

Tackling Intergenerational Poverty

Effective Community Initiatives:
Choosing the IGP Team Members



Introduction

Utah State University Extension is partnering with the Utah Intergenerational Welfare Reform Commission to assist counties in their efforts to understand and reduce intergenerational poverty. The driver for this effort is the Intergenerational Poverty Mitigation Act, passed originally by the Utah Legislature in 2012.

Members of the commission include the Utah Lieutenant Governor; the executive directors of the Department of Workforce Service, Department of Human Services, and Department of Health; the superintendent for the Utah State Office of Education; and the administrator for the Juvenile Courts. DWS was designated as the administrative agency for the commission and is responsible for producing the Intergenerational Poverty Annual Report.

<http://www.jobs.utah.gov/edo/intergenerational/index.html>

Meaningful steps to address persistent poverty in Utah will require community-level energy, innovation, and initiative. USU Extension and members of the commission have created several resources to help counties organize effective community initiatives.

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Choosing the IGP Team Members

The participants are worker bees of any community initiative. They are the ones that step up, show up, and prioritize community well-being over their own needs. They need to come together to creatively tackle a challenge so complex that it confounds organizations working alone. They need to be able to apply their individual experience and specialized knowledge to develop a richly integrative strategy that benefits the community at large. They need to be creative in that their thinking is not bound by the existing institutional structures and they can envision new ways to do things. But they also need to be ruthlessly pragmatic when it comes to developing their business model and budgeting resources to ensure that their recommendations can feasibly be implemented.

Attributes of effective group participants

Diversity of perspectives among members

Community initiatives derive much of their power by bringing a diverse cast of characters together and breaking down organizational silos that often impede communication. The range of people who might be able to contribute to a community initiative on intergenerational poverty includes (but is not limited to) the following:

- Early Childhood Development¹
- Public Health
- K-12 Education
- Workforce Development
- Economic Development
- Higher Education
- Behavioral Health
- Juvenile Justice
- Organization representing families experiencing poverty

A diverse membership is not driven by a desire to include absolutely everyone (which can make a group unmanageably large,) but is needed to bring an adequate range of experience and knowledge to bear on the problem.

The Appendix at the end of this document provides a grid for selecting diverse participants.

¹ For those counties with funding from DWS for a Community Planning Grant to address intergenerational poverty, this list represents a mandatory minimum set of partners

Available time

Participating conscientiously in a community initiative is a big time commitment that goes far beyond the periodic meetings of the entire team. There are reports to be written and sometimes painstakingly revised, sub-teams and their meetings, and liaison conversations with one's home organization. Being selected to participate should not be regarded as an honorary title or recognition of status, but as another burden onto what is probably an already heavy workload. These time demands might argue against choosing the head of an organization or agency—whose time can seldom be refocused away from their administrative responsibilities—but for choosing a senior staffer instead.

Personality

We all have our preferred working style; some of us are loners and others thrive in team settings. One style is not necessarily better than another—they are just different. There are four more specific personality attributes that make people effective in collaborative settings. The first is that they are not “turfy”—they do not feel a high need to protect their own organizational role or prominence. The second is that they are creative/innovative, while being a practical problem solver. The third is that they are comfortable with the churning and ambiguity that inevitably accompany group processes, particularly in the early phases. And finally, they are comfortable with differences in viewpoints and perspectives, both when it comes to articulating their own and when understanding the views of others.

Behaviors of effective group participants:

Attention to structure

The co-Chairs and facilitator can develop ground rules and agendas, but they need the participants to voluntarily adhere to and actively defend those structures. When participants hold one another accountable for following the group's own rules, it creates a culture of constructive interaction. It also allows the facilitator to attend to other critical matters.

Tips for Inviting People to Participate

How should invitations to participate be extended so that the key people say “yes?” A mix of personal and formal invitations is probably best. Having the co-Chairs make a personal pitch face-to-face will be important; being asked in person is powerful. But pairing that with a more formal letter from the County Commission may also help add a layer of authority and stature that pushes someone from “maybe” to “yes.” It may also make it easier to get permission from an employer to add this to the participant's workload.

Adequate preparation

Participants need to diligently complete their between-meeting tasks and show up ready to focus on the discussion of the day. This is particularly true when it is expected that everyone will have read a draft report and be ready to engage in substantive discussion about it.

Roles outside of meeting

Participants may be asked to serve on or lead sub-teams to dig deeper into particular issues than the full team has either the time or expertise to adequately address. Participants on those sub-teams need to recognize how important it is that they fulfill those roles to their fullest capacity.

Engaged participation during meetings

Aside from the obvious expectation to attend every meeting, there are important behaviors that ought to be exhibited during meetings. Make the meeting a priority, so that you don't need to arrive late or leave early. Everyone needs to find the middle ground between being too dominant and too quiet. Avoid being distracted or distracting others, which is becoming increasingly hard to do when cellphones bring a constant flow of emails and texts. Pair critical statements ("I don't think that will work...") with alternative strategies ("but if we make these changes, I think it could").

Respect for the group process

Community initiatives are vulnerable to "attacks from within." If the participants are not loyal champions of their own efforts, then the energy, morale, and legitimacy slip away. Participants should not engage in back-channel complaining; not divulge information before the group is ready to release it; not talk ill of other participants or the process to others; or not undermine group decisions that they might individually have preferred to be different.

Conclusion

Serving on a community planning team demands participants' best work, and they should be creative, responsible, and tolerant. If a community initiative is achieving its potential, all participants should be operating at the edge of their comfort zones. But ironically, these community-scale efforts are also a seedbed for the participants to do their very best work. When people look back over their careers, their top 10 accomplishments will rarely have occurred by toiling away in narrowly defined organizational roles, but other collaborative projects that stretch them.

Appendix:

Selecting Members of an IGP Planning Team

As you are thinking about people in your community who would be useful members of your IGP Team, use the following chart to jot down names of potential participants. On the left is a list of knowledge areas that should be represented in your group (many were specified in the grant RFP.) The next column is a place to write down the name of the person you first thought of to represent that perspective. The second person and third person who come to mind will be placed in their respective columns.

Now look at your list and think about the diversity of the choices. Are all the “first choices” from the same town? Are they all men? Are none of them young? Who are non-Caucasian choices? Perhaps you should prioritize some second and third choices to make sure the planning team mirrors the important diversity in your county.

Interest Group	First Choice	Second Choice	Third Choice
Early Childhood Development			
Public Health			
K-12 Education			
Workforce Development			
Economic Development			

Higher Education			
Behavioral Health			
Juvenile Justice			
Organization Representing Families Experiencing Poverty			
Religious Organization			
Other <i>What interest group would you consider to be an asset.</i> <i>List the interest group below.</i>			