



Commission Strategic Planning Meeting February 12, 2010

Red Lion Colonial Inn Hotel
Helena, Montana

Facilitated by:

Ascent Strategic Development

Ned Cooney, Facilitator ~ Consultant
406/212-7242 • www.AscentStrategy.com • Bigfork, Montana

Montana Commission on Community Service – *Planning Meeting February 2010*

Introduction

Context: On February 12, 2010, members of the Montana Commission on Community Service and staff of the Governor's Office of Community Service convened for a half-day retreat. In planning the agenda, the staff and facilitator sought to answer these questions:

- *What are some of the national trends and promising practices in the service and volunteerism movement?*
- *What are the most effective ways to engage each Commissioner in an appropriate way in the work of the Governor's Office of Community Service?*
- *What is the general framework for service and volunteerism in the State of Montana, and what choices still need to be made?*
- *How can the functioning of the Commission be improved? How can the staff of the OCS be supportive of the Commission as a whole, and individual members, in this work?*
- *What tasks should come out of this meeting?*

Agenda: With those questions in mind, the following *agenda topics* were identified:

- Trends in National Service and State Commissions
- Reasons Why We Serve on the Commission
- Review and Input on the 2009-2012 State Service Plan
- Maximizing our Potential and Evaluating Commission Operations, and staff recommendations for improvement
- Next Steps and Task Identification

Next Steps: This document reflects the discussion at the retreat held on February 12, 2010, and is a starting point for the work of the Commission and Governor's Office of Community Service. With broad input from the Commission members, staff will need to go forward to identify concrete action steps and timelines to:

- implement the State Service Plan;
- initiate improvements in Commission operations and structure; and
- engage individual Commissioners in this work their local communities, as ambassadors of

community service.

Trends in National Service and State Commissions

Bill Basl, Director of the Washington State Commission and chair of the America Association of State Service Commissions, shared his insights on the national service movement:

- This is a caring and giving community with open sharing of insights and information
- Service as a Strategy is a major focus of the new Edward M. Kennedy SERVE America Act
- This is a growing movement – so the question becomes, how do we manage increased financial resources?
- Montana is 6th in the nation for service and volunteerism, reflecting our tradition of neighbor helping neighbor.
- Unemployment numbers nationally present an opportunity. New skill sets are available now. Policies need to encourage volunteerism (for example, by recognizing volunteerism as an eligible activity to continue receiving benefits)
- In Washington State, a new Veteran's Corps was created to use skills to help returning veterans – not to “fix them” but to make a contribution and find connection, and address the issues of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- Brain research has showed the healing value of service and volunteerism
- Washington State has also created a Health Corps to address gaps in health care. The group discussed whether Montana could tie medical residencies and internships to support rural health needs? (Montana has 20 slots for Montana residents to attend the University of Washington schools of medicine, dental care, and veterinary care.)
- Washington State has also developed a Clean Energy Corps, working to conserve energy and take all state parks “off the grid”. This project works with the University of Washington School of the Environment.
- Another program in Washington State, the Reading Corps, addresses high school dropout rates in under-performing public schools. AmeriCorps members have recruited over 7,000 tutors that work with “Everybody Graduates” centers.
- A partnership has been formed with the Seattle Mariners to highlight service and volunteerism at one of their games. This is an effort driven by the Commissioners themselves. Discussion ensued about doing something similar with the Pioneer League teams in Montana.
- There is a movement to shift the thinking about service and volunteerism from “a nice thing to do” to a critical function of citizenship.
- Volunteer Generation funding (up to \$75,000 per state, available in March) is available from the Corporation for National Service (CNS) to plan efforts to promote and coordinate volunteers.

Why Do Members Choose to Serve on this Commission?

Kim Miske, Commission co-chair, was asked to share her motivations for service and her perspective on the role of the Commissioners:

- Financial and other resources to support service and volunteerism, which are important personally to Kim, are found in this organization.

- Commissioners have four roles that are critical:
 - > Craft policies that will maximize resources
 - > Advocate for service and volunteerism with the legislators
 - > Spread the word in their local communities, through such vehicles as opinion pieces in newspapers
 - > Bring ideas and “best practices” that come from our individual experiences

The group was then asked to share in pairs what their personal motivations are to serve, and then to share those reasons with the whole group:

- Fulfilling a need within ourselves

- Carrying on a family tradition/legacy

- Organizational volunteering is “exponential” and intriguing

- Positive energy comes from this kind of activity

- Take my passion to a new level – a “multiplier effect”

- Volunteerism is challenging in an increasingly virtual world...are we disconnected?

