

United Way's Strategic Partnership Conference: Creating Innovation and Impact Through Partnership: Innovative Partnership Competition

Katherine Bennett 09 June 2011

Introduction

The economic environment has plagued many businesses, small and large, with hardship and uncertainty, leaving entities across all sectors and industries at risk. A recent study conducted by the Nonprofit Finance Fund (2009) shows that America's nonprofit sector is financially vulnerable. The recession is forcing the issue of how to better invest in what works for the benefit of society. Decreases in funding and capital and human resources have affected nonprofit organizations' ability to fulfill missions and serve populations in need of their vital services. Recognizing gaps of funding and resources, nonprofit organizations are turning to partnerships to effectively address the needs of their constituents.

According to the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, "The turbulent economy is creating new incentives for charities to cooperate. More organizations are starting to share fundraising and marketing ideas, while others are considering merging, combining 'back offices' to handle administrative duties, or other formal alliances" (Wallace 2009). Across the country, community foundations, United Ways and nonprofit associations are holding workshops to help charities learn about their options. Organizations can no longer afford to ignore the fruitful opportunities of collaboration. Funders and nonprofit entities are recognizing the potential impact that collaboration can produce, and are rewarding agencies engaging in collaborative behavior.

The United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania (UWSEPA) understands the importance of cross-sector collaboration and nonprofit partnerships. Striving to increase awareness and the importance of collaboration, UWSEPA developed an arena to foster discussion and action. The arena created is the Strategic Partnerships Conference, which hosted the first annual Innovative Partnerships Competition in 2010 to bolster and reward Philadelphia's nonprofit organizations who are working collectively towards greater impact.

The Strategic Partnership Conference

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Responding to the effects of the national recession and the effect on the local community, UWSEPA recognized that nonprofit organizations were in great need of assistance and planning resources to supplement their operations to ensure long-term sustainability. In 2009, UWSEPA joined forces with Delaware Valley Grantmakers (DVG), the Philadelphia Foundation (TPF) and Women's Way to launch the Strategic Partnerships Initiative and subsequent conference. The conference featured informational sessions on topics such as joint programming, shared operations, management support organization models, and mergers.

UWSEPA believes that this initiative represents an opportunity to strengthen and broaden the scope of well-run organizations. Additionally, the initiative presents an opportunity to ensure that good programming, valued in the community and achieving strong outcomes, survives and is expanded when possible. The first symposium brought together nonprofit executives, board members and grantmakers from the Philadelphia region to discuss the role of partnerships in the nonprofit sector.

The success of the first conference prompted the need for further conversations focused on collaborative approaches to the region's most pressing problems. The second forum took place on December 3, 2010, and was hosted by the UWSEPA, the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Leadership Program, the *Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal* and DVG. The second Strategic

Partnership Conference, called Creating Innovation and Impact Through Partnership, gathered the region's nonprofit professionals to promote the advancement of organizational partnerships. Programming included inventive service delivery, development of staff management systems and leveraging resources to restructure organizational operations to ensure mission fulfillment.

Nonprofit leaders came together to find new ways of delivering their services, organizing their staff and allocating their resources in order to promote mission fulfillment in the most creative manner. The 2010 Strategic Partnership Conference also featured the first annual Innovative Partnership Competition, which showcased five organizations' approaches to collective impact.

The Innovative Partnership Competition

The Innovative Partnership Competition

Serving as a culmination to the Strategic Partnership Conference, the Innovative Partnership Competition was created to feature the most innovative examples of high-impact collaboration in the region. The 2010 conference hosts conducted the competition, which was fashioned as a two-phase contest. Participants were asked to submit an application describing their proposed or developing

initiatives following a set of questions and criteria. Phase one served as an initial screening process, indentifying the top five proposals. During phase two, the five finalists presented their innovative partnerships to a panel of judges and the audience of the conference. From the pool of finalists, three applications were selected and awarded cash prizes of \$15,000.

Phase One: Application

The open invitation for submissions produced 30 applications. Applicants were required to describe their collaboration following five criteria:

1. Describe the partnership, including all partners involved.
2. Illustrate the issue addressed by the strategic partnership and the proposed solution.
3. Capture the relationships which prompted the exploration of partnership.
4. Describe the potential, or existing, impact of the partnership.
5. Explain why the initiative is innovative.

Phase Two: Finalist Presentations

Finalists who showed the greatest degree of collaboration with the highest potential impact were awarded the opportunity to present their proposals to the audience of nonprofit professionals and a panel of expert judges of

various backgrounds from both the public and private sectors. Presentations were judged by the potential impact, level of innovation and feasibility of the collaboration and outcomes. Five finalists were selected to present during the Strategic Partnership Conference:

1. **Diplomas Now**, an existing partnership, is a unique data-driven collaborative that works closely with school administrators, teachers and other onsite providers to identify off-track youth and develop, implement and sustain comprehensive, targeted and intensive strategies to get them back on track. Partnering organizations include the Philadelphia Education Fund, Johns Hopkins University, the School District of Philadelphia, City Year of Greater Philadelphia, and Communities In Schools of Philadelphia.
2. **Double Dollars**, a developing partnership, targets families and heads of households in order to improve the well-being of Philadelphia communities and create lasting connections between healthy food and hungry stomachs. Partnering organizations include Fair Food, Wholesome Wave Foundation, the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, and the Philadelphia Department of Public Health.
3. **Farm to Families Initiative**, a working partnership, connects a diverse group of Philadelphia-based nonprofits to get fresh, affordable, local food to North Philadelphia families each week, year-round.

Partnering organizations include St. Christopher's Foundation for Children, farmers and producers from the Delaware Valley foodshed, Common Market, the SHARE Food Program, the Women's Community Revitalization Project, Neighborhood Bike Works, the Health Promotion Council, the Food Trust, OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, the Reinvestment Fund, the University of Pennsylvania's PennDesign, and Greensgrow Philadelphia Project.

4. **Philadelphia Refugee Health Collaborative**, a proposed collaboration, will create an equitable system of refugee health care in the Philadelphia region that ensures a consistently high standard of care for all newly arrived refugees. The Collaborative is a partnership between Philadelphia's three refugee resettlement agencies, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society Pennsylvania, Lutheran Children and Family Service and Nationalities Service Center, and their affiliated refugee health clinics, Jefferson Family Medicine Associates, Fairmount Primary Care Center, Nemours Pediatrics, Drexel Women's Care Center, Penn Center for Primary Care and Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.
5. **Women Against Abuse and Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Delaware County**, a proposed partnership, involves financial literacy and capability initiatives for women and families that have been affected by domestic violence, and cross-agency training opportunities for staff members of

each agency to learn about the issues addressed by the other organization.

Award Winners

Three partnerships—Farms to Families, the Philadelphia Refugee Health Collaborative and the Women Against Abuse and Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Delaware County—were awarded cash prizes of \$15,000. Two other finalists, Double Dollars and Diplomas Now, each received a prize of \$2,500 because of their marked success and innovative efforts. Additionally, each winner received consulting services to assist in the development of their strategic partnerships. Consulting services were donated by the Wharton Small Business Development Center and the Alliance for Nonprofit Management.

Conclusion

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The Strategic Partnership Conference and the Innovative Partnership Competition have demonstrated the importance strategic partnerships can play in a community. As described by the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania (n.d.), the conference and competition was created to facilitate dialogue between nonprofit leaders and funders, showcasing Philadelphia's ability to become a leader in effective partnerships. Mergers and creative partnerships enable nonprofit

organizations to expand service areas and increase impact and will continue to redefine the nonprofit industry.

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