

# Tackling Intergenerational Poverty

Effective Community Initiatives:  
Preparing co-Chairs for Success



## 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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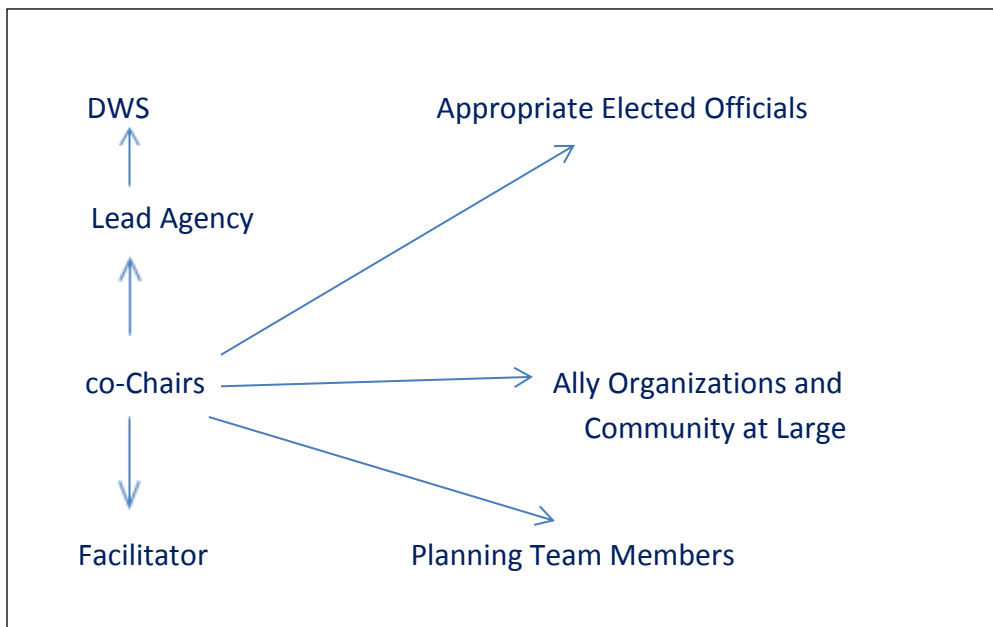
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# Preparing co-Chairs for Success

All of the roles in a community initiative are important; all are vital pieces of the puzzle. But none plays a more central role than the co-Chairs. Choosing co-Chairs with the right skills and personalities might be thought of as “hurdle #1” in the life of any initiative. (Throughout this series of resources on effective community initiatives, the term “Chair” is never used—it is always “co-Chairs.” This is because the role is best shared by multiple people (typically two) rather than placed entirely on the shoulders of one person.)

The leadership style of the co-Chairs sets the personality of the entire group. The members take their cues from the co-Chairs—if the co-Chairs are relaxed and informal, the others will be as well. If the co-Chairs are brusque and impatient, the members will be less open and forthcoming than they otherwise might be. If the co-Chairs ask questions and explore new ideas, the group will follow.

The various relationships the co-Chairs need to create are displayed below:



## Co-Chairs/Lead Agency/DWS Relationship

DWS is one of the lead agencies in the state-level efforts to reduce intergenerational poverty; the co-Chairs should therefore seek to build links with it. That is not to say that the planning teams are working for DWS or that DWS is somehow in charge of them. But DWS can be a resource to assist the county learning teams *particularly if the co-chairs are communicating*

*openly and regularly with the DWS.* The DWS very much wants the county planning teams to be successful, and the co-Chairs would be wise to build a partner relationship with the agency.

