LEARNING FROM WHAT GOES WELL

LESSONS IN BUILDING CAPACITY FOR COMMUNITIES TO ADDRESS VIOLENCE AND OPPRESSION THROUGH ASSET-BASED STRATEGIES

Project Summary
September 2016

INTRODUCTION

The Learning from What Goes Well (WGW) project was an 18-month, collaborative learning initiative for community teams in California to apply asset-based methodologies in their work to address domestic violence and other forms of violence and oppression. The project was designed in direct response to recommendations from a multi-year project, previously conducted in California by the Full Frame Initiative (FFI), to understand and document how survivors of domestic violence and other stakeholders define survivor success.[1] The survivor success project found that survivors defined personal success in the positive, asset-based context of social connections, personal agency, and creating value for self and others, while practitioners emphasized for survivors the absence of violence or separation from a violent relationship. This disconnect mirrors a broader context where, despite shared commitment to support survivor health and safety, services and systems for survivors can be misaligned with what survivors themselves want and need in order to experience success. Being survivor-centered and improving systems of care for survivors means understanding and engaging the varied supports and strategies that survivors employ to achieve not only safety, but also success and wellbeing. Both survivor and practitioner participants from the survivor success project recommended as a next step an initiative to learn tools and strategies to identify assets and extract lessons from when things go well. The WGW project explored what it takes to shift from a deficit-based, problem-defined approach to an asset-based approach that leverages what's already going well in order to more effectively address violence and other oppression.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The WGW project was designed to support a growing movement among domestic violence (DV) advocates and other stakeholders interested in lifting up community assets and strengthening more survivor-driven systems. A focus on cross-collaboration, intersectionality, and peer-learning served as the foundational framework for creating a network of community teams and organizational partners. The Full Frame Initiative partnered with representatives from the Alliance for Community Transformations; Break the Cycle; the Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse; and the Violence Prevention Coalition of Greater Los Angeles—who brought their organizational as well as personal expertise and experience. Together, these five project partners co-developed the infrastructure of the project, including: planning the application and recruitment process for community teams; hiring the project manager; sharing tools and methodologies from an asset-based framework; laying the groundwork for a thoughtful learning trajectory; and planning and implementing three in-person convenings.

The project partners selected three community teams representing a diverse cohort of volunteer groups working across intersectional issues and nontraditional avenues of violence prevention and intervention. The teams, located throughout California, were the California Hmong Advocates Network (Northern and Central California), the Community Doula Project (Alameda and San Francisco Counties), and Peace Pros LA (Santa Monica). Each team entered the project with an identified systemic challenge faced by survivors in their communities; these community challenges were the crucible for team members to grow their knowledge and capacity in applying new asset-based perspectives and strategies.

---

[1] Melbin, A., Jordan, A. & Smyth, K.F. (2014, November). *How Do Survivors Define Success? A New Project to Address an Overlooked Question.* Greenfield, MA: The Full Frame Initiative, 32, 34. Retrieved from http://fullframeinitiative.org/how-do-survivors-define-success-report-recommendations/

Over the course of the implementation phase of the project from October 2015 to September 2016, project participants gathered for three in-person convenings, each centered around curricula on asset-based methodologies and systems change strategies. Convenings also provided a crucial space for peer learning and establishing supportive relationships across teams and sectors. In between convenings, each team met monthly with the project manager and designated project partners who provided coaching and technical assistance on applying newly learned asset-based strategies to the team's community focus, and participated in all-teams meetings every other month for peer support and cross-team learning. Regular interactions between teams, partners, and the project manager facilitated a vibrant and responsive process where all participants could weigh in and provide input for the project's content and progress.

> As social justice activists, we are well-versed in paying attention to and speaking up about what is not going well. We all know this to be a critical piece of change work. However, through the Learning from What Goes Well Project we've slowed down to appreciate and investigate the instances when things go better than expected. It's been a chance to recognize other "positive outliers" around us and consider new ways to invite them into our collective change work.
>
> —*Community Doula Project*

COMMUNITY TEAMS

While all community teams shared a commitment to and interest in learning from what goes well to address domestic violence and other forms of violence and oppression in new ways, each team came from a distinct context and with unique expertise. The following synopses introduce the teams and their project objectives and contain links to team-authored summaries of their WGW project experience.

The California Hmong Advocates Network (CHAN) are a group of advocates working at a number of domestic violence programs in Northern and Central Valley California who have known each other and worked together since 2013. For the project, CHAN focused on providing peer support, guidance, and resources to Hmong advocates in Fresno County in order to decrease the isolation of Hmong advocates and to increase their presence in the Hmong community, in hopes of increasing culturally-aligned community supports and service systems for Hmong survivors.

Read more about CHAN's experience with the WGW project.

