

Tackling Intergenerational Poverty

Effective Community Initiatives:

Choosing a Facilitator



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 a Facilitator

Competent Facilitation

In a complex process involving many participants, having a good facilitator is critically important. This section discusses what to look for when hiring a facilitator, and the pros and cons of opting for a professional facilitator or a competent but less experienced local individual.

Core facilitation roles

The core roles of a facilitator are listed below. The section on Facilitation provides much greater detail about how these fit in to the facilitation process, and how to be successful implementing them.

- Process design
- Developing meeting agendas
- Communication between meetings
- Record keeping
- Meeting logistics
- Meeting facilitation

Necessary core skills and attributes

- Confident but humble
- Excellent listener
- Reliable
- Organized
- Trusted as fair/neutral
- Good problem solver
- Respected
- Sensible
- Reasonable/logical
- Comfortable speaking to groups
- Good at maintaining confidentiality
- Leadership skills
- Comfort with appropriate technology or software, especially for collaborative writing projects

Legible handwriting and good note taking skills are often helpful, but others can fill those roles as needed. Similarly, a familiarity with the general topic being discussed can be helpful, but is not critical.

Hire a Professional or Someone Local?

Professional facilitators are available for hire, which is an option to consider depending on your budget. In many cases, however, the right person may be already in your community. When hiring a facilitator, finding someone with experience is very helpful, but not more important than finding someone with the right temperament, core skills, and availability.

Professional facilitation

Professional facilitation can be extremely valuable, and may help a group reach goals and work through problems more quickly than without that resource. It may also be a more expensive route; however, combining professional facilitation with other staffing models to cover different aspects of the process, such as local logistics and notetaking, may reduce costs. The appendix to this module has a short list of places to start the search for a professional facilitator.

Looking for facilitation locally

Most rural communities do not have full-time professional facilitators. There are, however, people in every community who naturally perform facilitation roles, even without knowing it. When a large community event takes place, who is that behind-the-scenes person who keeps everyone moving and makes everyone feel a part of things? When there is strife, who naturally becomes the mediator? Who keeps things organized and functioning within your small community? Who is that level-headed, engaged member of your community who cares for others and is a good problem solver and listener?

A good facilitator does not have to be someone with stature, money, or formal experience in a facilitator role. They do not have to already be in a leadership role. In some cases, it might even be better if they are not. An excellent candidate may be sitting behind a desk at the local library, volunteering at the animal shelter, or organizing the next church potluck dinner. They just need to fit the description, have the time to commit, be able to work effectively with the co-Chairs, and be interested in finding solutions.

Important Considerations

There are pros and cons to having either a local or an outside facilitator. Trained neutral facilitators may be much more expensive than having someone local manage the process. Anyone coming from far away will also likely need travel funds. Neutral facilitation is an excellent choice in more contentious situations, or when an outside perspective is specifically desired.

Local facilitators may have less experience, but are also likely to be less expensive. They may be more flexible with scheduling if they are local and do not need to travel. A local individual will not have as steep a learning curve about local issues, but also may have hard-to-identify biases about certain partners that could be difficult to assess in an interview. Depending on the skill set a particular community initiative requires, local facilitators may be more or less equipped to provide content management if it is needed.

If a facilitator is already involved in some way with the content of the meeting, he or she must be honest with the group when/if his or her own interests or viewpoint comes into play. The person chosen to facilitate a meeting needs to be able to think beyond his or her own interests, both during the design phase and during the meetings. A short summary of the pros and cons of each choice follows.

Professional facilitator

- Pros:
 - More experienced
 - May be more efficient
 - No training required
 - Neutral
- Cons
 - May be much more expensive (hourly costs)
 - Higher travel costs (direct expenses and travel time)
 - May require additional staffing assistance for facilities, etc.

