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Kujichagulia: Actively Building a Public-Nonprofit- Community Partnership¹

Part A

Patricia Brady sat at her desk reviewing the presentation she would give in two weeks to the County Board of Commissioners. As Director of Ramsey County's Workforce Solutions, she led a department charged with delivering a range of services to employers, job seekers and welfare recipients across the county. As part of that mission she oversaw the Kujichagulia project, an effort bringing together the county government, a nonprofit organization, and the African-American community in what she felt was a one-of-a-kind partnership model. The effort focused on improving service delivery for African-American participants in the state's welfare program.

The three-year contract supporting the work was set to expire in December 2006, one month after the partners had scrapped their old ideas and instituted a new model for working together. Thankfully, the County approved a three-month contract extension. Brady and the other partners spent those three months working

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¹ Catherine Eichers Penkert, Nicholas Dobbins, and Jodi Sandfort (September 30, 2008). Based on research conducted by the authors and Adrienne Hannert, Manoj Kumar, Sajjan Yadav during the spring of 2008.

furiously to strengthen some of the partnership's softer elements before going in front of the Board. She shook her head and thought about the journey so far – three years of work and a million dollars invested. They had finally made a breakthrough in the last few months. It took time to build the trust that now existed. To make it work, each partner had to learn from the others, each needed to do business a little differently. But now she had to ask herself the hard question: “How am I going to convince the Commissioners to grant a second contract based on years of intangible progress and only a few months of hard data?”

The Problem at Hand

Five years earlier, employees of the Workforce Solutions and Community Human Services division of Minnesota's second-largest county undertook joint planning to determine how learning from the first years of the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) could inform a potential redesign of services.² Part of the examination included a look at outcomes by race and ethnicity. The report, compiled by the county's Office of Performance Measurement and Evaluation, detailed a number of major findings regarding racial disparities in success rates on the new MFIP program: a lower percentage of African-American and American Indian families were able to leave MFIP as a result of employment compared to participants overall; African-American families made up the highest number of those nearing the five-year time limit set by MFIP, with high numbers of extensions and closed cases; sanction rates were highest for American Indians and African-Americans; between 1997 and 2002 the proportion of white participants had *decreased* by 9 percent while the proportion of African-American participants had *increased* by 9 percent. County staff recognized certain communities were simply not doing as well with the new welfare system as others.

Rather than interpret the results of the examination by itself, two County leaders, a Human Services Planner named Deborah Schlick and MFIP Program Manager Ginnee Engberg, invited the community to respond to the data after it was analyzed. The county convened two rounds of informal consultations with people of color who either had an understanding of the welfare system and the county service delivery system, or who worked in agencies that served low-income families, to get their response to the racial disparities in outcomes. The purpose of

² The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) is Minnesota's welfare reform program that assists low-income families with children to economic stability through work.

these consultations was to consider what changes in operations and service delivery could better serve people of color in the program. The planners invited the County manager to attend so he could understand the full nature of the problem. Many different suggestions were put forth in the meetings, but the overriding message was that as the project continued, the community believed the county should include the community in the process of forming solutions that would address disparities.

County staff drafted a “Redesign Plan” and pitched it to the Welfare Reform Team, a group of community members from outside the county with experience with the welfare program. Yet, the team felt this initial plan did not go far enough in turning the design of strategies over to the community. It was suggested that more headway in connecting with the community was possible if, instead of engaging the community directly, they enlisted the help of trusted individuals to convene community conversations. Schlick and Engberg took the lead on the project. They began to connect with community members and get recommendations for individuals who had the good standing and respect within their cultural communities to facilitate a community-based redesign of MFIP. Rather than rewriting the Redesign Plan on their own, Schlick and Engberg convinced the County Board of Commissioners to authorize the hiring of consultants to lead community-based planning in the African-American and American Indian communities, which were experiencing the starkest disparities. These consultants would bring recommendations from each community back to the Board for action.

