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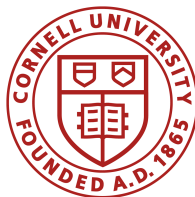
Energy
& Local
Economies

Communities in Action

Program Evaluation

Report to Richland County Dept. of Public Health

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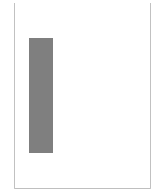
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INTRODUCTION



This report provides an evaluation of Richland County, Montana's Communities in Action program. Communities in Action has been functioning for over a decade as a coalition group that provides a forum and process for community discussion and assessment regarding public well-being and community development concerns. Over its lifetime, the program has benefited from the commitment of volunteer participants representing a variety of local entities and the citizenry and has tackled a wide array of community issues.

With a decade of experience and the heavy workload prompted by the Bakken oil boom slowing down, the time is ripe for Communities in Action to take a look at the successes of the program and plan its future. This program evaluation is part of that effort. The work results from a partnership between Communities in Action and a research team from Montana State University (MSU) that includes Extension Community Development specialists and Geography faculty and graduate students. MSU's engagement is supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

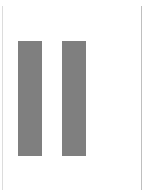
Working with the Communities in Action steering committee and the Richland County Health Department (RCHD), the MSU research team developed a research approach with the following activities:

- Ripple effect mapping with steering committee members
- Facilitation of seven town hall meetings in selected communities and schools
- Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders

Together, these activities were designed to capture the insights of participants and the general public regarding successes, challenges and opportunities associated with the Communities in Action program.

This report is organized as follows: Part 1 provides context in the form of a description of the Communities in Action process and a regional overview; Part 2 provides an overview of methods and findings of each of the program evaluation components; Part 3 summarizes key findings and offers recommendations to improve the Communities in Action process. Readers familiar with the region and the Communities in Action process are encouraged to go directly to Part 3.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT



In 2005, fifteen community leaders from Richland County formed the Communities in Action steering committee to help coordinate local responses to emerging concerns about quality of life in the county, many related to oil and gas activity impacts. Guided by the Richland County Health Department, Communities in Action used the “Mobilizing Action through Partnership and Planning (MAPP)” community building process.

The MAPP process, created by the National Association of County & City Health Officials, employs a mixture of needs assessments, data collection, and participatory meetings to improve community health (Corso, Conley, and Sharp 2001). In Richland County, the Communities in Action steering committee used the process’s framework while adopting it to meet their own needs. Ten AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers, who began their service with Communities in Action in August of 2005, assisted with organizing and implementing the MAPP process and developing a strategic plan over three years.

To assist with a telephone survey, the Richland County Health Department received a USDA Rural Business Opportunity Grant to hire researchers from the University of Montana – Missoula (UM). With help from UM and the AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers, the Health Department conducted eight quality of life assessments in Richland County, ranging from traditional health surveys to a program that gave disposable cameras to young people in the community to better understand their experiences. This process created baseline county data prior to the Bakken oil boom.

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION PROGRAM EVALUATION

In 2008 the steering committee hosted the first “State of the Community” county-wide conference to identify community needs and create action groups to work on priority projects. The goal of Communities in Action was – and continues to be – to unite community initiatives, build connections between people and organizations, and prevent redundancy. Despite the slow down in oil development, Communities in Action continues to work on increasing the quality of life for Richland County residents. The program “envision[s] Richland County as being a healthy community comprised of healthy individuals, economically thriving businesses, and a clean and safe place where families can grow” (“Richland County Quality of Life Assessment: 2010-2013” 2013, 4).

To achieve this vision, Communities in Action has followed a basic template for the past ten years. In theory, the steering committee in partnership with Public Health was responsible for collecting data on the community and developing a strategic plan for the organization. The steering committee and community conference act as information conduits linking the public, volunteers, and elected officials. Action groups take action on the identified issues. Action groups vary in formality, with some meeting regularly and others more loosely organized; many of the groups are formed and dissolved as needed. Action groups are a mixture of paid employees and volunteers, with some residents participating in multiple action groups. Their work is coordinated through the Communities in Action steering committee. Steering committee members act as liaisons to the action groups while providing oversight to the group as a whole. Steering committee members coordinate the “bigger picture” for the action groups, helping to connect people and resources to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. Figure 1 illustrates the process.

