

Fairfax County Human Services Department

Notes from the Listening Project Community Meetings

March 7th, 2011

This document contains information on the Fairfax County Listening Project Community Meeting held on Friday, March 7th, 2011. Sections 1 and 2 summarize the Listening Project and the intent of the Community Meeting. Sections 3-5 reflect high level findings from both Community Meetings focused on next steps for Fairfax County. *Please note that this summary represents a synthesis of comments that were heard and does not represent the level of consensus across the community for any one viewpoint.*

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I. Listening Project Overview

Description: Since August 2010, Fairfax County Human Services has engaged in a Listening Project, a research study focused on how Fairfax County can develop a strategic approach aimed at strengthening community capacity. Through a series of research efforts conducted by George Mason University and Community Wealth Ventures that include nonprofit, corporate and County participation, the Listening Project addresses the following key questions:

- What capacity building investments most align with the County’s strategic goals to address both nonprofit needs and critical human service system gaps?
- What capacity building approaches should Fairfax County use to ensure stronger nonprofits and better community outcomes?
- What is Fairfax County’s role in strengthening partnerships with nonprofits and corporations aimed at improve human service delivery?

Following the conclusion of this research phase, George Mason University and Community Wealth Ventures presented their considerations for the County during a meeting with Fairfax County Human Services Agency Directors and during two community meetings that engaged nonprofits and community organizations.

Next Steps: George Mason University and Community Wealth Ventures will begin an action planning process with Fairfax County Human Services focused on implementing strategies recommended as a result of this process.

Listening Project Timeline:



II. Community Meeting Overview

Description: Fairfax County Human Services invited Fairfax County nonprofits, community organizations and corporations to attend one of two community meetings to hear Listening Project findings and engage in a robust discussion around suggested action for the County's consideration. This presentation addressed:

- A presentation of project findings
- A discussion of project findings
- A dialogue focused on next steps for moving forward
- Informal networking

Meetings were held on Monday, March 7th from 1-4 PM and from 7-10 PM at the Government Center with attendance from over 80 Fairfax County community organizations and nonprofits. (Note: the majority of participants attended the afternoon session).

At a high level, the discussion focused on the following:

1. General questions about project findings
2. Role of the County in providing capacity building services
3. Nonprofit's risk tolerance for new program development and/or new service models
4. Considerations for the County's future action
5. Community feedback on surprising and/or interesting results

III. Additional Data and Further Research Requests

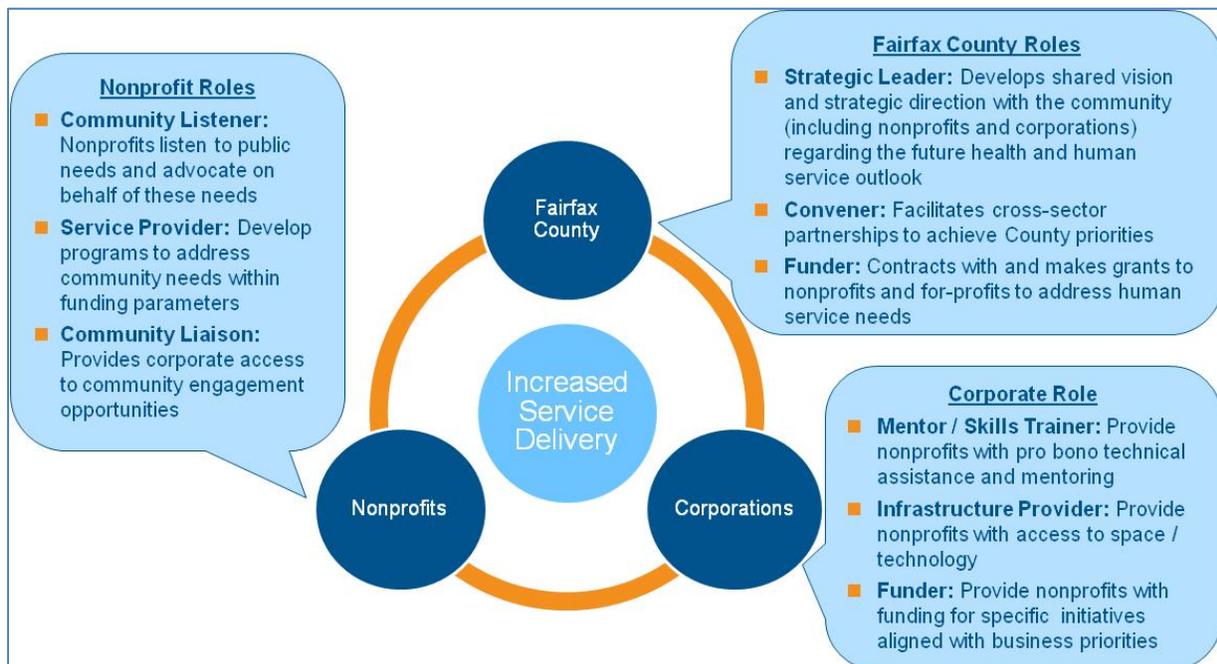
The following comments reflect participant’s interest in further research analysis and expanding sector roles as identified in the Listening Project presentation:

