance on three Beacon Centers. We also worked with the other Centers, Beacon Initiative staff and other community partners to identify best practices for community engagement.

Community Focus delivered site-specific direct technical assistance to the OMI/Excelsior Beacon Center, Visitacion Valley Community Beacon Center and Sunset Neighborhood Beacon Center. In most cases we worked directly with the Beacon Director through ongoing strategy sessions (for Sunset Neighborhood Beacon Center, we worked with a staff member directly responsible for community organizing). In these discussions, it was important to consider what the Beacon Center needed from its community council as well as the particular interests of the community council members. Through the strategy sessions, we helped the Beacon Center staff develop agendas for each upcoming council meeting. Pre-meeting strategy sessions included discussion about group dynamics, team development, meeting structure strategies, linking meeting agendas to long term goals, and facilitation techniques. In addition, we met with the Beacon staff after each community council meeting to debrief and plan out next steps.

Through a combination of meetings with Beacon staff and individual interviews with Beacon directors and community partners, Community Focus worked with the Beacon Initiative to begin identifying best practices for community engagement. The direct technical assistance work also contributed to the identification of successful strategies. This list of best practices reflected the experience and the lessons that the Beacon Centers have learned over years of engaging the community – it can act as a tool to not only strengthen community engagement by

sharing strategies among Beacon Centers, but to also catalyze a larger community discussion by sharing the strategies locally, regionally, and state-wide.

Why We Chose this Process

The assistance was tailored to each particular Beacon Center's needs. By integrating community engagement into the general operations of each Beacon Center, Community Focus was able to help the Centers develop sustainable processes.

The technical assistance in these cases focused on strengthening the community councils, and also included strategy development for overall community engagement. This included ongoing strategy sessions focused on recruitment, facilitation, outreach, team development, agenda creation, meeting structure, role definition, youth engagement, parent engagement, decision-making processes and sustainability of community engagement. In addition, Community Focus provided training and facilitation.

Results/Outcomes

- The OMI/Excelsior council created a recruitment list and increased recruitment from different constituencies. It also defined roles and responsibilities and developed a meeting structure to keep the direction of the council focused on its goals.

- The Visitacion Valley council became much more action-oriented, re-naming itself the "Beacon Action Team." We worked with the Beacon Director to take the self-defined roles and responsibilities and shape them into a standing meeting agenda matrix. In addition, we helped the team create a list of priorities and concerns for council project selection.

- Because the Sunset Neighborhood Beacon Center has a staff member dedicated to community work, the process of restarting the council and implementing strategies was not only smoother than Beacon Centers without dedicated staff resources, but happened at a faster pace. In addition, the Sunset Beacon was also able to successfully integrate young people into the council.

Lessons Learned

1. **Staff support for community engagement is essential.**
   Beacon Directors often have many competing priorities which limit their ability to consistently support the council's efforts. While support from the Beacon Director is important, staff support is crucial to developing a council that is a fully active team, implementing projects to support the Beacon Center and the community. An example of this is the Sunset Neighborhood Beacon Center, which was more successful more quickly because of dedicated staff support for community engagement.

2. **Community engagement needs to start at the top.**
   Getting the Beacon program staff to more naturally integrate community involvement opportunities into their regular programming and outreach required a major change in practice – a cultural shift. It was important for the Beacon Director to provide the leadership and support to the staff in order to facilitate this change.

3. **Community engagement requires certain skills.**
   The Beacon Center program staff people are hired for their skills in developing young people. The skills required for community engagement may require specialized training (e.g., in meeting facilitation, community organizing and strategic planning).

In Closing

The Beacon Centers have enormous potential to become highly engaged community centers in the neighborhoods that they serve. Many of the Beacon Centers spent their first years developing strong youth programs and integrating youth development principles into their programming. In addition, much of their funding has been restricted money designated for youth and family programming only. Without dedicated funding for community engagement, Beacon Centers have allocated small amounts of money to community programs when possible. Accordingly, community programs are often the first to be cut whenever there are budget cuts.

Because community engagement is integrally linked to the overall level of community development, each community faces different barriers and challenges in engaging the community. Strategies must be shaped to fit the targeted community

Dwindling membership, lack of direction, confusion about roles, poor structure, and facilitation issues were evident in the three Beacon community councils with which we worked. All benefited from the consistent focus, guidance and time put into resolving these issues. However, the larger issue of resources (time, staff and funds) will always need to be addressed in order to ensure sustainability. Dedication of resources, infrastructure support, and community-minded leadership within the institutions are necessary to ensure stable and consistent community engagement.