Community Ownership of the Policy Design Process

The community planning process was launched in the spring of 2003. The County contracted Mary K. Boyd and Kwame McDonald, two respected African-American leaders in Ramsey County, to lead the effort in their cultural community. They had a contract to assist the African-American community in developing a plan to help African-American MFIP families reach the program’s goals. Both Boyd and McDonald made it clear to the county that, while they were willing to assist in this capacity, they were risking their reputations with the community if the county undertook a superficial or ‘window-dressing’ effort and nothing came of the planning and recommendations.

The two consultants held many one-on-one conversations before facilitating two community-wide meetings held at a historically African-American community center in St. Paul. The meeting notices were titled, “A Call to Action,” and said:

“Ramsey County recognizes that African American families are experiencing much poorer outcomes than other racial and ethnic groups in MFIP. As members of the African-American community in Ramsey County, we can work together to develop ways to more effectively serve our people.”

Each meeting began with a short time for food and conversation, after which either Boyd or McDonald introduced and explained the philosophy of Kujichagulia, one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa that comprise a communitarian African philosophy. Kujichagulia is Swahili for “self-determination,” and it means, “To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves, and speak for ourselves instead of being defined, named, created for, and spoken for by others.” After this introduction, a reverend offered a prayer and another community member led the singing of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” also known as the Black National Anthem. Finally, the large group broke into small conversation circles to consider the following questions:

- Have you received help in your life at any time? If so, who helped you, and how?
- What does it take for an African-American who is on MFIP to move from welfare to independence?
- How can our African-American family and community tighten up and pull together to support independence by helping each other?

These questions led to uncommon conversations, particular at a publicly convened forum.

In addition to these community-wide gatherings, a small group met several times to investigate various approaches. It was during these discussions that the work of the Powderhorn Phillips Cultural Wellness Center (CWC) and their culturally-rooted approach to social services pioneered in neighboring Minneapolis came to light. The director, Atum Azzahir, opened CWC in 1996 as a continuation of an intense two-year community health organizing initiative. Initially, the effort focused in the Powderhorn neighborhood of Minneapolis, an area with large African-American and Hispanic populations that also had sizeable pockets of Native American and Asian citizens. There were significant health disparities between these communities and the white residents in the same neighborhood. The origins of the Cultural Wellness Center focused on creating a setting where people could generate and implement ideas to improve their health and well-being. It was to be a place where cultural knowledge and community resources could be taught and shared. The CWC articulated what it termed its “People’s Theory of Sickness

and Disease,” which stated that individualism, loss of culture and loss of community make you sick. In accordance with this theory, its mission was to promote health by unleashing the “power of citizens to heal themselves and to build community.”

When first approached by the county’s community consultants, Azzahir was clear about the differences between the CWC’s methods and the way Ramsey County had addressed similar problems. She said, “Our approach calls for a sharing of responsibility, a culturally-based knowledge production, so that everyone gets to tease out the lessons, everybody grows. That’s what distinguishes us from the conventional approach. The county does it by itself and the authority was theirs. That system didn’t give participants any credit, didn’t give them the benefit of the doubt, and then the participants learned to take advantage of the system. Everyone was a victim and a perpetrator.” In her understanding, a mutual partnership between the CWC and Ramsey County would involve each organization examining itself and better relating to the other. “The situation we’re in comes from the society, and no one of us will be able to resolve it alone. The leadership of the future will have to be able to work together. Our model, the CWC model, approaches this from that point of view...everyone has something to contribute.”

After much discussion, the African American leadership group agreed that, to create lasting results, culture had to be part of the solution to the problems. The group felt that Azzahir’s wisdom and ability to motivate people in her community to take responsibility for their own success, including the Wellness Center’s work with MFIP participants in Minneapolis, should serve as the foundation for their recommended solution to moving African-Americans in the direction of self-determination.