A. Suggested Areas for Further Research Exploration: The following ideas represent Community Meeting comments focused on how project research could be strengthened:

- 1. Increase Community Participation in Research:** Recognition that existing Listening Project does not include input from individual service recipients or community advocacy groups. Additionally, given 6 corporations participated in one focus group; future work could include more involvement with corporations.
- 2. Perform Additional Data Analysis:** Nonprofits recommended analyzing the nonprofit survey data in new ways, looking at organization size by staff and volunteer numbers.

B. Expansion of Sector Roles in Building Capacity: In addition to each sector’s role highlighted in the Listening Project presentation (and below), the following represent additional data that should also be captured for each sector:

- 1. Include “Strategic Leader” in Nonprofit’s Role:** The nonprofit sector should be seen as a “strategic leader.”
- 2. Include “Listener” and “Service Provider” in County’s Role:** The County should be considered a “listener” and a “service provider.” In its role as a “strategic leader,” the County should continue to provide clear goals so that nonprofits can align their work with County efforts.
- 3. Expand Corporations’ Role as a “Funder”:** Given the importance of corporate tax funding, the corporation’s role as a “funder” should be expanded to include donations as well as tax contributions.



IV. Role of the County in Supporting Nonprofit Capacity Building

When asked about the County's role in supporting nonprofit capacity building, respondents mentioned:

- A. All Nonprofits Agree that the County Should Fund Direct Services; However They Disagree on the County's Role in Capacity Building Services:** Nonprofits generally believe that the County should continue to fund direct services. However, there is conflict around the County's role in providing capacity building services and whether it should be providing these services at all or if it should provide them only after all direct service needs have been met.
- B. In Order to Meet Community Needs All Sectors Must be Strong:** While some nonprofits mention capacity building is not the role of the County, it is important to recognize that for the County to succeed in closing human service gaps, all sectors must be at their strongest.
- C. Recognition that Capacity Building Services Can Be Effective:** While most nonprofits may not believe the County should provide capacity building services, nonprofit recipients of capacity building support recognize how important this assistance has been in driving their organizational growth and sustainability. Participants mentioned the most effective capacity building services have been customized technical assistance. Additionally, participants mentioned that while nonprofits appreciate capacity building, many are currently focused on surviving the next few months, rather than focusing on long term sustainability.
- D. Recognition that Nonprofits Serve as Strong Resources for Each Other:** Nonprofits mentioned that while the County can provide additional resources, in general, the nonprofit community is very open and willing to help other nonprofits overcome organizational concerns. Currently, there are very strong peer support groups.

V. Participant Comments Focused on Nonprofit Capacity Building

The following statements reflect participants comments on what capacity building initiatives could lead to increased *nonprofit* capacity:

A. Develop Nonprofit Resources to Assist Outcomes Tracking:

- 1. Develop Nonprofit Benchmarks:** While many nonprofits track outcomes, there is currently no way to compare outcomes of similar organizations for benchmarking purposes. In order to help organizations continually improve and learn from one another, there is interest in developing an outcomes benchmarking tool kit that could be developed from existing outcomes data collected by the County. However, while nonprofits feel benchmarking would be useful, they also feel this will difficult since each organization provides slightly different services to different target audiences.
- 2. Provide Increased Funding to Support Long-Term Outcomes Tracking:** Nonprofits see the importance of outcomes tracking, but want the County and other funders to understand that tracking outcomes for the long-term requires increased funding support.
- 3. Involve Clients in Outcomes Evaluation of Nonprofits:** Since nonprofits aim to provide effective services to their clients, perhaps their clients should be involved in developing key outcomes that the County should prioritize.