### **Co-Chairs/Appropriate Elected Officials Relationship**

The vision of the IGP Commission is that county government be closely linked to the planning teams. While it is possible that a commissioner might even choose to serve as a co-Chair for a poverty reduction planning team, the demands on commissioners' time are so heavy that they may not have the time needed. Even when the county commission is the lead agency for the planning team, and therefore has direct authority over it, commissioners are not the only elected officials who need to be aware of and linked to the initiative. Mayors and legislators should also be kept informed about the initiative's progress. Their knowledge may be valuable, and they may be important partners in implementing whatever strategy emerges from the team. In addition, tribal governments may be important in some counties. Being appropriately linked to them will be a critical factor in developing a plan that can serve Native American populations in their county.

### **Co-Chairs/Facilitator Relationship**

This relationship will have stealth significance: the "behind the scenes" partnership between the co-Chairs and the facilitator will be critical to the success of the initiative, but it will not be entirely visible to other participants. The management team for the initiative will be the co-Chairs, the facilitator, and whatever staff assistance might be organized to support the initiative. The meeting agendas should be developed jointly by the facilitator and the co-Chairs, with the co-Chairs taking the lead on identifying goals and objectives, while leaving the development of the specific meeting design largely to the facilitator.

Three levels of design:

- Overall initiative
  - Individual meetings/events
  - Choosing activities and timing within meetings
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- Co-Chairs lead  
Cooperatively developed  
Facilitator leads

The co-Chairs and the facilitator need to be a team in the truest sense of the word. There needs to be trust, openness, and alignment between them. The co-Chairs need to be willing to provide helpful and honest feedback to the facilitator throughout the process. Merely telling the facilitator that "things are fine," when in fact there might be important opportunities to do

better is a huge disservice not only to everyone directly involved in the initiative, but to the community members experiencing persistent poverty as well.

### **Co-Chairs/Planning Team Relationship**

The relationship between the co-Chairs and the planning team participants can best be viewed as example-driven leadership of a self-directed team. The co-Chairs are being entrusted with the obligation to achieve meaningful outcome, but they have minimal leverage over their fellow participants. The participants are volunteers not directly employed by the co-Chairs; the co-Chairs do not have direct authority over them. The leadership the co-Chairs provide needs to be based more on creating clear expectations, articulating shared values, and by being a positive role model. If it is important that the participants are well-prepared for meetings, the co-Chairs need to make sure everyone understands that, while also exemplifying that preparedness themselves. If specific tasks are delegated to sub-teams, the co-Chairs need to set them up for success, but also hold them accountable for meeting deadlines and doing their best work.

The motivation behind the participants' involvement is more ethical than structural. The participants are all busy people with many demands on their time. Some will be asked to participate because they are part of local social services network (education, health care, etc.), and service on such a taskforce is closely aligned with their other professional expectations. But this initiative will still be an additional brick on their already substantial burden, and agreeing to participate needs to be based on full information about the time commitment they are signing up for. If the initiative turns out to require considerably more time than the participants expected, they may come to resent it and not give their very best effort.

The co-Chairs need to protect the planning team participants from themselves in two important ways. First, they need to prevent “mission creep” and keep the team on track. In order to meet the deadlines for the initiative, they need to help keep the focus on the task at hand. Second, they may need to help keep the working relationships among the team members positive and constructive. Informal conflict management—particularly between meetings—is something the co-Chairs need to be prepared for (managing difficult behaviors during meetings is better left to the facilitator).

### **Co-Chairs/Ally Organizations and Community at large Relationship**

The co-Chairs must take the lead in developing and implementing the communication strategy between the initiative and the broader community. Effectively engaging the appropriate

elected officials, partner organizations, and the community at large throughout the process will increase the prospects of successful implementation. The team must strike a balance of being appropriately discrete—find that middle ground between being secretive and having working documents floating around town.

It would be a shame if this Intergenerational Poverty project somehow did more harm than good. It is an opportunity to build working relationships among agencies, nonprofit organizations and the community at large. But if one organization feels marginalized, excluded, or criticized, the initiative could function more as a wedge than a bridge. The co-Chairs will be critical liaisons between the initiative and the social service network in their county. They need to bring people along with the team so that enthusiasm and support are created, not cynicism or resentment.