- We come from similar backgrounds but we expand the breadth of our own experiences by our service on this Commission

**State Service Plan Review and
Comments from Jackie Girard, Montana office of the Corporation for National Service**

Jan Lombardi and Danielle Shyne presented highlights of the State Service Plan submitted last year. (A summary of the presentation slides are attached)

Each state's commission is expected to have a state service plan on how they plan to promote national service and volunteerism in their state. Jan wrote a plan last fall as a general framework, because Montana did not have one in place as required by the Corporation for National Service. The plan reflects a recognition that 2009 was a significant year of change in staff, Commission leadership and federal legislation to expand AmeriCorps and enhance internal operations. In addition, the Office of Community Service developed the "ServeMontana" brand, and responded to the Governor's calls to action with campaigns that connect service strategies with fire and winter readiness. The critical next steps are to lay out a detailed implementation plan as a "road map" for service over the next few years, and to make choices between options presented in the plan.

Jackie Girard shared some comments about the challenge of allocating funding (including new funding this year):

- Poorly written applications will generally lead to poor programmatic results
- The additional funding coming to Montana this year is an opportunity, but must be taken seriously
- The Commission must focus on promoting high quality applications that will lead to high quality programs.

A question arose about the feasibility of making planning and demonstration grants, which would allow successful strategies to "scale up" to a statewide level. Washington State does make those kinds of grants through formula funds, but Bill cautioned that planning grants do not themselves result in AmeriCorps members actually working in their communities.

Maximizing our Potential and Evaluating Commission Operations
(Group Discussion)

What's Working now, in terms of how the commission operates and interacts with staff?

- Website for Commissioner documents
- Virtual meetings & conference calls – efficient use of technology (though the question was raised – how much of this do we want to do, and do we sacrifice human interaction too much?)
- Hard copies of meeting materials are better than electronic copies
- Face-to-face meetings are important to maintaining working relationships
- We get a lot of information, but not too much. It is a positive, two way communication
- We exercise good, effective oversight of funded programs
- Training opportunities show the programs to the Commissioners
- Use of audiovisual technology results in more organized presentations and meetings

What are some Areas for Improvement?

- The format of our online documents – not everyone has the right software and/or technological expertise.
- Phone meetings are not as conducive to funding decisions – we need to consider weather, and timing of our annual decisions.
- During funding discussions, public comments are made after the decisions are made
- Website is slow to open – is there too much on the front page?
- The Commissioner document section is hard to find
- On conference calls, it's difficult for people not in Helena to hear Helena discussions – too much background noise
- There is not always a common understanding of the “ground rules” for applications during funding discussions.

Maximizing our Potential and Evaluating Commission Operations
(Group Discussion)

What internal and statewide capacity issues and solutions are worth considering?

What is missing in the overall system? What tools do we need to build Montana's service and volunteerism capacity?

- A need to build internal capacity, with three different funding sources with differing requirements for matching from the state general fund
- We need to show benefit to the state for the investments of general funds (reflecting a concern over continued state fund match, given the condition of the budget)
- Staff continue to work with Montana Nonprofit Association (and others) to ensure organizations have capacity to administer programs funded by the Commission
- There is a gap currently in many communities, in linking people with service opportunities. The Serve Montana website, in partnership with Montana Nonprofit Association, will connect people to programs where they can serve
- Senior Corps is an effective strategy to build capacity to manage volunteers

Staff Recommendations: Transitioning from Committees to more flexible "Work Groups"

Jan and Danielle presented some of options for streamlining the operations of the Commission and its interactions with staff, and each other. There was general consensus among the Commissioners in attendance that the current committee structure does not seem to be effective for these reasons:

- Some committees do not meet at all; others meet around specific work items, but then become inactive for a period of time.
- The distinction between policy decisions (the purview of the Commission) and operational tactics (the domain of staff) is blurred.
- The Commission's by-laws are not reflective of actual practices and current structure.

The **proposed structure** would consist of one Standing Committee, two Annual Workgroups, and any number of "Ad Hoc" Workgroups that would be formed, and dissolved, depending on the current work of the Commission and OCS.

Proposed STANDING COMMITTEE:

The **Executive Committee** would consist of the Chair and Vice-Chair to work with the Executive Director on matters related to the Commission.

Proposed ANNUAL WORKGROUPS:

The **Grant Review** Workgroup would participate in grant review, selection, and recommendation for funding by the Commission.

The **ServeMontana** Award would participate in review and selection of annual award recipients.

Staff Recommendations: Transitioning from Committees to more flexible “Work Groups”
(continued)

Proposed AD HOC WORKGROUPS

The **Nuts and Bolts** Work Group would assist with review and updating of policy and operating procedures relating to Commission operations.

“The **Web Future**” Workgroup would assist with optimizing technology for improved effectiveness and efficiency of Commission and staff operations, training, communications....and save money

The “**Spread the Word**” Workgroup would assist with identifying ways to promote national service and volunteerism in Montana.

