

EVALUATION OF VNR STRATEGIC PLANNING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CONSULTATIONS 2009 - 2010

Overview of VNR Strategic Planning TA Consultations

From its inception in 2007, Valley Nonprofit Resources (VNR) has had a major focus in its technical assistance component on helping San Fernando Valley nonprofits become more strategic in their operations. In 2007 and 2008 most TA was focused on strategic development of a family involvement component in the operations of local mental health agencies. In 2009 VNR developed an approach to strategic planning for nonprofits, based on research and TA conducted by its parent agency, the nonprofit Human Interaction Research Institute. This approach is summarized in a *Strategic Planning Overview*, which is available on the VNR website.

Strategic planning TA consultations based on this approach have since been provided to a number of Valley nonprofits. Typically, the consultation begins with a meeting with senior staff and/or Board members of the nonprofits, to identify the need for strategic planning and developing a commitment to the significant investment of time and energy that will be required internally to develop a good plan. VNR reviews documents about the organization (including previous strategic plans if these exist), and conducts interviews with key organizational leaders to learn more about the organization.

Then a retreat is conducted (most often with the Board of Directors), to develop the components of a strategic plan. VNR prepares a draft plan based on output of this retreat, and provides it electronically to the organization. The Board (and usually staff as well) reviews this draft and provides feedback to VNR, which then prepares a refined version. In most cases, this refined draft (which is the property of the nonprofit client, not of VNR) is brought to completion by the organization. VNR in some cases has received requests to conduct a second round of strategic planning three or more years later, when the initial plan has completed its term of coverage.

Evaluation Objectives

In 2009-2010, VNR conducted 12 strategic planning TA consultations. The purpose of this small-scale internal evaluation study is to determine the success and impact of these consultations.

Method

Evaluation data were gathered in 2011 by VNR staff, through e-mailing a brief survey to the strategic planning recipients (typically the organization was represented in this data-gathering by its executive director or Board chair), and by follow-up telephone interviews. Both data-gathering methods focused on the following three simple questions:

(1) How has your organization made use of the Strategic Plan VNR helped you develop? (Examples: have used the plan for discussion at Board meetings, have submitted the plan with grant applications)

(2) What's one example of a specific positive impact on your organization from having this Plan?

(3) Is there anything you'd recommend VNR do differently in future strategic planning consultations with Valley nonprofits?

Data were compiled from these inputs and reviewed by VNR staff to yield the results presented below.

Subjects

The Valley nonprofit organizations included in this study were:

- * The Children's Project
- * Comprehensive Community Health Centers
- * Focus on Children Now
- * Glendale Healthier Community Coalition
- * The MUSIC Foundation
- * National Alliance for Mental Illness - San Fernando Valley Affiliate
- * West Valley PALS

Nonprofits receiving VNR consultation that were not included in the study were:

- * Academy for New Musical Theatre (VNR reviewed an existing strategic plan and made some suggestions for improvements).
- * Dubnoff Center (the consultation ended after the strategic planning Board retreat was completed; the Executive Director was terminated and a number of other changes made)
- * Havok Theatre (initial meetings were completed but the direction of the company changed and there was no immediate request for strategic planning)
- * Valley Interfaith Council (no response to survey or to telephone interview attempts)

There also were initial conversations with several other organizations that did not lead to an invitation to conduct strategic planning in full. These interactions will not be discussed further as part of this evaluation report.

Results

A summary of survey/interview data for each of the seven organizations included in this evaluation follows. Finally, an Analysis and Recommendations section provides input on what the outcomes of these consultations overall mean for Valley nonprofits, and how this service component of VNR might be improved in the future.

Summaries

The Children's Project

How Plan Was Developed: Co-executive directors developed the plan, with Board input.

Outcomes and Use of Plan: The completed plan has been used as a foundation for discussions about how to develop major activities at Board and staff meetings. It also is used as an attachment when applying for grants. The plan helps TCP to stay focused on its objectives.

Follow-on Activities: TCP is going through significant transitions which began when the plan was developed in 2009. Currently the organization is recruiting to hire a part-time executive director, and is preparing for the scaling back of the co-founders, as outlined in the strategic plan. TCP also has a contract with VNR to provide ongoing technical assistance consultation to the implementation of the strategic plan and to TCP's efforts to take the organization to the next level. This contractual relationship has been in effect since the plan was completed.

Comprehensive Community Health Centers

How Plan Was Developed: A Board retreat was conducted to develop the plan, with the executive director participating.

Outcomes and Use of Plan: The strategic plan was completed on schedule shortly following the retreat in 2009, and was subsequently used to guide the organization through significant program growth.

Follow-on Activities: In 2011 CCHC approached VNR to provide consultation to the development of an updated strategic plan. Scheduling difficulties prevented VNR from providing this consultation, as the date for a Board retreat had already been set when the approach was made, so CCHC did the retreat independently, following the successful model of the 2009 retreat. The update of the plan included an objective to build CCHC infrastructure in keeping with current external environmental challenges. CCHC leadership suggested that VNR could assist in another update of the plan in the near future, as the organization continues to evolve.

Focus on Children Now

How Plan Was Developed: A Board retreat was conducted to develop the plan, with the executive director participating.

Outcomes and Use of Plan: FOCN is a small organization based in the West Valley Armenian community. At the time the strategic plan was done in 2010, FOCN was in the process of re-framing its operating objectives to focus on new operations - most specifically, on opening a thrift store. The Board reported being excited about having a strategic plan to help them grow to the next level. At the time of the evaluation interview, they still had not finalized the plan because after the retreat the Board immediately began working on opening the thrift store, which consumed all their time and energy.

Follow-on Activities: After the thrift store is open, the last details of plan editing can be completed.