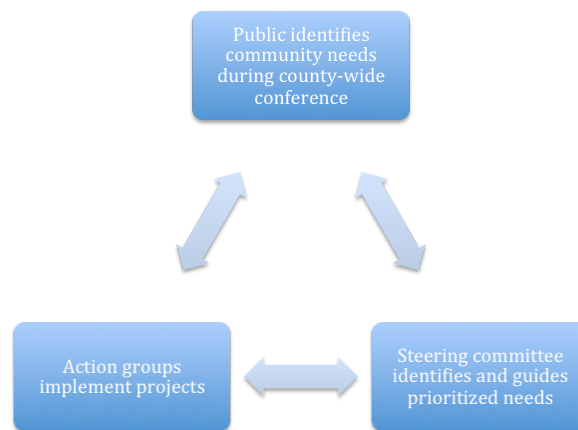


Figure 1. Communities in Action Information Conduits

The Richland County Health Department continues to provide an important role within the Communities in Action process, contributing over \$50,000 per year in in-kind donations, including administrative support, office space, internet, and supplies. The

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION PROGRAM EVALUATION

department also spearheads health assessments, such as the Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response (CASPER). These assessments are often required for their own work but provide useful data for the Communities in Action steering committee and associated partners, community agencies, and community groups. Thus, while Communities in Action does not currently have its own paid staff, it depends heavily on the time and skills of paid Health Department employees.

This is the first formal program evaluation undertaken by Communities in Action. While the steering committee recognizes the importance of internal program evaluation, they have struggled to find a process that works for them. In the past, the committee has used the County Health Ranking system developed by the University of Wisconsin and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Figure 2 provides a timeline of Communities in Action with major organizational developments.

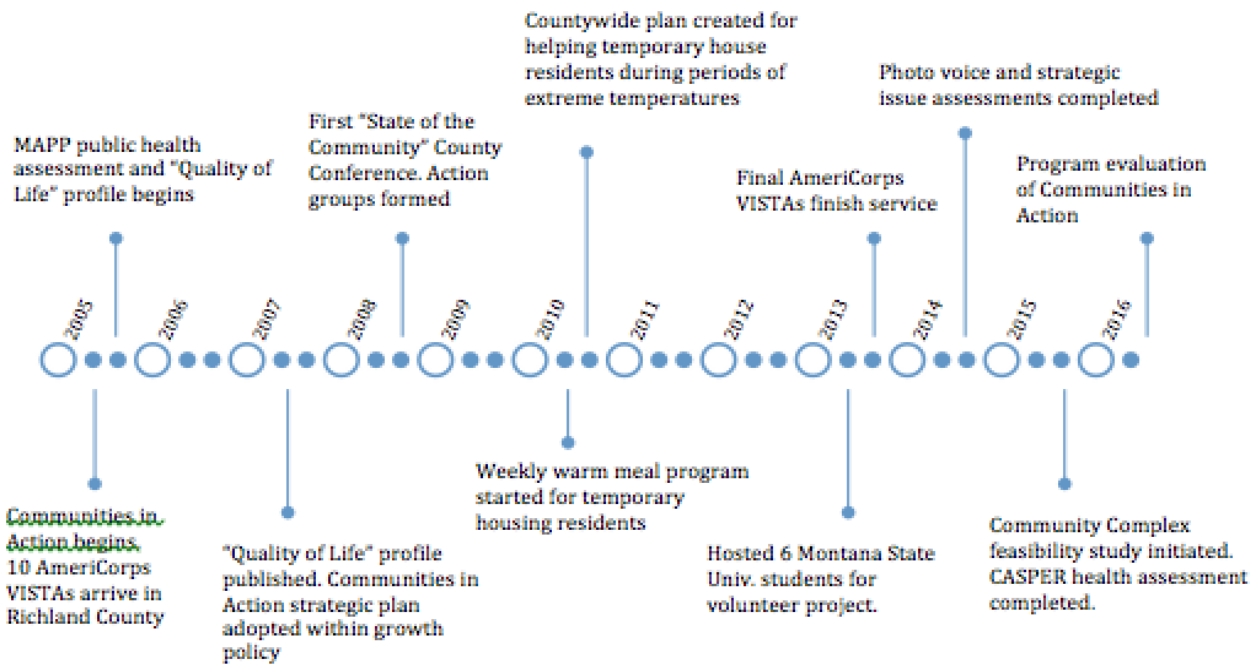


Figure 2. Timeline of Communities in Action program development

RICHLAND COUNTY OVERVIEW

Founded in 1914, Richland County is located in the rural, rolling landscapes of northeastern Montana. The county is the 32nd largest by area in the state of Montana, covering approximately 2,104 square miles. Despite the spanning county, the population is only 11,576 with 6,473 people living in the largest city, Sidney (U.S. Census Bureau 2014). Sidney is both the commercial hub of the area and the county seat.