County staff knew they would need to make a strong case to persuade the County Board to bypass the traditional competitive request for proposals process in favor of accepting the community’s recommendation to partner with the Cultural Wellness Center. Deb Schlick asked for letters of support from the planning committee as tangible information for the commissioners about who endorsed the proposed project and strategy. African-American leaders from a number of influential organizations, including the Urban League, the YWCA, the African-American Leadership Council, and the Council on Black Minnesotans, submitted letters of support for efforts of the community consultants’ process and for Azzahir’s work. Their letters stated that the community consultants had heard, documented, and were now presenting the voices of the community to the

decision-makers. The letters reiterated that, during the community meetings, the African-American community had expressed a strong desire for change in the way social issues like these were addressed. The African-American leadership believed that Azzahir's work through the Cultural Wellness Center would bring "a fresh, effective, and holistic approach [to] dealing with welfare in the African-American community," and that "this effort is one that will succeed because the community is involved and accountable."

The African-American Self-Determination Project appeared as new business on the October 21, 2003 agenda for the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners meeting. Workforce Solutions and Community Human Services presented the project jointly as an initiative to address MFIP racial disparities in Ramsey County. It would be funded with one million dollars set aside in the MFIP redesign process to support culturally-based work in the communities experiencing the greatest disparities in outcomes. County staff requested that the Board approve an agreement with the Cultural Wellness Center, authorize Engberg to negotiate the contract and any modifications or extensions as County Program Manager, and authorize her to make necessary budget adjustments. During the Board's discussion of the proposal, one commissioner raised concerns about the absence of details in the documentation regarding project outcomes. Engberg responded that the project was directed at the self-sufficiency outcome, and was therefore consistent with the state's request that the county improve those outcomes. She went on to explain that the planning process identified a multi-level strategy that worked not only with African-American families, but also with systems-level change. "It is very difficult to set outcomes for that." Despite not having a draft contract in place, the commissioners unanimously approved the proposals without results specified on the condition that County staff would follow-up to show them the outcomes and baselines once identified.

Implementing the New Approach

The first contract was for a total of \$1.187 million dollars over three years. It named two overall outcomes: a *system* outcome related to the self-support index for African-American MFIP participants "for which the entire Ramsey County MFIP system is responsible," and a *project* outcome that Ramsey County services staff would more effectively engage African-American participants in services intended to lead to increasing self sufficiency. The Cultural Wellness Center agreed their Community Systems Navigators (the front-line staff who worked with clients), would provide culturally-based advocacy, classes, and one-on-one and group mentoring to 500 MFIP families who self-identified as African-American.

Additionally, the CWC would work with other agencies and individuals in the African-American community to develop what they called a “network of support.” They would also provide trainings, coaching, and feedback for County staff to enhance the approaches they used to work with African-American participants to strengthen the county’s own capacity to address this and similar problems in the future. Finally, the contract specified that the CWC would assist Ramsey County MFIP in meeting the overall system and project outcomes, which centered on eliminating the disparities that existed for African-American MFIP participants.

The work began when Ramsey County management-level staff attended sessions at the Wellness Center, facilitated by Azzahir, intended to create introspection and help participants understand the fundamentals of the CWC’s approach. However, attendance at these sessions was low; frontline staff at the County saw the CWC’s sessions as extra work on top of the already heavier than usual workload because of a broader MFIP redesign. For months, the County and the CWC continued to grapple with how to work together. There were fundamental differences between their organizations: how they worked with participants; how they conceptualized success and tracked progress; how they understood the relative importance of systems-level and day-to-day work. On one hand, such distinctions were clear from the beginning. Largely, they were what inspired the contract in the first place. Yet, it was daunting to think about how such fundamental differences could be bridged in day-to-day operations. Periodically, County staff would ask questions about the definition of success within the Kujichagulia project and the need for evaluation of the work. However, clear decisions were never reached. By the end of 2004, the CWC had five Community Systems Navigators, five Elders, one graduating class of 35 people, 100 participating members, and nine new babies delivered with family and community support in place. However, it remained unclear whether or not this work was in line with the goal of easing disparities of MFIP participants, or if the CWC’s participants were even MFIP clients.