B. Improve Nonprofit Access to Existing County Resources:

- 1. Provide Access to Media Center:** The County should provide nonprofits access to the County's media center and public access channel.
- 2. Provide Connection to Capital:** The County should help nonprofits access additional community capital and connect to community/family foundations.
- 3. Provide Access to Existing County Trainings:** Nonprofits have an interest in board development, staff professional development, audit preparation, how to contract effectively with the County, financial management, etc. The County can leverage its expertise in providing some of these trainings.

VI. Participant Comments Focused on System Partnerships

The following statements reflect participants' comments on how to strengthen system partnerships:

A. Increase Nonprofit-Corporate Engagement:

- 1. Include Nonprofit Involvement in Business Attraction Packages:** When new businesses move to Fairfax County, the County should ensure they are involved with local nonprofits from the start.
- 2. Develop Tax Incentives to Encourage Nonprofit Involvement:** Nonprofits mentioned that they would like increased corporate partnership opportunities. The County could incentivize this through tax incentives for businesses who donate to nonprofits or hire disabled community members.
- 3. Facilitate Conversations with Business Partners:** The County could facilitate the difficult conversations with landlords and management companies about placing hard-to-serve populations in housing.

B. Improve County- Nonprofit Relationships:

- 1. Map Community Needs to Funded Programs:** Ensure that community needs map to where they are placing existing funding (e.g., green job training programs are wonderful if there is adequate access to green jobs).
- 2. Continue to Share Outcomes with the Community:** The County should continue to share nonprofit and community outcomes through quarterly reports shared both internally and externally.

C. Improve Nonprofit Access to Talent:

- 1. Assist Nonprofits in Attracting and Maintaining Top Talent:** Nonprofits mentioned difficulty in keeping talented staff at low salaries. Additionally, they recognized that high staff turnover levels means they may have difficulty building capacity when the staff are having a hard time subsisting due to the high cost of living in Fairfax County.
- 2. Address the Wage Disparity Between County and Nonprofit Staff:** Some nonprofits mentioned difficulty retaining staff since, at times, the County offers higher wages within the same service area than nonprofits can afford to pay. This results in competition between the County and nonprofits for certain staff positions.
- 3. Address Staff Salary Inequity Across Public Service Workers:** Some nonprofits would like increased equity across nonprofit workers and other public service workers (e.g., teachers, caseworkers).

VII. Participant Comments Focused on System Supports

The following statements reflect participants comments on what system supports could lead to increased nonprofit capacity:

A. Provide Access to Increased Funding Opportunities:

- 1. Provide a Greater Number of Longer Term Funding Opportunities to Reduce Nonprofit Risk:** Nonprofits agree that longer term funding would encourage them to develop new programs. Additionally, they mentioned existing County contract restrictions make it difficult to take risks and make changes as they gain new information.
- 2. Provide Overhead Funding and Rent Support:** Nonprofits often have an easier time finding outside funding for direct service support than funding overhead costs. The County should provide increased funding for overhead support and/or free space.
- 3. Coordinate Discounted Purchasing for Nonprofits:** Nonprofits mentioned an interest in having the County serve as a nonprofit purchasing agent to enable discounted purchases for HR, accounting, software etc. However, they acknowledged that several nonprofit purchasing groups such as NOVA already exist that do aggregate purchasing.

B. Improve Existing RFP Processes:

- 1. Develop Opportunities for Regional RFP's:** Community Meeting participants were interested in regional RFP opportunities to reduce the administrative and reporting burden associated with providing the same service in numerous counties.
- 2. Allow Greater Nonprofit Involvement in the RFP Development Process:** Community Meeting participants expressed an interest in having nonprofits engaged with the County in the RFP development process. As a result, nonprofits could provide feedback on how closely this RFP would address community needs.

C. Enhance Online Tools and Opportunities to Understand Community Resources:

- 1. Conduct County Asset Mapping:** The County should conduct an asset and resource mapping exercise highlighting specific organizations and individuals in the community and citing the assets/resources each has.
- 2. Connect Similar Nonprofits:** The County should connect similar nonprofits to each other so they can build on each other's strengths in addressing community outcomes.
- 3. Establish a Central Fairfax County Nonprofit Webpage:** The County should collaborate with nonprofits to develop a webpage that provides information on each nonprofit within the County including what they do, who they serve and where they are located. This way individuals in the community AND other nonprofits can find needed resources.