Located in what is known as the MonDak region, Richland County shares social and economic connections with Western North Dakota. Both the Missouri River and the Yellowstone River run through the county, providing important irrigation resources for farmers through the Lower Yellowstone Irrigation Project and offering ample recreational opportunities. The rivers converge several miles to the east of the county near Buford, North Dakota. The rest of the prairie landscape is dotted with farms, ranches, houses, towns, and – a feature particularly relevant for this report – oil wells.

Richland County sits atop the Williston Basin. Beginning in the early 2000s, new efficiencies in oil and gas drilling, high energy prices, and the discovery of the Elm Coulee Field in Richland County prompted a new round of exploration and energy production in the region. Between 2000 and 2006 the Elm Coulee Field doubled the Montana's oil production (Richmond 2012). Beyond the Elm Coulee Field, extensive drilling in other parts of the Williston Basin took off after 2008, concentrated largely in western North Dakota. While North Dakota drilling activities and production dwarfed the production in Montana, Sidney remained a critical service and logistics hub for the Bakken development. Driven by activity across the Bakken region, Richland County experienced a large influx in population, increasing demands on infrastructure and public services that persisted from 2006 through 2014. While drilling activity significantly slowed in 2014, there was a lag in the corresponding decline in local business activity, traffic and population pressures. As of summer 2016 many residents noted that Sidney was returning back to the city people had known before the “boom,” including less traffic, shorter lines at stores and restaurants, and a generally slower pace of life.

People

Richland County had a decreasing population from 1982 until the Bakken oil boom of the early 2000s. The oil boom led to an increase in population and significant changes to the county's demographic make up, including age distribution and diversity (“Richland County Quality of Life Assessment” 2013). Between 2000 and 2015, the average annual net migration of residents increased by 85% (U.S. Department of Commerce 2016). However, it is widely believed that population estimates grossly underestimate local

changes in population due to the difficulty of capturing rapid population fluxes and temporary workers.

As a rural, isolated county experiencing socioeconomic changes due to energy development, Richland County has unique challenges and opportunities related to public health. According to the 2015 CASPER health assessment (Richland County Health Department 2015), 81.8% of residents in Richland County either agreed or strongly agreed that they could get the health care they needed near their home. Residents identified their largest health issues as access to affordable housing, illegal drug use, and alcohol use. The health assessment also noted that Richland County has higher rates of cancer, diabetes, teen births, chlamydia, and unintentional injuries when compared to the Montana rates. Further, there is a lack of dental services and affordable childcare in Richland County. While the Health Department is actively working on many of these issues, the stress on its resources from the oil boom has also created challenges in meeting these needs.

Place

Richland County is designated as “frontier” due to its low population density. It covers 1,339,728 acres, of which 89.8% is privately owned, 6.3% is owned by the state, and 3.8% is owned by BLM (U.S. Geological Survey 2012). Throughout the county, 544 farms and ranches cover the rural landscapes in the county, with an average farm size of 2,377 acres (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2014). Given the number of farms and ranches in Richland County, the oil boom could have large impacts on the agriculture sector. While the county is considered isolated, it also has access to an airport in Sidney with five daily flights to Billings, MT.

Approximately 94% of Richland County residents think their community is a good to raise children, and 86.9% think it is a good place to grow old (Richland County Health Department 2015). Given the influx of workers due to oil workers and related services, affordable housing is one of the top priorities for community members. Approximately 27% of residents have high or very high housing costs (ibid). The county struggled with housing demands during the boom, and many new hotels, temporary homes, and apartment complexes were built. As population growth has declined with the oil slow down, it remains to be seen what will happen to this new infrastructure.

Prosperity

The oil boom dramatically reshaped Richland County’s economy, as shown by Figure 2. Unemployment decreased from a high of 11% in 1982 to just over 2% in 2014, a remarkably low rate when compared to state and national averages. The county also benefits from lower rates of poverty when compared to the rest of Montana, and the

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION PROGRAM EVALUATION

county's hardship-related transfer payments decreased from 2004 to 2014. However, the available data generally ends in 2014 when the price of crude oil as was \$98.92 per barrel; by February 2016, the price had fallen to \$31.62. While the data does not currently capture the impacts of this drop in oil prices, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is an uptick in unemployment and related hardship payments.