Glendale Healthier Community Coalition

How Plan Was Developed: A Board retreat was conducted to develop the plan.

Outcomes and Use of Plan: The purpose of the GHCC strategic plan is to guide the activities of a broad community coalition with more than 50 members, concerned with helping to improve the health of citizens of Glendale, children and adults. Among its numerous activities, GHCC has moved forward with a tobacco control project and another related ordinance has been adopted by the City. They also submitted a proposal for a population outreach effort that didn't get funded. And GHCC completed a comprehensive community needs assessment to help them understand what future directions they should take. Finally, they have continued to work with the City on Bicycle Path implementation to help achieve their fitness goals.

Follow-on Activities: Recently-installed leadership of GHCC helped the organization to select a new project on which they can collectively focus energy. The new project will focus on readmission of patients discharged from the community's three hospitals. This project will help to build bridges between institutional (e.g., SNFs) and acute care in the community. In particular, it will provide supplemental services for patients who are high risk for re-admission because they don't have the health care resources to live successfully in the community. VNR will provide consultation on the adjustments in strategic plans of participating institutions that will be needed to implement this program community-wide. Medicare penalties that will be implemented in response to high readmission rates will help to spur the implementation of this project. VNR currently is scheduled to present at a GHCC meeting a vision for how this project can be impacted by attention to strategic planning.

The MUSIC Foundation

How Plan Was Developed: A Board retreat was conducted to develop the plan, with executive director participation.

Outcomes and Use of Plan: After the plan was completed, it was mostly the education committee of the Board that implemented it, and its goals have now been met. There is still a need to reform the MUSIC Foundation's organizational structure, and this was to be discussed at an upcoming Board meeting. The Foundation also hired a professional grant writer, paid for through a Board member donation. The plan is discussed at each Board meeting. An organizational chart still is needed and will be developed at a future Board meeting.

Follow-on Activities: Fundraising is still a key concern of the organization. Staff suggested follow-on activities for VNR to help the Board implement the plan, and particularly to shape more active fundraising.

NAMI San Fernando Valley

How Plan Was Developed: A Board retreat was conducted to develop the plan.

Outcomes and Use of Plan: The NAMI SFV Board has used the strategic plan 2009-2011 to help keep Board meetings on track, and to assess progress every six months so that there was a fairly objective reading on how well goals were being achieved.

In relation to changes suggested in the strategic plan, NAMI SFV invited two consumers to join the Board, added two new programs, and increased the number of family-to-family classes offered. There was some success with the Latino community, via offering four Ask the Doctor sessions in Spanish (in collaboration with the LA County Department of Mental Health, and

translating the general affiliate brochure into Spanish. Much more work is still needed in the Latino communities.

Follow-on Activities: A request was made to VNR by the new President of NAMI SFV to help the organization develop a 2012-2014 strategic plan. A Board retreat was held in 2012 to draft this plan, which is currently under review by the Board.

West Valley PALS

How Plan Was Developed: A Board retreat was conducted to develop the plan.

Outcomes and Use of Plan: The completed plan is useful as a general guideline for planning and action by the Board - most of which is currently focused on fundraising, as the organization is struggling with cash flow issues. The plan has not been used as actively as the Board would like to see - "it's a really good paperweight" is how one Board member described it. But having the plan has helped the Board to feel more professional, as well as to focus its activities.

Follow-on Activities: No follow-on activities are planned.

Analysis and Recommendations

Overall results from this very small-scale internal evaluation study reveal the following:

1 - A strategic planning process has been created by VNR which produces completed, implementable strategic plans for San Fernando Valley nonprofits, based on active involvement of Boards of Directors and senior management staff. The process includes obtaining a commitment from the organization's leadership to participate actively in creating the plan, so that from the beginning it is seen as their property, not that of VNR. At the same time, by using a retreat process to obtain input on the plan's content and using that input to create a first draft, organizations are given "raw material" to work with that helps them more quickly create a refined plan that meets their needs. The focus on a concise plan with performance measures to determine whether the plan's objectives have been achieved also appears to facilitate successful planning.

2 - Many organizations come to the strategic planning at a time of transition, when they are re-considering basic organizational objectives and contemplating "moving to the next level" of growth. The planning process can both help them to define what that movement should be and to have a template for carrying it out.

3 - For those organizations that didn't complete the strategic planning process, the most common reason was that something changed within the nonprofit, e.g., an executive director left and other major changes in staffing occurred.

4 - Recruitment into VNR strategic planning occurs in several ways - the most common is the consultee approaching VNR after some other type of contact with the VNR program (e.g., attendance at a workshop on another subject). Some consultees also have been identified through educational workshops specific to strategic planning.

Recommendations for how the VNR strategic planning process could be improved include:

1 - Adding a time schedule for plan draft editing and final implementation to a brief written agreement guiding the strategic planning consultation would be of value. While circumstances may change the timing later on, having this as an up-front commitment by the Board and staff leadership of the nonprofit could reduce the time delays that happened in several cases reported here.

2 - It might be helpful to prepare a partial draft of the strategic plan, including at least the organizational description, the mission, and the outline of the other sections, to hand out at the retreat session that is commonly used as part of this process. Such a draft would help to speed up the draft construction that happens during a retreat.

3 - Providing written examples of performance measures in advance of the retreat might also be helpful. In all instances so far, performance measures needed to be constructed after the consultee Board and staff reviewed the rest of the draft plan, and this likely will continue to be the case. However, if there was a way to learn more about how to construct performance measures in advance, it might help consultees to think about these measures even though they are actually written at a later date.

A number of strategic planning consultations have been conducted in 2011-2012. Process and outcomes of these consultations will be evaluated by VNR in 2013.

prepared by Thomas E. Backer, PhD, 2012