The Community Doula Project (CDP) is comprised of members from two groups: Birth Justice Project and Black Women Birthing Justice, who collaborate on birth justice issues in the Bay Area with a shared goal of increasing doula care access for low-income communities of color, women in or formerly in prison, and survivors of domestic and sexual violence. CDP's project focus was to learn from and engage mainstream maternal health care providers as birth justice champions in efforts to increase voice and choice of low-income people, people of color, and survivors of violence in their birth process.

Read more about what CDP has to say about learning from what goes well.

Peace Pros LA (PPLA) is a multidisciplinary-membered consortium that formed in 2009 from a community forum hosted by the Santa Monica Police Department and the Westside Domestic Violence Network. Peace Pros LA engages multiple systems in Santa Monica around violence prevention through dialogue about healthy masculinity and engaging men as allies. During the WGW project, Peace Pros LA focused on their work to change campus culture around sexual assault and rape specifically at Santa Monica College, and explored how to frame their curriculum and training content with an asset-based framework.

Read more about what PPLA learned about asset-based strategies.

ASSET-BASED METHODOLOGIES AND TOOLS

The following asset-based methodologies and tools were presented, explored, and applied by community teams and project partners throughout the project. A mix of within-project leadership and external experts[2] offered resources, presented material, and/or facilitated learning spaces for project participants.

Community Asset Mapping—a creative arts-based mapping tool that helps identify the assets in any community as a key strategy for systems change (community can be defined by geography, identity group, or whatever hold most relevance to the given project). Asset mapping tells a visual story about a community, showing its strengths and where they are located. It can help surface informal and formal community resources (people, places, services, relationships) that may not be evident or immediately understood. Ultimately, this allows for a richer understanding of strategic opportunities for change and which and where resources can be leveraged. Asset mapping can be done at various phases in a project to illuminate the evolution of assets in a community.

> The WGW project has helped our team think more strategically about our approach to prevention work and implement an asset-based approach to improve our messaging to better resonate with our community. The hands-on, collaborative nature of the project has also helped strengthen our internal processes and pushed us to update and improve our training materials.
>
> —*Peace Pros LA*

Dominant Culture Habits and Antidotes—offers an opportunity to name, discuss and interrupt ingrained or tacit habits, based on dominant culture values, that create barriers to making powerful change. Dominant culture habits can be damaging because they become the norms and standards by which other indicators of culture are measured without being explicitly named or adopted by the group. Exercises to explore and name dominant culture habits

---

encourage finding antidotes to support new practices and ways of being, thinking, and working as pathways to new solutions to complex problems.

Identifying Community Leaders and Natural Supports—a mixed-methods, strengths-based approach to understanding existing relationships and assets within a community or group. This approach builds upon existing strengths in both formal and informal networks, and supports participants to strategically invest in key relationships and simultaneously identify areas to cultivate new connections.

Positive Deviance—an approach to problem solving based on the concept that in every group or community there are a few individuals (positive deviants) who, despite facing equal or worse challenges than other members of the community and having access to to same resources, exhibit behaviors and habits that allow them to have better solutions, and therefore better outcomes, to their problems. The approach asks groups or communities to identify, document, and examine these successful behaviors and strategies, and to develop actions and measurable outcomes for the entire community based on those findings. The Positive Deviance approach brings about behavioral and social change by identifying what is already right in the community or system, instead of introducing new or untested ("outsider") solutions or trying to fix what is going wrong.

Success Moment Workshop—a methodology created by the Full Frame Initiative that combines Appreciative Inquiry and Significant Moment Reflection for identifying and examining critical moments of personal success. The workshops serve as a tool for people to better understand how they define, experience, and create success in their own lives and to use that new understanding to create and experience more of these moments.

> The work to address gender-based violence seems slow because we don't see the results immediately, but little success moments give us hope and also a glimpse of what's to come.
>
> —*CA Hmong Advocates Network*

In addition to asset-based methodologies, the project introduced other topics and related tools that were pertinent and important for the group, given the focus of the work. They included:

Systems Change Strategies—exploring a framework for systems thinking and systems change in the context of specific community teams' opportunities. Key concepts and strategies included: using an actionable cause analysis to deepen understanding of the current state, prior to intervention; identifying various stakeholders' "points of pain"; looking for leveraged opportunities where small efforts could reap large returns; and paying attention to context, such as the history of past interventions and how people most affected understand the change effort.

Power Analysis and Authentic Community Engagement—a mixed-methods approach to articulating a shared framework about power at the intersections of personal, community, and systems level change. This framework provides the foundation to examine individual and

community resilience, assets and informal resources, and cultural specificity to support authentic community engagement. Concepts covered included resilience, self-determination, collective action, social justice, liberation, privilege, oppression, and trauma.