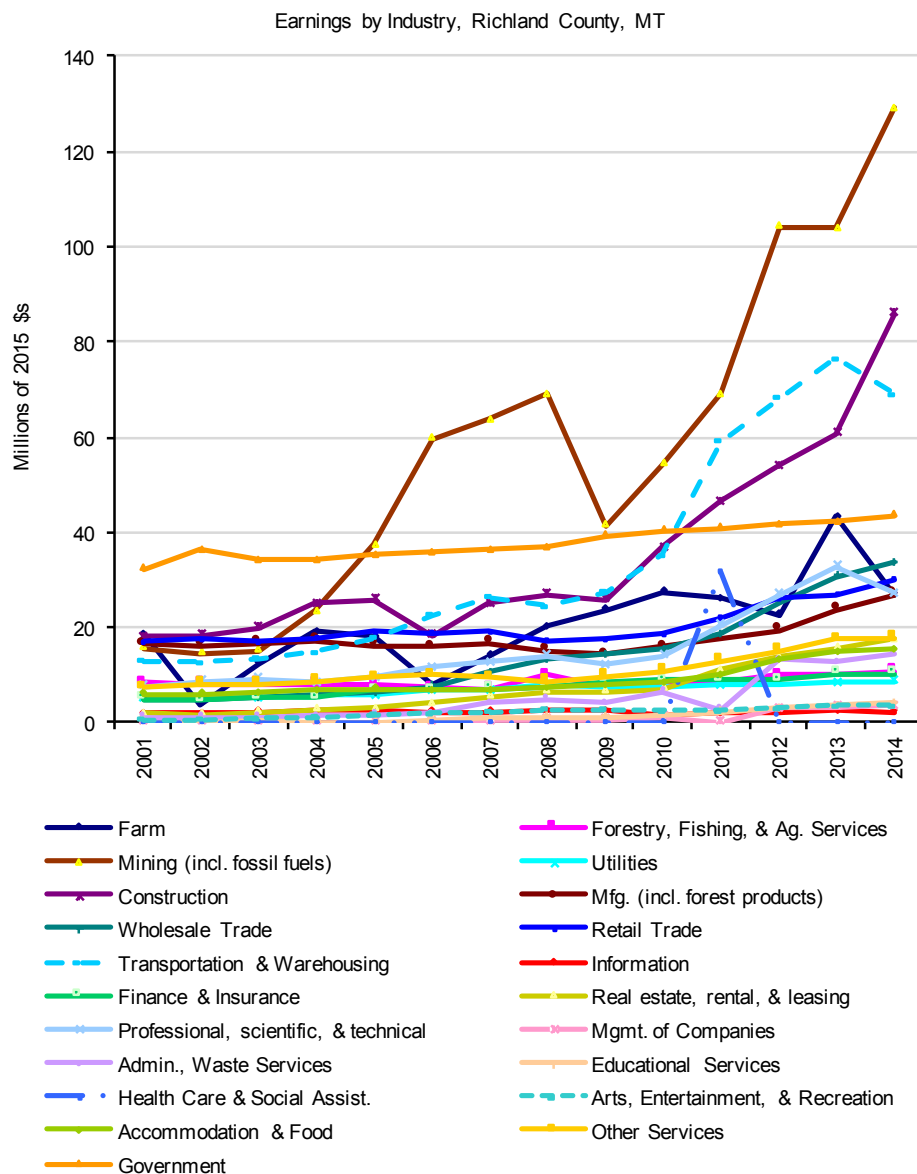
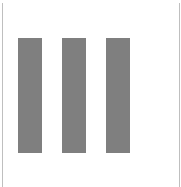


Figure 3. Earnings by Industry, 2015 \$s

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce. 2015. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Economic Accounts, Washington, D.C. Table CA05N, as reported in Headwaters Economics' Economic Profile System (headwaterseconomics.org/eps).

The economic makeup of the county has also shifted over the last ten years. In 2014, the top three industries in the county, by earning amounts, were mining, transportation and warehousing, and construction. Each of these industries has seen steep increases in the last ten years, presumably due to the oil boom. However, the actual benefits of these changes on the county are not well understood. Further, the importance of service jobs in Richland County should not be ignored. Even with the energy boom, the service sector (transportation and utilities, retail, wholesale, finance, insurance, and real estate), provide more jobs than the non-service sector (farm, agriculture services, mining, construction, and manufacturing). The county’s top employer by number of jobs is the Sidney Health Center.

METHODS & RESULTS



The program evaluation approach was designed to survey the range of perspectives among key stakeholders and the public-at-large on the impacts of the Communities in Action program. The program’s stated goals are to unite community initiatives, build connections between people and organizations, and prevent redundancy. The evaluation involved three distinct tools. Ripple effect mapping and in-depth interviews provided two angles on how steering committee members understand the impact of the program, while a series Town Hall meetings sampled perspectives from the community more broadly. The methods for each approach are described below, with general findings from the three inquiries following.

METHODS

Ripple Effect Mapping

On March 17, 2016, MSU Extension Specialist Tara Mastel and Graduate Research Assistant Katie Bills Walsh conducted a ripple effect mapping exercise with the Communities in Action steering committee. Ripple effect mapping is a new program evaluation tool designed to illustrate impacts of community development by linking chains of events (Emery et al. 2015; “Ripple Effects Mapping” 2015).