The special county staff meetings at the CWC were not working because few people were actually attending. Instead, it was agreed Azzahir and another Wellness Center staff would observe, participate in, and advise on internal county working meetings. As they learned more about the county’s issues, CWC realized they could focus help on participants in danger of sanctions (reductions to their welfare grant because of failure to comply with county rules). They decided to propose that the CWC’s Navigators implement culturally-informed outreach practices to these MFIP participants. To pilot this idea, the county assigned one of its Workforce Solutions employment counseling units to work as a team with the

CWC. By the time this model was put into action, Engberg had left her position as MFIP Program Manager. Her successor, Janet Guthrie, informed Bruce Casselton that his Workforce Solutions unit would be participating in this pilot. Guthrie, however, had not been involved in the planning; she could give him no clear information about the origins of the idea, its desired outcome, or the nature of the partnership.

Kujichagulia project planners did not know about the larger organizational changes experienced by frontline County workers when they envisioned the sanctions outreach teaming model. For the previous two years, the Workforce Solutions Employment Service Counselors grappled with a larger MFIP redesign that had cut contracts with many of the county's old MFIP vendors. Although the County moved from 15 to 5 agencies, planning staff had not figured out how to transition smoothly between old and new processes. County staff were overwhelmed with files from the eliminated agencies. Additionally, the redesign created a new model involving public health nurses for clients at risk of sanction. In practice, this approach left Employment Services Counselors dependent on the information gathered by the outreach workers, and created a time lag between a clients' non-compliant behavior and the actual sanction. It also made sanctions difficult to explain and left Employment Services Counselors to deal with upset and angry clients. On the surface, the proposed pilot project with the CWC looked to Casselton, the unit Supervisor, as if he was being asked to replicate the previous debacle. The toll on his staff was too high.

Unwilling to ask his staff to revisit a model that had left them aggravated and without a concrete structure in place, Casselton devised a structure given what the contract said CWC and the County were doing together. And then he went to meet with Azzahir. While he came to the meeting open for discussion, this was lost on Azzahir who saw, instead, a set of orders coming down from the county. Because they had no prior working relationship, Azzahir felt the dominant power paradigms of gender and race flare when this European-American male from the county presented his predetermined structure for the pilot created without the CWC's input. Needless to say, this did not improve the already shaky working relationship between the CWC Navigators and the County Employment Services Counselors.

It did not take long for implementation of the sanctions outreach pilot program to hit rocky ground. CWC staff worried about being seen in the community as simply an agent of the County; it was essential to maintain its independent status in the eyes of their clients. While this belief manifested itself in

numerous ways, most notably was a reluctance among Navigators to share information with the County Employment Service Counselors. County staff were told by their Supervisor to make client referrals to the CWC, which they did, but the lack of feedback from the CWC about the clients impeded the development of trust between the two groups of workers. These staff were supposed to be functioning as a team. Leadership on both sides later agreed that addressing the fundamental tension which created staff reluctance was essential to the future success of the program. However, the only conclusion that could be reached at the moment, in a meeting held to prepare for the departure of Deborah Schlick from her role at the county, was that the group needed “a breath of awareness.” They would reconvene later to determine how to make their work more intentional. Two years of the contract had elapsed, and partners on both sides were stuck with feelings of distrust and tension.

The proposed work plan for the third and final year in the contract was seen, at least for CWC, as an opportunity to educate and re-orient the partnership. It included activities focused on developing increased visibility in the community, such as “expanded networking” and “presentations to key stakeholders, including the community,” and finding effective methods of capturing the stories of the Navigators’ work. However, very little was mentioned regarding the actual work with MFIP client families. Conflict surfaced at a meeting between Guthrie, the two community consultants – now in their second contract with the county – Azzahir and a CWC Navigator. The CWC wanted to do work ‘outside of the box’ to address the legacy of hopelessness and despair plaguing the African-American community. Yet, Guthrie noted, “People are getting impatient with new learning on both sides, and it is essential for us to get back in front of the Board and continue to educate them.” Azzahir remarked, “One of the challenges we face is the County Board’s desire for traditional outcomes from nontraditional work.” It seemed the project was pulling in two different directions: the system was looking for numbers, while the community was after cultural change to move people away from dependence.