Productive Teams—identifying current and existing strengths of how community teams work together, including group dynamics, determining group processes, tools for decision making, anticipating and resolving potential conflict, and moving through differences while being authentic and respectful.

LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

> Learning from what goes well is like being right-handed and learning to write with your left hand. We have been conditioned to think of solutions based on our problems without looking at the assets we may already have.
>
> —*CA Hmong Advocates Network*

Teams and project partners have learned a great deal and experienced significant shifts over the 18 month project period. In the spirit of the project's learning origins and purpose, we share the following lessons, with the caveat that these lessons are based on our own context. Any learnings from what goes well contain both shared and unique characteristics depending on context, culture, and cohort.

Learning from what goes well takes time and effort. It is a reorientation and developmental change from our dominant culture's and the domestic violence field's focus on deficiencies and problems. As expressed by CHAN, starting from assets can be disorientating and is like learning to write with a different hand! Slowing down and allowing for introspection, reflection, and processing are crucial components to learning any new way of thinking. Particularly in a crisis response-based environment, incorporating a learning from what goes well orientation requires devoting intentional space and time to plan, discuss, and continually practice asset-based approaches. The project space was helpful for participants because it allotted specific times, gatherings, and reminders for learning and practicing a strength-based orientation. However, learning from what goes well can be applied and practiced in diverse ways. These can include asking different questions of ourselves (e.g., identifying something that went surprisingly well or an unanticipated win and examining what enabled that different outcome); starting conversations from an asset-based perspective (e.g., instead of *"what problem brought you to this point?"* try *"tell me one thing that went well this week, no matter how small"*); or conducting a more formal and concentrated learning project like this one. While not all of these applications require months of planning or additional funding, they all require ongoing practice and discipline.

Significant changes from learning from what goes well can be witnessed and experienced through micro-practices. While integrating a learning from what goes well approach in the foundation of anti-violence and anti-oppression work takes time and discipline, micro-practices can collectively make significant impact. In this project, teams demonstrated changes in their group practices, such as using vocabulary and asking questions from an asset-based framework, beginning debriefs and assessments with what went well, and planning their continuing work through lessons learned from successes. Team members and project partners also applied the tools and strategies learned during the project in their personal workplaces

and other spheres. These micro-practices demonstrate a broader orientation shift that, over time, lead to greater capacity and momentum for implementing creative solutions for complex, systems-situated work. It also means that there are small, micro-practices organizations and individuals can undertake—even without huge resources and investments—that can begin to change systems.

Learning from what goes well can surface allies in unexpected places. By identifying positive outliers or success moments as starting points, teams expressed refreshed curiosities and new perspectives on engaging unlikely allies (including those who were overlooked or even viewed as barriers in the past). The learning process asked teams to slow down and ask deep questions, which helped teams to reassess and reimagine their approaches and strategies. For example, one of the teams over the course of the project shifted from an antagonistic stance toward another stakeholder group in their sector that they had struggled with, to one of recognizing their shared humanity, experiences, and challenges. This shift is meaningful and energizing amidst work that often deals with crisis, scarcities, and seemingly never-ending problem solving.

Supports and resources are vital for sustainable, inclusive community engagement. This is especially relevant for communities outside of traditional structures who are working at intersections. Special attention to what it takes for informal and under-resourced communities to be able to participate is necessary, including considerations such as fair compensation for people's time and contributions, identification of opportunity costs and tradeoffs in participation, and an inclusive field that welcomes nontraditional groups and perspectives. It is valuable to think beyond mainstream groups and spheres and to include peripheral groups that are a part of innovative and relevant, but often overlooked or hidden, anti-violence and anti-oppression work. This project, which had teams with members ranging from DV advocates to doulas to educators to teen mentors, encompassed a plethora of experiences and outlooks that enriched conversations and strategies to anti-violence and anti-oppression efforts. Engaging different and diverse stakeholders will add value to the work that the DV field is committed to.

A learning mentality and openness to new approaches, as well as mutuality across all collaborators, are necessary to learn from what goes well. All team members and project partners entered the project with a desire and willingness to learn new strategies and approaches, and maintained a commitment to learning with and across participants, organizations, and project roles. Cultivating a culture of respect, mutuality, and collaboration was crucial for holding a learning initiative together, and it included many components, such as recognizing our own dominant culture habits and interrupting them with new practices; sharing facilitation, knowledge and expertise with one another; and having an iterative environment and adaptive process for planning convenings and meetings. The project respected all participants as teachers and learners, and demonstrated the power of reciprocal interactions between professional providers and practitioners with program participants and community members.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For further information, please contact
Anna Melbin, Director of Strategic Capacity Building
anna@fullframeinitiative.org