



E-PARCC

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Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration

Kujichagulia: Actively Building a Public-Nonprofit- Community Partnership

Part B

It was May 1, 2007 and Ramsey County's contract with the Cultural Wellness Center (CWC) was up for renewal at the County Board Meeting. Workforce Solutions and the Human Services Department were requesting approval of a new contract with the CWC for three years of enhanced Kujichagulia Project services, including reporting and training. Because the Board had not yet seen any quantifiable results from the first three years of the project, many Commissioners expressed concern about how the County's money was being spent and whether or not it was justifiable to pay for another three years of the project.

During individual meetings with the Commissioners prior to that day, Patricia Brady had explained to them, "we knew we would not get a lot of measurables from the Cultural Wellness Center at first because it was a new relationship and we had to build it. None of us – not the County, the Wellness Center, or the community – knew exactly why the [MFIP] program was not

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working. We had to spend time figuring it out together.” When one Commissioner responded, “we spent a million dollars over three years. What did we get?” Brady replied, “we got a really good start.”

A resolution for adoption of a second contract was introduced at the Board meeting. The Commissioner who had raised questions regarding outcomes during the initial approval process read from the minutes of that 2003 Board meeting when initial contract was approved. She noted the stipulation made then that staff would follow-up to show that outcomes and baselines were identified in the contract; she then documented a request her staff had made in November 2006 for information regarding these outcomes, a request for which a response had not been received. She concluded, “I do not feel as a Board we have received sufficient outcome-based performance measures, and from the first contract and the proposed renewal, is still vague. I believe the contract should not be renewed without significant changes in the proposed contract or should go out for an RFP. I believe the staff has been aware since 2003 that measurable outcomes would be achieved in the previous contract and did not add those measures. Therefore, I would like to add a layover until measurable goals and objectives are a part of the potential new contract with the baseline data and measurable goals.” She then moved to take the new contract off the table.

Exhausted from the months of work to lay the foundation for a strong presentation to the Board, and frustrated with this Commissioner’s resistance to further investment in what project partners believed were three years of important public work, Brady first replied, “I don’t know what to say.” She elaborated, “it has been very challenging to get some kind of data. With the original contract approved by the Board, the County contracted with the Cultural Wellness Center for activities around things that would allow participants to be able to participate in our program. There was no baseline data because Workforce Solutions had never worked with this agency before. This was also new work for the Wellness Center. They have attempted multiple avenues to get results with the African-American community and other communities of color, so there was no data available. During this first three-year period, we at Workforce Solutions simply wanted to gather enough data to get some baseline information. The responsibility for MFIP outcomes was never assigned to the Cultural Wellness Center; it was always on Workforce Solutions. The Center's role was to help Workforce Solutions fill gaps, to go places and do things the County could not do to get engagement from individuals. But the County held primary responsibility for getting outcomes from the employment system.” She explained that this time around they would be pulling together the kind of information that could be documented, tracked and

reported to the County Board. She also cautioned that this partnership with the community was being asked to correct a system that had been in place for many years, and that is impossible to do over a three-year period.

One Commissioner spoke up on behalf of the project by saying she had participated in a number of the activities involved with the Cultural Wellness Center and was very impressed with the work they have done. She said, “I hope for more measurable goals, but in order to have that, there has to be a baseline, and I believe that now exists. I am very supportive of this contract.”

Another Commissioner tried to respond to her colleague’s concern. While she understood the concerns raised in terms of specific outcomes, she stated that she knew that the CWC intended to be a partner with the County in reducing the disparities in the African-American community, and the work done during the first contract was the shared work of both the CWC and the County, rather than just the responsibility of the CWC. The Commissioner listed the training of Ramsey County staff, the review of information together, the understanding of the challenges, and a lack of taking credit for the fact that, at that time, the sanction rate for African-American families was close or equal to the rates of other communities in the County. She closed her case with a strong call to action for the Board, “we started at a point of extreme disparities, and we are moving toward an understanding of how to get this work done with the community, and to change that picture of disparity, and it is critical that this be moved forward. Any lack of movement in this area would be indicative of the County’s lack of willingness to continue that progress.”

After more deliberation, along with reassurance from County staff that the CWC’s data operation was up and running and that outcomes would be a significant element of the next contract, the Board voted 6 to 1 in favor of approving a second contract for the CWC for slightly over \$1 million. Within one week, County staff fulfilled their earlier commitment to send answers in writing regarding the questions from the opposing Commissioner about the projected quantitative outcomes for the second contract period.

Although the Board meeting was important, at least one Commissioner later acknowledged it was the individual meeting he had with the community consultants and Brady that convinced him to renew the contract. “It was sitting down, expressing my concerns about what happened to the last million dollars. They didn’t know. But their commitment to change that, I believed it. I believed there was a huge disparity in meeting needs of different communities in the

County, and that we need to continue to be bold and courageous to do a better job in these communities.” By coming to the County and saying, “this is what we need from you to be able to take care of ourselves,” the community, represented by the consultants, made a powerful impression on this Commissioner.