Mastel facilitated the conversation with roughly fifteen steering committee members. The exercise began with participants interviewing each other in pairs regarding impacts of the Communities in Action process. Partners asked each other about some of the greatest achievements from the process using a set of predetermined questions (see Appendix A).

Following the interviews, the facilitator asked the group to share some of the outcomes they discussed. The group listed well over 20 completed projects that have been accomplished by the community as a result of the Communities in Action process. A few positive changes in how people work on community issues were also listed such as increased “knowledge of what is going on in the community” and “increased volunteerism.” Comments from the group discussion were handwritten on a large sheet of paper taped to the wall in the room, as shown in Figure 4. Bills Walsh recorded verbatim quotes from the discussion. At the end, participants were asked to include the three most important outcomes from the Communities in Action process. After the exercise, Mastel recorded the results in Xmind, an online mind-mapping tool, for analysis.

Stakeholder Interviews

Tara Mastel conducted 19 individual interviews with key stakeholders in the Communities in Action process. Key stakeholders were defined as current or past members of the steering committee and employees the public health department with active roles in the Community in Action program. Interviews were conducted between mid-March and early May in 2016, in person and by phone. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix B) and lasted between 15 minutes and an hour and 15 minutes. Mastel kept notes during the interviews; the analysis here is based on those written notes.

Town Hall Meetings

In previous years, Communities in Action hosted a countywide community conference in Sidney. While these events were well attended, the steering committee also received feedback that the conference was overly focused on Sidney. In response, the steering committee decided to replace the conference with a series of town hall meetings in 2016.

The MSU Local Government Center provided facilitation and support services to the process. They designed the town hall meetings to highlight community strengths, to reflect on changes due to the oil and gas slow down, and to share information about how to volunteer with Communities in Action. An appreciative inquiry format was selected to highlight the community's assets. Representatives from action groups also gave brief presentations about their work and encouraged residents to join the group. For the full town hall meeting agenda, see Appendix C.

In total, Communities in Action met with over 200 community members through seven town hall meetings, two of which were in high schools. Locations were: Sidney High School; Sidney; Elmdale; Fairview High School; Fairview; Lambert (canceled due to lack of participants); Savage High School (canceled due to track meet); and Savage. Each town hall meeting had a distinct flavor and conversation. Appendix D provides the lists of assets that each community identified during town hall meetings.

RESULTS

The data we collected from the Ripple Effect mapping, town hall meetings, and key stakeholder interviews demonstrate that Communities in Action has had a genuine, measurable, and positive impact on Richland County. For this report, we report impacts in thematic categories. First, we discuss impacts from the perspective of the two main goals of Communities in Action: 1, to build connections between people and organizations and 2, to unite community initiatives and prevent redundancy. In addition, we share observations in three other categories: 3, impacts on participants as individuals and professionals; 4, program structure and operation, and 5, visibility and communication.

1. Building connections between people and organizations

The Communities in Action process gives people from diverse backgrounds an opportunity to come together to work on shared goals. Working on issues addressed by Communities in Action can be involved and demanding and as such gives participants a chance to go from being acquaintances to friends. A number of people interviewed reported that one of the key benefits of the Communities in Action process is the

opportunity to connect with people who are committed to working hard to make Sidney and Richland County a great place.

The action groups provide opportunity to meet new people or deepen already existing relationships. One steering committee member noted that Communities in Action resulted in more inclusive community development: “We definitely built community partnerships with other entities or people they would not have associated with because of the steering committee meetings and action groups.”

Recently, a diverse contingent from the Active Richland County action group attended the statewide Building Active Communities conference in Great Falls which is focused on increasing public infrastructure to promote physical activity. The group from Sidney included representatives from the Sidney Chamber of Commerce, the Public Health department, a county commissioner, and the Sidney Director of Public Works. Though they have diverse backgrounds, all have a shared goal of increasing access to and use of walking trails in the community. They may have learned about this conference through their own professional networks, but the experience they had attending the conference together is likely to increase the chance of advancing their shared goal of increasing walkability of their community.

Newcomers to the area benefit from the opportunity to accelerate the process of learning about activities and expertise in the community, which has personal and professional benefits. For example, Library Director Kelley Reisig has lived in Richland County for about three years. She said that without the steering committee, she would only know about 10% of the people she knows in town. These connections are highly valuable for her work at the library because the library’s mission is quite broad and knowing more people helps her more easily reach out to the community for partnerships on projects.