A Shift in Leadership

After that tense meeting, Azzahir, Guthrie, and the community consultants each committed to meeting individually with Patricia Brady, the Director of Workforce Solutions. While Brady knew of the Kujichagulia project through her role in supervising Engberg and Guthrie, she had not been closely involved in its implementation to date. After hearing about the current status, Brady knew she needed to increase her involvement. As a leader in both Ramsey County and in the

African-American community, she felt she must try to strengthen trust between the two organizations. The CWC responded positively to the initial meeting with Brady, reporting that the sense that she was a reformist working to make change inside the system, that she was very committed to the project's efforts. However CWC continued to focus on economic and participant development and creating a compelling message about CWC's goals, rather than the issues of data collection or identifying tangible ways to work with the MFIP system.

To open the process of dialogue between Casselton and Azzahir, community consultant Boyd needed to step in. She took them to lunch and allowed them to get to know each other under more neutral settings. This was a pivotal meeting. It allowed both strong leaders to hear the other and, with an improved understanding of each others' goals and concerns, create a new level of trust. Yet, there were only three months left in the contract.

Casselton proposed scrapping the sanctions outreach model and begin again in a new way of working together. They decided to send a letter, the text of which was written by CWC staff, to his entire unit's African American participants. It informed these citizens of the Wellness Center's work, clarified that CWC was not a County agency, and told them the CWC might contact them. Casselton signed the letter and sent it out under County letterhead to hundreds of individuals. Then, the CWC started to work the list. Two additional mailings were done in the following months. While letters were going out, they changed the referral process between Employment Service Counselors and Navigators. Azzahir and Casselton also established a regular joint meeting between their staffs to talk through issues together. Frontline staff soon took ownership of these meetings as a venue to learn more about the issues facing their clients across organizations.

Ultimately, they decided that CWC Navigators and County Counselors would meet one-to-one, pairing up to better communicate more client-specific issues and methods. Throughout nearly the entire three-year contract, the agencies had not satisfactorily resolved the issue of data collection and evaluation. Teaming individual CWC Navigators and County Employment Service Counselors addressed this issue by allowing for documentation of all participants, activities, and tracking through identification numbers. With greater levels of trust established between partners, the CWC also began to provide written reports of their work, improving upon the prior practice of relying solely upon verbal reports between Navigators, CWC, and County staff.

With the contract expiring soon, Brady knew she needed to buy more time before the project came up to the Board of Commissioners for renewal. She pushed for a three-month extension of the first contract period, and the County granted this request “based on a positive evaluation of the Contractor's services and the recommendations made by Workforce Solutions and Community Human Services.”

Brady, Azzahir, and the community consultants, Boyd and McDonald, felt they needed to use every moment of the three-month contract extension to solidify the project’s work and build the strongest possible case for its continuation. Anticipating questions from the commissioners regarding evaluation, Azzahir hired Biff Dunsworth as a full-time data specialist to compile outcome data for CWC participants. The addition of this position made it possible to share client-level data between the CWC and the county. Although all knew the commissioners would be looking for numbers as results, the partners also understood that the less tangible changes also needed to be documented. Dunsworth focused on client outcome the County could link with a statewide benefits tracking system; however, she also developed ways to document the community-based methods and success stories of the Navigators’ work with MFIP recipients.

While Dunsworth set-up and began implementing a data management system to address central points in the county’s evaluation, Azzahir, Brady, Boyd, and McDonald decided to proactively address the commissioners by scheduling individual meetings with them. These meetings were an opportunity for the partners to update the commissioners on the lessons learned and accomplishments of the Kujichagulia project, to show them the goals for the proposed second contract, and to address any of the commissioners’ questions and concerns outside of the formal Board meeting setting.

Now, with only two weeks before the Board would meet, Brady was still not sure if the project would be approved to continue. All of the challenges of the past three years – negotiating the differences between two very different organizations, continually taking a risk on new models, the intense efforts in the past few months to meet with Commissioners and align data collection – all would be for nothing if the Board felt there was not sufficient evidence to support a second contract for the Kujichagulia project. Brady exhaled deeply and did what she had always done in this project – she got back to work on her presentation and prepared herself to advocate for work she strongly believed in.

