

Tackling Intergenerational Poverty

Effective Community Initiatives:
Creating Alignment



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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Creating Alignment

Community initiatives can be thought of as combinations of four different components: purpose, product, process, and people¹. When these four components are well aligned, the initiative can achieve meaningful results. When they are not aligned, the effort may be slow, frustrating, confusing, and disappointing.

Four Components

Purpose is the larger need or issue that the initiative is trying to address. It may be to **understand and mitigate intergenerational poverty in your county**. Achieving the purpose may require more resources, partners, and time than this particular initiative has at its disposal, but it is critical to think of this initiative as a thoughtful step in achieving that purpose. The purpose serves as an organizational North Star that provides long-term direction.

Products are the specific outcomes generated by the initiative. Community initiatives can produce all sorts of products—a new wing on the high school, raising \$100,000 for a cancer patient, organizing a festival or parade, etc. Specifically related to intergenerational poverty, **a specific plan for mitigating intergenerational poverty at a local level that is presented to elected officials** may be an appropriate product. In order to be complete, such plan should identify particular steps to be taken, the participants responsible for those steps, the resources needed, the timing associated with taking those steps, and an evaluation framework to measure implementation accountability and outcome effectiveness.

People can be involved in the process in many ways. The **appropriate elected officials, co-Chairs, facilitator, members, content area experts, and allied organizations** will all be important to the success of a local initiative on intergenerational poverty. Some of these—like the members, co-Chairs, and facilitator—will be deeply involved in the effort on a day-to-day level; they will do the heavy lifting. Content area experts, on the other hand, will be called upon for much more specific roles. Having the right people in those core roles (member, co-Chair, and facilitator) will be critical to the outcome. The members should have enough time, content knowledge, openness to alternative perspectives, and be able to meaningfully contribute their creativity to the team’s learning. The co-Chairs will need to help keep the group on track, to maintain focus, and ensure an open process with accountability and integrity. The facilitator will do most of his/her work behind the scenes: promoting communication, organizing and updating draft documents, preparing meeting designs, and conducting meetings.

Process refers to the mechanics of how the initiative functions. In brief, **how will the initiative be organized and operate in order to accomplish its goal?** That broad question generates countless more specific ones: How often will they meet and for how long? What sort of decision rule will be used—majority vote, consensus, or something else? Will working documents or comments made during the

¹ This “Four P” alignment model builds off a presentation by Gary Severson and Gregg Walker at “Facing the Fire: new Tools and Science for Resilient Forests,” a conference sponsored by the Idaho Forest Restoration Partnership, Boise Idaho, on February 25, 2016.

meeting be shared outside the group? Who speaks for the group? What are the accountability mechanisms in terms of showing up for meetings, being prepared, and following through? Is there a means to replace or add a team member?

Create Alignment

As important as these four items are, it is the alignment between them that determines the effectiveness of a group. A number of questions can be used to examine the alignment in a group initiative:

1. Are the desired **Products** aligned with the **Purpose**?
 - Does a product contribute to a larger plan?
 - Does a product address fundamental needs regarding the purpose, or merely symptoms/indicators of it?
2. Are the **People** who are participating aligned with the **Purpose**?
 - Has the purpose been clearly communicated?
 - Are some people ideologically opposed to the purpose?
 - Are some people or organizations threatened by the purpose?
3. Is the **Process** aligned with achieving the **Products**?
 - Are the resources adequate?
 - Are the deadlines realistic?
 - Is there enough time for meaningful learning about the complexity of the situation?
 - Is the staff support and facilitation sufficient?
4. Are the **Products** aligned with the skills, experience, and authority of the **People**?
 - Do participants have the skills needed to achieve the products?
 - Are there adequate linkages to authority outside the group?
5. Are the **People** aligned with the **Process**?
 - Is there buy-in to the operating rules guiding the process?
 - Are the various roles clear?
 - Has leadership been clearly assigned and constructively employed?

There is no single right answer to these questions, and that is a mixed blessing. Each community initiative is a unique constellation of issues and individuals, constraints, and opportunities. And while there may be important lessons to be imported from other efforts, each community initiative needs to be built as a one-off custom effort, based on the best choices and good intentions of the participants.