2. Uniting community initiatives and preventing redundancy

One of the most significant benefits identified by people actively involved in Communities in Action is that it maximizes the use of the limited resources available in Richland County. The process brings people together, either through the action groups or the steering committee, to talk about their upcoming projects or identified needs, which leads the way to collaboration. In the ideal situation, someone shares a project they are considering at a meeting and others at the table offer some information, materials, or assistance to make the project easier or less expensive. Project objectives often overlap with the goals of multiple agencies and working together quickly becomes an obvious and easy way to advance toward more than one mission. As a participant in the Ripple Effect mapping exercise put it, “Instead of fighting for everyone’s dollar, we try to bring everyone together.”

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION PROGRAM EVALUATION

One of the most commonly cited examples of the efficacy of the initiative is how the faith-based community came together at the beginning of the boom to reach out to newcomers in need. Several church leaders saw the need to for newcomers to get out of their trailers, meet people from town and learn about services in the area. Many churches came together to provide meals and services to newcomers in Richland County, which resulted in the creation of the Faith Based Action Group. Through increased networking, the churches were able to prevent redundancy and provide more effective services to those that needed them.

CASE IN POINT: Richland County Library's Safe Sitter Program

The library's Safe Sitter program is a great example of how several groups collaborated to address a community need. During a recent Community Conference, residents noted that finding adequate childcare, particularly on evenings and weekends, was challenging in Richland County. The Library Director brought the idea of creating a safe sitter training program to Community in Action's youth-oriented action groups for feedback.

Members of the Best Beginnings, Partnership for Promise, and Stand for Youth action groups reacted favorably to the idea and offered support. A member of the Best Beginnings action group offered curriculum and life-like dolls the library could use at no cost. Action group members from Stand for Youth encouraged the class and helped market it to the young adults they serve. The library proceeded with training its youth librarian to offer the class.

Each safe sitter class offered has been immediately full with a waiting list. More youth engage with the library and youth taking the class have an additional income-generating opportunity. This summer, the library plans to add a teacher to be able to double the number of classes they can offer. In the end, the collaboration between these three action groups met a need identified by the public at minimal cost to the county. Further, more people were aware of the program in the community because a number of different action group members promoted the program among their clientele.

Organizations like the library, the sheriff's office, youth services, and public works that have a very broad mission have particularly benefited from the cross collaboration that Communities in Action allows. These organizations have such broad and challenging objectives that it is difficult to adequately address them all on their own. Partnering with other organizations that share a common goal such as youth services, mental health, or

physical health helps these organizations be more effective. By bringing groups together through this process, people can identify where they overlap and find ways to meet their goals and use resources more efficiently.

For example, the Sheriff's office has benefited significantly from this type of cross-departmental collaboration. Through the work the steering committee and action groups, the Sheriff's office has received funding for a mental health nurse to help inmates address mental health issues while in custody. This additional funding helps people who are incarcerated receive the help they need before they are released, which reduces the future strain on other resources such as the hospital, child protection, and the judicial system. All of these examples suggest that Communities in Action is effectively leveraging the community's social capital and resources to meet needs.

3. Outcomes for participants as individuals and professionals

The understanding of Communities in Action varies widely from person to person based on how directly they have benefited from the process. People who have had their work made easier by the process tend to have a high understanding and positive perception of the initiative. Those more removed from experiencing a direct impact tend to lack a full understanding of the process and do not fully appreciate its benefits.

People participate in Communities in Action for diverse reasons and have different expectations for their roles. There is tension amongst participants about how much structure is appropriate and needed. For example, action group members were recently asked to develop a charter for each action group. For some, this exercise was a valuable organizational tool to clarify the purpose and goals of the action group to its own members and to others on the steering committee. For others, the documents were confusing and a burdensome task to accomplish with a busy job and many other volunteer commitments.

Although several participants engage in Communities in Action as part of their jobs, many of the members are volunteering or adding additional responsibilities to their regular jobs. Participants have told us that the process feels stagnant, and/or they feel over committed to too many community groups. As the Bakken oil boom slows down, now is the time to assess the structure of Community in Action and make strategic decisions about how Communities in Action should proceed in the future.

Along with the lack of understanding of how the process works, many participants do not fully understand the benefits of the process. Instead of increased efficiency, individuals—especially those most removed from the process—tended to see CIA and the action groups as redundant, overlapping, and a duplication of efforts. The benefits

were not clear to those who were less involved. Related to this was a perception that most of the CIA members are paid employees as opposed to volunteers, which was perceived as a negative strike against the entire process.

On a positive note, individuals develop leadership skills and knowledge through the Communities in Action process. As one steering committee member said, “One of the best outcomes of the Communities in Action is increased knowledge of the condition of our community. At meetings you can hear the needs of the community.” This replicates research elsewhere (Haggerty and McBride 2016) that observed benefits in the form of social learning and enhanced leadership skills through community-based impact assessment process in the Wyoming gas fields.