Showing Results

With the second contract secured, Brady knew some changes needed to be made to the Kujichagulia project’s structure to ensure shared goals and accountability for results. One month after the Board meeting, Brady convened the first meeting of a formal Kujichagulia Project Partnership Committee, comprised of staff from several County departments, the Wellness Center, and the community consultants. For the first time since its inception, representatives of all aspects of the Self-Determination project’s work were gathered together around the same table.

At this meeting, County Evaluation staff presented several alternatives for evaluating and assessing the success of the collaborative partnership, the improvement of services, and the County’s relationship with project clients. This was a sensitive topic; yet it was viewed as vital to the future success of the project. In a sign that organizational change would continue to proceed slowly, CWC requested that this proposal be set aside to be revisited at a later date. It continued to be hard to talk about results in county terminology because of the philosophy of change and resulting language at the core of the CWC model. While the county wanted to talk of ‘racial disparities in employment outcomes,’ the CWC wanted to focus on indicators of ‘inner capacity to give back to the community.’ The meeting concluded with the CWC’s presentation of the data it had gathered on clients served and activities engaged in, with an accompanying written report covering the period from January through May.

Brady was now formally leading the Kujichagulia project from the County side. The continued miscommunication about evaluation affirmed her assessment that the lingering tensions between partners needed to be resolved before the work could truly move forward. She enlisted the help of a consultant and several partnership members to design a retreat that would help people work through their issues so they could refocus on their work with the participants. Four months after the first Partnership Committee meeting, the partnership’s major stakeholders, including Navigators, cultural consultants, management staff and front-line workers from both the CWC and the County, along with a Commissioner, met off- site for the “Retreat to Advance.” Brady welcomed everyone there and opened

with a short statement on how Kujichagulia was “not your typical partnership.” Five individuals representing five different perspectives each offered a 3-5 minute history of the partnership. The identified retreat leaders, including Brady, Azzahir, Boyd, and McDonald introduced the day’s process, which was to engage each other with a variety of questions, including: What comes to mind when you think of a partnership that is working? What are the values you bring to this partnership? What would success look like if we achieved the partnership we have described? What are the current barriers to success? What are the strengths we as a group bring to this process?

People expressed strong emotions about the outcomes they were looking for, why work had been painful, and about who did or did not trust others doing the work. County leadership felt disconcerted when Navigators expressed feelings that County leadership did not trust them to get the work done. This chance for all involved to voice their perspectives and build trust proved invaluable. No one wanted to see the partnership sink, so the group came to an agreement on how to move forward. Brady then followed up on the retreat by meeting one-on-one with Azzahir and the community consultants to solidify commitment about how the Partnership would move forward from there.

After the retreat, members of the Kujichagulia Partnership Committee continued to meet regularly on the first Monday of every month. Brady remained highly involved in the project by chairing these meetings, which initially lasted for an hour and a half but were later extended to two hours for time to work through questions and issues together. Outside of the meetings, the Wellness Center’s Data Specialist began to work closely with County evaluators so that the CWC’s data collection and analysis could be linked with the statewide MFIP data system.

Now, one year into the second contract, Patricia Brady again found herself at her desk preparing for a presentation to the Board of Commissioners. This time, the presentation’s purpose was to update Commissioners on the past year’s activities and progress in the hopes of maintaining open communication and support for the Kujichagulia Partnership. The Wellness Center now had data to report, and it showed that, for the first three quarters of 2007, the number of MFIP participants with the Kujichagulia project who recorded some hours of employment had increased by about 39 percent. While other county agencies had a higher percentage of staff working, they had not seen similar increases. Although it remained to be seen whether or not the CWC’s approach would lead to a higher percentage of MFIP participants working than the traditional approach used by other agencies, Brady felt optimistic about these initial data reports. Other hopeful

signs had appeared as well, including front-line workers speaking positively about the changes taking place and the decision to revisit the initial evaluation proposals that had been set aside.

This increase in trust and optimism between the partners also allowed for increased mutual learning and systems changes. For instance, the County requested Azzahir to consult with them about improving the welfare orientation session mandated by the state for all new recipients. Based on her feedback about potential cultural barriers, County staff changed the way the meetings were structured. In the same vein, the CWC experience influenced other dimensions of front-line county work with clients. As one employee described, traditional County services are taking “steps 1-10 with an outcome of x.” In contrast, “what [the CWC] is showing me is that they didn’t take 1-10, but they came out with x.” By using nontraditional methods learned from the CWC, County employees increasingly were reporting that clients now see a real commitment from staff to help the African-American families succeed.

Likewise, the CWC has learned about County processes and language; it had begun to trust government efforts where they previously may have questioned or fought them. As Azzahir put it, “Ramsey County has really challenged me to operate in this bigger vision. In doing so, sometimes I have to challenge myself and my colleagues, those who I lead and guide. I have to ask the African-American community to tone down our fight so that it can be a healing fight and I don’t inflict more wounds. That’s what cultural wellness is about, and if I can’t live it, I can’t be talking about it.” Perhaps most significantly, at the insistence of the County, the CWC also began to collect data to test and refine its cultural wellness model.

Brady knew parties on all sides of this partnership had learned an immense amount from each other over the past four years. She didn’t know, however, what would yet surface in the ongoing journey to better support the African-American community in Ramsey County.