Local facilitator

- Pros:
 - May be less expensive
 - No travel or lodging costs
 - Familiar with local issues
 - Familiar with local resources
- Cons
 - Less likely to be neutral – potential relationship conflicts or history
 - Less experience

Hiring a Facilitator

Keep in mind that a facilitator, especially for an extended process which will involve many people's time, should be well vetted. Interview potential candidates as you would any other project manager. Ensure that their personality, facilitation style, level of experience, and responses to your questions meets the needs of the group and the process. A good facilitator should welcome the opportunity to assess whether he or she is the right fit for a particular initiative.

A key factor in a facilitator's ability to succeed is whether he or she will work well with the co-Chairs. Therefore, the co-Chairs should always be involved in (and even lead, if feasible and

appropriate) the hiring process. If multiple groups running similar processes decide to jointly hire a facilitator, the process for vetting may be more complex but is still important.

Many facilitators operate as independent contractors. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize about pay, contracting, or other logistical elements of hiring. Payment arrangements may be based on a per-meeting basis, an hourly basis (keep in mind that up to 90% of the time required for facilitation is done outside the group's official meetings), or on a whole-project basis with several mid-project payments. Ask facilitators you interview how they normally arrange compensation for their services.

Regardless of where a facilitator is found or the employment details, make sure to set out the expectations in writing. Delineate how many meetings are anticipated over what time frame, and what core roles the person will be managing. If administrative support is available, ensure that everyone understands what any other involved parties will be doing. Because community planning and problem solving are inevitably complex, many potential facilitators would likely be excellent individuals to help set reasonable expectations and build appropriate contingencies into their contract. Include language that allows flexible outcomes, but also set measurable expectations or interim benchmarks when progress can be reviewed and expectations recalibrated as necessary.

Empowering a Local Facilitator

Let's assume there is a great local individual that meets all the requirements and is willing to serve as the facilitator for the collaborative effort. The facilitator is willing to be part of leading the community through the process, but he or she would appreciate a little help.

Some of that help comes from the way the process is structured.

- The facilitator needs to be empowered to speak openly with people. If the facilitator already works for one of the involved partner organizations, agencies, or other participants, he or she needs to be given the autonomy to work as a facilitator, separate from his or her existing role. If the facilitator learns something in confidence from a participant, in the interest of improving the process or outcomes, that information should be treated appropriately in the other work context.
- The facilitator must be given the authority, by the group, to perform his/her roles. It may challenge some existing power structures if, for example, the facilitator needs to ask a more powerful local individual to stop speaking so others may share their thoughts. However, it is important that the facilitator be able to do so. Ground rules established at the outset can help the facilitator perform his or her role well.

- Co-Chair assistance and support are critical. The co-Chairs are leaders of the initiative and should support the facilitator in making decisions, vetting process ideas, providing support and content guidance. A facilitator should ask lots of questions, and the co-chairs should be available to help find the answers. The facilitator draws part of his/her authority from the co-Chairs, and needs to receive public displays of that support.

The facilitator can also be empowered through external assistance. Even if a professional facilitator is not engaged for the whole process, one might be contracted for a limited mentoring role as the community initiative gets going or if a facilitator needs advice during the process.

Appendix:

Sources of Professional Facilitation in Utah

This list is not all inclusive. The names listed does not imply an endorsement of the people and organizations nor does it imply that people and organizations not included are not reliable sources. The list is merely intended as a starting place to locate facilitation assistance.

Utah Courts

https://www.utcourts.gov/mediation/roster/list_med.asp

A roster of court-approved mediators in Utah. While mediation is not the same as facilitation, many practitioners are skilled in both.

Environmental Dispute Resolution Program, University of Utah S.J. Quinney College of Law; Michele Straube, Director (Michele.straube@law.utah.edu)

Even though the program has an explicit environmental/natural resource focus, the staff has undertaken other types of projects.

Utah State University Extension

USU Extension has a small team of facilitators with experience in community and natural resource issues. (brian.h@usu.edu)

FindAFacilitator.com

A private service and online database which may have additional options from different industries. www.findafacilitator.com

The U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution

(<http://udall.gov/OurPrograms/Institute/Institute.aspx>)

The USIECR maintains a roster of mediators and facilitators. It requires an account registration prior to access.