4. Program structure and operation

When asked to discuss things that demonstrate successes of the Communities in Action program or things that would make it more effective, key stakeholders discussed concerns about structure, focus, and efficacy. Some focused on the need for more structure with respect to guidance and program objectives. In the fall of 2015, action groups were required to complete planning documents that included a “charter,” a list of achievements, and a work plan for the coming year with measurable goals. (As noted above, though, responses to this effort were mixed.)

A lack of focus, or an overly diffuse focus, was another criticism of Communities in Action leveled by a few very involved members. These people felt that the effort of the group is spread too thin and that the lack of time sensitivity in the process created no urgency to accomplish goals. When asked about a time that Communities in Action was working well, a few people mentioned when the whole group was focused on a common goal such as addressing safety issues for newcomers living in trailers, communal meals for trailer residents, or establishing the Boys and Girls club. Others mentioned the years when Communities in Action had the AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers as a time when Communities in Action was particularly effective. During these years, there was focus, structure, and adequate staffing, time, and energy to accomplish the initiative’s goals. A shortage of time was one of the most common challenges that people encountered when working with Communities in Action.

Steering committee members have been concerned about the coverage of the Communities in Action process across the county and have made efforts to ensure participation of the county’s smaller rural population centers. In 2016, instead of hosting a large “State of the County” community conference in Sidney, the steering committee conducted a series of small town hall meetings with the aim of creating a more inclusive format.

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION PROGRAM EVALUATION

All organizations have lifecycles. Understanding the changing phases of an organization's lifecycle – the challenges and opportunities – can help groups like Communities in Action make more strategic decisions. While many lifecycle models exist, Figure 4 offers a five-stage schema for understanding how organizations mature. Based on the lifecycle model presented here, we suggest that Communities in Action is transitioning between the start-up/incubation and adolescent/growing phases. Many of the “growing pains” expressed by Communities in Action participants are typical of this phase, including a fear of formalizing and the challenges of keeping participants engaged and excited. Recognizing that these challenges are expected and common to many organizations in this stage can help relieve participants' feelings of frustration and uncertainty.

Using a strategic planning process, Communities in Action needs to decide if they want to continue within their current lifecycle phase or if they want to move to the next phase by formalizing their structure. If the organization is interested in fully moving to the adolescent/growing phase, the steering committee members need to ask themselves, “How can we build Communities in Action to be viable?”

5. Visibility and communication

Communities in Action is a strong tool for coordinating activities between the county's service providers. However, awareness and understanding of CIA is surprisingly low. Some key decision-makers in the county still do not understand the basic structure of the organization and the benefits enjoyed by those that participate. Some high ranking individuals were unaware of the key elements of CIA and their relation to each other.

Communities in Action devotees readily complain that not everyone fully understands the organization and how it benefits the community. Part of the challenge others have in understanding Communities in Action may be that it seems overly complex. Another likely reason for low levels of understanding is a simple lack of appreciation for the value of interagency communications, planning, and collaboration. The organization's association with the Public Health department is confusing to some because they assume it is only related to individual health rather than the overall health of the community. Some lesser involved attendees talked about not being able to rationalize attending the steering committee meetings when they had so many other administrative or other tasks to attend to suggesting a low level of appreciation for planning and communication.

Although Communities in Action has accomplished many projects over the last ten years, the general public does not fully understand the organization's impact. At the 2016 town hall meetings, community members were visibly surprised by some of the

organization’s projects, such as the “free token” ride program to prevent DUIs. Of the 54 people who filled out surveys at the town hall meetings, over 29% had either never heard of Communities in Action or did not realize the groups were part of a bigger initiative. While Communities in Action plays an important connecting role within Richland County, its full impact is difficult to communicate, as the results of this networking are not always visible or easily measured. One of Communities in Action’s biggest challenges moving forward is to better communicate its collective impact on quality of life within Richland County.

Nonprofit Life Cycles Overview



Stage	Key Question	Duration	Obstacles	Opportunities
Grass Roots - Invention	Is the dream feasible?	0 – 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resistance to forming • Lack of funding/expertise • No outside support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity • Energy for the dream • Excitement to join
Start-Up - Incubation	How do we get this started?	1 – 2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of formalizing • Sustaining initial enthusiasm • Focusing the founder and energy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excitement of funders • Charismatic leader • People wanting to belong
Adolescent – Growing	How can we build this to be viable?	2 – 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence of systems & accountability • Overwhelmed with change • Change may alienate funders, clients, staff and board • Danger of becoming isolated in the system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of accomplishment • New faces, ‘arms and legs’ • Diversification in all areas of the organization • Rejuvenation for the founders
Mature - Sustainability	How can we ensure sustainability?	7 – 30 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of or too much control • Lack of risk taking • Board & staff too operational • Unable to transition in to a governance board • Conflict between old and new 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling secure • Adequate resources • New staff/board – fresh ideas • Ability to try something new
Stagnation & Renewal	How, if any, can we renew?	2 – 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resistance to change • Inability to address key challenges • Declining excitement • Isolation of the agency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wisdom from past • Strategic Partnership opportunities • Chance to take risks again and think ‘out-of-the-box’
Decline And Shut-Down	Should we close?	1 – 2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial crises • Inappropriate leadership • Loss of staff and volunteers • Lack of any passion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to complete turnaround • Graceful ‘sunset’ or merger