The Commission expressed support for these proposed changes. The Commission by-laws would need to be reviewed to assure this new structure can be utilized. (See Task 9 on page 10 of this document for the next step.)

Tasks and Potential Improvements to Consider
(Group Discussion)

1. Explore **connection with Pioneer Baseball Leagues** to promote service and volunteerism (following the Seattle Mariners model)
 - Sheila Rice will connect with the Great Falls team
 - Bill Basl will connect staff with the League Commissioner
2. Consider a legislative or policy change to allow volunteerism in lieu of job seeking for people receiving **Unemployment Benefit Insurance**
3. Explore options for **conferencing and virtual meeting technology**:
 - Web-Ex, an online meeting software
 - Adobe Connect
4. Convene Commissioners on a **regional basis for conference calls** – to maintain face-to-face aspect of meetings
5. Provide **Federal Grants Management training** for Commissioners would help in understanding requirements that grantees must follow, and improve the grant review process.
6. Offer training **on Robert’s Rules of Order** for Commissioners
7. Develop a **grievance policy and process** for applicants to know how to appeal funding decisions
8. Provide training to Commissioners on **social networking and online learning** options
9. Working through a “Nuts and Bolts” task force, **define and form ad-hoc workgroups** to focus on specific goals and projects – rather than relying on standing committees. Resource and regulatory constraints need to be identified, including how the Commission provides oversight and direction to these workgroups.

Breakout Group Discussions

Commissioners were divided into four breakout groups to tackle specific issues or questions, related to the State Service Plan. Staff members also convened to talk about how to involve Commissioners appropriately in the work of the Governor's Office.

Group 1 (Sheila, Jack, Kim)

Question about Involvement: How can the Commissioners (individually and collectively) be involved in the implementation of the overall plan, and in the promotion of service and volunteerism in Montana?

Recommendations:

- Continuity
- Lots of information
- Executive summary (instead of “full boat”)
- Local level involvement
- Recognize volunteers at local level
- Compliance and support
- Everyone serves on grant review committee: Results: Broader commission involvement in grant review, Better ideas for programming

Group 2 (John, Bob, Doug)

Question about Age 55+: What policies do you recommend to encourage service and volunteerism for citizens age 55 and over?

Recommendations:

- Contact organizations that deal with seniors and provide eligibility and benefit information as applicable – including AARP, MT Association of Churches

Group 3 (Scott, Jackie, Laura)

Question about Capacity: What can the Commission do to help Montana prepare for the growth in national service, the increasing need for volunteers, and an additional \$200,000 in funding?

Recommendations:

- Connect the dots with volunteers, organizations, providers outside of national service – keep in perspective
- Capacity for everyone – volunteers and national service
- Break down stigmas, eliminate misinformation
- Distribute information about what it takes to: apply, manage and support (and the Commission should provide monetary support to facilitate this)
- Increase awareness through already established groups
- Discussions with businesses about being open to volunteers, to build capacity and dialogue about what they need – relevance
- Tap into volunteer motivations and passion – bottom-up approach
- Speakers tour to promote service and volunteerism
- Perform an assessment of what's being done out there
- Build leadership capacity, training, and awareness in nonprofits
- Utilize the “Power of People to People Exchange”

Breakout Group Discussions (continued)

Group 4 (Karin, Chris)

Question about Collaboration: What new partnerships could be built to create new strategies that support national service and volunteerism as a means to address the Commission's priorities, such as reaching out to youth populations?

Recommendations:

- Connect existing programs with volunteers and with other agencies doing like things
- Identify existing youth groups
- Churches and religious energy support
- Engage traditional service groups (JayCees, Lions, Kiwanis, etc.)
- Strategies for connecting:
 1. policies to engage
 2. share people
 3. provide money
 4. training helps us identify gaps for entry point to get people to join in

Group 5 (Commission Staff – Danielle, Tony, Andee, Lorri, Kathy)

Question about Commissioner Involvement: How can we, in our role as staff, get Commissioners to be more involved in our work, to be more dedicated and interested, communicate more effectively, and build relationships and trust? What capacity-building needs does the staff have? What considerations should we keep in mind?

Recommendations for Commissioners:

- We are a “bank”, not a “charity” - tough decisions are required.
- Planning grants are incubators
- Pilot program is a pilot, not a guarantee of advancement
- Gain basic understanding of how Americorps works, planning, formula, competitive
- If programs are not succeeding, that's okay

Recommendations for Staff:

- Staff changes/challenges
- Work to learn more about each other (commission and staff)
- Consider a team building meeting
- Use email or phone (technology we can use, but will commissioners use it?)