Developed by: Speakman Management Consulting, 404-622-1205, www. Speakmanconsulting.com
 Adapted from: The 5 Life Stages of Nonprofits, Judith Sharkey Simon, 2002 and The Conservation Company, 1997.

Figure 4. Nonprofit Life Cycles Overview.

Source: Speakman Mgmt Consulting

MAIN POINTS, RECOMMENDATIONS & NEXT STEPS



MAIN POINTS

Notable contributions of the Communities in Action program are:

- Provides a structure to ensure and enhance communication and collaboration amongst community members and key service providers
- Maximizes the use of the limited resources available in Richland County through leveraging diverse resources and eliminating redundancy
- Fosters partnerships and interventions that deliver meaningful benefits to a diversity of citizens
- Builds relationships, community expertise, and leadership skills for residents who share a goal of creating a “better” Richland County
- Provides a platform for collecting community data, strategic planning, and facilitating grant writing

Key challenges facing the Communities in Action program are:

- Low awareness and understanding about Communities in Action’s goals and accomplishments on the part of some members of the network and the public at large
- Burn-out and exhaustion by core members
- Concerns about loss of efficacy and focus on the part of some key stakeholders
- Limited time and resources of participants

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Based on our evaluation, we offer a series of recommendations organized around both successes and challenges. These are described in Items 1-3 below.

1. Protect and enhance the core functions of the Communities in Action program, especially:

The annual community conference is a highly effective tool for inviting newcomers into volunteer service, for identifying communities needs, and for building knowledge among professional and volunteer stakeholders in community development activities. Varying the delivery and format of the conference to accommodate non-Sidney constituents and to create energy and excitement are important as this effort is carried forward.

Strategic networking and coordination by local service providers and key volunteers through the Steering Committee entity. Perhaps some more cachet could be built around the steering committee meetings to increase the awareness, attendance and ultimately, the effectiveness of the group. Ways to build stature for the meeting would be to funnel funding requests through this group, provide food at each meeting, and/or invite all visiting dignitaries to the meeting.

Staffing More staff to follow-up with action groups on goals and assist with funding options through local, state and federal resources could accelerate completion of community projects. This staff person could also celebrate achievement of goals which could encourage volunteers and inspire others to get involved. The staff person could help with measurement of objectives which would quantify the value of the initiative.

2. Address communication weaknesses:

Improving communication is likely the strongest need identified through the evaluation interviews. Measuring and quantifying success would help everyone involved to understand the benefits of the process, which would lead to greater support and participation. These metrics could make communication easier while bolstering support of the initiative amongst key leaders and the public as a whole. However, the increased time required to design, execute, analyze, and communicate the results is likely not

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possible given current human resources on the project. Ideas for creating better communication include:

Draft a **concise marketing piece** describing Communities in Action and how all of its components fit together. This could be very useful in communicating the initiative to people currently involved, the community at large, and potential funders.

Write **monthly updates** after steering committee for *Sidney Herald* and *Roundup*. Post to facebook and website.

Work with the steering committee to identify as many segments of the community as possible and determine the best way to communicate with each. Develop a **standard process for communicating** with each group and share that among all involved with the process.

Create and Implement a **county-wide email forum** to allow residents to post events, information, job postings, classified ads, etc. Potential platforms include:

- [Google group \(free email listserv\)](#)
- [Nextdoor \(free social network site\)](#)
- [Facebook \(free social network site\)](#)

3. Engage and implement strategic planning process:

Communities in Action may benefit from focusing their efforts more strategically. Many participants felt that the organization was most effective when they were collectively focused on a project, such as safety for people living in trailers. Focusing could help with the communications gap, but it could also simplify and reduce the richness of the complex network of people working on this effort.

Further, we encourage the steering committee to create a succession plan for the organization's leadership roles so that Communities in Action is not left in a vulnerable position during phases of leadership turnover. Communities in Action would benefit from a strategic planning process that is led by outside facilitators. External funding from a private foundation could be used to fund this process.

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